

STRATEGIC MASCULINITY: A GROUNDED THEORY EXAMINATION OF THE  
DISCOURSE OF MASCULINITY FOR COLLEGE MEN

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by

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DISCOURSE OF MASCULINITY

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

STRATEGIC MASCULINITY: A GROUNDED THEORY EXAMINATION OF THE  
DISCOURSE OF MASCULINITY FOR COLLEGE MEN

presented by Kenneth M. Akers,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DISCOURSE OF MASCULINITY

### Dedications

*Every day I feel is a blessing from God. And I consider it a new beginning. Yeah,  
everything is beautiful.*

-Prince-

*Starfish and coffee  
Maple syrup and jam  
Butterscotch clouds, a tangerine  
And a side order of ham  
If you set your mind free, baby  
Maybe you'd understand  
Starfish and coffee  
Maple syrup and jam*

-Prince-

It may seem odd that I chose a quote and a lyric from a pop star. But in the most unlikely places, we often find wisdom and inspiration. I chose the preceding to remind me of two central lessons in this short life: Be thankful for every day, and the imagination has no boundaries. I have a lot to be thankful for and I am blessed to have people around me who have encouraged me to ignore the boundaries and reach for more.

To Karen, my wife,

You are my light and my inspiration. Without your love and support, I could not have succeeded in completing this project. When I doubted, you did not. When I waivered, you did not. We have cried together, laughed together, and loved together through the good and the bad. I love you my LF.

To my father,

Thank you for making me a better man. I wish you could be here to see how you have made a difference in one man's life.

To my mother,

You have never doubted me. Thank you for providing the love and understanding that taught me to reach goals beyond my wildest dreams.

To my brother Steve,

Thank you for showing me how to be a man of honor and responsibility.

## DISCOURSE OF MASCULINITY

To Mike and David,

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For always greeting me with a tail wag and a kiss.

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Watching you grow into manhood has been my greatest pleasure. Remember to stay true to yourself, treat others with kindness, and hug those you love. You will fall from time to time— learn from failure and proceed to be a better man. And never, ever give up. I am proud of you and I love you.

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*Abstract*

*Masculinity is an experience that is angst ridden and stressful for young men in a modern world. The social pressure to perform dominant forms of masculinity along with intersectional issues such as race, sexual identity, and class complicates masculine identity processes. The author employed grounded theory to analyze the discourse of 25 college-age men to ascertain how men enact, negotiate, and manage masculinity. Utilizing the dual perspectives of Precarious Masculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity, the theory of Strategic Masculinity is offered as a communication-centered frame to examine the discourses of men in service of their masculine identity. The theory revealed that men strategically manage masculinity using a variety of strategies in varying contexts. Men engage in precarious discourses, rehabilitation efforts, and the experience of intersectional issues to negotiate personal masculinity. The theory also highlights men's use of gender capital to address challenges to their masculinity. Implications of Strategic Masculinity are discussed and avenues of future development of the model and further research are explored.*

## Chapter 1—Rationale

Young men confront an ongoing crisis when communicatively enacting and managing their conceptions of masculinity. Researchers and popular observers have referred to a “crisis of masculinity” repeatedly throughout the last 60 years (Kimmel, 2006; Levant, 1992). Others have noted this crisis as represented in popular contemporary entertainment mediums (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). Proponents’ of the crisis of masculinity note the loss of “traditional” forms of masculinity. Often, these views trigger a virtual existential examination of the identification processes that go into marking the complex construct of the masculine (Connell, 2005; Schlesinger, 1958). Various movements have arisen from time to time to address this perceived loss of traditional manhood ethos in our society. The mythopoetic men’s movement, for example, refers to the broad spectrum of men’s groups that sought to liberate men from current perceptions of manhood and reintroduce them to their masculine nature (Kimmel, 1995). The Promise Keepers movement of the 1990s similarly attempted to reclaim masculinity to “restore men’s sense of moral responsibility and leadership” in the community (Messner, 1997). These and other men’s movements have struggled to symbolically and materially reclaim masculinity for entire generations of men.

Critics of men’s movements find the idea of a crisis in masculinity ironic since men have traditionally been located near or at the center of patriarchal structures that privilege masculine forms and norms (Connell, 2005). These critics claim men are what Mumby (1998) might call concentric subjects who live in a powerful and privileged position within existing social structures concerning gender and society writ large.

Therefore, to these critics, the idea of a crisis of masculinity merely suggests that modern feminist movements and post-modernity are disempowering the dominant group and the notion of a “crisis” is mostly overblown.

Despite the objections, various approaches from the areas of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and more have noted the transient nature of masculinity and the challenges that accompany this ongoing precarious experience of manhood (Vandello, Bosen, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). According to these scholars, the experience of performing masculinity is full of angst, stress, uncertainty, and unrest. In short, reaching and securing manhood seems to be an insecure and precarious process. Men occupy positions in Western society that grant them systematic advantages over women in virtually every social and professional arena. How can men appear to enjoy overwhelming advantages, yet claim to suffer angst and stress at performing manhood? Additionally, how can men mourn the loss of manhood and declare a crisis of masculinity when seemingly advantaged at every turn? Reaching insight into such a perceived contradiction might be possible using a multiple theoretical approach that explores the communication processes involved in negotiating masculinity while attending to various forces that work to problematize gender identity processes.

Gaining an understanding of the precarious nature of masculinity and the forces that influence its enactment and maintenance requires sound theoretical approaches. Two such theoretical lenses that enjoy support in the literature are the psychological treatment of Precarious Manhood and the sociological treatment of Hegemonic Masculinity. I propose to delineate insights present in each perspective to explore existing knowledge concerning masculine identity. The result of this effort is a collision of concepts that give

birth to the communication-centered perspective of Precarious Masculinity. Such a perspective will contribute to understanding the precarious nature of masculinity revealed in the micro-discourses of men. This new view can also serve to explain the effect of larger macro-discourse on the micro-discourses of young men in their attempts to navigate emerging masculinity.

This study aims to examine how college-age men constitute, experience, and maintain masculine identity as revealed in discursive formations. This study is informed by dual theoretical perspectives to explore how young college-age men discursively enact and manage masculinity in everyday interactions. The following rationale will explore the social and communication-centered implications that arise in the performance of masculinity. I then offer Hegemonic Masculinity and Precarious Manhood as proper perspectives through which to inform the examination of masculinity for college-age men. Borrowing from each of these perspectives, the new communication-centered approach of Precarious Masculinity will be offered as an explanatory model to examine the formation and maintenance of masculine identity. Finally, I outline the purpose and scope of the proposed research effort.

### **Masculinity as a Social Problem**

The ongoing performance of masculinity has significant social implications that impact men's physical and psychological health, crime and unemployment, and interpersonal relationships. The idea that gender in general, and masculinity in particular, is performed is not a new one. Goffman (1977) noted that the nature of gendered performance in social interactions is messy and precarious. It is a performance that is an expression of what societal forces deem natural and which must be continually enacted in

public. Others have placed social interaction central to experiencing masculinity and note that we “do gender” in routine everyday practices and interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). While Goffman viewed performances as reflective of the scripts’ nooks and crannies of societal conventions concerning gender, West and Zimmerman saw the displays as more of an exercise in improvisational performance where an actor is continually adjusting his/her actions to adapt to current and developing norms of gender prescriptions. In short, the performance and enactment of masculinity play out in a social milieu that continually reinforces expressions of gendered identity. Importantly, these expressions are acted out in social structures that reflect deep structures inherent in the historical and situational contexts in which they are embedded (Kimmel, 2006). The acts themselves and the results of those practices have substantial social implications concerning all actors and to society at large. In other words, the expression, or the doing, of masculinity has an array of social consequences both for and beyond the social actor. Indeed, the implications touch a variety of areas of concern such as physical and mental health, relational well-being, and more significant social issues.

The performance of masculinity is one that results in significant psychological stress and anxiety as men attempt to prove manliness in formalized ritual (Gilmore, 1990; Kimmel, 2006). Anthropological and psychological examinations across cultures have noted that pervasive anxiety accompanies manhood rituals. Whether proving spiritual worth by tearing of the flesh by a young warrior in the sun dance of the Lakota Sioux, the bloody circumcision of adolescent boys of the Masai or Samburu of East Africa, the whipping contests of boys of the Ambura of Ethiopia, or the ongoing sexual conquests by young men of the Mehinaku of the rain forest of Brazil, young men gain acceptance only



if successful in their respective performances to be regarded by their societies as men (Gilmore, 1990; Gregor, 1977, Hassrick, 2012; Levine, 1966). Anxiety at the possibility of failure is a typical cultural experience for these adolescents facing performances of manhood. Even after the successful accomplishment of these tasks, young men in many cultures report anticipation at their next test of masculinity with angst.

While pre-industrial society rituals produced ongoing anxiety for young men, post-industrial experiences are not immune to a similar anxiety-provoking process of proving manly worth. Scholars have suggested that the absence of formalized ritual in postindustrial societies may produce anxiety in modern men (Kimmel, 2006). To be sure, organizations such as the military or fraternities offer some rites of passage for young men to formally enter manhood. Yet wider rituals of manhood are mostly absent from American life, and young men are left without formalized guidance for performances of masculinity. Therefore, contemporary men in postmodern societies may suffer increased anxiety and stress over self-perceptions of manhood as a result of the lack of rites of passage, and seek to relieve that anxiety through their ad hoc communicative efforts (Kimmel, 2008).

There is considerable empirical and theoretical support across disciplines for the view that the performance of masculinity invokes psychological trauma. Early psychological attempts at identifying gender roles resulted in the finding that men suffer a variety of anxiety and stress-related discrepancies that complicate the process of defining their masculinity (Pleck, 1981). In fact, the Gender Role Strain Paradigm suggests the anxiety of conforming to societal norms for masculinity can result in what is described as discrepancy strain, in which failing to reach male norms places tremendous

stress on the psychological and emotional processes of the actor (Pleck, 1987).

Dysfunctional strain may also result from actually achieving societal norms of masculinity, but in reaching the standard, one somehow negatively affects oneself and others in a social circle (Levant & Richmond, 2008). For example, one may successfully enact an idealized masculine behavior, like refusal to engage in child-rearing activities, and consequently, realize lower partner satisfaction in the relationship. Also, trauma strain, or strain associated with marginalized and minority male groups who try to enact prevailing male norms, may affect populations such as men of color, veterans, and survivors of child abuse (Levant, 1992). These marginalized groups navigate additional challenges when attempting expressions of idealized masculinity and pay the price with high instances of anxiety associated with failure to reach such norms.

Finally, attempts by average men to reach normative male standards have been linked to Alexithymia, or the inability to express emotions (Levant, 1992). It may be that struggling to reach the idealized form of manhood, which frequently devalues emotional expression, renders the actor incapable of processing or even feeling a variety of emotions. This inability to process emotions presents men with additional challenges in maintaining personal and intimate relationships.

The resulting stress from such strain on the male personality can have physical health implications. One sample of men showed a significant baseline testosterone level spike during and after gender threatening social interactions (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987). Such variations can have long-term health consequences such as hypertension, heart disease, and immune dysfunction over time. Additional health issues can be conceptually connected to the problematic issue of performing masculinity. By adopting and

implementing dominant forms of masculinity, men may engage in activities that affect their physical health in negative ways. Ongoing demonstrations of masculinity can significantly undermine good health practices. Such performances may result in engagement in risky health practices like smoking or heavy drinking, avoidance in seeking medical care when injured or sick, refusal to engage in preventative health screenings, and episodes of violence resulting in injury or death (Courtenay, 2000). Indeed, one meta-analysis demonstrated that men are more likely than women to engage in 14 of 16 risk-taking behaviors that can endanger health (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999). These findings can conceptually be linked to the ongoing performance of masculinity where men feel the need to prove they possess idealized manly qualities and therefore shortchange positive health behaviors or engage in risky health practices.

The result of performances in the pursuit of endorsed male roles is that men often shortchange their mental well-being because of the social stigma related to dominant norms of masculinity (Vogel, Wester, Hammer, & Downing-Matibag, 2014). Men frequently fail to seek mental health services because of threats to masculine identity. More precisely, and timely, is that members of the armed forces, bastions of hyper-masculine performances, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and endorse “toughness” as a masculine trait, report more symptoms related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Jakupcak, Blais, Grossbard, Garcia, & Okiishi, 2014). The stigma associated with appearing weak or unmanly to fellow organizational members seems to discourage seeking necessary emotional and psychological counseling. As a result, military members are left alone to navigate this damaging disorder without proper support or resources. Overall, the existing literature points to the persistent negative relationship between

common performances of idealized masculinity and men's health (Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Connell 2005; Robertson, 2007). Gender threats perceived by men seem to lead to a greater likelihood of adverse health outcomes.

A litany of additional social issues can arise because of the problematic expression of ideal manhood norms. Reports have demonstrated that conformity to traditional masculine norms can negatively affect relational satisfaction for women and men in heterosexual relationships (Burn & Ward, 2005). Expression of masculinity is conceptually linked to various violent crimes in the US and abroad (Messerschmidt 1993). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of crime is committed by men (Krienert, 2003). The literature suggests that in attempts to act out dominant forms of masculinity, men often invoke toughness, dominance, and a willingness to use violence to solve conflict, leading to a variety of crimes. Of particular concern in this area of gendered violence is the frequency and level of violence perpetrated by men against women. Performances of masculinity regularly manifest in bruised and battered bodies of women (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). Indeed, manifestations of challenged masculinity have been conceptually linked to murder-suicides in relational dyads and families (Oliffe, J. et al., 2007). Men may react to challenges or perceived shortcomings of manhood in violent displays against women in attempts to realize the ever fleeting and unreachable ideal of masculinity. Relatedly, scholarship has explored the correlations between cultural constructions of masculinity and the reification of hyper-masculine norms in prison populations (Karp, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2001). Prisoners engage in discourses of hyper-masculinized performance to establish standards of manhood in these dangerous environments. In such an inherently hazardous atmosphere, building one's manly

credentials involves facing the constant threat of failure with potentially damaging consequences.

**College-age men.** It is a steep terrain that young men attempt to navigate during the age range of 18-24. This crucial developmental stage in identity development is one in which young men enter a metaphorical no man's land. It is a time when most men enter work or school and are for the first time physically independent, yet still mostly dependent on the economic resources of their parents (Kimmel, 2008). They are neither considered entirely men or entirely boys and this time is marked by the heightened exploration of self-identity, interpersonal relationships, societal roles, and cognitive development (Harper & Harris, 2010). College men inhabit a tenuous position where their identities straddle the worlds of men and boys.

The variety of social issues conceptually linked to the performance of masculinity are especially salient in the population of traditional college-age men. A litany of problems has plagued college campus fraternities in recent years, including sexual misconduct and abuse, bigotry, everyday sexism, and institutionalized racism (McDonough, 2015). Also, reports have indicated ongoing concerns with college-age men alcohol and substance abuse (Courtenay, 2011; Iwamoto et al., 2011), relational violence (Kilmartin, 2014), depression (Pollack, 1998), and overrepresentation of campus judicial offenders (Redden, 2009). The crucial formative years of college-age men present a variety of identity challenges that may contribute to any number of physical and psychological problematic issues.

Despite the litany of issues college men face when exploring their emerging masculinity, a lack of support concerning men's issues exist on college campuses

(Kimmel, 2011). Harper and Harris (2010) outline this absence of support for college men on campuses and call for increased scholarship on college-age men. They note that male students have historically enjoyed a majority in institutions of higher learning and an advantage regarding opportunities in broad society. As a result, most gender-related examinations of students have focused (rightly) on leveling the playing field for women. Gender studies and initiatives have overwhelmingly focused on the challenges that women face in higher education and beyond. This focus has, in turn, led to assumptions that men in college are unproblematic and free of issues concerning gender identity; men have a consistent set of privileged experiences that lead to an ongoing advantage in future endeavors. Harris and Harper suggest that this has led to what they refer to as the Model Gender Majority Myth. The MGMM leads to several assumptions about college men. It suggests that all men benefit from gender privilege and that gender programs need not include men. Additionally, such a perspective suggests that men do not suffer from negative stereotypes, do not need gender-specific resources, and that their gender ensures success. Such an attitude downplays the needs of young men during a pivotal time in their gender development. By focusing on men as having consistent and universal experiences, scholarship programs have neglected to examine the multiple experiences of masculinity and have not adequately developed practical tools to address the variety of challenges to populations of young men.

These institutional challenges to exploring gender identity during a pivotal time frame are additionally exacerbated and problematized by the ongoing experiences of race, social class, material conditions, and emerging sexual orientation. This daunting existential landscape is where developing young men are directed to perform their

expression of manhood in ways that will influence their future as well as the wellbeing of society. While researchers have mapped this terrain using a variety of perspectives, the discursive and communicative structure which young men use to construct, negotiate, and maintain masculine identity are underdeveloped and deserve increased attention.

Development of a communication-centric theory of masculinity can be revealing and descriptive of the reasons for the precarious nature of masculinity.

### **Masculinity as a Communication Problem**

The social reality of masculinity is created at the intersection of communicative enactment and material circumstances (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Such is the central communication tenet that guides my approach to the exploration of discourse's role in the enactment and maintenance of college men's management of masculinity. Discourse takes center stage for the constitution of masculinity as men interact with other social actors and material circumstance in expressing and negotiating their idealized conceptions of manhood. Discourses represent the evolving cultural scripts that guide understanding and assist in creating social reality concerning gender (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). Discourses express masculine identity and create the social reality of masculinity. It is through this social construction that we come to define, negotiate, and experience gender. Through discourse and other communicative actions, we not only "do gender," but engage in an ongoing creation and recreation of the construct (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, examining communicative performances becomes central to the understanding of masculinity. Masculinity, it seems, is at its heart a communication problem.

Gilmore's (1990) landmark anthropological examination of manhood rituals around the world highlights the extent to which cultures endorse communicative performances of manhood. He notes the precarious nature of the expression of manhood across these varied cultures. After significant theorizing, he concludes that the answer to what he calls the "manhood puzzle" must lie in the careful examination of culture. Culture is, to borrow from his lexicon, a piece of the manhood puzzle. Understanding gender, however, as a complex identity construct is incomplete without placing discourse central to inquiry. Discourse can be viewed as fundamental to understanding the creation and symbolic experience of culture. A discursive approach views discourse as not just loosely coupled symbols of culture, but one that sees language in use as constituting meaning within a culture or an organization (Alvesson, 2004). Discourse in action constitutes the social reality that forms, constrains, and enables culture. So to understand the gender construct of masculinity, one must attend to the discursive practices in an organization or social setting.

Discursive expressions of masculinity are essential to understanding how men, consciously and unconsciously, experience themselves as masculine. Indeed, through communicative efforts, they enact, create, maintain, and negotiate their notions of manhood. This communication-centric perspective is best described by Chesbro & Fuse (2001) in the process of their development of a perceived masculinity scale. So central is discourse to the communication-centric view, that masculinity is conceptualized as the "study of the discourses and the effects of the discourses generated by men, unifying men, and revealing the identity and characteristics men ascribe to themselves, others, and their environment" (Chesbro & Fuse, 2001). I agree with their position that the construct



of masculinity is one that is socially and symbolically structured in interaction. Through discursive action, we create our identity as a particular type of masculinity, and we engage in ongoing negotiation of the construct in everyday micro-practices. Masculinity is discursively performed, thus allowing it to be researched by observing text and interaction in a variety of contexts.

Importantly, a communication position does not see masculinity as a stable concept, but one that shifts over time and is interdependent with culture and the interactive communicative processes within that culture (Berger, 1995; Spitzack, 1998). Masculinity is a social construct that emerges in everyday discourses with other members of the culture and is affected by social structure. This is not to say that masculinity varies in interaction every time. Stable social structures influence how men define masculinity and communicate the ideal forms of manhood as framed by societal forces (Connell, 2007). These types seem natural to men as they act on prescribed scripts of manhood. However, conceptions of masculinity are embedded in the social interactions in which we participate, and different forms of manhood emerge through those communicative efforts. Therefore, communication becomes central to understanding how gender is creatively constituted, negotiated, and performed in interaction.

Despite my stance that communication is constitutive of masculinity, materiality also plays a pivotal role in the construction of gender. Theorists have warned of the danger of falling into a form of text positivism when adopting a strong social constructionist view regarding social reality and communication practices (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Text positivism suggests that all social reality is socially constructed regardless of the material circumstances of social actors. Communication

indeed takes a central role in how men enact their masculinity and perform gender. But the symbolic position of communication creating social reality is bounded by a number of issues located in macro social structures and material realities (Fotaki, Metcalfe, & Harding, 2014). For example, a young man can perceive he is the idealized financier Gordon Gekko from the movie *Wall Street*. He can engage in discursive action that defines him as wealthy, powerful, and financially ruthless. But if he inhabits a marginalized position in the economic structure, this image of the business mogul is difficult, if not impossible, to create and maintain in the gaze of other social actors. The young man is constrained by material realities such as economic status, race, class, and a variety of different social factors. Masculinity is subject to the material reality of social structure as well as the symbolic construction of the construct.

Additional material realities combine to affect the material-symbolic constitution of gender and masculinity. A useful orientation to this view is to take into account the objects, sites, and bodies that can severely alter constitutive efforts during the communicative processes that enact and manage masculinity (Robichaud & Cooren, 2013). The materiality of objects such as technology and artifacts will undoubtedly affect how men define their masculinities. Workplace sites will modify interaction rules and the resources that might constrain or enable communicative efforts in the expression and constitution of manhood. Finally, men's body types, markings, physical attributions, and accouterments serve to empower or disavow interpretive efforts on the part of men.

Meisenbach (2008) further problematized materiality and the process of identity work by framing identity in a postmodern context of fragmented and multiple forms dependent upon the balancing of the discursive and material. Her examination of

fundraisers in education suggests that fundraising professionals shift discursive frames through conversation to manage and negotiate multiple identities in reaction to external negative or positive perceptions of the profession and the material necessities of raising funds for the institution. These professionals carefully negotiate the tensions present between the material realities of the job and the various identities associated with the profession. Through the process, the worker can react to the multiple stigmas that might be related to the profession and discursively manage their identity. I believe there is significant conceptual overlap to apply this tensioning process to how men construct masculine identity in the face of material realities. Faced with multiple cultural scripts concerning masculinity, men have to balance various material circumstances with their conceptions of what it means to be masculine. They negotiate numerous tensions in material contexts to perform their multiple masculine identities.

Closely related to the materiality and its effect on gender identity is intersectionality. Researchers have called for continued development concerning intersectionality of various factors about gender and masculinity (Holvino, 2010; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). Issues such as race, social class, ethnicity, and sexual identity each individually impact how a man makes sense of and constructs his idea of masculinity. Such variables simultaneously empower and limit how and when men can enact various masculinities in different contexts.

Scholars have noted the importance of examining the issue of gender, class, race, and sexual identity simultaneously to ascertain their roles in the construction of gendered identity (Holvino, 2010). These variables do not operate in isolation but are co-present when men attempt to make sense of and express masculine norms. Organizational

scholars have tried to address these issues by examining masculinity in relation to working and managerial classes (Mumby, 1998). Others have attempted to investigate the interplay of class, masculinity, and power simultaneously, delineating the dialectic relationship between power and resistance concerning gender in an organizational context (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

Dougherty (2011) offers one of the most comprehensive and compelling communication-centered examinations of intersectionality and gender in her study of social class and food production in a Midwest farming community. Overlaying gender, social class, and race, she demonstrates how socially constructed and material variables are interwoven to present powerful obstacles to how farmers discursively constitute and manage their professional identity as food producers. Communication is the mortar that binds these overlapping forces in an ongoing struggle to negotiate issues of class, gender, and race in relation to farming (Dougherty, 2011). Communication is the tool which marks the often unmarked struggle of class, marginalizes and empowers gender identity relations, and often reinforces societal race structures. Dougherty's examination highlights the value in attending to simultaneous and intersecting forces such as race and social class in the experience of masculinity for college-age men. Negotiating the ideal of manhood as defined by cultural forces is a daunting task. Adding to the mix material restraints and experiences of race, sexual identity, and social class makes even more precarious the process of creating and managing masculine identity.

This study will attend to the role and manner in which material circumstance marks the ongoing construction of Precarious Masculinity. In short, I adopt a material consciousness when examining the constitutive efforts of young men in the experience of

manhood. I also attend to the various factors of race, sexual identity, and social class and how they intersect to limit or empower the experience of masculinity for college-age men.

Given the scholarly evidence from a variety of disciplines, it seems the issue of precarious masculinity can be most usefully investigated as a communication problem. Not only does this approach appear closer to the core question under examination, but a communication perspective addresses gaps in the research concerning masculinity and gender. A proper study of masculinity should lend itself to exploring the balance between materiality and communicative performance while also attending to the various intersectional characteristics that mark the enactment and maintenance of this complex construct. Utilizing core concepts of Precarious Manhood and Hegemonic Masculinity, I offer Precarious Masculinity as a communication-centered lens to explore how men discursively construct, negotiate, and maintain masculine identity.

### **Precarious Manhood and Hegemonic Masculinity**

To begin addressing the issues related to discursively creating and negotiating notions of manhood, I turn to two theoretical foundations that can together offer insight into men's common experiences and to the various forces that affect and constrain the expectations of masculinity. Precarious Manhood provides a lens to examine the seemingly universal experience of masculinity as tenuous and fleeting. Hegemonic Masculinity offers a frame to view the various powerful forces that both limit and empower the expression of masculinity. Together, the two perspectives provide a powerful tool through which to examine what I am calling Precarious Masculinity.

Ideal manhood is an experience that is at once hard, if not impossible to gain, and quickly lost in social performances (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Such is the linchpin claim in the theoretical perspective of Precarious Manhood. An approach utilized in the field of psychology, Precarious Manhood has uncovered useful understandings concerning masculinity and claims that manhood is at once elusive, tenuous, and requiring of continuous social proof (Vandello et al., 2008). Research utilizing this perspective has been successful in highlighting the psychological anxiety and stress that accompanies the experience of performing manhood in a variety of cultural rituals and social settings.

While Precarious Manhood has uncovered the fleeting nature and accompanying angst men feel when expressing masculinity, it does a less efficient job of revealing the social structures that make the achievement of manhood problematic. The Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity has been successful in addressing these issues. A critical theory emerging from the sociology discipline, Hegemonic Masculinity focuses on examining vital elements of social structures that reveal the various circumstances leading to the precarious state of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Building on the concept of hegemony first conceptualized by Gramsci, Hegemonic Masculinity refers to the culturally idealized form of the masculine held by a society or culture (Connell, 1990). These idealized forms spring from and are reinforced by dominant political and religious institutions, popular culture, and various social entities within a given culture and come to be normalized over time. These social structures wield significant power over how men define and experience masculine

identity. Similar to the tenets present in Precarious Manhood, men continually fall short of realizing ideal forms of manhood and suffer angst and stress as a result.

Precarious Manhood and Hegemonic Masculinity used together provide a robust approach to examining the communicative performances utilized to enact and negotiate the precarious state of masculinity for young men. Concepts borrowed from both positions allow the construct to be delineated by constitutive communication practices that are bounded by the material circumstances that balance actor perspectives of masculinity.

### **Purpose**

The proposed study will examine how college-age men enact, negotiate, and manage precarious masculinity as material and discursive expressions. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with young men to explore how they experience and enact masculinity given important structural and material constraints. First, the perspectives of Precarious Manhood and Hegemonic Masculinity will be examined as orienting theories with which to guide identification of relevant emerging themes that provide an understanding of the experience of precarious masculinity by college-age men. A review of pertinent literature will then be explored to highlight the relevant findings and conceptual clarification of issues concerning masculinity in various disciplines and within communication studies. The review of literature is followed by a description of the methodological approach, design, data collection procedures, and method of analysis utilized in the proposed research. Discussion of findings will be offered based on resulting grounded theory analysis. I will then identify a communication-centric theory

that might guide future research into discourse and masculine identity formation and maintenance. Finally, limitations and future directions for further research are explored.



## Chapter 2—Literature Review

As I prepare this summary of pertinent masculinity literature, universities and colleges across the nation are facing increasing scrutiny concerning the bad behavior of groups of young men. Alerted by an internal whistleblower, an investigation found that two private Facebook pages maintained by the Pennsylvania State University Kappa Delta Rho Fraternity chapter openly discussed the use and sale of illegal drugs and distributed nude images of unconscious women in various stages of undress and compromising positions. Further investigation revealed a culture that tolerated and encouraged systematic violent hazing rituals, ongoing sexist behavior, drug use and sales, and other dangerous and sometimes illegal behavior. As troubling as the Penn State incident is, it is only one scandal in a long line of recent misbehaviors by college Fraternity members. Fraternities from a diverse collection of institutions like Georgia Tech, Arizona, Yale, Wesleyan University, Arizona State, Clemson, Michigan, Cal State, and Ohio State have been implicated in a variety of scandals including holding racists parties, engaging in dangerous hazing activities, sexual misconduct, encouraging rape practices, excessive alcohol and illegal drug consumption, and more (Panzar, 2015). Clearly, there is something wrong with either the fraternity system or the universities in which they reside.

Embedded within the various commentaries examining these ongoing issues in American fraternities is the observation by sociologist Michael Kimmel that many of these shocking practices can be conceptually linked to how men learn about becoming a "real man" in modern society (McDonough, 2015). Kimmel suggests that young men in fraternities are acting out what popular culture and uninformed peers reinforce about

being a "real man." This performance often means engaging in behaviors that encourage risk-taking, physical aggression, sexual predation, and hostility toward co-sexual lifestyles. This is in sharp contrast to what many early childhood influences like families, churches, and schools teach about being a "good man." What plays out through this seemingly contradictory tension is what various scholars have termed the "crisis" in masculinity (Knights & Tulberg, 2011). This oft-used characterization of masculinity in crisis stems from the compound, often uneven, and anxiety provoking construct that so dominates men's attempt to construct masculine identity.

The literature concerning masculinity, in general, is voluminous and fragmented indeed. Examinations of masculinity overlap and straddle disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication studies, and management studies to name a few. The picture emerging from the literature is that masculinity is a construct that is not entirely captured by one discipline but represented by multiple conditions of the psychological, economic, medical, communicative, social, legal, and structural imperatives (Berger & Weems, 1995). While perspectives are varied, there are also frequent themes concerning the enactment and maintenance of masculinity that emerge across disciplines. The expression and experience of masculine performance is one that is anxiety-ridden and stressful. Masculinity is a cognitive and emotional state that is hard won, easily lost, subject to various macro and microstructures, created and maintained through discursive and symbolic performances, historically and contextually situated, intersected and influenced by a variety of social and personal characteristics such as race and class, laden with issues of power and resistance, and constantly in flux despite dominant narratives and macrostructures.

The research on masculinity has consistently captured the scholarly and popular imagination and has resulted in a dramatic proliferation of monographs, journals, books, anthologies, and studies (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). Scholars, however, have noted the conceptual vagueness that often accompanies popular and empirical examinations of the construct of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Perhaps, in the case of studies where the researcher is male, this is one example of those concentric to the center often being too close to the subject and unable to position themselves appropriately (Mumby, 1998). Another explanation of this lack of conceptual clarity may be that while most cultures have a concept of gender, not all have a concept of masculinity (Connell, 2005). While conceptual definitions are not always explicit, there is still a preponderance of attempts to capture an adequate description of this construct from a variety of paradigmatic approaches.

Given the multiple influences on gender, organizing the broad and multidisciplinary findings concerning the emergence and maintenance of masculinity is a challenge. To help orient the reader and open my discussion on masculinity, I first examine two influential theoretical perspectives that I intend to use as orienting devices for the creation of the communication theory of Precarious Masculinity. I then proceed to explore the various critical conceptual areas that identify pivotal developments in the exploration of masculinity. Each area offers unique insights in the enactment of masculinity, often building upon and delineating on concepts provided by coexisting perspectives. Approaching the examination of this gendered construct in this manner allows a multifaceted, yet synthesizing method that paints a picture of masculinity that is

understandably complex, but can serve as an informative guide to examining the construct and developing an emerging theory of masculinity.

### **Precarious Manhood**

The theory of Precarious Manhood outlines masculinity as a tenuous, temporary state for men in any culture. It is an experience that is hard to gain, even more difficult to maintain, and can be easily lost during manly performances (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Manhood is something that is demonstrated in social interaction, ritualized displays, and discursive performances. That demonstration is continually under public scrutiny and subject to a social jury that can swiftly and permanently reject a man's claim that he is masculine.

The heart of Precarious Manhood is dependent on three assumptions (Vandello et al., 2008). First, manhood is conceptualized as a status that is achieved through demonstration of manly qualities valued by a particular culture and is elusive. Manhood is something that is earned in public through symbolic actions. The second assumption is that manhood status is one that is tenuous and can be easily lost through either the failure to perform some action or acting in a manner inconsistent with social conventions of manhood. Finally, manhood requires ongoing public demonstrations of masculine traits and behaviors and is primarily granted by others (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Manhood represents a desired, but a largely unattainable idea that may be briefly won, yet inevitably lost. It is a state of individual knowing and identity that is constantly under threat from social forces that threaten to strip the actor of his status within a social context.

The reality of social scrutiny and possibility of being stripped of the status of manhood leads to tremendous and ongoing anxiety for men (Vandello et al., 2008). Being a man requires constant social proof beyond formalized rituals of manhood or natural biological development. Therefore, a man is always engaged in performances as a man, whether through symbolic displays, ongoing social interaction, or discursive effort. The angst related to establishing oneself as properly masculine may be further complicated in modern industrial societies which often lack formalized rituals that signal passage from boyhood to manhood (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). A lack of ritual and formality denies young men an explicit endorsement of manhood by peers and social role models. Therefore, there remains an absence of a clear demarcation of where boyhood ends and manhood begins.

The Precarious Manhood thesis has generated robust research that is supportive of its central tenets. An early exploration into the thesis using direct and indirect measures suggests that men and women view the mantle of manhood to be dependent upon social factors rather than the physical factors that most frequently ascribe womanhood (Vandello et al., 2008). The theory suggests that men must pass several social tests to be considered a man and that the status is earned in a display of manly qualities explicitly promoted by the viewing public. The status of man, then, is an elusive one that must be earned, not ascribed to simple biological development. Further evidence from the same study suggests that as well as being elusive, manhood can be easily lost through incorrect navigation of social norms for masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008). Surveys indicate that men and women endorse the notion that manhood is easy to lose through social factors, such as losing a job, and also through physical factors such as growing physically weaker

over time. This was directly opposite for perceptions of womanhood which were ascribed to biological development. Additional research has supported the notion that manhood is bequeathed by the public and requires ongoing action to gain, maintain, or restore (Weaver, Vandello, Bosson, Burnaford; 2010). Manhood seems to coalesce most frequently around the notion of action. Manhood is something that men have to do rather than something they are naturally.

Given that manhood is an elusive state and that it is always threatened and subject to interrogation, it is no surprise that more anxiety may be experienced by men than women when establishing gender identity (Vandello et al., 2008). Support for this claim can be observed in early psychological measures of gender role stress concerning masculine identity. This perspective suggests that men suffer greater anxiety concerning their perceived gender roles when compared to their perceived personal characteristics (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Pleck, 1995). Research using the Precarious Manhood thesis reinforces this claim. When presented with gender threatening feedback concerning stereotypically male tasks, men identify more anxiety-laden words than women responding to feedback concerning stereotypically female tasks (Vandello et al., 2008). Gender threats, always present because of the elusive and tenuous nature of masculinity, seem to provoke increased stress that is ongoing and manifested in cognitive assessments of masculine identity.

Cognitive consequences related to threatened masculinity such as heightened anxiety can manifest themselves in a variety of ways that affect the physiological and social wellbeing of men and social contexts. Cortisol, the body's hormone response to stress brought on by socially perceived threats in the environment, can sharply spike in

men in reaction to gender threatening incidents (Caswell, Bosson, Vandello, & Sellers, 2014). Consistent body chemistry reactions to the anxiety produced by the precarious nature of manhood could lead to long-term health effects such as hypertension and immunity issues. Therefore, the cognitive states heightened by the tenuousness of masculinity can affect the physical health of men.

The fleeting nature of masculinity also has various social implications for interpersonal and organizational settings. Since men must always prove their manliness, they must engage in displays consistent with notions of manliness. For example, men who were asked to first engage in a perceived gender threatening feminine task, like hair braiding, chose to follow up with aggressive displays of punching and violence (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, and Wasti, 2009). Again, men engaged in aggressive gender reinforcing behavior more frequently than women. It seems that when manliness is threatened in some way, men feel the need to restore their manliness by acting out with physical action and toughness to reestablish manly worth.

The Precarious Manhood perspective has also provided insight into organizational issues such as financial risk-taking and perceptions of unemployment. For example, one study highlighted that when masculinity is threatening during gambling, men will place higher and more aggressive bets in an attempt to address gender threats (Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson, 2013). Men who are challenged because of conservative financial management may seek to restore their status as men by engaging in risky financial behavior. This finding gives insight into extreme risk-taking in financial organizations that can lead to devastating economic consequences like the recession of the early 2000s. Men also seem to react to unemployment as a threat to their masculine status. One study

showed that men differ considerably from women in that they perceived the loss of employment as a threat to their gender identity (Michniewicz, Vandello, & Bosson, 2014). Furthermore, they perceive that others will judge them more harshly and negatively as manly after a job loss. Data collected from women participants in the study, however, showed that women judged men much less harshly or negatively than participant men thought. This finding suggests that unemployment further adds to men's uncertainty in perceptions of manhood and the importance that men place on employment in their ongoing performances of masculinity.

Precarious Manhood contributes much to our understanding of masculinity and has great potential to give further insight into the nature of masculine identity. It has clearly demonstrated the anxiety that accompanies the ongoing performances of masculinity and that manhood is ascribed in public displays that are easily revoked by others in social systems. Indeed, it has demonstrated the possible cognitive and social implications of this precarious experience of gender. It is not, however, without some limitations as a frame for examining communicative efforts of young men when enacting masculinity.

Three common critiques have been enunciated concerning the Precarious Manhood perspective. First, Precarious Manhood is a perspective that focuses on the negative features of male gender without offering an understanding of the forces that shape male identity or a way of counterbalancing the deficits of masculinity (Heesack & Snowden, 2013). Some critique the perspective for an overemphasis on the precarious nature of the construct, and the possibility that this expectation of the negative might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy that shapes male behavior. Others have critiqued the



perspective for merely being depressing. Further, Precarious Manhood theory seems to imply inevitability and helplessness on the part of men in defining their manhood. Critics, therefore, call for an examination of the circumstances under which precariousness arises and why masculinity remains precarious in modern social structures (Heesacker & Snowden, 2013). It seems a focus on how the deficit view of Precarious Manhood is enacted *and* counteracted by men would be more informative of the masculinity construct.

Scholars have suggested a greater emphasis on the modern cultural and structural elements that enable and constrain the experience of masculinity. One conceptual view on Precarious Manhood is an evolutionary perspective that suggests men have traditionally had to engage in ritual displays to protect resources, gain prestige, exercise dominance over other males and attract suitable mates (Winegard, Winegard, & Geary, 2013). Given the complexity of modern cultural contexts, masculinity should be viewed as a less monolithic construct, and researchers should attend to the various social structures and subcultural texts that counterbalance the precarious nature of the construct.

The last concern of Precarious Manhood for the purpose of this investigation involves its emphasis on cognitive functions rather than communicative behavior. The theory provides little insight as to how the tenuous process of experiencing masculinity might be manifested in communication. One primary aim of this study is to address this issue and gain understanding about these discursive processes.

One perspective that can assist in addressing some of these issues is that of Hegemonic Masculinity. This critical perspective focuses on exploring critical elements of social structures of power, production, and emotional complexity that may reveal the

various circumstances leading to the precarious state of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Hegemonic Masculinity shares many overlaps with Precarious Manhood while addressing key criticisms of the stance and can provide an avenue to more fully understand the masculine construct.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Connell's (1990) landmark theoretical construct of masculinity addresses the powerful influences inherent to social structures that empower and limit how men and women perceive, define, and maintain gender. Hegemonic Masculinity refers to the dominant forces within society that favor one type of masculinity over others within economic, educational, social, and organizational contexts. Emerging from studies of social inequality in Australian High Schools, Hegemonic Masculinity originated as a critique of sex role theories and their attempts to essentialize masculinity as a unified, generalizable construct (Connell, 2005). What emerged from this analysis was a general theory of gender that made claims for the existence of multiple masculinities that were subject to powerful social structures that affected how men and women experience gender relations.

A significant concept of the theory is derived from Marxist theory in Gramsci's analysis of class relations (Connell, 1995). The idea of hegemony promotes the view that a dominant or ruling class can strongly affect the value system of general society in such a way that their cultural system is accepted as the right or correct view of reality. The dominant view becomes the taken for granted worldview of cultural norms and is continuously reinforced by social institutions and structures through which they communicate to subordinate classes. Within social class, there exists room for

challenging these taken for granted views, but cultural hegemony suggests that these dominant forms exert tremendous influence on how members of a group accurately perceive a cultural reality.

Hegemonic Masculinity extends the concept into the realm of gender and is informative as to how the construct of masculinity is experienced by social actors. Hegemonic Masculinity is defined as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (Connell, 1990). Put another way; it represents “the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates on the terrain of ‘common sense’ and conventional morality” (Hanke, 1990). This privileged form of masculinity informs how men define manhood and what forms of manhood may be less acceptable. Importantly, very few men embody the idealized form of masculinity, but often endorse the dominant form since they benefit from dominant patriarchal forms that mark most Western societies.

Three elements are essential for understanding the relationship between Hegemonic Masculinity and individual men’s development of masculine identity. Power relationships in western culture have overwhelmingly favored men to the disadvantage and often detriment of women (Connell, 2005). Whether the head of household or the corporation, patriarchal forms are the norm and social power has firmly been embedded in gender relations favoring men. Similarly, production relations have favored male standards. Economic distribution and access to capital sharply favor men in most industrialized societies. Finally, Connell also suggests that Cathexis, or sexual desire, in our society has privileged men in standards of sexual behavior and desire. Indeed, often women’s emotional and physical needs in matters of Cathexis are completely ignored in

favor of male norms. As Connell posits, men are concentric to the powerful structural bases of modern industrialized societies and should benefit from the hegemonic forms that have resulted from such dominance.

The rise of feminist theorizing and changing modern structures of economy have challenged existing gender relationships of power, production, and cathexis. Familial power relationships have shifted significantly in the past century with women taking greater responsibility and more proactive roles in family decisions. Relationships of production have altered with more women entering the workforce and occupying central positions in economic decision making and increased power in economic structure. The sexual revolution of the seventies led the charge to a new focus on women's, as opposed to men's, emotional and physical needs and desires as appropriate and valued.

The notion of Hegemonic Masculinity complicates relations in all societal issues related to gender. Connell notes that multiple masculinities exist in subcultures under the covering umbrella of hegemony (Connell, 1995). But, while the hegemonic form of masculinity holds sway over the cultural ideal of manhood, areas of resistance concerning the definition of masculinity do emerge as communities of men assemble based on a variety unifying commonalities such as sexual identity or economic status. As alternate male communities appear, however, these forms of masculinity are subordinated to the traditional norm of masculinity, and an anxious struggle ensues between the micro discourses of men. This struggle between competing forms is further complicated because men as a gender are privileged, and complicit, in maintaining social structures that overwhelmingly favor men. Therefore, while men from alternate male communities might challenge existing norms of masculinity, they nevertheless benefit from existing

gender relations in general and are not likely to successfully redefine dominant perceptions of manliness. To complicate matters more, challenges to the dominant form of masculinity are further undermined by issues of race, economic status, and class in addition to a variety of factors that result in the marginalization of groups of men in relation to dominant conceptions of masculinity.

The interrelated issues of gender relations and multiple male communities combined to make the enactment and maintenance of masculinity a difficult and precarious task. Evolving gender relations place a man in the position of modifying notions of masculinity while competing against powerful structures that reify and reinforce traditional notions of manliness. Further complicating the process is his complicity in enforcing norms to his benefit, the existence of competing male communities vying for a voice in the process, and the subordination and marginalization of groups due to issues like class and race that intersect with existing gender relations. The result for men is a crisis tendency concerning the enactment of masculinity (Connell, 2005). With so many competing voices and a powerful hegemonic way of knowing, it is little wonder that men face a great deal of angst and stress in the enactment of masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity has proven influential in a variety of fields and yielded significant progress for masculinity studies. The theory, however, has been critiqued for various conceptual issues. Criticisms of Hegemonic Masculinity include a de-emphasis concerning issues of power, ambiguity concerning who actually represents the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, a blanket characterization of masculinity associated as negative, and a lack of discussion concerning the patterns of gender relations (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell has addressed such concerns and reformulated Hegemonic Masculinity based on the careful analysis of these critiques. One critique that particularly resonates for the purpose of this study is that Hegemonic Masculinity fails to examine how men position themselves in relation to dominant forms of masculinity through ongoing discursive efforts. Connell notes that men negotiate multiple meanings of masculinity in relation to hegemonic forms and it is through discursive practices that men manage masculine identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). She and others have called for a continued examination of discourse in practice to ascertain how “boys and men choose those discursive positions that help them ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness”. The current study seeks to address this issue to examine how masculinities are constructed and used in discourse.

Hegemonic Masculinity provides a lens through which to examine the interrelated social structure elements that lead to an experience of masculinity for men that is continuously negotiated in an ongoing struggle against dominant masculine forms. Precarious Manhood provides a lens that explores the anxiety and stress related to the tenuous, short-lived, and ever-challenged experience of manhood that can lead to a variety of social and interpersonal problems. Neither perspective offers a communication-centered examination of how college men constitute, manage, and negotiate masculinity in light of cognitive, cultural, structural, and intersectional issues. Combining the two theories with a focus on communicative processes addresses this deficit and provides a new perspective I call Precarious Masculinity.

### **Precarious Masculinity**

Precarious Masculinity combines Hegemonic Masculinity and Precarious Manhood perspectives to offer a new theoretical lens through which to examine the masculine identity processes in a discursive context. Precarious Masculinity takes a communication-centered approach with a particular emphasis on discourse to understanding the production and reproduction of masculinity. Precarious Masculinity proposes that understanding of how young men come to understand and negotiate their notions of masculinity crystallize in everyday discourses that are subject to larger societal discourses and material realities.

My proposed perspective places a premium on discourse to delineate how young men come to negotiate their masculine identity. The decision to place discourse central to an understanding of masculinity demands a clear statement of my epistemological position concerning discourse. I approach my description of position by examining two distinct, yet related issues concerning discourse and gender. First, I describe my approach to the micro versus macro discourse issue. I then address the role of materiality with regard to discourse and gender.

Discourse has often been conceptualized as operating on a continuum between two extremes (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). One end of the spectrum, often known as the little d, suggests that micro discourses (or everyday conversations) constitute organizational reality. Therefore, a micro approach to examining masculinity would favor local meaning of manhood as constituted through everyday discourse. The other extreme favors a big D approach. The big D approach favors macro discourse. Macro discourses represent large societal or organizational narratives that strongly influence how micro discourses unfold. Therefore, a big D approach to masculinity would examine societal or

organizational narratives of what is masculine and use that frame to examine everyday discourse.

Scholars have called for a limitation of a binary view of discourses and advocate adoption of a more balanced dialectic view where tensions exist between grand discourses and micro discourses (Mumby, 2011). I adopt a position closer to the dialectic with some qualification. I suggest that to understand the management of masculinity for college men, one must attend to the intersection of macro and micro discourse as demonstrated in everyday discourses between and among men. Larger macro discourse concerning desired social masculinity exerts pressure from above from a variety of social entities on young men who are exploring what it means to become a man (Connell, 2005). Micro discourses represent individual agency that challenges larger discourse and provide pressure from below. The intersection of these discourses is where masculine identity emerges for young men. Masculine identity emerges and is managed in the ongoing discourses that are subject to multiple forces at the micro and macro levels.

Another area of concern when examining discourse is the relationship between discourse, materiality, and gender. Organizational scholars have increasingly expressed concern over the privileging of discourse over material concerns in organizational studies when exploring gender and other social constructs (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Mumby, 2011). Such perspectives frame discourse as a powerful constitutive force that overrides any material circumstances. Perspectives on gender favoring discourse over other concerns can lead to a myopic view of masculinity; one where masculinity is simply what an organizational text or discursive formation says it is in a given context. A purely discursive perspective on gender minimalizes or ignores material circumstances,



like race or social class, and runs the risk of reducing social understanding to only text. Therefore, for a balanced approach to examining masculinity, one must attend to the material/discourse issue.

Several approaches have been proposed to address the material/discourse issue both for organizational studies as a whole and gender specifically. Some have suggested that studies should delineate the tensions present between discursive claims of organizational members and the material circumstances that might impact those claims (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 2011). Dialectical approaches nod to the complex tensions that exist between material circumstance and gender in an organization. Some, however, suggest that examining tensions does not go far enough to explain the complex interrelated process that bridges the material and discursive when examining gender. Ashcraft & Lockwood-Harris (2014) suggest that the material/discursive problem can be addressed by reframing the manner in which we approach examining social constructs in organizations. Such a reframing views discourse on gender and materiality as intertwined and mixed. As the authors' suggest, the "motif here is not interaction, but interpenetration" (Ashcraft & Lockwood-Harris, 2014). Masculinity from this perspective develops in the interplay and interpenetration of elements of discourse and material circumstances. I adopt this perspective in developing Precarious Masculinity as a viable frame to examining masculine identity formations and negotiation. The theory of Precarious Masculinity will draw heavily on the assumption that the material and the discursive interact and mix to strongly influence young men in their emerging formation of masculine identity.

The perspective of Precarious Masculinity draws on Precarious Manhood by adopting several tenets of the theory. First, Precarious Masculinity assumes that achieving masculinity is a state that is earned through symbolic and discursive actions in a social context. Second, masculinity is a status that is tenuous and can easily be lost through failure to perform in a manner consistent with social norms for masculinity. Third, masculinity requires regular and ongoing demonstration of manhood in order for an individual to be considered manly. Masculinity is a desired concept that is hard to attain, easy to lose and is under constant scrutiny.

Precarious Masculinity draws on Hegemonic Masculinity by attending to the powerful influences of social structures that limit and enable how men define and maintain their masculinity. Masculinity is created and formed by social interaction under an umbrella of relationships of power, production, and cathexis that have traditionally privileged a particular hegemonic, or dominant, form of masculinity. While multiple communities of masculinities exist, they engage in struggles that are enabled and limited by social structures that privilege patriarchal forms.

Precarious Masculinity provides a communication-centric approach with which to examine the discursive and symbolic creation and maintenance of masculinity while attending to material circumstances that might affect the experience of masculinity. While conceptually logical, at this point Precarious Masculinity is undeveloped. This study addresses the development of this construct. To do so, it is important to consider the research on masculinity in order to delineate and guide my study. I now turn to findings from several perspectives that may inform my efforts.

### **Cognitive Approaches**

The examination of cognitive approaches is important to explore the masculine construct given its historical place in the study of masculinity. Also, cognitive perspectives have helped to highlight various mental health issues faced by men in the light of performing masculinity. While I claim that masculinity is formed and maintained discursively, psychological processes that form individual understanding of masculine identity are important to explain initial conceptions of masculinity and how individuals form a core masculine identity. Cognitive theories form the grist, if you will, that individuals will use in the communicative efforts to understand masculine identity.

Cognitive theories have done much to extend understanding concerning masculinity. These approaches to defining masculinity emerge from the field of psychology and attempt to operationalize the psychological processes of individuals in creating a gendered identity. These examinations can be usefully categorized into a trait centric perspective and a normative centric perspective in exploring masculine identity (Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). Trait perspectives adopt a decidedly positivist or essentialist approach to defining masculinity and closely tie the masculine construct to the biological sex of male. In contrast, normative examinations move beyond gender orientation and attempt to measure the attitudes of individuals towards what is manly, or masculine ideology.

Early trait approaches adopted the gender role identity paradigm (GRIP) to explain how men defined masculine identity (Levant, 2011). GRIP approaches assume men were highly motivated to match gendered identity with biological sex. Men struggle to match appropriate behaviors or traits to perceived natural qualities which marked male sex. The extent to which a man was cognitively successful at managing this identity/sex

dialectic marked appropriate gendered development. The inability to manage the process resulted in a variety of deviant results such as homosexuality, exaggerated performance of the masculine role, and devaluation of women (Levant, 2011). The GRIP perspective limits the experience of masculinity to a developmental norm that is an accomplishment. This accomplishment results in a cognitively well-adjusted man or one where a man fails in his developmental efforts and suffers from a poorly adjusted gender identity. From this perspective, masculinity is a historically and socially invariant concept that embraces the belief that the gendered nature of a man is linked with biological sex. While researchers noted that the process of reconciling gendered identity and sex was a failure prone and stress-inducing process, the conceptual definition of manhood remained one that was assumed to be unproblematic and persistent across social and historical variables.

A paramour of this approach is the male sex role inventory (MSRI) which approached the measurement of masculinity as associated with acquired behavioral and personality traits (Pleck, 1981). According to this approach, men learn to enact culturally accepted biological traits of masculinity in early childhood development and through prescriptive cultural scripts. Therefore masculinity is based on the physiological and psychological characteristics that a given culture comes to identify with manliness. The concept of masculinity then becomes one that can be measured by the traits or perspectives of traits an actor possesses concerning gender orientation.

The next wave of psychological approaches that may be categorized as normative challenged this essentialist and unproblematic approach to examining masculinity. Normative theories build on trait perspectives to explore the underlying perceptions of individuals and their perspectives of being masculine or feminine, rather than the

psychologically endorsed roles that indicate simple gender orientation. Pleck (1981) meticulously outlined the existing role identity paradigm and then offered an alternative perspective that foreshadowed theory guided by social constructionism. The gender role strain paradigm framed gender as a problematic construct that was not only based on biological sex differences but psychologically and socially created constructs that were dynamic and changed due to time and developmental processes. Biological development is an important factor in how a man produces and maintains masculine identity, but social experiences and cognitive processes are central to how men perceive and act on their gendered roles (Pleck, 1995). With so many influences feeding into the definition of masculinity, the process represents one that is prone to failure on the part of men as they navigate multiple, and often contradictory, cultural scripts of masculinity that create challenges to negotiating gendered identity. The process is even more complicated because of what Pleck referred to as masculine ideology. Masculine ideology refers to the cultural scripts that represent the accepted role that widely dominate what a society endorses as proper or accepted behavior for a man (Pleck, 1995). Schools, parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, and peers are all influenced by these ideologies and largely endorse these norms, who then in turn influence how young men think about and develop their ideas of masculinity.

The trait and normative perspectives in these traditions have resulted in an impressive variety of scales that measure both gendered orientation and gendered ideology respectively (Thompson, Pleack, & Ferrera, 1992). Trait approaches such as Bem's Sex Role inventory and Spence's Personal Attributes Questionnaire attempted to identify traits more associated with men and women. Normative instruments like The

Macho Scale measure individual differences in the endorsement of sexist attitudes concerning patriarchy and anti-femininity (Villemez & Touhey, 1977). The Attitudes Toward the Male Role (AMR) scale examines normative attitudes toward the appropriate male behavior in public displays (Doyle & Moore, 1978). Another normative measure, The Attitude Toward Masculinity Transcendence Scale (ATMTS) examines changing societal norms and values in defining masculinity (Moreland & Van Tuinen, 1978). These and a long list of other cognitive research represent a rigorous approach to identifying how men and women endorse a somewhat generalizable view of masculine roles and gendered ideology.

Many of the findings related to these cognitive perspectives examine the links between cognitive endorsements of masculinity and the effects or consequences of certain types of perceptions of masculinity. An especially interesting finding emerging from such measures concerns the traditional roles and behaviors cognitively endorsed by college men due to gender-role conflict and negotiation. College men who endorse “traditional” roles exhibit cognitive patterns that value restrictive emotionality, an obsession with achievement and success, restricted affectionate behavior, value power and competition, homophobia, and hesitance to seek health care (Levant & Richmond, 2008). Men seem to conceptualize these behavioral patterns as feminine and exhibit a general fear of femininity. Additionally, men subscribing to an operationalized measure of the “traditional” American conception of manhood are significantly less satisfied in their heterosexual romantic relationships than those with either no reference group or an alternative to traditional masculinity reference group (Coughlin & Wade, 2012).

Traditional measurements of masculinity have also been linked with other consequences to men. Men subscribing to conceptions of manhood that embrace risk-taking, self-sufficiency, toughness and other “variables” that comprise masculinity have a higher rate of accidents and other preventable health risks (Courtenay, 2000). Men with traditional views of masculinity are more likely to take behavioral risks that endanger their health. Masculine gender role stress is linked to increased anger, anxiety, and health risks for college men (Eisler, Skidmore, and Ward, 1988). It is clear that the stress and anxiety linked with attempting to reconcile masculine ideologies with perceived masculine realities lead men to engage in aggressive and risky activities that are dangerous to themselves and others. Thinking about how to be a man in the light of endorsed masculine ideologies can lead to deleterious effects.

Cognitive approaches have demonstrated the variability of the masculinity construct across different cultures (Levant & Richmond, 2008). While cross-cultural differences have been noted, cognitive approaches have shown baseline trait and role similarities across men within the US culture (Pleck, 1995). Traits and attitudes associated with traditional masculinity such as aggressiveness, homosociality, self-reliance, dominance, restricted emotionality, and achievement status repeatedly appear in the literature concerning Western masculinity norms (Levant & Richmond, 2008). The Western conception of masculinity, while subject to challenge from subcultures such as co-sexual or specific racially centered masculinities, remains remarkably consistent over the last several decades.

Overall, cognitively focused examinations of masculinity denote several trends in how actors conceptualize the idea of manhood and lend insight into how we might be

informed about masculinity issues going forward. First, there does seem to be a conceptual differentiation for gender orientation versus gender ideology (Archer, 1990). The literature is clear that men make a distinction between the ideals of masculinity offered in some cultural or organizational contexts (masculine ideologies) and the perceived traits one may or may not possess. Second, men and women hold distinctly different views regarding perceived masculinity of an actor and the general ideology endorsed (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). For example, men and women frame their perceptions in differing ideological perspectives and therefore vary in their understanding of idealized manhood.

Perhaps the most pertinent and persistent finding across early measures of masculinity is the constructs ongoing relationship with stress and anxiety. A consistent and enduring discovery that emerges from the literature is one of anxiety and stress that is related to the cognitive experience of masculinity (Levant, 2011). This is logical given competing masculine ideologies that may exist in contextual settings and self-perceived traits often seems to be at odds or least inconsistent. The disconnect between ideology and perceived qualities lends itself to an anxious state on the part of men as they attempt to endorse ideal qualities of manhood while failing to live up to the desired standard in their lived experiences. Pleck notes men often perceive a lack of satisfaction in reaching ideals for the masculine role and suggests one generalizable finding concerning the examination of masculinity is that men suffer ongoing stress in their attempt to realize unattainable ideals. Others have echoed this finding suggesting that this experience leads to a construct that lends itself to an ongoing crisis (Connell, 2005).



Indeed, anxiety and stress as a common experience for men in their perceptions of manhood pervade this literature. In attempting to conform to and identify proper gender roles, men often exhibit anger and anxiety leading to high-risk behaviors (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988). Conceptualizing and acting on accepted gender roles is an essential ingredient in healthy personal adjustment. Yet findings are clear that men suffer a higher degree of gender-role stress and accompanying negative feelings and behaviors than women when attempting to cognitively reconcile prescribed gender roles. Young men manifest this stress in displays of anger and risk-taking and a variety of other psychologically and physiologically damaging behaviors (Blazina & Watkins, 1996). Further, this gender-role strain is not constrained to any one collection of men but has proven consistent across heterogeneous groups (Pleck, 1995). Men from upper and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those with disabilities, men of color, various ethnic backgrounds, and those of differing sexual orientations suffer angst concerning masculinity displays and perceptions (Chesebro & Fuse, 2001). Among this diverse array of cohorts of men, anxiety, and stress related to expressing or experiencing manhood seem to be persistent, cross cultural, and ever-present variables.

The cognitive tradition and its focus on measures and psychological processes provide an important jumping off point to solving the puzzle of masculinity. Such perspectives have been successful in operationalizing masculinity and providing insight into how actors cognitively build conceptions of ideal manhood (ideology) and perceive the masculine role. The perspective has demonstrated the cognitive disconnect between idealized forms and perceived qualities an actor might possess. Cognitive approaches provide evidence that males and females think about gender roles in distinct ways. Most

importantly, the perspective has successfully demonstrated the cognitive process concerning perceptions of manhood as a stressful and anxiety provoking experience.

### **Culture, Social Construction, and Masculinity**

Cultural research on masculinity is helpful in highlighting the centrality of social construction and performative efforts of men in defining their masculinity. Additionally, cultural perspectives account for the existence of multiple masculinities that may be played out by actors in a variety of contexts. Finally, these views highlight the various influences that culture places on men as they negotiate their masculine identity.

Cultural approaches to examining gender adopt a distinctly different stance than the cognitive approaches which preceded them. Rather than a focus on internal processes, cultural approaches examine the ongoing social interaction between actors that constitute social reality. From this perspective, masculinity is a concept that is developed in symbolic interaction with others within cultural settings. Cultural approaches assume that how we come to know gender is dependent upon historical and situational variables that we come to agree upon as a social group. Gender is a socially constructed concept that can and does vary over time.

Several competing conceptual definitions of culture have been offered in a variety of fields. Culture has been framed as a complex whole of knowledge, beliefs, and habits. Culture has been conceived as collective programming for separating in and out groups (Hofstede, 1994). Culture has been imagined as collections of attitudes, values, and behaviors shared by groups and modified by individuals. As demonstrated by the above examples, each conceptual definition of culture provides a focus for how to examine cultural variables. Perhaps the most well-developed conceptual elicitation of culture for

investigating masculinity is Spencer and Oatey's (2008) definition of the construct as "a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior." Cultural approaches attempt to capture the forces that provide the grist for men to use in the exploration of their masculine identity.

Culture is central to understanding how college men make sense of and navigate their masculine identity (Kimmel, 2006). Efforts from a cultural tradition of research echo many of the findings of cognitive approaches while helping to piece together a more nuanced and detailed development of the puzzle that is masculinity. This approach is one that is based on the cultural influences present in a variety of contexts. Treatments from this tradition stem from the examination of social groups, and ongoing symbolic performances embedded in culture as it exists at any given time. Cultural perspectives attempt to delineate and explore historical and situational variables in the shaping of cultural elements that in turn affect how men determine what larger society and embedded cultures associate with masculinity.

Cultural approaches center on the social construction of gender in the discussion of masculinity, examine the historical and contextual forces on enacting masculinity, explore the multiplicity of masculinities in organizational and social contexts, and note the importance of symbolic and discursive performance in the enactment and maintenance of gender (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell, 2005). Social constructivists emphasize the power of social interactions and situational contexts in which they take place. While cultural departures from cognitive perspectives are noteworthy, there is

significant overlap between the positions. A cognitive (and performative) separation of masculine ideology and perceived performance of masculinity still emerges from cultural traditions (Kimmel, 2008). More important, the perception and performance of masculinity seem to invoke anxiety and stress for men. It appears that the angst present in cognitive processes reverberate in the performances so favored in cultural approaches.

Cultural approaches to defining masculinity, indeed all gender constructs, involve the social and symbolically constructed notion of what it means to be masculine in a given context or culture (Chesbro & Fuse, 2001). The reality of masculinity, then, is enacted in the discursive and performative practices between two or more actors. The cultural position does not envision masculinity as a fixed and stable concept, but one that shifts over time and is dependent upon culture and the interactive processes within that culture (Berger, 1995; Spitzack, 1998). Rather than existing as an unquestioned norm, the gender construct is the product of performative efforts embedded within and subject to cultural influence and ongoing adjustment. Masculinity then is a flexible social construct that can vary within culture and group and is continually negotiated and reformed in interactive rituals and social norms.

Gilmore's (1990) landmark examination of masculinity is indicative of the cultural approach to examining how men come to define and express manhood. He studied formal and informal manhood performances in a variety of cultures. His findings indicate a wide range of methods between and within cultures in expressing what it means to be a man given different cultural norms. The explored practices are heavily influenced by the prevailing character and history of the culture under examination. For example, the fishing culture of the Trukese in the South Pacific have rituals of manhood

based on their unique historical culture. For the Trukese, a man proves his worth by fishing in shark infested water in small rudimentary dugout canoes and, when on land, become “weekend warriors” meeting all challenges in alcohol driven violent one-on-one fights. The behavior of these young men can be explained through the historical development of the Trukese culture over the past 500 years. Once known as a warlike and violent culture, the Trukese were systematically conquered by Western powers and officially annexed by the Germans in the 1800s. Christian reformers accompanied this influence and wiped out many militaristic norms such as raiding, killing of strangers washed ashore, and indecency of dress (Gilmore, 1990). A new culture emerged based on trade and alcohol usage for young men. Therefore, the old practices of proving manhood, such as extreme violence upon encroachers and war with other tribes were replaced with rites connected to fishing and ongoing individual combat. The Trukese case illustrates the power of culture in defining what it means to be a man based on the idiosyncratic tendencies of particular societal norms. Gilmore repeatedly demonstrates the influence of culture in his examination of different performances of manhood across the world. The commonality among all the societies concerning manhood was that culture is the most potent influencer in how men perceive their masculine identity and perform as a man.

Examinations of masculinity from a cultural position note the importance of the historical and situational context of the community in the study of masculinity (Kimmel, 2005). While some scholars have pointed out that in American culture the dominant ideal of masculinity has not changed since the 1800's (a view disputed by other perspectives), others have noted the definition of masculinity is not stable and shifts according to time, culture, and historical context (Spitzack, 1998). For example, the American concept of

masculinity is demonstrative of the influence of historical context and fluidity with which conceptions of manhood change over time and reflected in dominant popular discourse. Characterizations of masculinity in early America emphasized the rugged individualist and self-made man. A man who was always restless, fiercely independent, aggressive in business and love, formal and polite, and gentlemanly. This interpretation and performance of manhood has changed with the ongoing cultural development of America. For example, the industrial revolution worked to transform the idealized form of manhood from the self-made man to an idealized form that privileged the captains of industry, and eventually the good company man in a white collar who slavishly adheres to the corporation norms and attends to the bottom line (Kimmel, 2006). Kimmel goes on to suggest that the modern millennial man is now in a period of increased anxiety and anger due to the decline of the manufacturing economy and uncertain nature of the modern world. Therefore, men are seeking outlets through loutish behavior that attempts to recapture earlier ideals of manhood in a postmodern world. These historical and cultural variables provide the grist and cultural scripts for the performance of masculinity in social contexts. In addition to providing the material for developing cultural scripts, socio-historical factors act as dominant structures that enable and restrain how actors might experience and express masculinity.

While historical context does connote a preferred and stable unitary form of masculinity, multiple masculinities are thought to be acted out, simultaneously or in different contexts, within culture (Mumby, 1998). Masculinity, while conceived as an unquestioned norm in a given historical concept, exists in multiple and varied sub-forms that are often at odds. Therefore, shop floor workers might maintain their masculinity

through juvenile joking and conflict discourse in their interactions with supervisors and coworkers, while an engineering staff might prove their manliness through demonstrations of material consumption and expressions of managerial dominance (Collinson, 1988; Mumby, 1998).

Cultural perspectives have been valuable in examining the processes of experiencing masculinity for college men. Kimmel's (2008) *Guyland* is perhaps the most highly regarded and widely cited examination of college men's cultural influences and resulting processes of masculine gender identification. Kimmel labels college men's experiences in college as *Guyland* in highlighting the homogenous and often dysfunctional manner in which young men define their emerging conceptions of masculinity. College men's attempts at defining and acting upon their masculine identities is profoundly affected by larger social and economic changes in recent US history. Today's college men face lower and stagnant wages for professions, an economy shifting from production to consumption, changing prescribed gender roles and increased competition from women as they enter professional areas normally prescribed for men, and crippling student debt (Kimmel, 2008). Additionally, Kimmel suggests that men face a society that is culturally homogenized despite a variety of choices for masculine identity. Given these significant cultural influences and a lack of formalized ritual of manhood once present in the US, college men take more time to reach the traditional developmental markers of economic and social independence. The extensive college cohorts Kimmel observed and interviewed expressed their conception of manhood with discourse that devalued women and alternate views of masculinity like homosexuality. College men descriptions of manhood highlight acts of risk-taking, binge drinking,

homosociality, aggressive discourse and actions against other groups of men, ongoing short-term sexual conquests, hostility towards women, glorification and ongoing consumption of porn, and escape of responsibility through video games and media consumption. Kimmel identifies these behaviors as constituting a social milieu from which three cultural dimensions arise for college men. A culture of entitlement is characterized by a strong sense of superiority for young college men where femininity is devalued and men convince themselves of their rightful place in the existing power structure of the larger society. A culture of silence pervades the set of rules of young men as they remain quiet concerning other men's misbehaviors, often in fear of being called out as unmanly by other men. Finally, a culture of protection exists where bad behaviors by other men are not just ignored, but actively hidden from those outside of Guyland. Kimmel's examination highlights the power of larger cultural scripts and emerging college culture to influence how young men make sense of what it means to be a man.

Cultural approaches have assisted in further delineating male identity negotiation of college men and the environments in which they operate. A grounded theory approach examining college men focused on the meanings of masculinities and the contextual influences that guide masculine identity creation (Harris III, 2010). The research identified the multiple cultural influences on men's masculine identity efforts such as academic interest, campus involvement, male gender norms, male peer interactions, and overall campus culture. Based on these contextual elements, the study identified several themes that emerged in interaction with a variety of men on college campuses. Men described manliness as "being respected" on campus. Respect was earned by standing up for oneself with male peers when one's masculinity was questioned, demonstrated hard



work, and the ability to manage multiple social and class-related demands. Men also consistently identified being masculine with being confident and self-assured. Portraying confidence signaled a man who was in control and comfortable with his identity as manly. Interestingly, this quality also allowed men more leeway and latitude with peers when a confident man might act in a manner inconsistent with masculine norms. College men also expect their male cohorts to “assume responsibility” by taking control in social contexts and making difficult decisions. For example, college men viewed men who had large muscular builds and displayed physical prowess to be more masculine than those of smaller stature. This finding offers insight as to what college men view as manly and into the processes men go through to negotiate their masculinity. The researchers, however, also connect these themes to the contextual forces such as campus culture and precollege socialization that frame these perceptions of masculinity for these college men.

Ongoing cultural approaches provide additional insight as to how men engage against the backdrop of social groups to make sense of what it means to be masculine and gain insight as to how men communicate concerning their masculinity. College men, for example, view their college experience as a time to explore self-expression for their masculinity but feel constrained depending on the gender and makeup of the group in which the interaction takes place (Davis, 2002). College men view their time in higher education as a time for exploration of identity, but explore in very different ways depending on the performative environment. College men seem to be able to express themselves more effectively and using more discourse in one on one instances with women. This contrasts sharply with expression in a group of men where college men engage in more performance for the sake of conforming to the dominant social

convention of perceived male roles. Therefore, communication in a group of men is often comprised of put-downs, insults, rough physical play, and performances meant to prove one's manliness in a group (Davis, 2002; Kimmel, 2008). As many researchers have noted, proof of manhood is most often exhibited in performances in front of other men. So while men engage in self-reflection and self-expression in college, they show confusion about masculinity because of the various scripts they must adopt, dependent upon the context and makeup of the numerous social groups with which they interact.

One consistent finding of cultural approaches that echoes earlier cognitive perspectives is the fear of femininity in performances of masculinity for college men. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have noted the ubiquity of this experience for men and suggest that defining masculinity for college men involves an anti-feminine mandate (Kimmel, 1994; O'Neil et al., 1986). Based on their cultural experiences, embracing any qualities that might be perceived as feminine denigrates their status as a man when in the company of other men (Davis, 2002). Early socialization structures for boys encourage widespread gender segregation and distrust and rejection of those characteristics equated with the feminine (Allen, 1954; Levant & Pollack, 2008; Maccoby, 1990). Young men are taught to avoid the feminine at all costs and to denigrate feminine forms. In fact, the expression of masculinity is often defined not by what it is, but what it is not. Young boys are taught that to be manly is to not be a "sissy" or "mama's boy." To be perceived as such means not being masculine and risking social alienation or even physical violence from other boys (Ducat, 2005). The demonstration of masculinity often means *not* possessing or expressing womanly sentiments or qualities like emotional vulnerability, sensitivity, inclusiveness, and collaboration (Kimmel, 2008). The anti-feminine mandate

implies that performances that appear as feminine to other actors in a social setting are devalued and often mark a man as not possessing masculine qualities valued by other men. This mandate becomes a potent force in limiting how a man may enact and experience masculinity in college settings. Therefore, college men often engage in performances that highlight misogyny and homophobia that serve to distance men from the perception that they might possess female traits and be perceived as less manly.

Like earlier cognitive perspectives, cultural views of masculinity are rife with examples of the anxiety and stress that accompany the performance of manhood. Gilmore's examination of various cultural rituals of manhood notes the ongoing anxiety that is virtually universal across cultures. Others have likewise noted the cultural constraints concerning masculinity that men experience in college contexts when they navigate masculine identity issues (Davis, 2002). Kimmel's work exploring the performances of college-age men notes the ongoing discursive scripts that members use to demonstrate manhood credentials. Language that emphasizes perceived manly qualities, boasting of sexual conquest and binge drinking, hazing rituals, glorification of pornography, and devaluing homosexual behavior pervades the vernacular of men in hyper-masculinized contexts (Kimmel, 2006). Anxiety associated with losing manhood credentials pervades the scripts of these men exploring their masculine identity. With the wrong word or perceived action, a young man opens himself to ridicule and can become the object of rhetoric from others that devalues his masculine identity. Gender policing by peers exert ongoing and pervasive stress on these participants as they navigate the perilous path to manhood.

The literature above represents cultural approaches to examining masculinity and have added significant pieces of the puzzle of masculinity concerning college men. Cultural perspectives demonstrate the shifting nature of masculinity due to the context, the centrality of social construction in the creation and maintenance of the concept of masculinity, the significance of history and context in creating masculine identity, the existence of multiple forms of masculinity, and the power of culture and organization in forming conceptions of manhood, including the anti-feminine mandate. Cultural perspectives demonstrate the influence of a variety of contexts in defining what is masculine for college-age men. What these views lack in examining the development of masculinity, however, is attention to the powerful structural factors that limit or empower the expression of masculinity. Perspectives emerging mostly from the critical and feminist traditions attend to these elements and can inform a systematic approach to examining masculinity for college men.

### **Critical Theory, Feminism, and Masculinity**

Critical and feminist theories will help with the current study by highlighting the varied structural issues that influence men in their experiences of masculinity. Critical stances point to the powerful ideological structures that limit how men define masculinity in light of existing conventions. Feminists' positions reveal structures of understanding that privilege certain conceptions of masculinity while simultaneously empowering or restricting how specific masculine communities experience manhood.

Critical theory has been conceptualized as a process of “unearthing, and then researching, the assumptions one is operating under, primarily by taking different perspectives on familiar, taken for granted beliefs and behaviors” (Kimmel & Davis,

2011). If cultural and cognitive perspectives provide evidence that the experience of masculinity is attended by ongoing angst, critical and feminists' traditions are informative in providing the *why* for this stress and anxiety. These perspectives examine the broader ideological structures that exert pressure on men to adhere to particular forms of masculinity within organizations and other varied contexts. I consider critical and feminist approaches together, not because they are indistinguishable paradigms, but because of their shared interest in critically examining uneven power relationships inherent to cultural structures that privilege one ideal form of masculinity over others. Such perspectives highlight several issues pertinent to discovering how masculinity is enacted and maintained in light of issues such as the privileging of certain forms of knowledge over other forms, power and resistance, and privileged cultural texts. Both perspectives examine the political and powerful forces that limit how college-age men experience and constitute masculinity. More importantly, critical stances serve an emancipatory purpose in that they offer to expand accepted definitions of masculine identity.

Feminist theory is not a singular universal perspective. There are a large variety of feminist theories that have influenced contemporary scholarship, including radical feminism, cultural feminism, liberal feminism, and more in a number of disciplinary areas. For my purposes, I choose to examine some common themes that pervade feminist theory in its relation to masculine studies rather than delineate various paradigms within the theoretical framework. There is little doubt, however, that feminist scholarship has played a central role in the evolution of masculine studies (Gardener, 2005). Feminist

theorizing has challenged universal dominant conceptions of gender and offered alternative frames for examining how we approach feminine and masculine identity.

Feminism is, at its heart, committed to uncovering the inequalities between genders that exist due to larger social structures. Feminism examines dominant forms of knowledge that are built into social structures like educational, government, and business organizations and how those forms coalesce as ideologies that subjugate or inhibit certain experiences for subordinate populations (Gardener, 2005). Feminists note that most often the dominant ideology is one of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a form of institutionalized male dominance that values characteristics that are traditionally associated with some men and devalue forms of structure and organizing that are associated with women (Buzzanell, 1994; Wagner, 2005). Patriarchal structure pervades all social institutions and, over time, promotes, privileges, and reifies processes and knowledge that favor men in every vital aspect of society. The way men come to know gender becomes unproblematic and male dominance seems natural. Consequentially, privileged male forms of knowing become embedded in everyday practices and language. Therefore, male forms of doing become the correct way, the unquestioned way, and women suffer a variety of inequities in society. Institutions themselves represent fundamentally gendered sites where dominant forms are practiced in an undisputed manner (Acker, 1990). Feminist theory suggests that because of patriarchy, men have an advantage over women in every arena of society including capitalist structures, educational opportunities, family relations, religious institutions, and more.

Feminist perspectives have been fruitful in uncovering and calling attention to patriarchal forms practiced in society and have challenged theorists and practitioners

alike to seek alternate paths of knowledge to level the playing field between genders (Wagner, 2005). By challenging systems that privilege men in social settings, feminism benefits masculinity studies in profound ways. For example, feminism problematizes gender in general because the perspective notes that gender is socially constructed and therefore female and male roles are negotiable and ever-changing. In a sense, feminist theory created the field of masculine studies by deconstructing the roles of men and women as they exist in the social structure and exploring alternate ways to understanding those roles (Gardiner, 2005). Such efforts opened up a world of possibilities for examining masculinity in a variety of context and in relation to dominant structures.

Closely related to the variability of forms of gender is the relationship that men have with patriarchal structures. While some early brands of feminism framed men as universally benefitting from a society set up to favor men, not all men benefit equally (Kimmel, 2005). Issues of class, race, disability, sexuality, and ethnicity intersect gender and complicate men's relationship with dominant ways of knowing. For example, a gay black man does not experience the same advantages of a patriarchal system as a straight white man. Feminist theory suggests that overall, this man might be advantaged in systems of meaning vis a vis women, but the systems favor a narrow conception of what it means to be a particular gender. These ideological systems that drive how we perceive gender and meaning have been forcefully argued as a system of dominance defined as hegemonic masculinity.

I review the concept of hegemonic masculinity in depth in the latter part of this literature review. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, however, is central to examining critical approaches in masculinity studies. If patriarchy represents the larger

social structures that favor men in society, hegemonic masculinity represents the dominant ideology for how men are expected to behave and think about being a man. Hegemony refers to a system of ideas that dominant ruling groups within a social structure promote as natural (Kaufman, 2003). Hegemonic masculinity then becomes “the configuration of gendered practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995). Essentially, what it means to be a real man is dictated by a worldview that is promoted by the dominant social structures within society. Some qualities are encouraged while other qualities considered most often as feminine are consistently subordinated. The current view of hegemonic masculinity in the US, for example, dictates that men are unemotional, aggressive, devalue any behavior that is feminine, physically tough, strive for financial and material success, risk-taking, competitiveness, and are hostile to homosexuality. Very few members of a social structure embody the characteristics of this idealized form of manhood, but members often strive to perform in a manner consistent with those forms or internalize ideological forms consistent with hegemonic forms (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2005). These dominant forms tend to be reified with larger macro discourses and institutional norms and appear as taken for granted, naturally occurring characteristics associated with masculinity and the male sex (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). These hegemonic forms often dominate and devalue alternative forms of masculinity and feminine forms. Therefore, critical stances towards masculinity work to uncover these privileged forms in the interest of fairness to alternative masculinities. In the college setting, the power of these dominant forms limits how a young man may define and navigate masculine identity. Importantly, men and



women become subject to this dominant kind of masculinity. For all members of society, hegemonic masculine forms reinforced the legitimacy of patriarchal processes. For men, hegemonic masculinity limits how men may interpret and experience masculinity in light of authoritative social structures.

Critical and feminist lenses have been valuable in examining the various processes and challenges college men confront when attempting to navigate issues of masculine identity. Feminist theorists have noted that the institutionalized patriarchal practices of colleges continue to reinforce masculine stereotypes and dominant male forms (Wagner, 2005). Many college campus administrative bodies treat male development as unproblematic and a taken-for-granted process. Dominant forms of masculinity seem natural, and there is a hesitancy to talk about masculinity as a contributing cause of bad behavior by men. Indeed, college men's identity processes have traditionally been treated as examining all students' development and gender was often not treated as a variable for consideration (Laker, 2003). As Laker (2003) notes, college men are often corrected like "bad dogs" when they misbehave through disrespect towards women, hostility towards gay men, or any number of behaviors associated with hyper-masculine forms. Alternatively, if treated as young developing men, operating in a social setting that encourages hegemonic patterns such as restrictive emotionality, hostility towards "feminine" behavior, and restrictive affective behavior between men, effective intervention programs could be developed that focused on offering alternative frames concerning masculine identity. Wagner suggests that framing men's development from a feminist perspective can highlight patriarchal forms in the institution, treated masculinity

as a gender identity issue, and offer alternative approaches to assisting men in developing individual masculine identities.

Berkowitz (2011) offers a critical approach that highlights the process of how college men negotiate and experience masculine development. He presents evidence from critical studies that suggest college men are rather uncomfortable with acting out the behaviors of hegemonic masculinity but remain silent about their misgivings because of a perception that the majority of men endorse such behaviors and other men will punish failure to live up to such norms. More importantly, these same men then act consistently with the dominant forms and therefore reinforce the perception that the behaviors are natural and “boys are just being boys”. College men then become the unwilling agents that engage in practices that reinforce and strengthen the dominant form of masculinity on a college campus (Berkowitz, 2011). This type of process is at the heart of how hegemonic masculinity remains a standard for men in college and can lead to a variety of campus woes like rape cultures, binge drinking, homophobia, and sexism.

### **Intersectionality and Masculinity**

An examination of the literature about intersectionality and masculinity is crucial to the current study. Men are not just men, but products of a variety of influences that might include class, race, ethnic identity, class, and sexual identity. The study of masculinity is, therefore, the study of a variety of constructs that intersect to enable or limit how men make sense of and act on their masculine identity.

Scholars have noted the tendency in masculinity studies to compartmentalize men in masculinity studies (Harper, Wordell, & McGuire, 2011). Compartmentalize in this case means examining masculine identity creation and maintenance using one dominant

social lens. For example, considering the experience of a college man strictly based on his membership as a white male reduces understanding of masculine identity processes. While instructive of how this young man might constitute his masculinity, we would be ignoring other salient factors such as the social class or sexuality of the young man. Obviously, this broad approach problematizes any examination of masculinity but is crucial to understanding the complexity of masculine identity processes. Thus, there have been multiple calls from a variety of researchers to examine the intersectionality of factors important to understanding the masculine construct (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Harper & Harris, 2010; Kimmel & Davis, 2011; Mumby, 1998). Adopting an intersectional approach provides a more focused lens to examine the multidimensional processes of gender identification and various influences that confront men when negotiating masculine identity.

Intersectionality can be conceptually defined as the “mutually constitutive relations among social identities” (Shields, 2008). These social identities are interwoven into identity processes and can significantly influence how men come to define their individual masculinity. Significant areas of intersectionality include factors such as race, sexual orientation, social class, physical disability, and even spirituality.

As an example of the importance of intersectionality, I reflect upon my development as a man. I would be considered mostly unproblematic for most scholars in an examination of masculine identity. I am straight, white, middle-aged, middle-class, and of no discernable ethnic group. I could be the poster child for an average American man or the quintessential WASP in our society. While unmarked physically, my development as a man was heavily influenced by social class issues. I am what my

advisor refers to as a class straddler. My early developmental years were spent raised by an economically struggling single mother in a lower-class environment. My mother married when I was about 12 and my father's addition of income meant we had reached lower middle-class status, though that status was largely dependent on the frequent layoffs my father suffered in a truck manufacturing plant. As a result of this development, I embraced a working-class conception of masculinity where men took care of their family and engaged in physical labor or body work (Dougherty, 2011). Because of my parents' body work, I was able to go to college and eventually enter work related to text rather than body. As a result, I have often felt ambivalence about my masculine identity as I straddled two very different approaches to manhood. I now inhabit a place in the social structure that my father would not recognize with regard to masculinity. Nevertheless, my experiences with class have been important in my negotiation with gender.

My case is somewhat bland regarding intersectionality, but still relevant to what factors influenced my development as a man. Now imagine adding additional layers to the identity process. Imagine being a gay man of mixed race from a low socioeconomic background entering college as a first generation degree seeker. Scholarly work has demonstrated that such a man often juggles performances of masculinity dependent upon various peer groups (Harper & Harris, 2010). The masculine identity that is more salient, and therefore performed and experienced, is dependent upon which peers one is involved with at the time. In negotiating the various masculinity demands within college, men often prioritize, or value one form of masculinity over others at any given time (Shaun,

Wardell, & McGuire, 2011). Such identity work has consequences in that overlapping masculinity identities cause additional stress to be all things to all groups of peers.

Given the additional stress and anxiety that might be pertinent in the formation of conceptions of masculinity, I now to turn to three specific material circumstances to explore the process of becoming a man.

**Black masculinity.** One area of intersectionality that has been explored, but requires additional development concerns the experiences of young Black men in college as they navigate their masculine identity. Scholars have noted that it is difficult to fully realize experiences of black masculinity without exploring the history of racial discrimination in our society (Harper, 2010). Hooks (2004) concisely examines that role of discrimination and the manner in which internalized racism has influenced perceptions of black masculinity. In American society, there is a long practice on the part of the dominant culture of viewing black men in relation to their bodies rather than their minds (Bederman, 1995). Black men were historically stereotyped as physically dominant specimens who were unusually dim-witted and “slow”. They were viewed as lazy, body classed, unpredictable, and often dangerous for their lack of intellect. Hooks suggest that this institutionalized racism eventually manifested itself as internalized racism. Internalized racism occurs when “stigmatized groups accept and recycle negative stereotypes concerning their aptitude, abilities, and societal place” (Hooks, 2004). The result is that black men have often been socialized to devalue educational development in pursuit of other goals. Often, black communities view boys who show interest in reading and intellectual pursuits as “sissy” or as trying to “act white”. Therefore, education

becomes devalued, and even the act of going to college is loaded with implications for young black men.

It is against this backdrop that young black men struggle to manage their overlapping identity challenges as African Americans and as men. Early examinations into expressions of masculinities uncovered the concept of “cool posing” (Major & Billson, 1992). Black college students were found to use cool posing to cope with oppression that was typical of their experiences in society. Therefore, black men developed unique ways to express their masculinity through styles of dress, gesturing, walking, etc. The authors suggest that the rituals symbolically opposed white masculinity norms and expressed the uniqueness of black manhood.

Other studies have attempted to identify additional dimensions concerning masculinity norms among black college men. Black college men often express their masculinity in terms of toughness, promiscuity, and physical expressions. Oliver (1989) noted two general orientations to these norms, expressed by the “tough guy” or the “player of women”. He also notes that these two orientations and accompanying norms seem to be in reaction to the opportunities denied to black men in the broader culture. While the norms uncovered might be similar to white men’s norms, these qualities are of particular value to black men as they negotiate manhood with respect to their experiences with racism.

Additional studies provide evidence that black experiences of masculinity are by no means universal. For example, research on Black college men who are high achievers (high GPAs and heavily involved in campus activities) found that those men experienced and described masculinity in very different ways than their Black peers who did not

attend college (Harper, 2004). High achievers described masculinity as the pursuit of academic excellence, holding leadership positions on campus, and service to black communities. High achievers description are in sharp contrast to uninvolved peers who valued sexual conquest, competition, and the display of material possessions.

Academically driven black student-athletes provided another example of the variability of masculinity experiences in college. Academic black men perceived masculine attributes as being accountable, character display, service to the community, and academic excellence (Martin & Harris, 2006). Given these findings, it is important to note that experiences of masculinity for black men vary given other contextual variables.

**Co-sexual identities and masculinity.** Approaching a review of literature related to masculine identity is problematic because of the various labels and terms used to describe men who might fall outside of the heteronormative paradigm that permeates praxis and theory. Compton and Dougherty (2017) have persuasively argued that a form of linguistic inequality exists when labeling gender perspectives that do not conform to heteronormative standards that are used in research. For example, use of the term “non-heterosexual men” might serve to connote that heterosexual behavior and identity is somehow superior to other forms of gender identity. Various approaches to examining “alternate” sexual orientation and gender identity utilize terms that privilege heteronormative behavior and practice and serve to frame non-heteronormative as somehow deviant from the norm. Decentering heteronormativity through the use of a new framework can help to level the linguistic playing field and provide balance to research and practice. Utilizing co-cultural theory, the authors’ have offered the term co-sexuality

as providing a more useful and equal framework for examining sexualities that lie outside of normative expectations.

The argument for the use of co-sexual is a powerful one. I use the term co-sexual to refer in general to men who fall outside of heteronormative standards of sexuality and gender. When exploring specific findings concerning co-sexual identities in the literature, I use terms from the specific literature under consideration.

Co-sexual men find unique challenges in dealing with issues of gender identity. In American and other patriarchal societies, gay men have mostly been interpreted as being distinctly lacking in masculinity (Connell, 2005). Gay men are often popularly portrayed as limp-wristed, fashion oriented, high talking caricatures who embody feminine characteristics and act flamboyantly. They are perceived as weak, indecisive, avoid conflict, passive, and deviant. It is against this challenging backdrop that co-sexual college men navigate their experiences with masculinity.

Research has demonstrated that gay college men's experiences of masculinity are by no means universal. While colleges have historically been institutions formed and operated in a manner consistent with patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, campus cultures vary in their degrees of acceptance and inclusiveness concerning alternate sexual identities (Berila, 2011). College campuses often contain diverse populations of students that can affect how gay students experience their gender identity. Additionally, colleges often adopt different stances in assisting students in navigating masculinity issues.

Dilley (2013) problematizes gay men's experience concerning masculinity by questioning the very way researchers categorize gay college men. He offers a typology based on research into co-sexual college men's perception of male identity and historical



development on college campuses that demonstrate variation across gay identities. Co-sexual identities on college campuses can be conceptually broken into the six categories of homosexual, gay, queer, closeted, normal, and parallel. Homosexual identity is comprised of an actor who acknowledges feelings and attractions for other men but does not necessarily share that aspect of his identity with others. In contrast, gay identity is a more public manifestation of gendered identity and promotes change in dominant attitudes on a campus. Queer identity marks a public performance of masculine identity that is very public and seeks acceptance in opposition to straight culture. Closeted masculine identity is a recognition of sexual attraction to other men, but is a very private identity that is not shared with others. Normal identity concerns an identification as heterosexual male where homosexual activity does not have an effect upon masculine identity beyond the cultural norms of campus. Finally, parallel masculine identity refers to shifting between straight and co-sexual identities and compartmenting identity based on sexual context. Such a categorization of co-sexual identities highlight the difficulty in universalizing “gay” masculinity vis a vis larger narratives of masculinity for college men. Not only do co-sexual men have to navigate masculinity norms on a college campus, but navigate the various manifestations of co-sexual identities in relation to the constitution of masculinity.

While there is clear evidence of varying co-sexual masculinities in play by college men, it is also clear that navigating masculinity is heavily influenced by notions of dominant campus forms of masculinity. Co-sexual men have been socialized against the backdrop of hegemonic masculinity and socialized gender norms. Therefore, most co-sexual men have been taught that to be considered masculine, they must exhibit behaviors

of rationality, heterosexuality, authoritativeness, toughness, and patriarchal power relations. The college experience for many co-sexual men involves a high degree of dissonance between these dominant forms of masculinity and the emerging alternate conceptions of masculinity associated with sexual identity (Berila, 2011). Co-sexual men feel the pressure to conform to masculinity norms while exploring being a gay man and often struggle to reconcile the two. This reconciling of the dominant forms of masculinity and emerging individual masculine identity manifests itself in a variety of common behaviors for co-sexual college men. Often, they strive to “fit in” to a heteronormative culture and perform actions consistent with dominant norms to reduce the dissonance they often feel in the light of accepted masculine forms (Berila, 2011). So a man who identifies with being co-sexual may engage in performances of toughness or act straight to conform to conceptions of manhood. Alternatively, co-sexual men might engage in acts of resistance against the dominant forms of masculinity embraced on a college campus. They may act in a flamboyant manner consistent with popular conceptions of homosexual behavior in an attempt at delineating themselves from dominant forms of masculinity and exploring personal masculine identity. Performances of this type have implications for these men and how they come to experience masculinity.

The performances of co-sexual men are even more challenging when the man in question is African American and co-sexual. Washington and Wall (2010) examined the intersection of masculinity, race, and sexual orientation and noted the elaborate dance that gay and bisexual men of African descent (GBMAD) had to engage in when negotiating masculine identity. They noted that GBMAD engaged in the constant shifting of masculinities to engage with multiple masculine communities. For example, in some

college environments, a GBMAD might identify as an African American identified gay (AAIG) to highlight their race in relation to their masculine identity. In other settings, they may identify as gay-identified African American (GIAA) in which they embraced gay identity over race in negotiating masculinity issues. A significant number actually rejected any label because the political or cultural agenda socially related to the gay community might be more consistent with White and middle-class issues rather than their experiences as men of color.

**Class and masculinity.** As if these intersections did not complicate gender identity enough, one must also attend to social class as an additional intersection in the experience of masculinity. Class pervades every facet of modern western society differentiating individuals and groups in a variety of ways including dress, living conditions, diets, places of worship and more (Domhoff, 1998). College settings are no different, and the experience of masculinity is often limited or enabled by conceptions of class by college men.

Class as a variable can be conceived as defining class largely based on socio-economic status measures (Savage, 2000). Various measures from this perspective define class in terms of income, head of household occupation, net worth, and an array of other discretely measured variables that indicate a place in the social structure of any given society (Dougherty, 2011; Hout, 2008). Variable measures conceptually divide individuals into one of many broad categories. Traditional conceptions of categories might be divided into three – lower, middle, and upper – to as many as the 17 used by the National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) of the United Kingdom. Variable proponents argue that categorization is logical and defines class in measurable

ways that aid research and practical use of the construct. The most compelling argument for class as a variable are objective indicators like education, wealth, and prestige all indicate markers that, in turn, affect our social perceptions to place ourselves in the social order (Krauss, Piff, & Keltner, 2011). Like masculinity, however, some have argued variable conceptualizations of class are inconsistent and minimize important perceptual and structural difference in class processes (Conley, 2008; Dougherty, 2011). They argue that an understanding of class starts with a cultural perspective.

Bourdieu adopted a cultural perspective of class and offered a developed cultural class theory. His approach envisioned social class as largely a learned lifestyle that was passed on from generation to generation in the form of varying forms of cultural and social capital. Classes exist in what he termed as habitus, or fields of play based on capital, and upper-classes were advantaged by their positioning in the fields (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu posited that families in the upper-class were able to gain and develop cultural capital, teaching their children in the way of high culture and distinguish themselves from the lower-classes. Preferred tastes and knowledge are absorbed by upper-class children so that they have a leg up on lower-classes in the class game. Since the upper-class members are versed in the rules of advantage, they help set the rules of education for what is favored in social contexts, and thus are more likely to enter the upper-class. The lower-class children, disadvantaged in relation to their upper counterparts, are likely to stay in the lower-classes. From this cultural perspective, it is easy to identify class through the preferred aesthetic taste concerning art, food, and other cultural indicators. Upper-class individuals have more discriminating tastes in food (or at least set the rules for what is more highly valued) and favor more abstract themes in art.

Lower-class individuals will more likely gravitate towards simple representational art and common food choices (as well as eating in bulk, if possible, according to Bourdieu).

Another perspective for examining class taps into early socialization habits and how different classes shape their children's earliest educational experiences (Lareau, 2011). In a longitudinal study, Lareau followed several families to determine early antecedents to class. She posits that cultural norms and values affect class from an early age with parents of middle-class children cultivating the language and activities of their children so that they are versed in middle-class norms. Conversely, lower-class children are less involved with their parents and develop in a naturalistic manner that reinforces lower-class language and experiences. Over time and generations, these norms are reified and become the norm for a society.

Support can be found for these views in the general and communication literature. Grouped classes in neighborhoods have been shown to hoard opportunities to share for like classed individuals (Patillo, 2008). While ostensibly a critical examination, one famous study showed the cultural effect on young men in England's working-class who were certainly raised with minimal involvement from parents allowing them to roam in a naturalistic fashion and mock the "earholes" of education and middle-class, thus reinforcing their class roots (Willis, 1977). Teamsterville working-class young men were also similarly left to their own naturalistic devices and had minimal cultivation from their parents (Philipson, 1975). Working-class and middle-class storytelling teaching cultural norms do differ in dramatic and emotional content (Burger & Miller, 1999). Similarly, middle and working-class young people talk about class itself in distinct ways, indicating

their cultural upbringing (Stuber, 2006). Such cultural norms of experiencing class follow college men to campuses and significantly influence how they make sense of masculinity.

With regard to college campuses, class identification has an appreciable impact on the potential for completion of a program of study and on the masculine identification processes of college men (Washington & Wall, 2010). Students from low socio-economic status (SES) are far less likely to graduate from college. As an illustration, one study reported that “while 51% of the highest SES quartile eighth graders in 1988 reported having attained a bachelor’s degree 12 years later, only 7% of students from the lowest SES quartile reported the same” (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). The data for low SES students attending two-year colleges is even more troubling. Less than one-third of low SES students who enroll at two-year institutions earn an associate’s degree, certification, or transfer to a four-year institution. Of those, only ten percent will earn a bachelor’s degree. The data is even more depressing when the focus shifts specifically to young men from low SES categories, particular when race and ethnicity are added to the mix. There is significant evidence to suggest that low SES men continue to lose ground concerning success in college.

The low success of male low SES students can conceptually be linked, in part, to their experiences and management of masculinity. Lower SES men do not arrive at college as blank slates concerning their conceptions of manhood. Many come from backgrounds where labor is considered a masculine endeavor and status is attained through providing for one’s family through hard manual work, an emphasis on mechanical expertise, and physical endurance. The introduction to college provides a stark contrast for men in that curricula is designed to train men for mental work with a

managerial focus. This incompatibility between low SES masculinity and managerial masculinity can cause significant stress for young college men and is accompanied by a host of issues (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips 2001). College men may not be fully supported by family members who do not endorse the managerial masculinity norms that are endorsed in college. Low SES college men may opt to abandon college in order to earn immediate income through body work (Marvin, 2006) and to reassert masculinity norms they learned early in life. Overall, men's transition from a lower SES background that promotes working-class masculinity to institutions that promote middle-class managerial masculinity presents a stressful environment for managing masculinity processes in college men.

Clearly, intersections of race, sexual identification, and class are important issues in guiding study concerning the experience of masculinity for college men. Each variable on its own presents challenges for college men exploring manhood at a crucial developmental stage. In combination, the navigation of such intersections is truly daunting for young men. Navigating such issues certainly requires engagement in sound communicative efforts on the part of college men. It is to these communicative efforts I now turn.

**Communication and masculinity.** I argue that communication is the central piece of understanding the puzzle of masculinity. Therefore, communication-oriented literature exploring masculinity are examined in this section. Discursive and symbolic communicative efforts are central to men in their efforts to understanding and expressing masculine identity.

There is a shortage of communication-centered examinations of masculinity for college men. As demonstrated in this review, most studies concerning college masculinity have emerged from the burgeoning field of masculinity studies, feminist treatments, and sociological perspectives (Harris & Harper, 2010; Kimmel, 2011). These perspectives have added significant value in gleaning understanding about masculinity for college men, but approach the communication aspect of this process as tangential at best. They place communication processes as representative expressions of identity or spoken results of masculine experiences. A communication approach adopts a substantially different focus on masculine identity processes in that discourse is central to creating, negotiating, and maintaining gender identity.

To demonstrate the communicative approach to masculinity, I turn to two landmark works that have had significant influence in communication perspectives on gender issues. Judith Butler's (1990) landmark examination of gender identity posited the notion of gendered performativity. Her primary claim is that gendered identity only exists in the political and language realms of dominant social entities. Identity is not something that is, but something that is created through the arbitrary signifiers and symbols used by social beings. Gender, then, becomes a performance rather than symbolic expression, an imaginary and arbitrary cultural interpretation where one form of gender is privileged over others. This observation is significant in approaching how men represent masculinity in any setting. Rather than masculinity being an inherent set of qualities associated with men, it is a performed expression of dominant norms of masculinity in a given context.



Another significant development concerning gender and communication extends from West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender. The authors claim that the performance of gender is dependent upon interaction with others in a social context and that actors come to know their gendered identity through those interactions. Gendered identity is created in everyday routine interactions. Gender becomes visible and taken for granted through conversation, mannerisms, body language, and other types of activities. While not communication centric, this view of gender moves discourse and other symbolic communication behaviors more towards the center of understanding of masculinity. Masculine identity from this perspective becomes something that is more than just expressed or performed. It becomes a concept that is dependent upon ongoing interaction between actors and is dependent upon communication processes.

Butler's observations concerning gender as performance, and West and Zimmerman's claims concerning the interactive nature of gendered expression lead to a logical conclusion that many communication perspectives have embraced. Communication is central to the creation and maintenance of gender. With regard to masculinity, this means that masculinity is constituted through discourse and other interactive communicative acts. Masculinity is "the study of the discourses and the effects of the discourses generated by men, unifying men, and revealing the identity and characteristics men ascribe to themselves, others, and their environment", and masculinity is "profoundly and ultimately a communication concept" (Chesbro and Fuse, 2001). Most communication treatments concerning masculinity adopt the spirit, if not the letter, of this approach.

While there is still a dearth of communication-centered examinations of masculinity for college men, other areas of the communication field have yielded significant findings for masculinity studies. Research from the fields of organizational communication, performance studies, interpersonal communication, and critical studies offer insight into the macro and micro discourses of men in exploring and managing masculine identity.

Research has examined the larger performances of masculinity in popular culture and film to illustrate the crisis that often accompanies complex experiences of masculinity. Feminist scholars have deconstructed popular movies portraying males in the workplace and their reinforcement of patriarchal forms and hegemonic masculinity while also revealing masculinity in crisis and potential vulnerabilities in those forms (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003). The authors' deconstruct two popular movies about modern conceptions of masculinity and discusses the discourse and performances of manhood used in the movies by the main characters, uses feminist and critical organizational theory as a lens, and situates the topic as the historically reoccurring "crisis" of masculinity. *Fight Club* and *In the Company of Men* center on men in varying phases of crisis concerning their masculinity in a world with evolving views about manhood. Both films main characters lament the downfall of manhood in the civilized world of bureaucratic organizations. They point to the feminization of the workplace, the devaluation of physical labor, the emphasis on materiality and commercialism, the overall corporate servitude placed upon men, and other perceived injustices of the system. As a result, the characters attempt to recapture former iterations of masculinity. For *Company of Men*, the characters redefine the corporate environment in primitive ways and act in a "survival of

the fittest" manner in the "jungle" of the corporation. They redefine masculinity in a sadistic manner that devalues and manipulates women and highlights primitive masculine traits in the modern civilized corporate world. For *Fight Club*, the main character actually creates an alter ego and in a homo-erotic visually depictive manner, reverts back to primitive acts of fighting in a non-materialistic, savage environment that rejects the civilized culture. Ashcraft and Flores's deconstruction of the narratives highlights two divergent discourses of men in contemporary white collar environments. On the one hand, *Fight Club*'s characters try to reclaim a sense of manhood that existed in early America that promoted action, savagery, homo-social friendships, and physical prowess. On the other hand, *Men* reframes masculinity in terms of the managerial control by men and values domination in the white collar world.

Research has demonstrated the central role that communication takes in framing and creating masculinity in a variety of contexts. For example, men who engage in particular types of symbolic communication and discourse reframed their status as men despite physical disability (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008). The authors studied the phenomenon of wheelchair "murderball" to examine constructed masculinity and how manliness is reinforced through the ultra-violent and aggressive sport for those who are quadriplegic. The researchers suggest that participating in the sport is a communicative act that is meant to challenge ableist views of those confined to wheelchairs. The participants engaged in extremely and sometimes exaggerated forms of violence in the playing of the sport to show their ability to operate as fully functional (sometimes almost "super" functional) individuals. Participants would also engage in discourse involving hyper-sexualized humor and talk to reduce the stigma associated with their physical

issues and “rehabilitate” their masculinity. Such discourse allows members to frame their disabilities to resemble “normal” masculinity. This also means often reifying hegemonic forms of masculinity despite members’ physical inability to reach socially ideal forms of manhood. Murderball participants’ descriptions of masculinity illustrate the centrality of discourse and symbolic communication in studying perceptions of masculinity. Discourse is used to reframe masculine experiences and to reduce the social stigma, or taint, often associated with being a disabled man.

Such reframing and taint management frequently appears in the literature on dirty work. Dirty work includes occupations that have significant distasteful duties like gravediggers, garbage collectors, firefighters, correctional professionals, sex workers, etc. Research has suggested that workers in general use discursive reframing to construct a positive identity in the light of distasteful responsibility associated with a profession (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Tracy and Scott (2006) examined this phenomenon in relation to reducing taint for correctional officers and firefighters while managing expectation for masculinity. But firefighters and correctional officers face a considerable amount of dirty work in their respective professions. Much of this dirty work is considered consistent with “feminine” work like caretaking and cleaning and could be considered a challenge to masculine norms for members. Firefighter’s discursively highlighted the aspects of their jobs that call attention to danger and sexuality- like "running into a burning building" and sexually loaded joking. They would discursively frame messages that highlighted the exciting, manly aspects of the job and minimizes the "feminine" caretaking and cleaning aspects that are much more common. Correctional officers, on the other hand, have a more difficult time framing their experiences as

masculine because of the often negative public portrayal of their profession. Therefore, while they tried to reframe their job as more exciting, they did not enjoy the discursive advantages of firefighters who have often been glamourized in public for their more dangerous responsibilities. Such insights into reframing stigmatized status could be useful in examining groups of college men in the navigation of their masculine identity. Co-sexual men are routinely stigmatized by fellow men in everyday discourse and in the institutionalized fraternity system as a whole (Yeung, Stompler, & Wharton, 2006). Often low SES men are stigmatized as well, or at least feel that they are held in less esteem by other students and sometimes even family (Harper & Harris, 2010). Understanding how men incorporate reframing processes for stigmatized status in these conditions can be informative when exploring the gender identity process.

Additional research in the organizational communication field has demonstrated that masculinity is unstable, fragmented, and negotiated in a dialectical manner between micro and macro discourses. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) examine airline pilots and their discursive expression of masculinity in the light of historical texts that situate pilots as dashing, risk-taking, adventurous, brave dare-devil males to a more modern conception of professional team player figure occupying a key role in the flying industry. The airline pilot as subject is quite unstable in terms of masculine identity and has been affected by discourses from government agencies, the airline industry, the popular and professional press and others. The pilots, however, engage in micro discourse that resist larger macro discourses concerning their professional masculine identity. Thus, a dialectical tension exists between how pilot masculinity is framed in the public and how pilots choose to frame their masculine identity in everyday conversations. These micro discourses both

resist dominant conceptions of masculinity and, ironically, serve to reinforce larger discourses concerning masculinity.

Discourse is used to demonstrate norms and rules of masculinity within a community and may also reflect the anxiety that accompanies the expression of the construct. For example, members of the Chicago neighborhood comprised mainly of teamster union member's families enforce norms of masculinity by hanging out on particular street corners or bars that informally exclude women (Philipson, 1990). Men are expected to speak in particular ways when faced with specific situations, like when another man denigrates a man's mother or girlfriend. Speaking is devalued and low in quantity when dealing with outsiders, wives, children, and those of a different ethnicity (Philipson, 1990). Masculinity norms are enacted and maintained through the communication rules and discourses in the community. Male members of the community who do not conform to the given masculine discourse may be relegated to an unmanly status or discursively isolated from the speech community.

The limited amount of examination of college masculinity from a communication perspective generally focuses on alcohol use and its link to conceptions of masculinity. This is not a surprising focus as drinking has been described as an area that is dominated by men, is male identified and male centered (Harper & Harris, 2010). Scholars have suggested that social drinking by college men is often a homosocial event and serves as a symbolic marker of masculinity. Communication treatments of masculinity suggest that men engage in a variety of discursive narratives that highlight the increased risk-taking, entertaining stories concerning the loss of control during drinking binges, and regrettable sexual choices (Workman, 2001). Drinking and the consequences of drinking become a

symbol of masculinity for college men. Narratives of drinking and loss of control can be used to highlight behaviors of masculine performance when using alcohol. Conversely, narratives of drinking adventures can serve as excuses for misbehaving as men. Engstrom (2012) demonstrated how men on one college campus would discursively produce and reproduce dominant conceptions of manhood when discussing bad behaviors associated with drinking binges. Participants in the study engaged in discourses that normalized excessive drinking, excused harmful acts committed while drinking (I did... because I was drunk), and associated drinking with expressing masculinity.

Communication research on masculinity has demonstrated the centrality of discourse and symbolic communicative acts in the creation and maintenance of masculine identities. While progress in the area has been significant, there is room for additional communication theories centered on masculinity. This is particularly true when considering a perspective to examine men at a crucial developmental age. To fill this void in the literature, I will propose a new perspective that is grounded in data collected from college men.

I am proposing a communication theory of masculinity informed by the theory of precarious manhood and hegemonic masculinity. My argument is based on the need for a communication-centered theory of masculinity where discourse and speech are central to the constitution, negotiation, and maintenance of masculine identity. Such theory development is daunting indeed and must be informed by findings from a variety of disciplines and approaches. Cognitive approaches are important in that they represent the early development of identity and note the anxiety related to reconciling various masculine ideologies with the roles expected of men. I believe cognitive theories are

important in that so much of how we come to know ourselves as men is in privacy and silence. Phillipson noted such when he described a speech community of unionized workers who devalued overt speech in favor of silence. Harris's findings likewise support this idea of quiet when describing how men related to other men side by side rather than face to face. Culture is also central to developing a new theory of masculinity. The social construction of masculinity means that many masculinities can be experienced and that masculinity scripts are formed against the backdrop of historical and contextual variables. Our interactions with others are crucial to developing masculine identity. Critical theories point out the uneven power relationships that form culture and the traditional dominance of some groups to the detriment and marginalization of others. They are essential in centralizing ongoing power and political elements that are further material for creating masculine identity. The intersectionality of race, class, and gender are yet more important factors in the formation and maintenance of masculinity. Such variables represent the material circumstances that limit or empower men's ability to navigate masculine identity.

My stance is that communication plays the pivotal roles in giving salience and life to masculine identity. Dougherty once made a similar argument concerning social class in stating that discourse is the mortar that binds overlapping forces in an ongoing struggle to negotiate issues of class, gender, and race in relation to farming. I offer an alternative metaphor in the discussion of masculinity. I posit that communication is the fire in which masculine identity is tempered, forged, and shaped among the various forces that limit or empower our ability to create and maintain what it means to be a man. Discourse gives shape to the cognitive, coherence to social construction and culture, offers resistance to



the power of patriarchal forms and dominant institutional structures, and voice to the intersection of race and class. Like metal, masculinity seems largely permanent, but only awaits the proper amount of heat and new mix of alloy to alter its makeup. It is a delicate balance of weight, strength, fatigue resistance, and craftsmanship that produces metals that are not too brittle and prone to cracking. A communication-centered approach to masculinity might eventually guide young men to reach the right balance of alloy and to produce strong, ethical, and reflective men.

Precarious Masculinity offers a starting point for creating a theory of masculinity. Informed by the notion of Precarious Manhood, the new theory posits that manhood is a precarious state; one which is hard to reach, easy to lose, and elusive. Precarious Masculinity, however, will examine how the discourses of young men constitute manhood, negotiate the tenuous process, and maintain ongoing notions of manliness. Hegemonic Masculinity, with its focus on social structure, power relations, and resistance, also informs the development of Precarious Masculinity. Precarious Masculinity, however, will attempt to delineate how men discursively navigate and manage men's relationship with social structures in defining their personal masculine identity.

As a starting point to examine this issue, I offer the following research questions.

RQ1: How do college men discursively enact and maintain Precarious Masculinity?

RQ2: How do social structures impact the discursive enactment and maintenance of Precarious Masculinity?

RQ3: How do intersectional issues of race, class, and sexuality impact the discursive enactment and maintenance of Precarious Masculinity?

### Chapter 3—Method

This study on college men's masculine identity processes utilizes a ground theory methodology from a social constructionist perspective to develop a theory of precarious masculinity. Schwandt (2000) identifies social constructionism as one of three major epistemological stances in qualitative inquiry. Social construction adopts the position that all knowledge is constructed against the backdrop of shared understandings and experiences of social actors. Developing knowledge depends on historical and situational forces and are affected by ideological and political concerns (Schwandt, 2000). Therefore, knowledge is not an a priori phenomenon, but one that is fluid and based on interaction in a social setting. Social constructionism is concerned with unraveling or explaining the process by which people experience or describe their world (Gergen, 1985). It is concerned with exploring the world as co-constructed by participants in discourse and symbolic action.

Social constructionism does not denote a universal epistemological stance. Scholars have noted the distinction between "strong" and "weak" forms of constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). A strong form of constructionism embraces an ontological relativism or a stance that there is no objective reality beyond the conceptions of reality recognized by social actors. From such a view, knowledge claims are based on situated context, heavily influenced by ideological concerns, and claims of understanding by a researcher are value-laden. In sharp contrast is weak constructionism. Weak constructionism adopts an epistemological stance that objective reality can limit knowledge claims. Methods employed by the researcher may be limited by contextual and historical matters, and knowledge claims may be suspect. I adopt a weak approach to

social construction in the examination of college-age men and their constitutive efforts concerning masculine identity. The literature on masculinity studies is consistent with this approach. Masculinity as a construct is seen in multiple forms in varying contexts, heavily affected by historical and contextual issues, and is created in social interaction (Connell, 2005). It is also an identity issue that is limited by circumstances including intersections with socio-economic status, body issues, race, and other limiting factors with concern to making knowledge claims. Grounded theory offers a systematic approach to examining this complex construct.

Grounded theory is a systematic methodological approach that is used to develop theory that emerges from a close relationship with data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory offers methods that “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting, and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories grounded in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006). Early iterations of the grounded theory approach depended on rigidly prescribed methods that codified qualitative data similar to the codification of quantitative procedures. Later iterations added flexibility to analysis procedures, and interpretive commitments providing for an inductive approach to the generation of theory that is grounded in the data.

Charmaz (2006) likens grounded theory to that of a craft and researcher a craftsperson. Fine craft disciplines normally offer prescribed best practices that inform baseline approaches for creating a work of functional art. Craftspeople, however, often vary in their focus of how best to create and improvise in an informed manner. Such is the methodology offered by grounded theory from Charmaz’s constructivist approach. Grounded theory from this perspective is a set of principles and practices that remain

close to the data being examined (Charmaz, 2000). The researcher, while informed by current theory, is guided by the theoretical frameworks that emerge from an ongoing data collection and analysis process. The researcher may be compelled by this ongoing process to collect data from alternate sources or use another method based on the constructs. The research process is said to be grounded in, or closely related to, the data from which a theoretical framework is being created for the examined construct. Collection and analysis is conducted systematically in a manner that encourages ongoing comparison between data sets and emerging conceptual frameworks of theoretical explanation. Charmaz's methodological approach offers the researcher a systematic process for collection and analysis while allowing maximum flexibility in the creation of theory.

Grounded theory from Charmaz's perspective refers to a lack of separation between the studied phenomenon and the researcher. This is an axiological commitment that claims researchers are part of the creation of knowledge, not simply discovering existing phenomena. As Charmaz notes, constructed grounded theory offers "an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (Charmaz, 1995). Any theory offered as a result of inductive theory building is infused with the perspectives of participants and researcher as constructed knowledge. It is not *the* construction of reality, but one that is co-constructed through the lens of participants' experiences and researcher perspective.

Constructing theory claims in grounded theory demands the collection of rich data. Charmaz describes rich data as that which "gets beneath the surface of social and subjective life" (Charmaz, 2006). Rich data is that which explores not only the explicit

discourse of participants, but the meanings, consequences, and invisible structures that shape social knowledge. Rich data is data that is descriptive, complete, focused, and detailed. As Charmaz notes, sometimes the pursuit of rich data sources is as informative of the area of interest as the data itself. My effort and approach to collecting rich data are described in the following section.

### **Method**

I employed the use of intensive interviewing to explore the discourse used in constituting, negotiating, and maintaining masculinity for college-age men. Interviews were analyzed to build explanatory theory concerning the emergence and maintenance of masculinity during a crucial developmental period for young men.

Interviews highlight the significance of language in inquiry between human beings (Seidman, 2013). The heart of who we are is expressed and explored through interaction with other human beings. It is how we make sense of the world and the social realities that we occupy. As Weick (1995) notes, making sense of our surroundings involves engaging in social processes and retroactively attribute meaning to situations and self. The conversation that takes place in interviewing is a basic mode of inquiry that promotes and encourages making sense of our identity in interaction.

Interviews are conceptualized as directed conversations between researcher and participant (Charmaz, 2006). These conversations allow in-depth exploration of participant perspectives and experiences concerning the construct of interest. The interviewer guides the conversation in an attempt to understand the experiences and meanings of the participant. Therefore, the interviewer is an active participant in the interview process; one that encourages the participant to reflect upon “experiences in

ways that seldom occur in everyday life” (Charmaz, 2006). The interviewer takes on the role of gentle interrogator, guide, and encourager to understand, indeed, to co-create knowledge that emerges from the analysis of discourse in interaction with the participant.

The intensive style of interviewing promoted by Charmaz (2006) allows the interviewer to reach beyond ordinary conversation using a variety of techniques. For example, an interviewer might stop to explore a particular statement or topic, encourage the participant to add more detail, adjust the pace of the interview, redirect or keep the participant on a particular topic, and engage in other active techniques to glean participant meaning. This intensive style is particularly suited for ground theory in that it allows the researcher to react and adjust interviewing practices given the emerging data.

In preparation for interviews, I created an interview guide. Charmaz notes the need to create a few broad, open-ended questions to begin exploration of a phenomenon. Questions tend to evolve in grounded theory based on potential properties that emerge in ongoing analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, the guide evolved in subsequent interviews, or even during individual interviews. While the questions were largely informed by the literature, they were broad enough to take the conversation in different directions based on emerging categories and theory development (Charmaz, 2006). Follow up questions that encourage exploration or clarification of interesting avenues were available and I would occasionally veer away from the guide when such avenues were presented. Questions often overlapped in order to explore the phenomenon under exploration fully. For example, many of my questions continually revisited the notion of challenges to participant conceptions of manhood in order to encourage reflection on

instances that may have provoked anxiety concerning the masculine identity of participants.

In creating the initial interview guide, I relied on several sources of inspiration. First, as a man who has a deep curiosity concerning how other men perceive and come to know themselves as men, I rely on a lifetime of experiences in a variety of contexts. Glesne (2006) notes that often interview questions are guided by experiential knowledge concerning a topic. As a middle-aged man, I think that the experiences I have had in the military, as a restaurant manager, as a businessman, and as a lifelong student have merit. While these experiences are valuable, I am also a white male who enjoys many of the advantages of living in a patriarchal society. This could present challenges not only for the creation of meaningful questions but for the conduct of the interviews and analysis of data. Charmaz emphasizes the importance of wrestling with preconceptions that might taint analysis of data. She notes that there are several methods of grounded theory that can help offset potential bias (Charmaz, 2006). These include acknowledgment of personal perspective, an intimate familiarity with the studied phenomenon, adopting a reflexive stance throughout the analysis process, adherence to sound coding practices, and use of rich data to support claims.

Given her suggestions, I have taken several steps to reduce personal bias in the collection of my data for this project. First, I have written about some of my personal history as a man in the body of this text. As a white, middle-aged man, I acknowledge that I possess several characteristics that are consistent with the patriarchal forms that dominate Western society. I have outlined those characteristics and revealed other personal stories that might offer potential bias in approaching the study. Second, I

completed an exhaustive review of literature that explores a variety of approaches and topics in masculinity studies. Third, I adopted a reflexive perspective in my approach to data analysis in this study. This involves adhering to sound coding practices outlined later in this methods section. Being reflexive also meant an ongoing revisiting of data and the categories that emerged from the data, and constant questioning of preconceptions on my part. I also sought out the advice of several college-age men not involved as participants to ascertain their perspective of the lines of questioning used during interviews. I found this to be a particularly useful method for molding my initial protocol. Two of these young men, for example, pointed out that college-age men rarely talk directly about being men and that young men may experience a sort of precariousness in talking about the subject. They suggested several different alternative questions and approaches to designing the protocol. Finally, at the end of each interview, I would ask the young men to comment on what I *did not* ask that they thought might be pertinent to my study.

My second source to generate interview questions relied on a familiarity with the larger masculinity literature from a variety of disciplines. Developing questions involves building them based on content emerging from past findings in the subject area (Glesne, 2006; Kvale, 1996). Therefore, I attempted to have a basis in the literature for most of my questions while leaving room to explore potential avenues of discovery that might present themselves during the process. I also tried to formulate questions that reflected relevant themes, but that was also dynamic in that they encouraged ongoing exploration of fruitful areas that arose in interaction with participants. My initial guide is included in Appendix A for review.



Interviews were conducted in locations convenient for the participants in this study. All interviews took place on two college campuses in an area that promoted confidentiality and comfort for the participants. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed with the knowledge and consent of participants. I kept note-taking to a minimum during the interviews in order to reduce distraction and be fully engaged in the process. Immediately following the interview, I wrote extemporaneous notes in an attempt to capture the context, nature, and descriptions of the conversation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, I also engaged in memo writing following the interviews and during subsequent transcriptions of recordings.

### **Participants and Theoretical Sampling**

Sampling in grounded theory is closely tied to the constant comparative method and ongoing analysis in every phase of data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Sampling depends upon conceptual and theoretical development, not data saturation or the need for a representative sample of a population. Therefore, sampling in some cases of Ground Theory can theoretically involve few participants. Sampling of data continues until no further theoretical categories emerge from the study. This could include a sample of a handful of students, or dozens.

I attempted to find participants who cut across a variety of variables such as race, sexual identity, and social economic class. In order to examine the discursive expression and management of masculinity for college-age men, interviews were conducted with participants who met the criteria for this study. College-age men are defined as men between the ages of 18 and 24. Participant demographics are included in Table 1 at the end of this manuscript. This age range represents a key developmental stage in the

gendered identity development of young men. Participants reflected the demographic makeup that represents various intersections explored by the study.

Sampling in the early phase of data collection is referred to as initial sampling consistent with grounded theory methodology. Initial participants in this study were recruited using two approaches. In the first method, participants were recruited from a basic communication course at a large Midwest university. The primary researcher visited two classrooms, briefly described the study, and collected volunteers who were offered extra credit in the course to encourage participation. A second approach located participants through snowball sampling. Original participants were asked to refer college men that fit the demographics sought by the primary researcher. Interestingly, the topic and interview experience stimulated great interest among the participants of the study. Most of the men in the study expressed thanks and great interest in examining masculinity for young men—an area many thought was understudied and novel.

Initial sampling was not successful in identifying co-sexual men. As a result, I reached out to a local LGBTQ center that served the surrounding campus and community. After I submitted an application to conduct interviews to the director of the center, a post was made to a mailing list and online bulletin board. The post described the study and ask for volunteers for interviews concerning masculinity. Four members of the center reached out to me and volunteered to be interviewed for the study.

Theoretical sampling continued until data was sufficiently “saturated” (Charmaz, 2006). Saturation specifically refers to the state where categories and properties in an emerging theory are fully developed and additional data analysis will no longer advance understanding of the construct. My initial intent was to interview approximately 15-18

college-age men across the variety of characteristics outlined in the study. While my first interviews generated data consistent with my study, I decided to expand my sample to 25 men. After the coding of the 25 samples, the categories of the proposed theory were sufficiently saturated.

### **Interview Procedures**

As participants were identified for this study, I contacted them via email to schedule the interview at a convenient time and location, and to convey information about the interview process. Interview scholars often stress the importance of building rapport with participants to develop an atmosphere of trust and respect for the interview event (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990). I believe providing early information concerning the data collection event is one way to build rapport early in the process. An initial summary included a preview of questions, researcher background, and what to expect at the interview location including time frame, electronic instruments used for recording, and assurance of confidentiality. Most of the participants in the interviews made positive comments about the early delivery of questions in that they had a chance to reflect on a topic that they did not normally engage in on a conscious level.

Participants were asked to bring two items to initial interviews. One item to represent masculinity in general for the participant. Another item represents the participant's masculinity specifically. Asking men to bring items that symbolize masculinity is a tool to elicit conversation about masculinity. This accomplishes several goals for the current study. First, there is precedent for this procedure and its efficacy in stimulating conversation about identity issues. Smith (2011) used personal items to elicit stories about retirement and noted the care and time participants took in choosing items.

Second, Charmaz notes that men sometimes offer a unique challenge in interviews concerning masculine identity issues. She observed that men who are interrogated about personal masculinity issues often shift to Meta discourses about masculinity in general rather than reflect on personal masculinity issues; alternatively, men may see one-on-one interviews about masculinity as threatening if some topics challenge masculinity claims (Charmaz, 2006). Indeed, as I note in the results of my study, male participants would slip into Meta discourses at times in regard to masculinity. I did find that the items often assisted in successfully shifting the discussion from Meta issues to more personal ones. Indeed, this shifting between the two levels of discourse takes a central place in the proposed theory. Having an item to open initial dialogue about masculinity was highly efficacious in helping to build trust, rapport, and to reduce perceived threats to masculinity claims.

I provided participants with a written brief concerning the research topic when they arrived at the interview site. While the risk of damage to participants is minimal, they were also presented with a consent form and a list of campus resources available to participants should they be needed. The participant completed a form concerning demographics (age, employment status, campus involvement, etc.) before commencing with the interview. After completing forms, I verbally briefed the participant about the interview process and the subject under consideration. I followed a basic script when conducting my briefing. While I did not read word for word from the brief, I did follow the basic outline and tried not to overly explain the study or guiding theories so as not to unduly influence the participants own narrative. A copy of the basic script is included in Appendix B of this document.

Briefing represents an important step in the interview process and presents a chance for the researcher to build rapport and communicate the nature of the interview to the participant (Kvale, 1996). Lindlof & Taylor (2002) suggests that this step in the interview process can build trust and goodwill between researcher and participant as well as encourage reciprocity of information sharing. The relationship of interviewer and interviewee is one that is cooperative, but fundamentally unequal regarding expertise and control of the direction and tone of the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Engaging in clear briefings and disclosure can help to reduce that power difference and encourage greater sharing of information.

Kvale (1996) notes that some participants sometimes feel anxiety over self-disclosure, or conversely, feel a release of tension or reflection upon the completion of an interview. After the interview, the participants were debriefed concerning broad themes discovered during the interview and the next steps in the research process. They were given an opportunity to ask questions about the project, and comment on their experiences in the interview.

This post interview step was particularly interesting in the context of this study. Participants often seemed at ease and fairly open during the recorded sessions of the interview. However, after the formal interview, many of my participants exhibited behavior and dialogue that continued to explore the subject of masculinity. Warren et al. (2003) found that participants often open up in a variety of ways “after the interview”. Using Goffman, they explored the strip of time after recording and before rituals of departure. Participants often “turned the tables” on the researcher and interrogated him/her seeking feedback on, for example, “how did I do” or “where is your research at

this time” (Warren, Barnes-Brus, Burgess, Wiebold-Lippisch, Hackney, Harkness, Kennedy, Dingwall, Rosenblatt, Ryen, & Shuy, 2003). Participants also might open up about the topic in ways they may not have in the recorded sessions.

The young men in my study exhibited both behaviors post-recording. Many wanted to continue the dialog after the recorder was off. Indeed many would offer additional stories about precarious situations related to their masculinity. Others would offer to send me information from an article they had read or a video on YouTube. Yet others would offer additional analysis on the nature of manhood. I always tried to engage them in the discussions with an eye towards my research goals and data. After identifying this trend of the participants to offer more information concerning the subject, I would gain permission from the participant to use our discussion in my analysis. Gaining permission, I would take notes after the departure of the participant. This resulted in additional memos I used in my overall analysis. I do not offer any quotes from these additional interactions in my results, but these ad hoc conversations inevitably contributed to my analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The best practices of grounded theory advocate interpretation that is guided by familiarization with the pertinent literature, relevant theory, and an immersion in the data to identify emerging conceptual themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory demands a close relationship with the data and with emerging findings. Indeed, collecting rich data requires “entering research participants’ worlds” (Charmaz, 2006). Data is continuously compared to categories from earlier data and the researcher is guided towards additional data collection until theoretical saturation is achieved. Charmaz notes

a tendency for qualitative researchers to refer to saturation as a point when no further categories emerge from data sets. However, she differentiates this approach from grounded theory analysis where saturation refers to a state where the description of properties of the emergent theory are exhausted and complete.

Coding represents the crucial link between the collection of data and developing an explanation for what is going on in the data. Coding provides the initial structure for emerging theory by offering a systematic approach for identifying themes arising from researcher interaction with the data. As Glaser (1978) notes, coding allows for close interaction with data to identify emerging theory. This coding essentially provides the framing, or bare bones, of the theory that is later fleshed out in theory.

My first approach for coding discourse of college men was to engage in initial coding of the interview transcripts. Initial coding sticks close to the data and involves speed and spontaneity in identifying key incidents present in the discourse (Charmaz, 2006). The key to initial coding is to “see actions in each segment of data rather than applying preexisting categories to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding involves letting actions come out of the data, rather than trying to frame them through a particular theory. I engaged in incident by incident initial coding in order to identify emergent categories concerning how college men experience and talk about masculinity in college.

I tried to adhere to Charmaz’s guidelines in creating codes during the initial phase. She advocates expressing action in codes. She suggests that using gerunds in coding “fosters theoretical sensitivity” and focuses our coding on enacted processes rather than static topics. Therefore, as I progressed through initial coding, I tried to express them *in action*. Some early examples include codes like “expressing (non)

emotion” and “rehabilitating personal manliness” to express the discursive or symbolic action in young men’s management of masculine identity. Additionally, I tried to code with speed and spontaneity, create simple and precise codes, remain open to new codes, compare later codes to earlier codes, and closely tie codes to the data (Charmaz, 2006). This initial method of coding encouraged and enabled constant comparison of codes to form the frame of categories of the theory.

To assist in initial coding and early memoing, I used the software program QSR-Nvivo, a qualitative method computer program. QSR-Nvivo, while a general qualitative method software program, has been successfully shown to assist in grounded theory analysis (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). Nvivo’s toolset can assist in the iterative process of grounded theory by offering a systematic manner to create codes (by the researcher, not generated by the program), link memos, quickly link passages of interviews to codes, make systematic comparisons through linking, and the deft handling of data.

I mainly used the software to create and organize “Nodes” and “subnodes” for my emerging codes. Essentially the software allowed me to create my own codes based on my ongoing analysis and to organize them in an expanding/collapsing tree structure within the software. The great advantage of such software is that it allows the researcher to simulate how one might code by hand- as if organizing codes with the raw data on index cards or color-coded paper and organizing and reorganizing them. I could easily rename codes, shift existing codes to subunits, or move codes at will. Codes are also linked to the interview passages from where they were generated. Therefore, one can call



up codes and read the passages linked at will and make further refinements to the coding process.

Nvivo also offers the capability to link memos to interview data and codes. This allows the researcher to create memos on the fly and shift between raw data, codes, and memos at will. While the software also offers queries to analyze data, I did not utilize the tool as I felt it would not reflect analysis consistent with the grounded theory methodology. I took Richards (2002) advice and did try to fit my research to the software, but use the software in a manner useful for my study.

In addition to category identification, I tried to be cognizant of terms used by the actors themselves to locate potential patterns in the data. Descriptive or common terms used in interaction by participants are often used in final labeling of categories of the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006). This form of initial coding, *in vivo* coding, helps to preserve participant meaning concerning experiences and serves as an important form of verification for the study. Again, I found that Nvivo assisted with my being able to locate where I had identified an *in vivo* code of interest. The software allowed me to classify a code as *in vivo* and I could call *in vivo* codes up at will.

The second major phase of my coding was engaging in focused coding. Where initial coding focuses on coding by line, word, or incident, focused coding involves making decisions about the earlier codes and refining them (Charmaz, 2006). This involves often revisiting the data and making decisions about initial codes as to their salience to the study. Focused coding involves refining the initial codes and reducing them to thematic categories that make the most sense given the data. Focused coding also involves constant revisiting of the raw data to compare, restate, or eliminate categories.

Rather than examining the data in a linear manner, focused coding may involve moving back and forth, making comparisons, or finding implicit meaning in the data.

My approach to focused coding fit the description that Charmaz offered. It was definitely not always linear. My early efforts involved locating what the data indicated were the most significant codes. Nvivo helped in locating the most frequently used codes, but I also engaged in repeated readings of the raw data in the interviews, rephrasing of codes, removing of some codes, and general reorganizing of coding to locate the most important or those that pointed towards analysis of larger segments of data. In short, I synthesized and made ongoing decisions about the coding in order to reflect the characteristics of the emerging theoretical categories in the study. I see initial coding as fragmenting the collected data. The focused coding represents a restructuring of the fragments to develop a more cohesive and emerging theory emerging from the data.

After focused coding, I engaged in theoretical coding of the data concerning college men and their experience of masculinity. Theoretical coding involves rebuilding the data into structured categories and subcategories to give coherence to the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical coding involves specifying dimensions of a category and describing properties to flesh out the details of a proposed theory. If initial and focused coding provides the frame for grounded theory, it is in theoretical coding that we add structure and detail to the frame and start to define the core principals of the theory. Categories and subcategories are conceptually linked and lay the groundwork for final theorizing of the construct.

Along with theoretical coding, I engaged in a form of axial coding. While theoretical coding assisted in identifying categories and accompanying properties, axial

coding helped me identify the core concepts around which those elements were arranged. As Strauss (1987) note, this type of coding locates the axis around which other concepts arrange in some logical manner. My approach to the coding of the data in this study embraced this step in the method. For me, axial coding became the key to locating the center of the proposed theory of Strategic Masculinity. Three core theoretical concepts began to emerge as the central tenets of the perspective. In locating this center, I arranged and rearranged the categories in order to ascertain how the categories interacted with one another. This provided a tentative illustration of the animation, or the direction and detail of the processes of interaction, of the theory writ large.

### **Memos in the Construction of Theory**

Charmaz (2006) notes the importance of memo writing in the grounded theory approach. Memo writing involves early engagement with the data and can be written immediately after collecting data. Memo writing is also useful during coding of data to identify categories for proposed theory. Memo writing involves making connections between and among the data to gain theoretical insight into the phenomenon examined. Finally, writing memos provides a chance to capture comparisons while engaged in the data.

I created memos throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data on college men and experiences of masculinity. Early in the process, I produced memos after interviews when possible. I reflected on the early themes or phrases that might have stood out in the interview and noted possible links between interviews or early categories. As Charmaz comments, successive memo writing provides a “space to become actively engaged in your materials” (Charmaz, 2006). I used memos in a manner consistent with

Charmaz. My memos provided me with space to muse on a variety of avenues I might explore in understanding college masculinity. Often, I would reflect on the participant's demeanor and confidence along with emerging themes I might identify. I often think of a memo as a stream of consciousness paired with an engagement with the data.

Memos are used in the ongoing analysis of emerging categories arising from the data. Categories that are identified from initial coding can be compared, broadened, or refined in memo writing as the researcher reflects on the emerging constructs. This ongoing interrogation of the data informs the subsequent sampling and analysis of data. Engaging in ongoing memo writing sets the stage for making meaningful claims concerning the categories and properties that emerge during coding procedures.

Within the body of memos, attention should be paid to identifying emerging categories and the data which categories might subsume (Charmaz, 2006). Early definition of data included in categories encourages the researcher to make ongoing observations about the data. Engaging in this approach allows the researcher to compare new data with data, or data with earlier analysis of categories, or data with categories.

Memo writing is highly interdependent with analytic procedures. Initial and focused coding takes place in coordination and compliments memo writing. While coding identifies potential categories and their accompanying properties, memo writing allows for reflection of findings and encourages deeper and ongoing engagement with data. Memos empower the researcher to explore and describe properties in a manner that is reflexive and remains close to the data.

### **Validation**

Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that validity in qualitative inquiry is highly dependent upon examining the lens through which a researcher approaches his/her study. Depending on the lens utilized in a study, the researcher must make clear their paradigmatic assumptions and offer procedures commonly used in qualitative inquiry as evidence of his/her research efforts. Earlier in this chapter, I located my position concerning my use of grounded theory and my general epistemological stance in relation to this study. In addition, I offer common procedures for validation including member checks, the nature of grounded theory methodology, thick description of data, and researcher reflexivity,

As a starting point to explore validity in this study, some participants involved in the research were offered the opportunity to review my interpretation concerning college men and their experiences of masculinity (Keyton, 2006). Member checks of analyzed data add credibility to the study and act as a check on researcher biases. Reviewing the tone and content of findings allow participants to challenge researcher findings and to clarify positions on the topic under examination.

Another form of verification comes in the use of grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory represents a systematic approach to qualitative research where processes are well defined and transparent (Charmaz, 2006). The use of grounded theory is one that is engaged deeply with data and clear about coding procedures. Findings have to be defended and justified through engagement with data and the literature. Theoretical claims should be apparent and consistent with the data. Validation is achieved based on the prolonged engagement with data and ongoing persistent analysis. I have tried to consistently demonstrate the systematic and ordered approach I used in analyzing the data

from the current study. Where I could, I have offered examples of my initial codes, outlined my use of Nvivo, offered my approach and examples of memoing, and detailed my reasoning process.

Another form of validation comes in a form of thick description. Detailed descriptions of interview interactions provide the reader with the ability to place data in context and determine the voracity of claims. Whenever possible, specific excerpts in the interviewees own words have been offered in findings and I tried to engage in minimal editing for readability. I also incorporated descriptions to capture tone or emotional content within exchanges with participants. For example, I might include details about a sigh, or a quiet laugh to attempt to capture subtleties that often take place during interview interactions. I attempted to engage in description that allowed the reader to judge the fit of the researcher's findings based on its face validity (Keyton, 2006).

As a final form of validation, I have attempted to disclose my biases, assumptions, and beliefs concerning masculinity. This form of validation has been framed as researcher reflexivity (Creswell and Miller, 2000). I have attempted to be clear about my position of privilege as a white, middle-class, middle-aged man. I have also provided some background concerning my experience and my role in providing interpretive commentary within the discussion of findings. In short, I have attempted to provide voice to my role as the researcher while offering a reasonable interpretation of the data in this study.

## Chapter 4—Results

The purpose of the current study was to develop a communication-centered theory of masculinity exploring how college men discursively enact, maintain, and navigate their masculine identity. I also proposed to examine how social structures in society impacted men's efforts in managing the discursive attempts. Finally, the study aimed to attend to if and how intersectional issues of race, class, and sexual identification impact discursive attempts at navigating and maintaining masculine identity.

I initially proposed to label the new communication-centered approach to the examination of masculine identity processes Precarious Masculinity. My original reasoning for centering the precarious nature of masculinity in an explanatory theory concerned capturing the anxiety-ridden process that many men experience when trying to enact and manage manhood. While the study confirms the difficulty and stress that can accompany the experience of becoming a man, the label seems inadequate given the data generated during my analysis. The study reveals that college men utilize a variety of tactics to strategically manage the stress and challenges they face in negotiating their emerging masculinity. Therefore, I have relabeled the proposed theory Strategic Masculinity to more fully capture the ongoing strategic management of masculinity for college men.

Analysis of conversations with college-age men, 18-24, resulted in the formation of a new theory of masculinity that is communication-centered and confirming of past findings concerning masculinity while exploring new findings that add value to gender studies in general. Strategic Masculinity opens new ground in highlighting the process by which young men talk about and navigate their developing masculine identity in light of a

variety of interlocking forces that problematize the tenuous process of becoming a man in a postmodern society.

Strategic Masculinity is explanatory in that it reveals and explores variables that contribute to the precarious nature of masculinity, the so-called crisis of masculinity, the ongoing effect of dominant forms of masculinity on individual identity efforts, the discourse used to describe and navigate personal masculinity, and the influence of race, sexual preference, and class in ongoing experiences of masculinity. Strategic Masculinity also reveals the strategic manner in which young men approach the management of emerging masculinity using a variety of methods that serve to acquire and manage *gender capital* in multiple contexts.

Interviews with the college-age men in this study indicate the complex and often anxiety-provoking processes of becoming a man in Western society. The young men in my study were well aware of societal expectations for a man to perform dominant forms of masculinity- to act tough, be physically strong, shield emotions, dominate other men, succeed at all costs, and demonstrate virility. Many recalled when they or others were challenged for not demonstrating those qualities and the resulting internal or external questioning of their manhood in comparison to peers and societal expectation. They also often recognized that their race, sexual preference, or class strongly influence how and when they could act out their masculinity. Additionally, the men in the study expressed that sometimes efforts at demonstrating manhood seemed impossible in a politically correct climate where they felt men were viewed as dangerous, volatile, or in a consistently negative light. In short, the young men felt that performing masculinity was a difficult proposition.



Yet among this seemingly negative debris was tremendous optimism on the part of the young men in this study. Many recognized the privileges they enjoy as men in a traditionally patriarchal society and expressed the desire to treat women with respect and equality. They easily shift between performances that sometimes reify hegemonic forms of masculinity, but they also engage in ongoing efforts to interrogate dominant forms of masculinity in pursuit of a well-balanced identity. Men engaged in discourse that often challenged the tenuous position of masculinity expressed in the theory of precarious manhood and described remarkable stability and awareness of masculine identity processes. Many of them see college as a unique atmosphere to explore their masculinity and experiment with alternate forms of manhood. Indeed, most of them do not even see themselves as fully formed men in college. Finally, the men in my study centralized ethics as a major component of their masculinity.

The following sections outline the three central concepts and characteristics of the theory of Strategic Masculinity. First, I present the model as a whole and give an overview of the proposed theory. I then describe the three core components of the theory in turn. Within each component, I note the properties and discursive characteristics that comprise each category. Examples of interview data are offered in each section to support claims concerning each category of the theory. Finally, I animate the processes present between the various characteristics to show how they interact with one another and as a starting point for future studies.

### **The Theory of Strategic Masculinity**

The discourses of college-age men concerning masculinity do indeed reflect the strategic nature of masculine identity formation. Analysis of my conversations with

college men indicated three central concepts that illustrate and explain how young men come to experience and know their masculinity against the backdrop of personal experience, the college discursive community, crisis-inducing challenges to masculinity, issues of materiality, and societal pressures to live up to dominant conceptions of masculinity.

College men are strategic in the management of masculinity and they utilize a variety of strategies in maintaining and negotiating their masculinity. The literature concerning strategic communication suggests a variety of conceptual definitions of the term strategic (Wiemann & Daly, 2009). Most coalesce around the belief that strategic communication is related to a general plan of action to reach interpersonal goals. I adopt the spirit of this approach and conceptually offer that the term strategic implies a general behavioral or discursive approach in service to reaching short or long-term desired end states. Men engage in cognitive and discursive acts that serve to stabilize their masculinity to their internal self and externally to social actors in various contexts.

A general strategic approach is attained through the use of strategy. Wiemann & Daly (2009) note that the terms “tactic” and “strategy” are often used interchangeably. I have chosen to use the term strategy in reference to acts taken in services of a larger strategic goal. Specifically, I label strategy as a set of discursive actions that are utilized in service to a given strategic approach. Therefore, strategies are actions that reside under the umbrella of strategic perspectives. For example, I will offer that passive, active, and interactive strategies are used to manage challenges to personal masculinity strategically.

The theory coalesces around three central components that are primary in forming masculine identity for college-aged students. The three central concepts are Precarious

Discourses, the Rehabilitation of Masculinity, and Intersectionality. Each of these core components is influenced by a variety of characteristics that often problematize the discursive efforts of college men when exploring masculinity and serve to make the experience of masculinity an often anxiety-ridden process. The characteristic of the model at once serve to problematize and empower men as they enact, manage, and negotiate emerging masculinity in a college context. The full model illustrating these characteristics is presented in figure 1.

At the heart of the proposed model is the phenomenon of precarious discourse. College-age men's discourse about masculine identity demonstrated a tentativeness that is more exploratory than declarative in nature. The discourse these men exhibited framed masculine identity that was at once fluid and fixed. The men often described masculinity as a work in progress, an unfinished state. Yet they just as often offered explanations of manhood as a fixed concept—one where there seemed to be little doubt about an end state for masculine identity. I delineate this relationship between fluid and fixed perceptions of masculine identity in the section on precarious discourse. College men also define masculine identity as a concept that is largely dependent on the college discursive community in which they are embedded. For them, the college community is one that encourages exploration, experimentation, and a certain political stance that discourages narrow conceptions of masculine identity. However, early gender experiences from family, high school, sports and other organizations exert influence in defining masculine identity and college men draw on these resources to help perform their masculine identity.

The second core concept of the theory concerns the ongoing rehabilitation of masculine identity. The discourse of college men is characterized by attempts to rehabilitate masculine identity at a personal level and general perceptions of men in a negative context at a collective level. Young men recognize challenges to their personal masculinity and engage in selective attempts to reclaim their status as men. College men also discursively differentiate themselves from dominant conceptions of masculinity in attempts to declare personal masculine identity that is unique. College men also engage in addressing the hegemonic forms that permeate social institutions and the media in attempts to rehabilitate perceptions of men in general. Finally, college men often focus on the ethics of masculinity in an attempt to reclaim a positive image of men in general.

The third core concept concerns the intersectionality that can problematize perceptions of masculine identity for college-age men. Issues of race present additional challenges to black college men when navigating personal masculine identity as they inhabit sometimes contradictory masculine contexts. Issues of class can further problematize the experience of masculinity. A handful of the young men in this study came from working-class backgrounds and held conflicting conceptions of masculinity when compared to the middle-class professions in which they were training. Finally, co-sexual men wrestle with dominant heterosexual community conceptions of manhood. In addition, they inhabit communities where gender is further problematized by the existence of multiples forms of gender that experience masculinity in a number of forms.

Taken in isolation, any of the three core components can complicate the process of experiencing and performing masculinity in college men. Experienced together, these components can make strategically enacting, maintaining, and navigating emerging

masculinity a daunting and anxiety-ridden process. I now turn to examine each core component in detail.

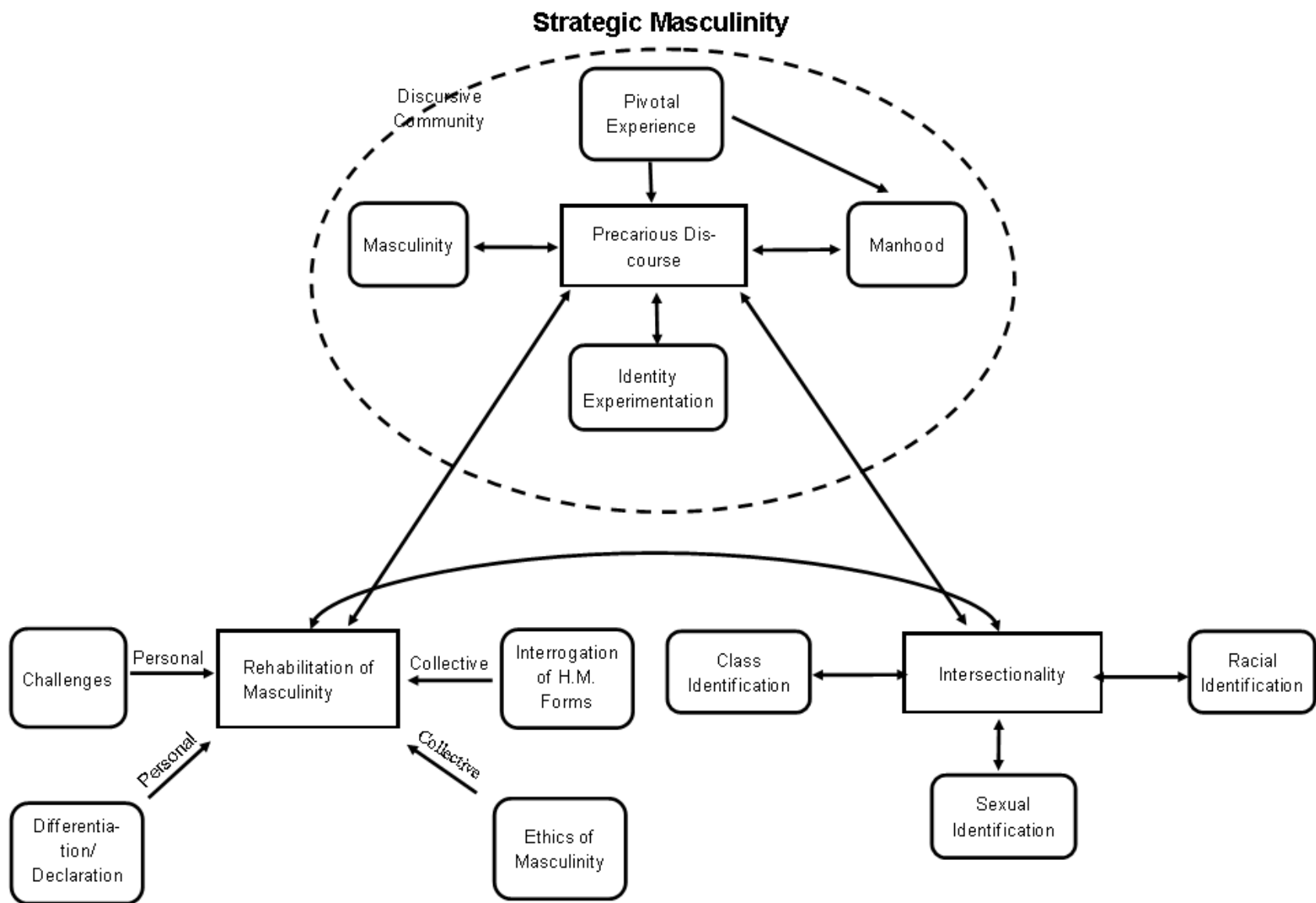


Figure 1. Full model of Strategic Masculinity. This figure illustrates the core elements of the theory along with their characteristics and proposed illustration of processes. Arrows indicate the primary direction of influence.

**Precarious Discourse.** At first blush, the topic of masculinity seems unproblematic. After all, the language of western society is patriarchal and seems custom made for men. College men, however, often have a difficult time locating their position and personal perceptions of masculinity. College men discuss masculinity as an unfinished fluid product in one breath. In the next, they make declarative statements about the construct and treat it as permanent and fixed. They speak of pivotal moments when they discovered their personal manhood, yet speak of manhood as a future state which they have not reached. They discuss their college manhood experience as if they are in a laboratory trying out different brands of manliness. They speak of ideals of manhood that are often consistent with the dominant hegemonic form of manhood, yet are critical of those ideals and see modern masculine forms as negative and men as bad overall. They often try to differentiate themselves from these dominant forms of manhood, yet are eager to defend their manhood when another man challenges them on those very forms.

I label college men's talk about masculinity as precarious discourse. College men use discourse that is shot through with uncertainty and problematized with a variety of factors that make it challenging to definitively locate personal masculinity in a modern context. Precarious discourse is talk that is at once tentative and declarative as college men pull from early pivotal gender experiences, fluid concepts of masculinity, more fixed concepts of manhood, and an open and experimental college discursive community. Finally, in relation to other core issues such as attempts at personal and collective rehabilitation and material issues, college men use a variety of stabilizing, destabilizing,

and restabilizing discourses to navigate and negotiate their sense of masculine identity.

The sub model representing this core concept of the theory is illustrated in figure 2.

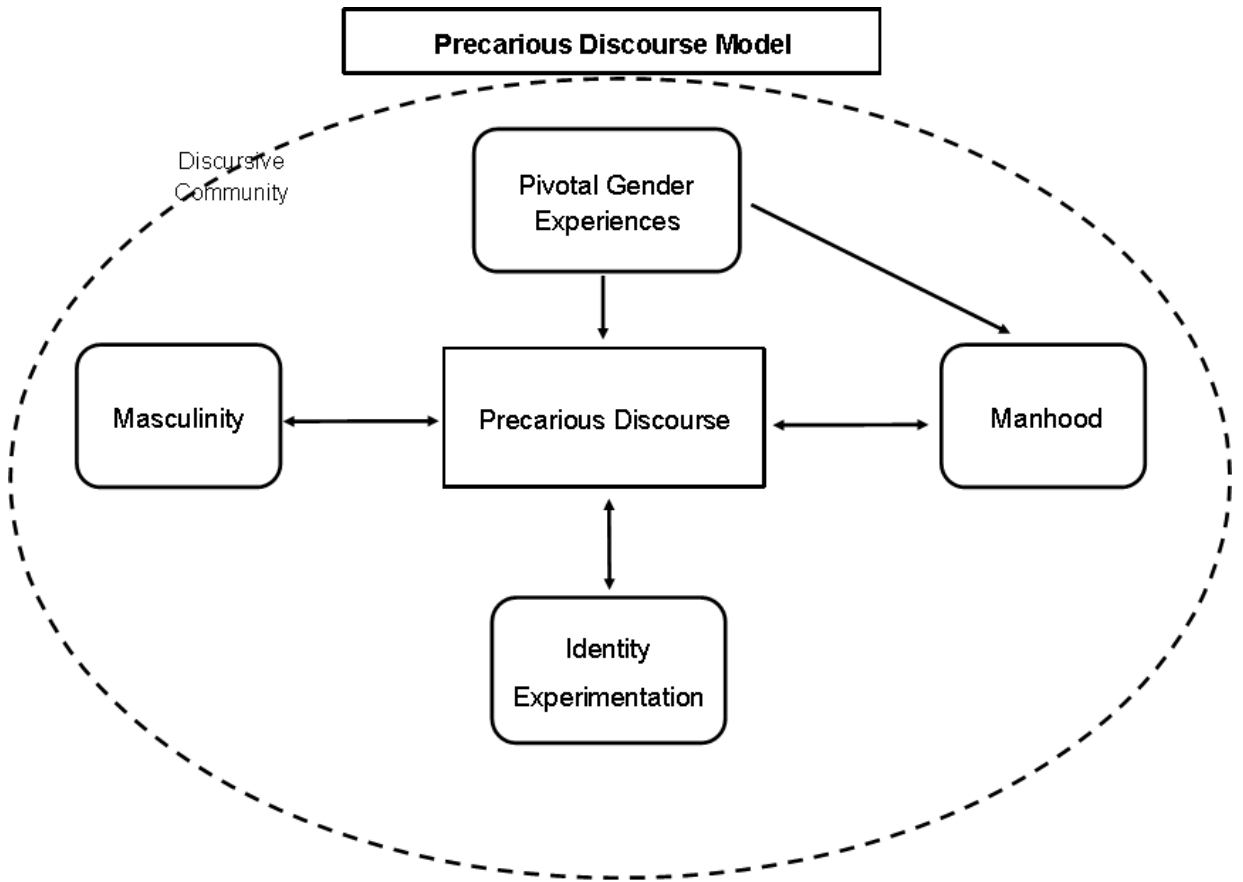


Figure 2. Sub model of precarious discourse. This figure outlines the characteristics of precarious discourse and offers a proposed illustration of processes. Arrows indicate the speculation of directions of influence.

*The college discursive community.* A significant characteristic of precarious discourses is the college discursive community. Other characteristics of the core concept of precarious discourse are set against the backdrop of the college discursive community. During our discussions, the young men in interviews noted some common experiences and themes about college and gender despite being from two distinct types of institutions—a large Midwestern university and a small nonprofit private College. The college context



as a whole is a discursive community that is largely safe for exploring masculine identity, represents a fresh start, is a temporary and impermanent space for establishing conceptions of gender, and is an empowering, if sometimes political milieu to discover personal masculinity.

The college discursive space is mostly considered a safe environment when exploring masculine identity for college-age men. Most of the men in my study expressed the view that they often came from a high school context and communities where masculinity was expressed in a very narrow and limited manner. More often than not, their high school context was one that endorsed modern hegemonic forms of masculinity as preferred forms- a view that embraced a man as tough, stoic, competitive, aggressive, heteronormative, and virile among other characteristics. Any variation from these norms by young men were often punished by other social actors, so young men often expressed feeling surveilled and hemmed in with regard to expressing masculinity.

The college discursive space, however, offered a safe space in which to explore masculinity. College represents a more open environment that accepts several competing forms of identity including different forms of masculinity. College represents a context where a young man is offered a new start in defining his masculine identity. As Chris, who is black and from a lower-class background, recalls about his entrance to the college community:

Chris: When you get to college people are expressing themselves in so many different ways I think. I think women as well. Guys realize ‘hey if I can just be myself and the right girls can be attracted to that’ instead of, ‘oh, I have to act this way and if I don't act this way and girls aren't going to like me.’ I think you can be yourself a lot more in college. There are so many different phases people go through in college and I think that has something to do with finding yourself...like finding your masculinity and how to be a man.

Chris feels comfortable with the variety of expressions of gender in the context of college. For him, it is a chance to experience many differing conceptions of being a man. College is a place where “you can be yourself” with regard to interacting with women without regard for any outside defined phases of adulthood. College represents a discursive environment where Chris can find himself and his ideas of being a man in a context that, at least at a macro level, is safe from criticism.

Steven, who is white and middle-class, expresses his pleasant surprise upon his introduction to a discursive community where he can feel freer to explore his masculinity in a fairly safe context. After growing up in a small rural community, he found a context that allowed him room to express his masculinity:

Steven: I don't know how it is for everybody. I mean I come from a really small town of like 500 people and I went through school with 35 of the same people my whole life. I just never felt like it was really a real environment to be in. It just always kind of felt like going through the motions type of thing and to get out of there. And then coming to college it was more like ‘OK, I'm free to make my own decisions. I'm free to live the life that I've always wanted to live without judgment for the most part.’

Steven: And I think it was just kind of like discovery time for me to just figure out who the person that I actually am, instead of trying to be the person that I needed to be at that time. I think after leaving a small town and moving to this bigger place. Coming to college and just kind of figuring out who I am, I think, has helped me understand emotion. I mean on a much deeper sense I'm able to talk to more than just one person about what's going on in my life right now. And I think before now it's always been like conceal it. If you have to tell somebody, you know, you tell your closest friend or you tell your brother. Otherwise, it's just kind of held in.

Like many participants in this study, Steven recognizes college as a discursive community where self-exploration is encouraged, indeed, expected. College represents a freedom of discourse where he can escape narrow, predefined conceptions of masculinity and he can exercise agency in exploring his personal masculinity.

While college is framed as an empowering and safe context in terms of negotiating masculine identity, this discursive community is seen as a temporary, not permanent, context of limited safety. Participants often spoke of the impermanence of college masculinity and most do not see themselves as fully formed men. College men often see themselves as occupying a blurry area between childhood and manhood and see themselves as a work in progress with a vague view of the finish line of masculinity.

Curt, who is white and middle-class, is indicative of this perspective:

Interviewer: I think you said something like ‘when I’m a full man.’ Like you’re still in development to some extent. One of my questions was ‘was there a moment in your life where you said ‘I’m now a man?’ and it sounds like you’re working towards it.

Curt: That kind of goes back to my family. They were more restrictive. And I’m a really independent person and it took a while to figure that out. But in their eyes, I haven’t reached full manhood. And in my eyes, my god, I don’t believe that just because I’m in college I’m a full man. I mean they’re [parents] still paying for my tuition, although, I’m trying to help as much as I can. They’re still paying for that. I’m not self-reliant completely. I think once I get past that and I’m on my own, that’s when I realize that I’ve gained my manhood.

Curt sees himself as a work in progress. Importantly, he also notes that his parents still see him as not fully formed. For Curt, he is actively straddling an area between childhood and full manhood. He sees the dividing line as a time after college when he can be financially independent. However, college is moving him towards completion of this desired end state:

Interviewer: Interesting. So you kind of you’re in a place in between?

Curt: I mean I see myself as a more mature person. I’ve gained a lot of maturity through my years. Maybe more so than some people. But I don’t feel like I’ve reached my manhood.

Like many of the men I interviewed, Curt perceives the college discursive community as a training ground and an experimental context for negotiating manhood. College is seen

as a holding area for the exploration of gender. Curt is at once declaring his independence from his family as a person, but not as a man. For him, and for many of the participants, college represents a murky area in terms of manhood. It is a time when most are exerting independence of personality and opinion, but are still dependent upon the judgment of family to indicate full manhood. Beyond that endorsement, most see exiting college and gaining financial independence as an indicator of “full” manhood. College manhood is temporary manhood for many of the participants- true masculinity will be granted after leaving the protective space of college and gaining success in employment in a knowledge economy.

Tony, black and middle-class, echoes this sentiment when asked about building mature relationships with women. He describes college as a context where the expectation of a man is only to get a degree, not form lasting bonds with women. Any other relationships or acts of gender exploration are temporary:

Tony: But you know is college like, you're at a new place, depending on if you travel to go to college, you're meeting so many new people and, you know, college is just a limited the amount of time -- however long you want it to be. So you're trying to just enjoy that. Nobody expects anything long term coming out of college except for the degree. So everyone's just trying to have fun and live their life, because if you are in college you're still young and trying to enjoy the last years of your young life. So you're trying to live it to the fullest and have a good time.

Like many of the participants, Tony describes college as lacking permanence- it is a temporary discursive community where the clock is running and identity exploration is just experimentation for the real world of work and responsibility.

While college offers safety, openness, and a temporary workshop for experiencing gender identity, it is not without challenges or challenging viewpoints. Indeed, the nature of the college discursive community is problematic for some of the participants'

masculine identity efforts. College men in the study often pointed to the political nature of college as a concerning issue. College, while seemingly open to a variety of viewpoints, was sometimes perceived as suffocating for some views of masculinity.

Davis, white and middle-class, offered a common view on this phenomenon when I asked him about being challenged as a man. He offered this experience about his transition into college when compared to his experience in high school:

Davis: Well, in high school its anything that's a little female that you do, they just crack down on it.

Interviewer: What do they crack down on?

Davis: Like for example you get made fun of immediately like for wearing, I don't know, a jacket that's really long, like an overcoat or something. Or wearing bright colors, stuff like that.

Interviewer: Does it not happen after high school?

Davis: In college you get the opposite. You call out to someone like that and you get taken down. They come at you if you judge someone or if you judge them and they come back at you, then you're criticized for the judging.

Interviewer: For the judgment?

Davis: Yeah, It's crazy in college. Like, my cousin, we went to summer welcome and we were just out of high school and he says the word "hoe". Everyone came down on him about that. Like all the student leaders and all of them. And he was like, 'geez' and they're like 'that's slut shaming, that's discriminatory, and that's prejudice.' All this other stuff - let people be themselves. Like in college you can do whatever you want and no one's really going to get criticized. There's some really weird people. To me, seeing all this, I see it as overreaction. I see high school and college as two extremes. High school was terrible. People were just like insulting everyone-- not to me, ever, but I would just see it. Other people. I don't get offended about anything. In college I don't see them getting offended like that. And I could see how that would be a nice balance and hopefully when I get into the real world I'll see that but right now I'm seeing the other side of this and I'm going through the other extreme right now.

Davis sees the college discursive environment as somewhat political. He notes that even though he sees nothing wrong with calling a woman ‘hoe’, his viewpoint is stifled because of a form of political correctness. Note also that Davis refers to this political view as temporary in college- he notes that when he gets to “the real world”, he anticipates a discursive community that is more accepting of what he sees as a reactionary response.

The college discursive community is a context that encourages gender exploration, a safe haven for exploration, a temporary laboratory that prepares young men for permanent manhood, and an environment that possesses some political niches that affect gender identity. Aside from the political element, such an environment seems conducive to a fairly unproblematic stage for learning how to become a man. However, men do not arrive at college as blank canvasses. By the time men reach college, they have already been influenced by pivotal milestones that affect how and when they arrive at fully formed conceptions of their masculinity.

*Pivotal gender experiences.* Precarious discourse is characterized by ongoing reflection on pivotal gender experiences. Pivotal gender experiences include events, rites of passage, and significant role models like relatives, coaches, or teachers that strongly influence ongoing negotiation of masculinity for college men. These direct influences on conceptions of manhood serve as measures for successfully navigating masculinity for college men. They essentially provide a model against the backdrop of the experimentation and alternate experiences of masculinity encountered in college.

The college men in this study often struggled early in interviews to talk about masculinity as a concept. Many stated that it is a topic they are only peripherally

concerned with and they had not consciously discussed the topic directly. Young men rarely talk about manhood specifically as a topic of concern when in peer groups. As one participant related concerning his male friends, they did not typically talk about feelings or selves out loud. Instead, they participate in activities that promote understanding of manhood in an action. As Graham, white and middle-class, relayed:

Graham: We didn't talk much. Probably even less than what normal friends do about deeper things. But as time went on I can tell you more about my friend than he could even explain. We got this deeper understanding of each other and I think that men get that doing the things we do and like you may gain a certain respect for a man just because you know he did something good for another person. You just get that personal respect and develop an unspoken understanding of each through actions you see in them. Their actions and mannerisms, things like that. Maybe how they treat people. You just kind of figure it out. I mean my best friends, I could tell you everything about them. But have they ever told me that stuff? Probably not.

Graham's description of his male friendships is somewhat common. Research has shown differences in same-sex friendships with regard to the character of discourse. Women same-sex relationships tend to have more discourse that are marked by emotional sharing and talk in general. Male same-sex relationships tend to emphasize activities and less discourse related to internalized perspectives (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982). Graham notes that he comes to know his friend's masculinity through observation during activities and a lack of emphasis on exploring perspectives. Talking explicitly about a topic like masculinity might actually be seen as violating normative standards of manhood. Instead, Graham learns about the masculinity of his male friends through observation and joint activity. More explicit and direct talk about masculinity is normally reserved for those men and women who have a significant influence on college men's gendered identity.

Instead of referencing internalized discussions, they often reference role models as embodying desired masculine traits in order to understand concepts of masculinity.

College-age men most frequently reference role models as central to their development of notions of manhood. Discourse about these significant individuals often provided a starting place for college men to talk about masculinity.

Significant models of behavior for college men not surprisingly were most frequently male relatives. The most frequently mentioned male role models were fathers. Seth, who is white and upper class, discusses the importance of watching other men early in his life, particularly his father, to observe how to act like a man.

Interviewer: How did you learn how to be a man?

Seth: Just kind of watching. It's just like anything else, is by example. So you kind of pick out people that you think are good men and have the characteristics of good men and you kind of just try to model that to your own life. It's always going to be different. Like there are different situations, but its learning lessons from people. I think definitely my dad was one. I think it's harder for people that didn't grow up having that father figure to have someone to model off of. So I think that's a big deal for me and I think it's a big deal for a lot of people too.

Seth notes the importance of having some type of prototype male to model manly behavior. Like many men in the study, Seth mentioned that he and his father did not often talk directly about manhood, but that he learned through observation of desired traits, and worked to emulate behavior. Seth learns to talk about masculinity and reference his masculine identity through the lens of action with men who had significant influence in his life.

While college men look to joint action with peers and male role models in order to emulate behavior, the identity process is not without reflection. Often men talked about their stated significant models with some ambivalence and actively critiqued characteristics they might finding troubling with concern to their own masculinity. My



exchange with Terry, who identifies as white and lower-class, was representative of this phenomenon:

Interviewer: How did you learn to behave like a man?

Terry: Honestly I think, you know just modeling my dad. I mean, I try not to associate myself as like my lone identity stemming from my dad. You know, I love my dad and I respect him, but there's like aspects of him I don't want to be recognized as like 'here is your son sort of thing'. For example, he's really paranoid and I don't want to be like that because I see how it gets to him. But you know in the sense I know how to treat women. That definitely stemmed from my dad.

Such exchanges serve to demonstrate an interesting dynamic that young men display when discussing their significant male influencers. Terry, while he pays homage to certain aspects of his father's manly characteristics, also discursively distances himself from what he considers qualities he does not see as consistent with his conception of masculine identity. This is a consistent finding in the interviews I conducted. Young men often hail the characteristics of their male role models, but also critique other characteristics of those models without my prompt. The young men engage in discourse that serves to distance themselves from their stated prototypes and begin to mold an individual masculine identity. The discussions represent a discursive negotiation process concerning masculinity that appears in several dimensions in the data.

Individual pivotal influencers were common indicators of masculine influence for supplying the grist for discourse concerning masculinity for college men. College men indicated that communities of individuals, particularly older male family members, were crucial to their initial and ongoing negotiation of masculinity. During our conversation about how he learned to become a man, Curt, for example, mentions a variety of family members who helped him to obtain the language of manliness:

Curt: My dad. I mean that's a huge one obviously. My family is pretty close. We actually live on a property all together on a farm in the southeast part of the state. So my uncle was there as well. And they're two different people completely. I mean my uncle is really outdoorsy. I hunt with him. My dad is not a big hunter. I mean that is the hardest working man I've ever seen. The things that he's taught me just in general have adapted my view into what being a man is. Like taking care of the family by doing things that you maybe you don't want to do normally, but you have to. Like going out and mowing the lawn. No one else is going to do it and you're in charge there.

Curt: I've learned from him [dad] and then my uncle as well. He was a big influential figure in my life. And, you know, a lot of time he's a farmer. He actually has had a job. He also owns franchises, he has a farm. And oftentimes I'll go out there and work with him and building fence and dealing with the cows, and all that stuff. We go hunting. My dad is not a hunter as I said before. But my uncle and my grandpa are. And so we bond. We go out on our hunting trips you know. So a lot of those things that I've learned from both of those men in my life are what constructed my idea of manhood.

Curt, like many of my participants, sees learning to be a man as a community effort.

More often than not, this represents a community of men. Like most college men, he learned to talk about and perform masculinity through observation of a community of men. As we see later, this instills a baseline of manhood from which he can then modify as he negotiates a personal sense of masculinity. He learns different lessons from different men in his life in building the language and concepts of masculinity.

Like Curt, Chris depended on a community of male family members to guide his performance efforts for masculinity. Unlike Curt, Chris notes the absence of his father early in his life. But like many participants, he looked to other male figures for guidance for how to act ethically and fulfill the responsibilities that come with manhood. As he puts it:

Chris: Well, I come from a life where my dad was out of the picture early. When I was in the fifth and sixth grade, he kind of left the picture. So it was always me my mom and my sister and my two little brothers. So I would look a lot to uncles and my grandpa on my mom's side and my grandpa he always preached to me, number one, be humble. And number two, take care of your own. So look out for

my little brothers', sisters, and my mom, stuff like that. And I watched him do it. He took care of his. He was the oldest in his family and went to work when he was 18, just out of high school and then took care of his young brothers and sisters, then took care of his children. He had nine kids and then some of his daughters and stuff had kids who really weren't ready, so he took care of them. And I have other cousins that he pretty much raised.

Interviewer: So you saw him act and provide for family.

Chris: Yeah and he did it in a way to where he never needed praise. I always admired his kind of masculinity because he would provide or he'd cover a check or he always picked up dinner or checks when all the family and stuff was out. But he wouldn't say anything, he would just do it discreetly. You know how some guys pick up a tab and they want everybody at the table to know? He kind of just did it and just took care of it.

Chris notes several features he learns about the discourse of masculinity from his extended male family members. For example, he learns the importance of humility and selective discourse from his grandfather. For Chris, as with many of my participants, controlling discourse becomes important in the performance of being a man. Silence becomes an important factor in acting out manhood.

While male role models were the most frequently mentioned influencer for learning how to act like a man, significant women also played a key role in many of my participants' enactment of manhood. Some men thought that they viewed masculinity from a unique perspective because of pivotal female influences. For example, Anthony, who is white and middle-class, during a discussion about what type of men were considered more manly than others, spoke at length about how his conversations with women were affected by his mother and sisters' influence on his conception of masculinity:

Anthony: I mean they (men who were not considered 'manly') can be low on the totem pole and still be considered a man for other reasons. I was raised from 16 plus by my mom and my sister more or less. That's why I base it more on

principle than other things that, maybe dads, would teach their sons kind of thing. Because I, you know, I've kind of learned to respect women more maybe because I was raised by women.

Anthony separates himself from other men who might have had primarily male role models. He speaks less about manhood and more about personhood and attributes this type of discursive framing to his female role models. Anthony's ongoing discussions with me continually referenced what he considered a view different from most of his male cohort. To him, the pivotal influences of his female family members allow him to negotiate a masculinity that is more in tune with women and more appropriate in a college context.

Mothers as mentors for masculinity were the most common female role models mentioned in relation to emerging masculine identity discourse. Several of my participants noted that mothers tended to focus less on dominant traits of masculinity when discussing gender with their sons. Leo, who is black and lower-class, tended to shift discourse away from masculinity per se and focus on personhood when discussing his significant role model:

Leo: My mom always just, when she was sending me off to school, she was always telling me don't change who you are for anybody. That's how you want to be as a person and that's how you should act. You don't change yourself for anybody else. And I took that to heart. So I never acted in any way that I wasn't, you know, I wasn't gonna go home and talk like I don't have an education. I was gonna talk like I had sense.

While Leo later provides some very interesting insights concerning masculinity and race, he consistently centered personhood as central to being a good man. He felt his mother focused him on acting as an individual with a firm moral center rather than focus on a certain male identity. Leo's discourse is one of personhood rather than manhood.

Another participant provided a sharp contrast to Leo's balanced approach to masculinity. Hank is a white, middle-class man whose mother was influential in how he talks about men and his own personal masculinity. The focus of influence was decidedly different than many of my participants. Hank's discourse was one full of criticism and cautious disdain for men in general and to some extent his personal discourse concerning his manhood. He relates his perspective on his mother's messages concerning manhood when I ask him about his father:

Hank: Well. Technically my father wasn't really a father and the stereotype masculinity things he never taught me. Like he still hasn't taught me, but that's beside the point, like fixing a car or playing sports.

Interviewer: So how did you learn to be a man?

Hank: My mom taught me everything.

Interviewer: So what did she teach you about how men were supposed to act?

Hank: Wow. It was kind of pessimistic but, she taught me they (men) were really bad based upon her experiences.

Interviewer: So what's bad?

Hank: Like how they will use you pretty much as objects and then move on.

Hank's pivotal influence concerning masculinity paints a fairly bleak view of masculinity in general. Our later interactions in the interview reflect this distrust for masculine traits in general, and for Hank's personal concept of his manhood. This reflects talk that is quite tentative concerning masculinity and Hank clearly engaged in discourse that was anxious and stressful concerning masculine identity.

Significant rites and past events were also strong indicators of how college men talked about manhood in this study. Scholars suggest that formal rites of passage and

significant organized events mark important milestones that identify young boys as entering into manhood and that postmodern societies often lack these benchmarks to signal manhood (Gilmore 1990, Kimmel, 2006). While participants in this study could sometimes locate significant events and rites in their development as men, they were not aware of those moments as milestones in their development before our interviews.

Participants discourses concerning events were what Weick (1995) labeled sensemaking. Weick famously observed, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” This is how I view the process by which my participants located their rites and events in relation to establishing male identity. Weick suggested that sensemaking is an emergent interpretation dependent upon identity, is retrospective in that we shape interpretations based on experience, is ongoing, is extracted from cues from the environment, and is something that provides a plausible explanation of the concept under examination. In short, rites and events identified by participants offered anchors through which to make sense of male identity and the discourse of college-age men reflected this process.

Significant ongoing events are important in how men make sense of and talk about their masculinity. Paul is a white, middle-class man who offered an insight as to events that form his conception of being a man. His description of physicality was fairly common to many of my participants as he described how important physicality was to being a man.

Interviewer: Has there been an experience that said at any time in your life has said you were a man and indicated ‘I have now reached that point where I am a man?’

Paul: When I was younger I used to be really skinny. I mean I'm still really skinny but like *really* skinny. And all my friends and the girls used to be like ‘oh your

little'. That just *mindfucked* me. I was like 'I got to be huge' and that's probably why one of my biggest things is just the physical bigness. But I've always been little. Then after a few years, I got pretty decently big, like fit for my size and everyone was 'oh man you're big.' And then all my friends started like giving me shit like 'oh your huge man.' But they always call me the strongest dude. Even though I'm not big, but I mean, pound for pound I am big. And at that point I was like 'OK, I feel like a man.'

It is important to note that Paul didn't verbalize this significant event until I started to probe him on his beliefs and talk concerning masculine identity. He did not see the event as significant in regard to masculinity until prompted about a time in his life when he felt like he was a man. This was typical for many of my participants who often had a hard time pointing to particularly poignant moments in their enactment of manhood. This provides support for some scholar's claims that formal rites or rituals are largely missing from contemporary societies. I found, however, that many young men seemed to retroactively create or experience their own personal rites of passage in their discussions of becoming a man. In other words, they locate and make sense of rituals after cues direct their attention to significant events associated with manhood.

While some men had to search their experiences to find significant moments leading to manhood, a few others could point to vivid experiences that they drew on to understand their masculine identity. Kevin, white and middle-class, offers a compelling example of his first successful hunting experience that sounds like it came right out of a movie:

Kevin: Well all throughout my life, even from kindergarten, my dad would give me sort of like life lessons here and there about being a man and how I need to grow up and all this stuff. My dad's a big hunter and I used to always go with him. Then, one time, in I think it was a fifth grade, I went with him and it was during the youth season during deer season. I had just killed my first deer and my dad was so proud of me. He gave me a hug and he made me track the deer and gut the deer. Of course he knew all that stuff, but he put me in a role and I did it. I tracked the deer all day and I got it. I cleaned the deer and he helped me there. But for the

most part I did it and I remember it is after I had cleaned the deer, he put some blood on his finger and like put it on my face. It's like war paint and he said 'congratulations you're a man now.' I've only seen that like movies or whatever. So at that point I was like 'wow, this is so cool.'

Interviewer: How old were you?

Kevin: I was probably 10 or 11 11 when that happened.

Interviewer: Did you think you were a man then?

Kevin: I did. I did. And I walked out, especially immediately after that, I walked and kind of puffed my chest out and like 'Oh man.' It was pretty cool.

Kevin's ad hoc rite is one of the few semi-formalized or formalized rituals identified by participants in this study. As Kevin spoke about his masculine identity, he repeatedly referred back to this experience as fundamental to how he speaks about manhood. He equated, for example, the hunter as provider for the family and spoke of his responsibility to become independent as a man. For him, this rite of passage signaled the beginning of his journey as a man and provided him a measure with which to mark his progress into masculinity.

While Kevin and Paul remember historical pivotal moments to help frame their discourse about masculine identity, other men identify pivotal moments yet to come. College men often speak of manhood as a future state and the rites and rituals that mark accomplishing full manliness are yet to be experienced. Seth is indicative of this phenomenon of speculating when he might cross the line from boy to man:

Interviewer: Was there any one experience that's happened to you or you're looking forward to happening that says 'today I'm a man?'

Seth: I think when I get my first career job. I think that's going to be a big one for me. And obviously it's something I've worked for since high school and that's the goal is to get a good job at the end of a college career. So, I think when I get my first job and I call my dad and tell him. I think that's going to be the moment to me where I feel like a man.



Interviewer: Earning your own way.

Seth: Yeah, exactly. Paying for you own stuff. Because I have many jobs in the past but nothing like your career when I'm earning a salary and benefits and that's something that I studied for. So I'm really looking forward to that day.

Like Seth, the men in my study almost universally expressed manhood as a goal that was not yet reached. Participants often noted that they operated at a time of life when they were not fully formed men, nor were they fully boys. Exchanges would often be characterized by the participant recounting ways in which he had almost reached manhood, but was waiting for the financial independence and gainful employment that post-graduation offered. The discourse of true manhood is, for many, a future state of identity that only professional careers and independence will grant.

Pivotal gender experiences and role models are a central characteristic of precarious discourse. Early rituals and role models provide a gender frame through which college men are able to make sense of and form emerging concepts of masculinity. College men draw from these early experiences to provide the discursive grist as they are immersed in the gendered experimental laboratory of college.

***Identity experimentation.*** Participants in the study noted several common characteristics of being a man in college that are important in the development of the theory. For these young men, college represents at once a place to experiment with manhood and develop notions of masculinity, and a space where they are neither fully formed men nor boys. College, it seems, represents an open context that is a testing ground and laboratory for the development of personal masculinity with a myriad of choices.

Kimmel (2006) describes college men's experience in college as one fraught with surveillance from other men concerning gendered performances. He suggests that other men are constantly ranking, judging, and assessing the manliness of other young men and quick to remedy any deviance from standardized mainstream masculinity performances like homonormativity. Participants in my study indicated a very different college context when performing masculinity. My participants acknowledge some degree of surveillance from other men, but it was highly contextual as we will see in the section on rehabilitation of masculinity. Instead, many men indicated they experimented with alternate forms in the expression of masculinity different than those they had been exposed to in earlier formative years. They described the college context as one where they could exhibit agency in forming their masculine identity and they could play with alternate forms.

Consider Seth's experience with experimentation with his masculinity. As a top athlete, Seth always felt pressured to act very tough in high school and to present himself in an almost hyper-masculine manner. Now a sophomore, he finds college liberating and feels comfortable expressing his masculinity in alternate ways:

Seth: I've moved four hours away from home, so I've experienced a lot of different personalities coming to college in a bigger city. I'm from a small town so I like seeing a lot of other things. Wearing a different thing or acting out in a different way. I think that's definitely something you would try to experiment with in college. Beyond that just getting away from home and seeing new things and new people.

Interviewer: Do you think you experience it (masculinity) different now?

Seth: I mean yeah. I found myself looking at different articles of clothing and thinking 'oh like I wouldn't have done that in high school.' I wouldn't have worn that or at least try it on, anything like that. So it's definitely brought me out and kind of opened my eyes a little bit more. It feels more acceptable.

Seth experienced college as an opportunity to experiment with his masculine identity. Rather than feeling the need to perform his heteronormativity in front of other men, he thought he could redefine his masculinity and explore other ways to express his manhood in an environment that generally encourages exploration of alternate ideas. He considers college to be a safe and accepting arena where he can explore his identity.

Chris noted a similar experience. As an African American male, he noted he felt pressure to act out cultural stereotypes of aggression and hyper-masculinity early in his life. Raised by a single mother in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, Chris learned to act tough in school and never participate in classes. Participation and intellectual discussion were not manly. Indeed, keeping quiet and acting “hard” were the norms. Speaking was considered a feminine quality. However, he recalls a pivotal college experience as one where other students are much more accepting of a variety of masculine expressions and he was encouraged to express his views.

Chris: I never usually participated much in class because that wasn't ever the cool thing to do where I grew up. I always did well in school and I never like let people see me. But now I know here like participating is different... I remember Steve R. [a classmate] came up to me in class. I had piped up and said something in class earlier. He was like ‘you changed the whole class.’

Chris: I thought ‘I should participate more’. I never had somebody encourage me like that. I don't think I'll ever forget him saying that just because it kind of showed that you can be yourself here, your own man and people are going to like you for it. I think that that's kind of the college environment and it is empowering.

Chris experimented with participation in class as an alternative form of masculinity that was very different from the lessons he learned growing up in the inner city. He felt that college was an environment that made it acceptable to engage in an exchange of ideas and converse, rather than prove toughness through silence.

Mick, a black man who identifies as gay, framed his college years as a time to play with conceptions of masculinity and explore his personal manhood. Mick offers several compelling stories about experimentation with alternate masculine forms. His description of coming out right before college symbolized an important moment for Mick. It was a moment when he began to feel comfortable twisting gendered norms to explore who he wanted to become as a man: In response to a question about experimenting with masculinity in college, he noted:

Mick: It did let me experiment with my masculinity. Yeah. It gave me license to do that.

Interviewer: You feel like when you are in college you have more room to explore?

Mick: Yes. But that was even more so because I came out right before college. So that gave me license. Even in my sophomore year I did drag. I just didn't understand it, so I wanted to try it. I'm actually pretty good at it. Not something that I show off, but that's something my family doesn't know I've done before.

Interviewer: So here you feel freer to experiment with that side of yourself, this side of masculinity? So you could you give another example of that?

Mick: So last year I basically was in a suit and tie almost every day. Just for the fucks of it. Mainly because I wanted to become comfortable in suit and ties. Even then I have a very sparkly dark blue bow tie that I wear, so it's still like a standard of how I want to look. So I really like to fuck with it. Kind of experiment with both extremes and see which one I am comfortable with or comfortable with both.

Mick's commentary on masculinity reflects a desire and willingness to experience his personal masculine identity in a variety of ways without fear of critique from others.

College offered him the discursive space to dress in drag occasionally or dress differently "just for the fucks of it". Indeed, Mick's discourse about masculinity reflected an ongoing willingness to push the boundaries of what is masculine for himself. His description of

these practices reflected college as a safe context that was accepting of multiple conceptions of masculinity in the right context.

For Terry, college opened up a world of possibilities concerning his exploration of masculinity beyond the campus. Identifying as a straight white man, Terry said college opened him up to the possibility of experiencing masculinity and sexuality in an alternate manner:

Terry: Like I said I was really open minded like over the summer. I experimented with a guy. And now I don't know if I associate as being bisexual, but I'm not opposed to being with a guy. I'm not close to being with a guy. As far as like life goals go, I see just having a family. And right now I see that being with a female and having a kid. But you know before I experimented I looked at guys as like not an option. Now, I'm not opposed to it down the road. Life may happen and I may find somebody. That's just how life is. You never know. You can't predict that in ten years, you just can't. So I guess the same thing could be said about having a family with the guy. It's a possibility, that idea's there, but I just don't see it happening right now. Like right now like as far as preference goes it's probably like you know 80/20. I seek interpersonal relationships with women more than men right now. I'll go out of my way for women. More than a guy.

The discourse of masculinity expanded in scope and meaning for Terry after his first year of college. He built on his description of masculinity by experimentation with alternative forms. His experience with college empowered him to explore his masculine identity in ways very different than his early experiences in his hometown.

College men indicated that experimentation of masculinity becomes important in how they negotiate and manage expectations of their masculine identity. Experimentation allows them to question preconceived notions of masculinity and expand the manner in which they discuss gender. Experimentation feeds into the notion that masculinity is a concept that is fluid and open to change. Yet, at the same time, college men are pulling from earlier pivotal experiences that suggest to them that manhood is a somewhat fixed

concept with current and future milestones that indicate success in reaching manliness. So, masculinity is a concept that suggests fluidity and fixedness at the same time.

*Masculinity and manhood: the dual anchors of precarious discourse.* The proposed model places the concepts of manhood and masculinity as bookends to precarious discourse. Discussions of masculinity with college students exposes a tension between fluid conceptions of masculinity and more fixed descriptions of manhood. As college men talked about masculinity, I noted an issue with the terminology I had planned for this study. At the beginning of interviews, I would frame the terms masculinity, manhood, and manliness as essentially having the same meaning. However, as college men discussed masculine identity, I noticed a pattern of how men talked about conceptions of male gender. College men consistently shifted between the speculative and declarative statements when asked about how they perceived masculinity and manhood. Strategic Masculinity emerges from discourse that is at once assured and tentative. The result is expression that is shifting, changing, and gender negotiation in process.

To frame this discursive phenomenon within the proposed theory, I propose that men use discourse that demonstrates an ongoing tension between masculinity and manhood. I suggest that the term masculinity refers to the fluid, changing, ongoing, and permeable nature of masculine identity. The term manhood, however, represents the declarative, fixed, and non-permeable nature of masculine identity processes. The tension between these two constructs results in ongoing precarious discourse that marks the ongoing negotiation of personal masculine identity. Essentially, college men display discourse that is constantly negotiating what it means to be a man in modernity.

Men often discuss their notions of manhood that is relatively fixed and declarative. Most participants were very confident in pointing out some characteristics they clearly thought of as representing personal manhood. College men's discourse of manhood were often unequivocal they were firm about how they perceived manhood. For example, many participants readily describe manhood as having characteristics of physicality, toughness, stoicism, ethical behavior, or sexual virility. College men often use discourse that seems to suggest that their notions of manhood are quite stable and unproblematic.

While talk about manhood can seem stable, notions concerning characteristics of masculine identity are marked by lots of qualification and editorializing. There is a speculative quality to college men's discourse with regard to masculinity that I label as masculinity. While men could easily locate masculine qualities like toughness or virility, there is a tone of tentativeness that often qualifies these statements. It seems that college men are pulling from past pivotal experiences to locate their views of manhood and at the same time display considerable latitude when exploring those views.

This notion of the fluid in tension with the fixed permeates the discussions of college men when discussing masculine identity. College men shift back and forth between the two as if locating and negotiating a landing point for their male identity. My conversation with Steven is demonstrative of the tone that often accompanies talk about masculinity and manhood. Steven is a white, middle-class student who works construction full time during his summers and part-time during the semester. During the college year, he is active in several college clubs, activities, and generally considered a leader on campus. Steven chose to bring a hammer as his representation of masculinity.

For him, the hammer represents many of the lessons he learned from his grandfather and father. Steven equates the hammer with hard work, physical labor, integrity, and stoicism in his actions on the job. He explicitly talks early in the interview about these qualities as manly:

Steven: My grandfather was an Airforce commander. He always had that kind of integrity and hard work mindset. He's now close to 90 years old and he still changes the oil on this truck and still mows the lawn and still does all of those things that he's done his whole life. He's never believed in weakness and he's always been a very strong person. And then my dad's kind of done the same thing that I'm doing currently. He used to flip houses and do construction. He has been a fire chief for 20 years and he's now kind of gotten to the point in his life where he's slowed down a little bit. But he still has the same type of values. You work hard for your money.

Interviewer: So I heard you say a few things. I mean (you said) work is really equated with being a man, particularly physical labor and not showing weakness.

Steven: Yeah. I mean it wasn't ever like explicitly told to me you know 'don't be weak.' But I think it was just kind of that implicit value that I kind of took from everybody around me. That no matter what's going on, whether it's mental or physical, you just don't show weakness. And maybe not in the sense of like emotional breakdowns or you need to vent or whatever. But it's just like always strive to have integrity and just perseverance, that type of strength. I think more so than just physical toughness.

Interviewer: You brought something else up that's of interest to me and that is emotion. I mean were you taught to control your emotions as a man.

Steven: My upbringing was...I'm close to my parents but not in an emotional way. I mean it's never been like if I'm in trouble, they're the first people I got to talk to. I think before now it's always been like conceal it [emotion] If you have to tell somebody, you tell your closest friend or you tell your brother...it's just kind of held in.

Steven has always equated men with being strong and silent; hard workers who didn't complain and went about their jobs with a degree of stoicism. Steven does value non emotion, physical and mental strength, and lack of demonstrating emotion as manly. His early dialogue offers a fairly straightforward and fixed view of manhood. His later



comments, however, indicate that his view of masculine identity is still somewhat fluid and permeable- that is open to change, indeed, developing through his discourses:

Steven: You know with the whole masculinity thing. I mean, I'm a big guy and I've always been an athlete. I've always worked with my hands, but I've never tried to give off that type of vibe to anybody. That because I do these things, I'm more of a man than say someone else that hasn't ever done these thing. I've never really thought about it in terms of like 'I am masculine', I guess. You know, do the things I do portray myself as masculine? I think I've always just kind of done what I wanted to do, *but* I am aware of masculinity and therefore since coming to college talking about my emotions and connecting more. Not just having a group of guy friends, but really trying to diversify myself and lots of female and male friends. Even like cross-culturally- international friends and stuff like that. I think I have just changed the way I look at it.

Steven's discourse on masculinity has evolved and changed since his arrival at college. He indicates that he experiences and performs emotion differently and is moving away from a fixed notion of what indicates manhood. He goes on to talk about several other experiences that changed his conception about strength, relationships, and other characteristics related to his masculinity.

Steven's dialogues about masculinity and manhood are representative of the dynamic between notions of fixed manhood and fluid masculinity for the participants of this study. Two incompatible, yet complementary, processes seem to be playing out as college men discover and modify their notions of manliness. The tension between these two concepts – masculinity and manhood- represent the discursive negotiation process of developing masculine identity for college men. It is talk that consistently shifts between declarative statements about the assuredness of manly qualities, and the fluidity, permeable definition of others.

**Summary of precarious discourse.** The first major core of the proposed model suggests that discourse by college men is precarious, uncertain, and complicated by

several characteristics. At first glance, one might wonder if discourse concerning masculinity is really that precarious given the college context. After all, college seems to offer a discursive community where new ideas about gender are readily acceptable and even encouraged. Indeed, participants indicated that college presents the opportunity to experiment with the fluid concept of masculinity. However, those efforts might be complicated by early pivotal experiences and role models that affected more fixed and persistent conceptions of manhood.

College is, however, not a unitary context that offers the same experience for every college man. As we will see, it is an experience that is made up of several sub contexts that complicate the process of becoming a man. Athletic teams, college fraternities, and various social settings with different peer groups can complicate the discursive process and offer ongoing challenges for men. These often present young men with the challenge to personally and collectively rehabilitate a perceived notion that men are morally and behaviorally corrupt.

**The rehabilitation of masculinity.** College men in this study engage in discourse that served to collectively and personally rehabilitate masculine identity. These rehabilitation efforts highlight the second core dimension of the proposed theory of Strategic Masculinity. College men offered their perspective on the state of perception of men in general in modern society. Men consistently described male behavior as being framed in a negative manner by social structures such as schools, various media, and governmental structures. In short, men are associated with bad behavior and in a negative light.

Surrounded by what they perceive as negativity concerning masculinity in general, young men engage in discourse that serves to rehabilitate the notion of masculinity. The characteristics of rehabilitation include both collective and personal dimensions as men try to reclaim some positive views of masculinity. The collective dimension of rehabilitation serves the concept of masculinity in general. College men seem to feel a duty to often critique behaviors associated with common hegemonic forms or reclaim the ethical high ground associated with men in general. A second effort seems to simultaneously take place at the personal level as young men attempt to differentiate themselves from the bad associated with men and to answer personal challenges to their own personal masculine identity. The sub model representing the core concept and characteristic of rehabilitation is illustrated in figure 3.

In this section, I explore the collective and personal dimensions that serve to rehabilitate masculine identity. Personal efforts at rehabilitation concerns answering personal challenges to manhood using various discursive and symbolic efforts, and a personal declaration of manhood. Collective efforts at rehabilitating masculinity concern an interrogation of hegemonic forms and highlighting the ethical components of being male. Together, these efforts serve to reclaim the positive characteristics of being a man.

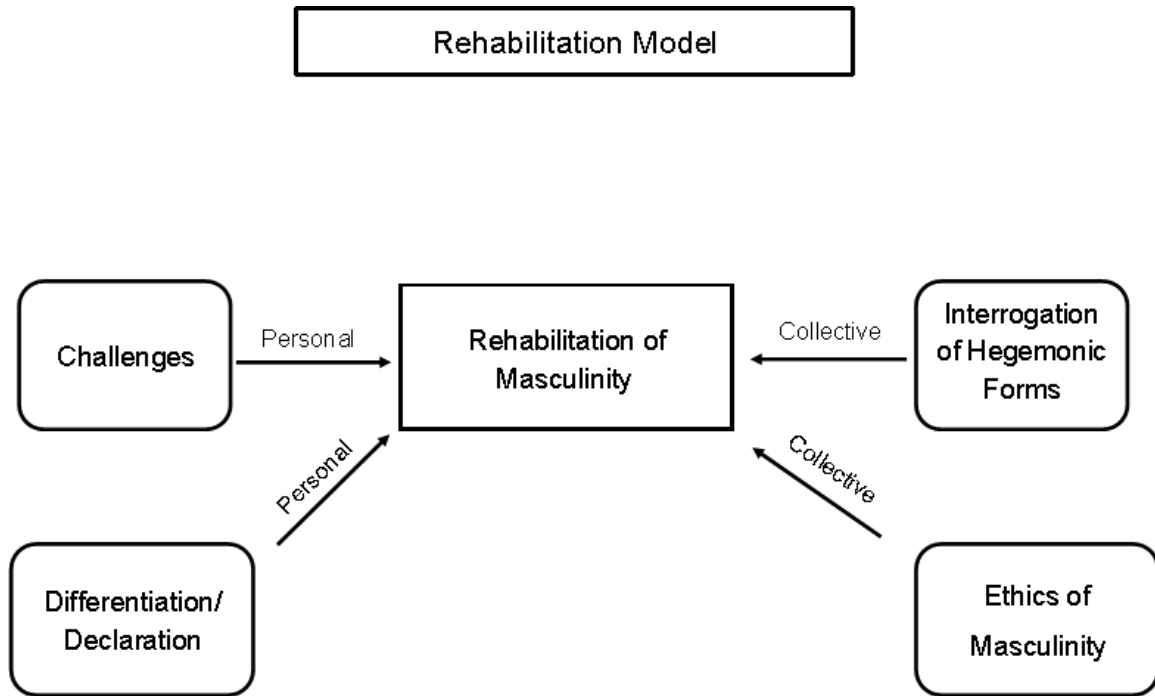


Figure 3. Sub model of Rehabilitation. This figure outlines the characteristics of rehabilitation and offers a proposed illustration of processes. Arrows indicate the speculation of directions of influence.

that men have to answer challenges to their masculinity through immediate and direct action. Precarious manhood suggest that it is a struggle to gain manhood and maintaining it requires constant proof in social contexts and that manhood is fleeting and easily lost (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). The results of this examination suggest a related, but much more complex processual method in which men perceive social challenges and in turn choose to answer them. While young men can readily recall challenges to their masculinity, the imperative to answer the challenge is heavily dependent upon context, environment, and unfolds over time. Additionally, young men employ a variety of sophisticated symbolic and discursive strategies to address challenges.

College-age men can readily recall either personal or observed instances of their masculinity being threatened in a social context. The experiences are wide-ranging and

varied in their intensity and significance to participants. My participants offered instances of being challenged for the attire they wore, their sexual prowess or their ability to “pick up” women, their physical strength, the ability to drink copious amounts of alcohol, their physical toughness, and many more. There is little doubt in their descriptions that they have been challenged at times for their social actions. What is different from previous examinations of precarious manhood is the importance placed upon answering those challenges and the importance of the challenges themselves in terms of the participants’ gendered identity.

Challenges to masculinity exist for college men, but not every challenge has to be answered in public or in the identity processes of young men. Stories were replete with examples of events that were memorable, but not central to how members defended their identity in front of others. Tommy, who identifies as white and middle-class, offers an explanation for answering challenges or choosing to let them go unanswered:

Tommy: I am a little bit of a mama's boy and in touch much more with my feminine side. It's typically me the one getting picked on. I really don't care.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example?

Tommy: Yeah it's funny, because, like I said, I'll get called out. I mean not even anything super derogatory or negative, just like friends messing with me. Something like ‘you’re such a wuss’ or another word sounding like wussy. Just like them saying ‘manly men wouldn't do that’ and just kind of those stereotypical things - nothing super significant. But at the same time I'm typically the first person who they will come to and ask for advice about a girl they're talking to or ‘hey I just met this person’ or ‘hey I think I might want to just hang out with this girl for more than one night.’ I'm typically like the mature one of the group that they'll come to and kind of seek advice from. So I get made fun of, but they still seek me out in times of need, which I find kind of interesting.

Interviewer: You don't find it to be a threat to you as a man? You know, for example you know you're called a wuss and you have to do something to restore that somehow?

Tommy: [laughs] No! I mean I think some people, not that they don't feel comfortable with themselves to where they'll do that [challenge] out of response just to make up for being insecure as men.

Interviewer: So it's not a big deal for you when someone calls you out for being less than masculine?

Tommy: I'd say that a couple of years ago it probably would have been more of a big deal, but with maturation and life experiences I've gone through, I kind of don't care much about threats. I know what I do care about. And whether or not this one random guy on the street thinks I'm a manly man or not, that really doesn't matter.

The Precarious Manhood thesis suggests that men are driven to answer public challenges to manhood. Yet Tommy offers the perspective that men are more selective about the challenges they answer. He suggests that a verbal insult from a random man does not require him to discursively or symbolically address the state of his masculinity. This finding suggests that men pick and choose when and how to address direct or indirect challenges to their respective male identities.

Other participants built on this idea that they are selective in addressing challenges and that all slights did not bear attention. Participants consistently pointed to instances when "I didn't see it as a challenge" or "I don't care what someone else thinks about me", even when they clearly perceived that their personal masculinity was being challenged. The data suggests that challenges to male identity do indeed go unchallenged. My analysis indicates that most challenges are deemed unworthy of address.

While participants indicated that many challenges are downplayed, they did recognize that challenges happened and they sometimes felt compelled to address them in some discursive or symbolic manner. During their descriptions of instances of when they had been challenged as men, or seen others similarly challenged, these men indicated that the decision about when to redress a slight to their masculinity largely rested on the

context or situation in which the instance occurred and if the perceived insult threatened other significant areas of their identity.

Context plays a significant part in the how and when college men seek to restore their masculinity based on some social challenge. I indicated earlier that the college context offers a multitude of situations where college men feel safe expressing and experimenting with their personal brand of masculinity as they explore their masculine identity. However, not every situation or social group is considered safe in college. How men act and speak in response to challenge depends on the social group and situation in which the instance takes place. Responding to challenges for college men essentially comes down to understanding a complex set of rules heavily dependent upon the social circumstance in which one is embedded. I now turn to examining several contexts to illustrate this phenomenon.

Male friend groups exercise a significant influence on college men's efforts to manage and enact masculinity. Most of the men in my study describe situations where their masculinity was challenged in friend groups. Indeed, many of the men indicated ongoing experiences where their fellow men in a group tested, teased, harassed, or tweaked the participants concerning actions or talk that might be seen as not conforming to standard behaviors related to masculinity. Challenging masculine norm within friends is quite often the norm. In sharp contrast to the theory of precarious manhood, most of the men in the study indicated that such verbal, or even physical challenges, did not threaten their conceptions of masculine identity in any significant way. Anthony, who identifies as white and middle-class, when probed about challenges, offers a typical summation of operating within an all-male friend group with regard to challenges about masculinity:

Anthony: It's such a common thing, even in a friend group, to just joke around like in college about that [acting less than manly].

Interviewer: So that's common within friends? But do you feel threatened masculinity wise? Do you think they feel threatened?

Anthony: Not in our friend group but, I mean, if one of my friends says that to another one my friends, then it's not going to be a big deal. Somebody that we don't know says it to one of my friends, then they're going to be like 'you know, what's his deal?' In my group, it could be totally serious, *but it won't hit that hard*.

Facing challenges from men in friend groups rarely offers a serious crisis of masculinity for most college men. Anthony noted that teasing about manliness was part of the discursive environment and part of showing solidarity within his circle of friends. As he later described to me, "giving shit is just part it". Many of the participants echo this sentiment and explained this phenomenon by describing what I think of as the *gender capital* they have accrued over time during their friendships. They have proven their worth to their fellow men through ongoing discursive or symbolic action. Therefore, most challenges are not perceived as gendered threats in isolation and are handled through discursive exchanges that are most often considered good-natured ribbing. The safety of the group where men might possess gender capital allows men to assess which challenges they will answer and which are somewhat benign, and even a sign of bonding between men in most participant descriptions.

I initially thought that I had identified gender capital as a novel concept within masculinity studies. Several scholars, however, have referenced gender capital as a characteristic of masculinity and gender identity processes in general (Bridges, 2009; Huppatz, 2012). Most treatments of gender capital build on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital explored in the literature review of this study. Bridges (2009) offers a definition



fit for use in this study when he describes gender capital as “the knowledge, resources and aspects of identity available– within a given context – that permit access to regime-specific gendered identities.” Bridges definition closely captures the dynamic that participants described in our conversations.

Within any given context, college men have accumulated the coin of gender capital that can either legitimize or undermine their bona fides as men within that context. Therefore, within a group of male friends, a man may have proven his masculine assets and not feel compelled to face every challenge to his masculinity. Within another context, he may possess less gender capital in terms of masculinity and feel compelled to answer questions about his manhood. In short, gender capital is context dependent. Currency within differing contexts varies. What might serve as currency in an athletic context, for example, might not be accepted in an academic environment. Therefore, men have to manage multiple currencies in a variety of contexts to manage masculinity.

Challenges to masculinity while in men and women groups marked a different type of reaction on the part of college men. College men indicated that their demeanor and discourse often changed when their manliness was somehow challenged while in front of groups mixed with men and women. What may be good-natured teasing in a group of men becomes an event for the performance, and often the personal rehabilitation of individual masculinity for participants. Paul indicates the change in tone and process when I asked him about being challenged in a mixed gender group:

Paul: I try to be more, you know, even more masculine. I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like you're just trying to be more masculine than you would in front of guy friends.

Interviewer: You think you perform manhood more in front of women than men?

Paul: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is performance the same when you are in a group as when you are alone with a woman?

Paul: I don't think so. So what I think is definitely when you're with your buddies in front of other men, you want to be more masculine. But if it's just like with a girl I mean you just don't really care. I mean obviously going to try to be a little masculine, but you're not trying to like be the top dog.

Paul's description of male performance is consistent with past examinations of masculinity when in the company of women. College men often try to prove their masculinity in front of women, but for the benefit of other men. In this case, Paul recognizes that he and other men adapt their discourse to prove they can be successful with women- that they are sexually viable and desirable to women. For Paul and others in this study, discursive performance shifts in these circumstances and reflects a tone consistent with the accepted masculine norms he equates with societies conception of men- that of the tough, strong, and virile male. Another participant also notes the shift in discourse and the heightened need to address challenges to his masculinity:

Interviewer: Do you see any difference in how men react when they are around women?

Charles: Definitely yes. When guys are amongst themselves, and then, when guys are around girls...I think a lot of girls would never even talk to a guy twice if she heard the way we talked to each other in the locker room. It's really bad. I always think it is funny to see how a guy, some guys, act way differently. I got a friend that as soon as we get around girls, he's throwing everybody else under the bus, or just, really on a different guy's case. Trying to make the other guy look bad and to kind of make themselves look better. I have friends that they're most certainly not the most talkative around guys, but you put them around some girls, and they become more talkative, a whole different person. And the opposite as well. Guys who were really loud and stuff around in the locker room, were really funny and talked a lot. Then we get around girls and it's like a whole different thing. I think that might go hand-in-hand with what they perceive as masculinity - what guys think girls think.

Men shift their discourse in response to their perceptions of how women think about men. Additionally, Charles notes that not only do men change their discourse to enforce their own manly credentials, but they are more prone to challenge other men- to “throw them under the bus” as Charles puts it. As Charles put it later in our interview, challenges to masculinity become magnified when college men react in mixed company. As he put it, guys “have to address it or lose your card” when their masculinity is somehow questioned in mixed company.

Challenges to masculinity by strangers can provoke the need to take discursive action to rehabilitate personal masculinity. Discourse often shifts to become more reactive and defensive in response to some criticism of masculine qualities due to a perceived shortcoming in action. My discussions with Wren, identifying as white and lower-class, gives some insight as to how and why young men feel compelled to defend and prove their masculine credentials in reaction to a challenge from a stranger:

Wren: I feel like you know if you're at a party or whatever and I am talking to a girl and I don't close the deal. I don't get her number or something like that. I feel like that's kind of something they [a stranger] question and you feel kind of like a hit. Your manhood's a little bit hurt.

Interviewer: A little? It sounds like you recover pretty quickly?

Wren: Yeah. I mean you can't really win them all, so it's kind of the way you look at it. You definitely hear about it from your friends, but it's not a big deal.

Interviewer: Do you think it's different if a stranger does the same thing?

Wren: Yeah. Because it's like they don't really know you, they don't know your personality. So it's different if this random guy was ‘hey man you didn't even get her number.’ I would be like, ‘dude, you don't know me’. I don't know. It's different for someone that knows me, knows my personality and my habits and stuff like that.

Interviewer: So you might be more defensive with a stranger? You might have to answer?

Wren: Yes, definitely. I might say ‘everyone strikes out, I get numbers all the time.’ Like, ‘that’s the first one I haven’t gotten’ (laughs).

Wren echoes a sentiment held by many men in the study. Wren feels like he has built goodwill with his friends concerning his masculine bona fides. He does not feel the need to answer challenges directly or in every instance. A stranger, however, has not consistently observed his credentials as a man. The stranger is not qualified to “know his personality” or “habits”. Therefore, Wren feels like he has to address perceived shortcomings in his masculine identity to prove he is a legitimate man and possesses manly qualities. In responding to the stranger in this instance, Wren stresses his ability to have success with women; a masculine quality he strongly subscribes to in his earlier descriptions of masculinity.

Jon, who identifies as white and middle-class, reinforced this finding when discussing a time when he decided to take some challenge to his masculinity seriously and fashion a response:

Interviewer: So you think that notion (of answering challenge) make sense more with strangers than friends? Why?

Jon: Because I feel like friends actually deep down they're going to, you know, they're going to like you either way. It's just one of those things. They may make fun of you for it. But it's one of those things you just got to brush off and take it I guess. But if a stranger makes fun of you for something like that it's like ‘all right, who are u?’ You step up.

Jon takes challenges from his friend group as part of the process of bonding. Teasing or prodding about displaying feminine qualities or not exhibiting strength by friends is easily ignored or “brushed off”. Indeed, he sees his role as to “take it”- a proof of manhood in itself. But he also doesn’t see the discourse as threatening to his personal

masculine identity because of his friends' deep understanding of his credentials as a man. But he feels a responsibility to "step up" to those who do not know him. While Jon has built up gender capital with those in his friend circle, he does not have the same capital with strangers. Therefore, he feels the need to address perceived shortcomings in some social contexts.

Other contexts further complicate the decision of when and how to respond to challenges concerning masculine identity. Many of the participants in this study either currently or formally competed on sports teams. These young men would sometimes pull from their recollections of situations with teammates to illustrate the notion of challenged masculinity and the unique stakes associated with acting out a certain kind of manhood. Interactions with teammates can offer yet another glimpse into the complexity of how young men navigate their personal masculine identity depending on social context.

Men athletes occupy a discursive space that represents classic ideals of manhood. Media representations and American culture have portrayed the playing field as bastions of hegemonic masculinity recalling notions of aggressiveness, virility, strength, and other patriarchal values (Trujillo, 1991). Male athletes have come to represent these values and male college participants in this study strongly identified masculinity with the same set of values. This endorsement of hegemonic masculinity in sports often dictated how these men would respond to challenge in the locker room and on the playing field with fellow teammates. Eddie, white and middle-class, describes it best:

Eddie: When you're an athlete and you're in a sports mindset, and people question you, it's like 'oh yeah. Guess what we're going to do now? We're going to figure this out.' Because it then turns into a challenge for who can do better. It's always that challenge of 'I can play basketball better than you. I can play baseball better than you. I can hit better. I am better.' Whatever you are going to challenge. And

then it gets into is almost like an argument of being hurt. Who was hurt the most? Who needs to prove what they've got? It goes back and forth.

Eddie's comments are very typical of college men athletes experience with masculinity challenges with teammates. Their experience with masculinity challenges is ongoing and precarious, to say the least.

Participants noted that challenges are part and parcel of being a member of a sports team. Teammates often challenge the manly qualities of the men in their group. Men noted that deciding when to respond to challenges depended on what qualities might be questioned in a situation. Teammates, like friend groups, are often forgiving of perceived shortcomings because men have built goodwill over time. They have earned gender capital that gives them some leeway. For example, it is common for men to tease each other about success, or lack thereof with women. Generally, the men I spoke with said many challenges about this quality of masculine identity would go unanswered. Other challenges, however, that were closer to core athletic identity such and physical strength, athletic prowess, or strong leadership qualities demanded response.

*Summarizing challenges to masculinity.* Not every challenge to personal identity has to be explicitly answered. Despite the claims of the precarious manhood model, masculinity is not so easily lost by failing to answer challenges. For example, many have accumulated the gender capital that protects them from ongoing teasing and challenges from friend groups. On the other hand, a stranger's challenge to the athletic prowess of an athlete might trigger a quick response of a college male athlete. The response to challenge is heavily dependent upon context and not all challenges are created equal. A situation that might challenge one man will not mean that much to another man given the unique context that he inhabits.

Losing manhood is also not a one-time event, but a process that happens over time since men build up gender capital with friend groups, women, etc. Challenges do, however, happen and how men deal with them is important. Precarious Masculinity suggests that a man is driven to offer social proof when challenged. I suggest that the process of defending masculinity is far more complicated. College men weigh a variety of factors before deciding when and if they are going to publically defend their manhood. The calculus of defending one's masculinity depends on knowing the context, the social group, and assessing the success of a potential strategy. My interview with Eddie began to shine light on this complex process. As I probed for a pattern to answering challenges, he offered seemingly conflicting approaches. Later, however, as he discussed when to take offense at a common reference, he offered insight:

Eddie: It just depends. I have seen situations where people take it personally even it's more or less joking. There are situations where if you say that 'we have a problem.' It's a challenge. Or if you're just joking, then yeah, we'll just laugh and I'll call you it too and we'll call it even. But I have seen it where people go from zero to 60 and they get really upset and it's not cool. 'We've got a problem.'

Interviewer: So given what you told me, is fag the one. Is that when you say that 'it's on?'

Eddie: Not necessarily. It's more like, do you need to say something in that kind of situation. There are people out there who still like jump in and say 'yeah that's not ok.' Or there are some situations where it's like. 'OK, well now you've said your piece.' We can go back to actually saying some fun stuff. It depends on who you are with.

My exchange with Eddie begins to capture the complexity for if, when, and how a man decides to address some challenge. Men do not often engage in the knee-jerk, involuntary defense mechanisms to defend their masculinity as is suggested by the precarious manhood model. Rather, they are thoughtful in the assessment of challenges

based on many social factors. If they do decide to address challenges, they then engage in a variety of discursive strategies that they think might be effective.

*Responding to challenges.* Deciding whether to answer a challenge involves making sense of a frequently uncertain environment of gender for college men. I suggest that coming to understand personal masculinity is a process that is often uncertain and confusing for college-age men as they learn to navigate various contexts and social groups. If you add additional factors, like the perceived need to rehabilitate notions of manhood, the increasing political aspect of college, and issues of intersectionality like class or race, masculinity can represent a very uncertain journey. Given this uncertainty, my interviews with college men lead me to borrow from Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) to frame the various strategies that men use to navigate challenges to their masculinity.

URT was originally conceived to explain how workers make sense of strangers in initial interactions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). According to the theory, people experience uncertainty when they meet strangers in the workplace. Further development of the theory suggested that we experience anxiety due to uncertainty and that we are motivated to reduce this uncertainty/anxiety so that we can anticipate and predict what type of values, beliefs, and behaviors to expect from the environment in question. Based on my findings, I suggest that college men engage in a similar process when assessing challenges to their masculinity. Men assess the uncertainty presented when they perceive some social challenge to their masculinity and decide on a proper strategy from three broad communicative strategies to reduce that uncertainty.



URT suggest three strategies for addressing uncertainty in a given context. Passive strategies are engaged by observing and interpreting the stranger at a distance without talking to him/her or others. Active strategies are engaged by asking third parties in the organization about the behaviors, values, beliefs, etc. of the stranger. Finally, Interactive strategies are engaged by speaking directly to the stranger. The person judges the stranger's behaviors, beliefs, values from verbal and nonverbal cues present in interaction.

My data can be framed by modifying URT and suggesting that college men utilize passive, active, and interactive strategies when assessing and addressing social challenges to their masculinity. Men gauge a number of factors including context, situation, and the value they place on different aspects of masculine gender to choose discursive, cognitive, and symbolic strategies in response to challenges concerning their gendered identity.

Not all challenges require explicit social proof of manhood for college men when a man attempts to rehabilitate personal masculinity in response to some challenge. College men indicate that they are often driven to handle challenges to their identity in a passive manner. A passive strategy involves a cognitive assessment of the person, persons, or situation in question and less of a focus on explicit discursive strategy. I think of this strategy as the target engaging in an inner dialogue that attributes cause to the behavior of the originator of the challenge. As we talked about answering challenges to his manhood, Jon pointed out that although he sometimes felt the need to explicitly address a challenge, he more often engaged in a mental exercise that downplayed the issue and made it about the person where it originated:

Interviewer: You don't feel you need to drink more or be more physical because someone called you out? It doesn't exactly resonate that you have to respond to the guy?

Jon: Yeah. It's one of those things where I've notice if you ignore it, ignoring something is the worst possible thing for that person that's giving you shit, because it shows like 'you just looked like the idiot when you were saying stuff to me.'

Jon manages to cognitively flip the script on the originator and questioning his notions of masculinity. He derives his power to address challenges from other by cognitively acknowledging the issue, but not explicitly engaging with the originator. He feels that he nullifies the social challenge by refusing to explicitly address it in the first place.

Steven engages in a similar strategy that encapsulates the passive approach even more clearly. He discusses his reasoning of when to interactively versus passively engage with a threat:

Steven: I'm going to tiptoe here. I don't think it's all joking (from peer groups). You know I think, at least for me, the person who's name calling, the person who's calling somebody a pussy or queer or whatever. I think that they're dealing with some stuff themselves. I think that something is going on with them and therefore they have to put it on somebody else. Like 'you know you need to show that you're masculine or that you need to prove yourself.' But really, I'm insecure about it too. So I've always kind of felt that just growing up the way I grew up friends. I didn't really get to pick my friends. I competed with them 365 days a year. So they were my friends no matter what and they were very standoffish. You know putting people in corners and trying to get them to prove something themselves.

Steven equates some challenges from other men as being associated with their own character or attributes their behavior to situational variables. He engages in an inner cognitive dialogue that stresses empathy, "but I'm really insecure about it (masculinity) too", and seeks to explain the originating person's behavioral motivation in issuing the challenge. By choosing not to actively answer the challenge, Steven rehabilitates his personal masculinity through silence. Actually, for Steven, not answering a challenge is

his personal proof of masculinity in and of itself. It is the restraint that answers the challenge by not seeking to address the slight directly with the originator.

A second communicative strategy in personal rehabilitation in response to a challenge is to actively address the situation. An active strategy is a socially cooperative strategy where other members in the social context jointly engage the target or each other to assist in rehabilitating the target man. Participants seem to use passive strategies as a first step in addressing perceived challenges to their behaviors associated with personal masculinity. When a first option seems to be insufficient, college men often scan their social group to ascertain if others in the group will assist in some way. Often men can avoid some display to prove their worth as men because others in the group will defend them by either attacking the target or endorsing their masculinity based on accumulated gender capital or the inappropriateness of the target attack.

Several of the men in this study indicated using active strategies to address perceived challenges to their manhood in some social context. Their descriptions of such a strategy describe events where others in the social situation (usually a friend group) would overhear or observe a challenge and intercede to defend the target man or decry statements as inappropriate. Kevin offered a general example to me when probed about being insulted with a slur questioning gender:

Kevin: It's not uncommon to have a situation where if you said fag, people would be like 'we can't really say that', they correct you. And it's also not uncommon for them to be jump in and start saying it to the guy who started it. 'He is a fag' or 'he's a faggot' or something like that. Now it's kind of dying out because the culture that we are developing. The homosexual comments they kind of are like now, 'Should I really say that or should I not.' I don't hear it as much as when I was a kid and not much at all here.

In many contexts, certain types of attacks on masculinity are socially unacceptable. Kevin has seen men called “fags” and others immediately decry the attack based on prevailing views in the group. Similarly, participants would report groups that took up the challenges on behalf of the target man based on their knowledge of his past demonstrated masculine trait. They would essentially call out the attacker for questioning the target’s masculinity based on the gender capital the target may have accumulated over time.

Active and passive strategies are not conceptualized in the previous precarious manhood model. This is problematic in that the model only focuses on direct responses to perceived challenges to masculinity. It makes sense that men utilize multiple communicative strategies to address threats to masculinity. Addressing threats directly in every instance carries the possibility, even probability, of failure to live up to masculine standards in the eyes of other social actors. Utilizing multiple strategies that minimize exposure, limits the risk to young men trying to navigate masculine identity.

While active and passive strategies might be a preferred course of action that limits risk in gender threatening situation, college men can easily recall and describe situations where a challenge has to be answered interactively. An interactive communicative strategy is one where the target man either symbolically or discursively interacts directly with the perceived challenge to his masculinity. Interactive strategies are most closely aligned with actions consistent with the precarious manhood model.

As college men in the study relayed their experiences in directly confronting challenges, they described situations that ran from the relatively benign to very serious consequential action. Take Eddie and his description of being challenged during a

common day. Eddie actually describes several challenges he might encounter in any given day:

Eddie: I get offended sometimes that people try to say that I'm not this way (manly). I wasn't the fastest on my team. So I would always try to like try to ignore their comments. But some of those times it's like 'you know what, now I have to prove to you that I can I make up in other qualities' and I think that is related to like the manly thing, not just the athlete. Say when you're out at night, I don't know, at parties, or if you're just in a coffee shop ordering coffee. Because I order white chocolate mochas, and it sounds a little, not to be sexist, it sounds a little feminine. So I order the coffee but you know you always get those jabs 'Oh that sounds really white girl.' And I'm like 'oh thanks for that. Thanks for that.' It happens in everyday life but I mean I don't necessarily get offended by it. It's more or less just now I have to act tough for the rest of the day. So watch out.

Eddie's case is interesting because his perceived challenges come from multiple social actors. He might get critiqued for being slow on the baseball team, teased at parties for not drinking enough, or demeaned for acting 'like a white girl' in his choice of coffee. While he downplays the threat, he notes "watch out" because he now has to act out more masculine behaviors to rehabilitate his personal masculinity. He feels he has to explicitly display more masculine behaviors and discourse to reclaim that which he has lost.

Paul's description of directly confronting challenges to masculinity in the fraternity world provides a picture of men with very precarious holds on masculine identity and a need to consistently rehabilitate personal identity. In his world, most challenges have to be answered directly by immediate interaction with the situation or person who highlighted some perceived shortcoming:

Paul: At the frat parties it's like, 'can you drink the most.' Who can get the most blacked out? I mean we challenge each other in drinking contests.

Interviewer: Does anybody ever turn down the challenges or do others intercede?

Paul: Rarely, just because I mean, you don't want to be not the most masculine guy.

Interviewer: They see it as a challenge to being a guy?

Paul: Yes. And you don't want to just be outdone in a drinking contest like the first one to shotgun the beer wins or whoever drinks the most wins.

Interviewer: And what's a loser get?

Paul: I don't know. They get a lot of shit. You know, you're a pussy or you're a faggot.

In the context of fraternity parties, a man has to prove he can drink heavily, even to the point of unconsciousness. Absent being able to dismiss the threat (passive) or for others to confirm his bona fides as a man (active), most of Paul's challenges are answered immediately and directly with the situational challenge. The consequences of failing in that endeavor include additional masculinity attacks – being considered a “pussy” or “faggot”. The interactive strategies, in this case, carry severe risks to personal masculinity if not successful. Failure to properly address interactive challenges successfully for participants opens them up to further scrutiny. Interestingly, in the fraternity context described by Paul, gender capital seems to be something that members have to constantly earn or be considered less manly.

Interactive strategies are often not the avenue of first choice for college men. Men often feel ambiguous about the need to engage in direct action to answer challenges concerning their masculinity. They might try to ignore the originator of the challenge at first, then interact with actors in the environment. Tommy discusses the process that many college men in my study implied they followed before engaging in interactive strategies. In describing one ongoing situation with an acquaintance, Tommy stressed how he tried to ignore and downplay the teasing he took about aspects of his masculinity.

Tommy: But he would just like find ways to kind of mess with me and get under my skin. And once I had enough, I'd physically get up and I was like ‘all right

stop it.' And then he'd keep going. And the only way I'd get him to stop was by physically pinning him down on his shoulders. But, It's just I always, after doing it, would just be like standing there, not ashamed of myself, but just kind of like 'what has this come to'. That's what it took. He stopped talking.

Tommy puts off an overt direct strategy (in this case physical confrontation) for as long as possible. He describes his strategy of ignoring the challenge, then downplaying it. But when other communicative strategies fail, he finally reaches a breaking point—the “all right, that’s it” moment where he feels he must engage directly to rehabilitate his personal sense of masculine identity in the presence of other men.

Other examples abounded in this particular sample of participants. College men engaged in a continuum of interactive strategies from simple discursive objections to a challenge, to symbolic displays, or to physical violence of varying seriousness. Like the precarious manhood model, men did often (but not always) feel compelled to restore their masculinity and give social proof of manhood. The process and communicative strategies, however, are complex and dependent on a variety of context and situational variables.

Clearly, the process of responding to challenges to personal masculinity is one that is fraught with danger to core masculine identity. Just knowing the rules and appropriate responses can be an anxiety -provoking process. Answering personal challenges, however, is only one aspect that complicates the process of becoming a man. Men also have to answer to the collective perception of forms of masculinity that seem to dominate societal structures. I will discuss this in the next section.

**Interrogation of hegemonic masculinity and declarations of personal masculinity.** The ongoing rehabilitation of masculinity for college men involves a critical examination of hegemonic forms of masculinity, personal differentiation from those

forms, and ongoing declarations of personal masculinity that individualize masculine identity. When discussing masculinity, men are keenly aware of the dominant messages communicated by social structures such as the media, educational institutions, and organizations concerning how men should act and talk. Additionally, college men indicate that while they understand the expectations of these forms of hegemonic masculinity, they also perceive strongly negative connotations associated with performing dominant forms. As a result, college men engage in critical interrogation of hegemonic forms. While they often admitted to bowing to pressure to perform consistent with the dominant forms of masculinity, they also went to pains to often discursively differentiate themselves from this mainstream view and declare unique perspectives of masculinity. What emerges is a process of discourse that critiques dominant conceptions while carving out a personal sense of masculine identity tailored for the individual man.

To generate conversation about how social structures frame masculinity in a societal context, participants brought items with them that they felt reflected masculinity in general, or from a societal perspective. These items are somewhat unsurprising in that they clearly conform to what would be associated with the current hegemonic form of masculinity in American society. Among the items were sports equipment like baseball gloves and footballs, action pictures of athletes, hammers, barbells, protein powder, pictures of bodybuilders, athletic jerseys, logos of superheroes, and bank cards.

Participants then provided explanations as to the reasoning for their items of choice.

College men described their choices for items that represented general masculinity in terms consistent with modern notions of Hegemonic Masculinity. The young men characterized general notions of masculinity with a variety of similar



descriptions. Many college men described general masculinity as “men are tough”, “men make money”, “men protect”, “men are successful”, “a man doesn’t cry”, “you don’t show your feelings”, “you don’t show pain”, “you keep to yourself”, “getting women”, “men are hard”, “they have a hard look”. Further descriptions frame society’s view of men as overcoming adversity, achieving financial success, competing and winning, and remaining stoic. In short, college men perceive the messages they receive from social structures as being consistent with the descriptions of Hegemonic Masculinity proposed by most scholarly and popular research (Kimmel, 2006).

What is interesting about this finding is the perceptions that men offer about their personal conception of masculinity and their discursive interrogation of hegemonic forms common in their descriptions. Men often framed modern hegemonic forms as negative. To them, much of the larger societal discussion concerning men was framed as men “being bad”. Male behavior as reported by media or framed in social discussion is seen as having a negative connotation. They often described that men, in general, were seen as overly aggressive, homophobic, engaged in irresponsible sexual behavior, treated women with disrespect and inequality, and engage in excessive health and body risk. Roderick, who identifies as black and lower-class offers an insight that was common among college men:

Roderick: I think masculinity is starting, especially like by the feminist movement. I'm definitely starting to be like looked down upon. Like there was this hash tag on Twitter and it was called "masculinity so fragile". It was on Twitter and people would show examples of fragile masculinity. If you call a man weak, then he's getting all ‘well no I'm not, what do you mean?’ He's going to get really defensive about it and stuff like that. And so you're saying that it's something that's very fragile. And yet there's nothing you can say to a woman that will question her womanhood to that point. So if you say that to a man that, he's going to get defensive about it. So they're saying that it's something that's very fragile.

Roderick is expressing the view that modern masculinity is not only fragile, but also seen as negative by a significant portion of society (in this case, he frames a nebulous feminist movement). Indeed, he feels that men are “looked down upon” for their bad behavior and insecurities as men. He feels threatened by the view that somehow men are fragile and weak.

The young men I interviewed often felt constrained by this perception and worked to offset it through their discursive efforts. Curt’s description about a simple piece of clothing, a tank top he has heard framed as a “bro tank”, captures this sentiment concerning men and aggression:

Curt: It's just there's a lot media involved which I don't want to follow much because I believe it's extremely biased and nonfactual. But there are news stories and things like that which pushes a lot to society which bothers me a little bit. When people see that they're you know negatively describing like these men or putting down men especially, I see a lot of posts on Facebook. Saying things like ‘you know how males are.’ Some of those things they kind of associate negatively.

Interviewer: Like being aggressive?

Curt: Yeah. When you can see like especially in appearance stuff like that. You associate like the big guy at the gym is a douche bag because he likes to wear a bro tank.

Interviewer: Did you say a bro tank? What is that?

Curt: You know, a tank top and it shows off the body more. And they [other people] just assume that's he is a douche bag. I see it as natural instinct for how we work as men because I feel like people try to assume that we're all exactly the same and that we work the exact same. I guess maybe helps them out in their own head or something like that. You know we're different. We have all different instincts.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel defensive about that?

Curt: At times. But I have come to the realization that I'm not going to get anywhere. I mean I'm trying to get less so as I progress through life. But you know I'm not gonna get anywhere in someone's head who is completely biased and has no factual evidence. So I just don't spend my time there.

Curt expresses his frustration at what he considers the stereotypical framing of men who wear certain types of clothing and are considered “douchebags”. For him, the characterization lacks validity and men have individual identity and personal agency in their actions. At the same time, he is making a declaration of his personal masculine identity. By attacking the dominant story of masculinity, he is rehabilitating manhood at a collective level and for his personal masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity can be usefully conceived as a master narrative that men recount in conversations about masculinity. College men are fluent in the narrative and they often endorse and act out pieces of the narrative and equate masculinity consistent with dominant conceptions. Significantly, however, they also engage in discourse in the form of small narratives about their personal masculinity that present fractures in the master narrative. Within their descriptions of masculinity is an ongoing critical assessment of the dominant and simultaneous declarations that differentiate them as individual men. College men actively interrogate and question dominant concepts about masculinity and discursively critique the dominant in attempting to manage their gendered identity. The process is one where men are simultaneously rehabilitating masculinity at the collective level by fracturing the narrative of hegemonic forms, and rehabilitating a personal level by differentiating and declaring individuality.

David's descriptions of masculinity echo those reflected in the classic hegemonic description of manhood. In discussing the items he brought to our interview, a golf club, David, who identifies as white and middle-class, offers an example of the fracturing

process and personal differentiation as he discusses a common critique of his sport of choice:

David: I think people may determine how masculine a guy is by the sport they play, or what kind of hobbies they have. So that's basically why I brought this in. Not saying golf's the most masculine sport.

Interviewer: What do you mean it's not the most masculine sport? What do you mean by that?

David: I think people don't see it as a physical sport. And so when there's no physical contact, people see it as less masculine. I think this is kind of why everybody sees golf as a pretentious sport. That's what I hear anyway. There's a lot of people here that will just kind of kind of discard golf. I mean mostly joking, but there are people that discard golf as more of a hobby rather than a sport.

Interviewer: So, joking... what would that say? Can you remember any of them?

David: Just kind of how you know 'oh you don't have to do anything.' 'All you do is walk and swing a little piece of iron and go chase it [the ball].'

Interviewer: How do you handle that?

David: I defend it. Because there's a lot more that goes into it. I mean you're carrying a bag that's 30 pounds and you're walking six miles and swinging in between every time. Every time you walks out, it's gets strenuous. 18 holes of golf gets strenuous.

Interviewer: In a tournament you play several days in a row, right.

David: Two rounds in one day. It gets tough.

Interviewer: When somebody mentions that to you, do you equate that with masculinity or is it something different. Do you ever feel like you're being challenged as a man?

David: I don't think so. Just because that's not really how I judge my masculinity. I get judged by maybe my demeanor and maybe what I choose to look like or choose to act like

David is engaging masculinity on multiple tracks as he addresses societal norms of masculinity and his personal identity. At one level, he endorses the view that men have to

display strength and stamina in their activities. He was sure that men were judged on what sport they played and felt that the more strength and action in the sport, the manlier a man was judged. Experience has taught him that his masculinity can be challenged because he plays golf because it is a sport that doesn't involve obvious displays of these characteristics. So he defends his choice to play the sport and questions the common norms of what constitutes strength for men. He reframes golf in the defense of his masculinity and for those who play golf in general. For him, golf can be framed as a sport requiring stamina and should not be dismissed as a hobby, but a genuinely masculine sport. However, he then declares his personal masculinity by downplaying the importance of displaying strength and focusing on his demeanor during competition. His discourse concerning his manhood presents fractures in the master narrative of dominant masculinity while concurrently declaring his personal masculinity and differentiating himself from other men.

Another frequently discussed quality participants equate with hegemonic forms is how men are expected to handle emotions. Participants consistently commented that men were expected to remain stoic and keep their emotions under control. Again, while discussing this issue, college men frequently interrogated this dominant form and offered an alternative perspective along with personal statements concerning personal masculinity. As Devin, who identifies as white and middle-class, described during our exploration of emotion:

Devin: I guess kind of that I feel like this younger generation of people have different opinions of masculinity. And it's just kind of a generational thing.

Interviewer: Talk about that.

Devin: I just feel like traditional views of masculinity are kind of like an old fashioned way of looking at it. But I mean obviously it's still going to be like the prevailing opinion just because it's the status quo and that's what everyone is used to. But I feel like by the time I'm like in my 30s, masculinity and being a man won't be as big of a deal when it comes to being macho.

Interviewer: It sounds like maybe you've thought about that (being macho, unemotional) and you questioned some things a little bit?

Devin: Yeah, I guess the more I think about it, the more I can say it does seem that society's changing. I think that thing [macho, unemotional] is still kind of around. And I think that it is kind of stupid too, because I mean obviously everybody has emotions. I feel like that's had a lot of bad consequences in how guys can express themselves. That's like apparently a pretty big thing like guys don't tell people how they feel and they just bottle up emotions that it has a lot of negative effects.

Devin: I mean I've kind of seen a lot of people around campus who like, I feel like they try to look tough and look manly to impress people. And I just think it's kind of stupid doing that.

As Devin reflected upon hegemonic qualities, he engaged in a critique of how social structures frame men in the experience of emotion. He questions the validity of those claims and offers an alternative narrative concerning the stoicism often demanded from men in Western society. In fact, he is sure that the larger narrative is going to change in a few short years and strongly implies this will be a positive development. Concurrently, Devin is making a personal declaration of his personal identity.

Part and parcel of making personal declarations of masculinity for college men is differentiating themselves from what they perceive as dominant forms of masculinity. In this form of personal rehabilitation, men seek to selectively distance themselves from specific hegemonic forms and provide resistance to those forms. Tommy, who identifies as white and middle-class, for example, frequently sought to distance himself from many

aspects of hegemonic forms. As we discussed characteristics that men were expected to display, he sought to clarify that he personally felt different from other men:

Tommy: I don't want to say I am not influenced at all by my peers or anything like that, just because being around them they will rub off on you in one way or another. But, and I don't mean this in a condescending way, I feel like I've always been more mature than my peers. So hanging out sometimes with my guy friends talking about man card this and man card that and I'm like 'all right this is, not that I'm above it, but we don't need to talk about this. What do we gain from this? This this isn't beneficial to us. It doesn't further anything.

Tommy's last statement culminated after many discursive efforts to differentiate himself from other college men. He, like many other of the participants, would describe a characteristic of hegemonic forms, then immediately follow with "not that I think that", or "I don't agree with that". While they often subscribe to some qualities of the dominant form, they often seek to differentiate themselves from other men. Some might suggest this is evidence of the third-person effect where a subject believes that other people are more persuadable by the media, or societal structures, than they themselves (Davidson, 1983). Indeed the evidence, in this case, suggests that men downplay the effect social structures have on their personal conception of masculinity while having a great effect on other college men. Differentiation then becomes an avenue for college men to rehabilitate their personal identity and separate themselves from the perceived norms of hegemonic masculinity. In this way, college men distinguish themselves from the negative perceptions of hegemonic masculinity.

College men are aware of the negative consequences of Hegemonic Masculinity. They believe that men, in general, are portrayed as being dangerous and engaging in bad behavior. As we have seen, their discursive reaction is to interrogate the validity of hegemonic forms even while sometimes acting them out, distance themselves by

differentiation, and declare a personal masculinity that downplays their association with those forms and carves out personal gendered identity. College men approach this process thoughtfully and with an eye to the ethical aspect of becoming a man, as I will discuss in the next section.

*Ethics of masculinity.* The final aspect of rehabilitation concerns attempts by college men to address the perception that being a man in modern society is associated with negative behavior and consequences. Addressing the “badness” of men is an exercise in the rehabilitation of the collective of men in general. College men in my study expressed concern with the ethical dimension of being a man and most of them centralized ethics as an important aspect of their personal masculinity.

Many of the participants stressed that ethics were central to being a man. Participants would describe being a man as having “integrity”, “chivalry”, “doing the right thing”, “treating others with respect” as the proper behavior for them at a personal level. Dean, who identifies as white and middle-class, used the word “integrity” several times early in our interview. I probed him about his personal ethical outlook:

Interviewer: You said something else kind of interesting... integrity. Do you think integrity is a manhood quality?

Dean: Definitely yeah. My dad is kind of old fashioned. He's a little bit older so I was raised always to be honest. He always hated when I lied to him. So integrity was a big, big deal to him. And you know he's a military man so that was a huge deal to him and it's passed on to me. It's a big deal to me as well. So I think that's definitely a big part of manhood for me.

Interviewer: So there's an ethical component within it. Do you think society communicates that? Are the messages you get from society do you think that they're consistent with that?

Dean: It's hard to say. There's things that point to that and there's things that don't. I think on the ethical side it sometimes makes me question whether society is



putting an emphasis on ethics or not. So personally I don't think it is, but I know a lot of my friends also think integrity is a big deal. So as far as the people that I know and the people I surround myself with, I would say yes.

For Dean, honest discourse and acting with integrity are central to being a man. His observation is that his fellow men embrace these values as well. He again later injects ethics into our discussion concerning race. In response to my questioning if race affected his view of manhood, he revisits his centrality of ethics:

Dean: I don't see it as different. I kind of hold every man to the personal integrity like I talked about earlier. I think that, you know, it all depends on the situation. I don't think that race plays a big part for me. So.

Interviewer: So as a white guy you don't feel a need to be more masculine?

Dean: No. I think everyone should be the same and, not the same but, you know integrity wise, I think that's defines men that for me, regardless of race.

For dean and other men in this study, integrity and ethics are often framed as more important than qualities associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity. Indeed, in Dean's case, acting morally overrides issues of race in acting out masculinity. Language concerning ethics becomes the norm for many college men when discussing masculinity.

In embracing ethical discourse concerning manhood, men distance their personal identity from what many consider a general view of men acting unethically. They seek to personally rehabilitate their masculinity vis a vis the collective. By employing discourse that enacts ethical perspectives, college men address the deficit view offered by many in framing masculinity. College men are concerned with being ethical. In a world where men are often framed as violent, misogynist, reckless, and irresponsible, many take it upon themselves to at least pay lip service to discourse that serves an integrity of action, faithfulness to others, as honesty of expression, and other noteworthy aspects of ethical behavior. They claim to embrace ethical behavior and hold other men to a standard of

morality. They talk in ways that serve to rehabilitate their personal masculinity.

*Summary of rehabilitation of masculinity.* The discourse of masculinity for college men is characterized by personal and collective attempts at rehabilitation. College men feel compelled to address what they consider a general view of men as possessing qualities that can lead to destructive behaviors. As a result, they have learned to interrogate dominant hegemonic forms of masculinity to address manhood in the collective sense. They highlight characteristics of hegemonic forms and attempt to modify and differentiate themselves from those perceived bad qualities. This results in discourse that differentiates themselves from dominant forms and results in the personal rehabilitation of manhood and declarations of masculine identity. They also engage in addressing personal challenges to manhood with varied and sophisticated communicative strategies that are closely tied to peer groups and situational context. Finally, they engage in discourse that centralizes ethics and moral behavior that serves to demonstrate that men can be seen in contrast to hegemonic forms and deserve a more positive framing.

The rehabilitation of masculinity problematizes and complicates the already precarious task of enacting, negotiating, and managing manhood. In attempting to rehabilitate personal and collective masculinity, discourse becomes messy, often uncertain, and complicated to young men who are exploring their masculine identity. It is small wonder that entrance to manhood can be a daunting and intimidating task for young men in a modern context. The task however, is even more complex when issues of materiality and intersectionality are added to the mix of precarious discourses.

**Intersectionality and masculinity.** Scholars have described intersectionality as “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities” that have a significant

impact on the conceptualization of gender (Shields, 2008). Issues of race, class, and sexual preference, among other variables, problematized the characterization of masculinity as a universal experience for men. As an exercise in precariousness, masculinity can be further complicated by these material circumstances. Becoming a man can be a daunting task in the face of ongoing challenges, attempts at collective and personal rehabilitation, and often precarious discourse. With the addition of intersectional issues, particularly multiple intersections, it is little wonder that some participants still describe masculinity as suffering a crisis.

I explored three intersectional issues in the current study—those of race, class, and self-identified co-sexual men. Consistent with the research on intersectionality, participants described discourse of masculinity that was problematized by perception of race, class, and sexual identity. Intersectionality strongly impacts and interacts with precarious discourses to complicate the process of becoming a man. The intersectional sub model is illustrated in figure 4.

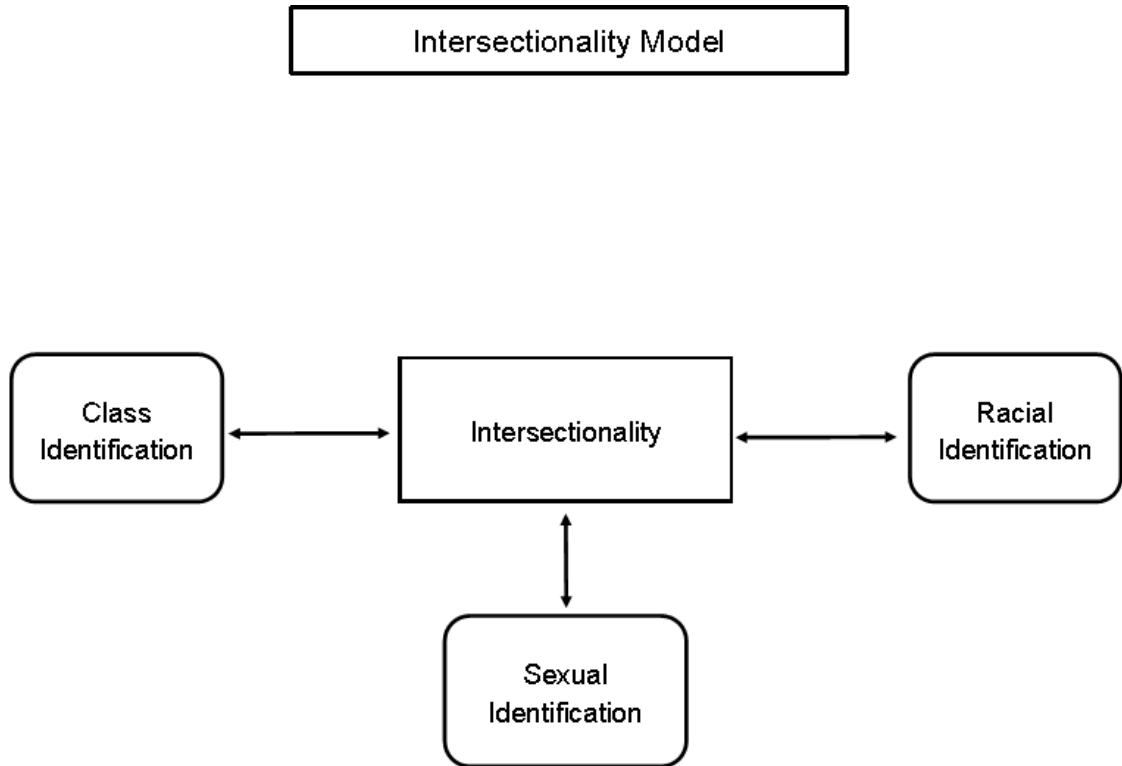


Figure 4. Sub model of Intersectionality. This figure outlines the characteristics discourse that marks material issues and personal masculinity and offers a proposed illustration of processes. Arrows indicate the speculation of directions of influence.

***Race and masculinity.*** The intersection of race and masculinity serves to make the process of becoming a man one marked by precarious discourse and full of risks. I focus on Caucasian and African American men to examine race in the context of masculinity for this study. All men were asked their perceptions on how race affected their experience of masculinity. I refer to African American men as black and Caucasian men as White for the remainder of this paper. This is a conscious decision on my part based on how the men in my study referred to their race in our discussions. I introduced the concept of gender capital concerning how and when men might address challenges to their masculinity. Concerning race, black men and white men in this study conceptually weigh and assess their gender capital in regards to race and masculinity.

Men inhabit communities where building gender capital involves proving that they can perform with many characteristics consistently within a given context. I offer instances of this use of gender capital as I explore other relevant characteristics in this section.

One of the more interesting findings concerns the saliency of race for college men in the experience of masculinity. While not universal, most of the white men interviewed either downplayed, or dismissed outright, the role that race plays in their masculine identity. Many of my self-identified white participants chose to focus on the individual masculine character of men when discussing race vis a vis manhood. Many of the white participants in my interviews dismissed the possibility that race had anything to do with manhood or reaching manhood successfully. For them, the idea of white privilege is a non-factor, and all men have similar experiences. Kevin's (who identifies as white) response to my questions concerning race is representative of this lack of race consciousness:

Kevin: No, no. I don't think it does. I think you can be white and be just as much of a man or less of a man than an African-American or Asian or whatever and vice versa. I don't think race really plays a factor in how much of a man you are.

Interviewer: would you consider African-Americans that you know, or Hispanic, or other races, do you think they have a pretty different view of manhood?

Kevin: I personally think its all universal across men in general.

Many of the white men I interviewed echoed this sentiment and characterized masculinity as the experience, not race. It is reminiscent of the view that the experience of whiteness is one that is invisible and taken for granted by those who are white (Halley, Eshleman, and Vijava, 2010). My white participants' perspectives support this claim. Most of them see race as largely unproblematic and not relevant to achievements concerning masculinity. When it comes to the issue of masculinity, white men mostly claimed to be

colorblind (Flagg, 2008). I left quite a few of these interviews with the distinct impression that many white men were certain that we had overcome racism and were certain that achieving manhood was separate from racial perspectives.

Another explanation for white men's perceptions concerning the saliency of race relates to gender capital. As white men, these college men occupy a space in Western society where they are traditionally privileged in most areas. The status in the hierarchy of society grants white college men instant gender capital in the pursuit of masculine identity. White men are unmarked (Brekhus, 1998) and are presented with a relatively unproblematic path to manhood with regard to race. The white men in this study were somewhat oblivious, or outright denied, that they possessed positive gender capital that might make their path to masculinity less problematic than men of other races.

Indeed, the white college men in this study displayed discourse that was quite uneasy when discussing their race as a factor in their masculine identity. Rather than focus on how identifying as white might serve to affect the discourse or experience of masculinity, often these men focused on other races and the appropriateness of discussing race in the first place. Devin, white and middle-class, for example, expressed misgivings talking about race and masculinity. As he put it, "I guess talking about this thing is still kind of taboo." Devin's perspective is that discussing his race in relation to masculinity is a topic that is dangerous and potentially explosive.

The saliency of race for black men, however, is an ever-present issue that clearly affects how they enact and maintain masculine identity. The black men in this study engaged in a meaningful way concerning race and masculinity. The black men I interviewed were highly cognizant of white advantage and felt they faced higher, and

multiple, standards of manhood that made the experience of masculinity a precarious process. These college men engaged in talk that framed black masculinity as laden with expectations consistent with hyper-masculinity, a keen awareness of the historical struggles of black men, and the necessity of serving multiple masculine identities in college and beyond.

Four out of five of the college men who identified as black expressed their belief that their race problematized the process of becoming a man. Most black men expressed that their status as black men meant they had to act tougher, and prove themselves worthy of being called men. They most often expressed the belief that as black men, they had greater obstacles to prove their worthiness as men to multiple populations. Even when one of my participants, who identified as black and middle-class, tried to dismiss his race as a contributing factor to the precarious process of becoming a man, his discourse reflected a revealing perspective:

Tony: For me race on the subject of masculinity, I don't think it has much of an affect. Like masculinity. Men come in all colors from all countries, have all, you know, different religions. So when we talk about men as a race, we (black men) work harder more to appeal as a race to show that we can do the same things that other races can. As a black man, I'm just trying to show that a black man can do everything that a white man, an Asian man, a Hispanic man, that we all can do the same things that they do. Not necessarily to show that I'm better or not necessarily to assert myself as a man, just showing that in comparison to men of other colors or a religion or a cultural background or whatever, you know, I'm just trying to show that I'm the same. I can do the same as them.

During our interview, Tony consistently denied that race played a factor in how he expressed his masculinity. Even within the denials, he reveals that he feels pressure to prove he can 'do everything that a white man', or men of other races, can do. He clearly expresses the need to live up to a standard of manliness that is equal to others. He reveals that as a black man, he has to work harder to prove his worth as a man. Again, gender

capital seems to come into play in Tony's assessment of his masculinity vs. a white man. As a black man, Tony clearly feels he lacks positive gender capital in relation to his white male peers. He feels the need to perform masculinity up to the standards of those peers in order to earn capital.

Tony's description demonstrates an additional pressure on black men when navigating their masculine identity. Other participants noted their belief that black men not only had to do things as well as other men, but they had to live up to expectations of hyper-masculinity within the black community. Roderick discussed his perspective of expectations of men in black communities:

Roderick: But my race, I think we are kind of different in society and in the black community we're kind of looked at as always being strong and we can't show emotion and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Even more than white counterparts or other races?

Roderick: I would say yes. Like I speak on their behalf (laughing). I don't care. I'm a part of the community. But I say, yeah, in our community, you're supposed to be a strong man and you're supposed to be like a rock. You're supposed to be a rock to your girlfriend and your family.

Roderick expresses the expectation for black men to embody strength and emotional control at all times. Being a rock for his girlfriend or family is paramount to becoming a man. While Roderick generally expressed masculinity as centered on strength and physical power, these characteristics become even more pronounced in relation to his perspective on race.

Chris is an athlete who also identifies as black, albeit with clarification. Chris has a white mother and black father. Growing up, Chris was unsure of how to fill out forms that prompted for his race. This hesitancy was addressed by his father early on who insisted that he check "African American" or "Black". Chris's father was clear about



what racial identity he wanted his son to have. So Chris indicated race became salient for him early in his life. He went on to discuss how standards for men in his community take on highly aggressive and tough characteristics:

Chris: I think that the whole idea of acting hard and stuff is way more relevant in the black community. Way more relevant. Violence. Like youth and stuff and I'm around it a lot and, when I go back home, I coach basketball camps in the area and I try to give back a little bit. Kids are angry, especially the ones in the projects. In those homes they definitely have to act harder. And I don't know. I think I know why that is. But I think it's just because they're given that image by society.

For Chris, becoming a man in the black community is equated with violence and aggressiveness. Further, he believes that the media reinforces a view of black men as dangerous and hyper-masculine. He goes on to discuss his early conceptions of masculinity in a predominantly black neighborhood:

Chris: If somebody hit me or put their hands on me, I needed to hit them back twice as hard. So that stuck with me at a young age and I didn't necessarily like it. But I thought fighting was manly and if somebody challenges you and you back down from a fight, you're a punk.

Chris notes that in his community, answering challenges to perceived slights about manhood is crucial to being considered masculine. He lived in a world where to let challenges go was to be considered "a punk". It was a world where hypermasculinity was embraced and endorsed by most community members.

Chris offered another story about a challenge he faced early on in his community that reinforces his perspective of black masculinity. As was common, he was playing basketball with an older boy in a local park known for strong players. After he won the game, he was physically confronted by the other boy who used discourse that challenged his status as a man (he was still relatively young, but Chris recognized this as a challenge). Chris and the boy fought, and Chris got "bumped up pretty good"- he lost the

fight. When his father returned home that night, he made Chris go back to the park and fight the boy again. For the father, Chris had lost his status as an emerging man and he had to renew the challenge to prove his worth.

Chris went on to be a successful athlete and attend several schools on athletic scholarships. When Chris faces challenges in college to his masculinity, he reflects on early moments in his upbringing. His early training and discursive community demanded immediate and decisive response to challenges. But his new environment in college discourages such direct confrontation. Obviously, this problematizes the process of addressing masculine identity issues in such a context and makes the experience of emerging manhood a precarious process where he has to carefully navigate the demand of black masculinity and those of his college environment.

Another marker of black masculinity for the participants of this study concerns financial success. Hooks (2004) noted that in many black communities, black men have rejected the traditional work ethic as a value and replaced it with money as a primary measure of success. Money and financial success are equated with status as a man. Several of my black participants confirmed this finding when discussing markers and expectations of black men. As one put it:

Leo: I would think so. I would say black men are perceived to work harder for certain things. Whether that being illegal or legal. They have to have tried to make money. That's the most important thing and, not exactly bettering themselves, but make money, money is a king.

Where Leo learned manhood, making money in any way was seen as a sign that one was a man. Chris had a similar perspective and noted that for the black community, financial success, whether legal or illegal was a major marker of manhood. Quoting his favorite rapper, he remarked that to become a man “Black men can either sell dope, rap, or go to

the NBA... in that order.” While demonstrating financial independence and success is often common to modern hegemonic forms of masculinity, the imperative for these black men is particularly pronounced.

The black men in this study painted a picture of masculine standards in their respective black communities as one that is very difficult to reach. The primary markers of manhood in their communities were consistent with the dominant forms of masculinity that promote a hyper-masculine standard. This problematizes the process of becoming a man by challenging black men to reach a standard difficult to reach. Black men navigate demands from within their communities that add to the precarious nature of masculinity. Not only do they have to serve their notions of manhood within the black community, but also serve the interests and expectations that accompany college and its various contexts.

*Rehabilitation of black masculinity.* The black men in my study were keenly aware of the consequences and history of institutionalized racism in relation to their masculine identity efforts. Without prompting, several of the men related personal incidents of what they perceived as racism as complicating their negotiation of masculine identity. Incidents of perceived racism caused them to engage in a form of rehabilitation of their black masculinity within their discourse. Incidents ran from mundane everyday incidents that revealed common stereotypes about black men to blatant race and gender shaming on the part of authority.

Black men are sensitive to a perceived stereotype that they might be dangerous and threatening to society. Chris again gave some insight into the daily reminders he often receives that he is considered a threat to others:

Chris: If I walk into an elevator and it's just me and a white lady. I know so many times just like the purse will go from the left to the right. I think sometimes just

subconsciously. Sometimes I want to say you know (raises his hands in surrender and laughs softly) ‘I come in peace you know. I’m just riding the elevator up just like you are.’

As my wife reminds me, women often operate in a physical space that requires them always to be alert of danger from strangers in general. However, Chris’s perception is not without merit or empirical evidence. Media representations of African American men are significantly more likely to be portrayed as violent and systematically over-represented as criminal (Oliver, 2003). While Chris was not aware of the research, he was mindful of personal experiences where individual’s actions signaled that he was a potential threat. The experience of this stereotyping complicates the experience of becoming a man. Chris interrogates this perspective by framing himself as just another person completing a mundane journey to class, not a black man with nefarious intent.

Such seemingly innocuous incidents may seem a minor hindrance in negotiating masculine identity. Several participants, however, noted more overt forms of stereotyping of young black men. At the time of these interviews, several incidents of police shootings of black men and the resulting protests by concerned activist groups had been well publicized. Three of my five participants alluded to these incidents in relation to black male experiences of masculinity. The young black men in my study seemed to be aware of the history of ongoing institutionalized racism in America. They could relate to what one participant described as harassment by official authorities, or as one participant described as “driving while black”. These incidents were often perceived as threats to manhood, or problematizing the negotiating process of becoming a man. One participant, sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement summed up his experience with

institutionalized racism after a thoughtful statement about how black men have on occasion been referred to in stereotypical and insulting language:

Chris: When it comes to the whole black lives matter campaign. I think that has a lot to do with masculinity. There's nothing that I think makes you feel less like a man than getting harassed by the police or something like that. I don't think there's anything that can take your manhood quite as much as that or being called boy by somebody who thinks less of you by your race.

Referring to black men as “boy” or equally insulting labels has a dark history in America. Southern slave owners would often refer to black men as boys, discursively dismissing their manhood. During the 1920s, many of the luggage handlers for trains were referred to as “boy” or “George” by white customers who did not bother to learn the names of these workers (Arneson, 2001). The porters went on to form a union, and among other demands, protested the common moniker used by their predominantly white clients. Indeed, one of the more common signs during protests read “I am a man”. Even now, the participant related being called a boy with challenging his manhood.

Chris went on to tell a specific story about the police in his local town pulling he and a friend over while they were walking home from an athletic event, seemingly for no reason except they were young black men. The police referred to him as a boy several times and treated him as a potential threat. He very much equated this with a challenge to his status as a man. Ironically, he felt that a phone call to his mother, who is white, would likely diffuse the situation if the police would even allow him to make a call. The irony was not lost on him. He expressed frustration at having to depend on his mother to assure the police that he was not a criminal, but a well-respected athlete and student in the local community. For this young man, negotiating his masculine identity is complicated by this common form of institutionalized racism.

Some of my participants also expressed frustration over how black men are often portrayed in entertainment and how this perspective challenged them as black men. Leo equates manhood to being a provider and protector for his family. His father worked hard and was a significant influence in providing Leo with a strong work ethic and desired to succeed. But Leo expressed frustration at images in popular culture about black men:

Leo: I know being African-American like I know it's, it's completely different. Like just seeing the way that TV shows and stuff like that portray black men as, you know, not being providers and not caring for anybody but themselves and ultimately being selfish. That kind of puts a stereotype on black men.

Leo sees messages in entertainment that black men are uncaring and lazy. This portrayal is contrary to his experience with black masculinity and his worldview in general. As he told me, he works to provide a different image of black men; that of a man who cares for family and provides economically. Again, Leo is rehabilitating stereotypical black masculinity that is sometimes portrayed by media and acted upon by institutions. He attempts to declare a form of personal masculinity that is contrary to those stereotypes and defend black masculinity in general to combat those stereotypes.

The participants in my study demonstrated a keen awareness of the additional challenges they face in managing and negotiating their masculine identity as young black men. They noted the high expectations of black men regarding toughness, financial success, and other qualities associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity. They exhibited discourse that was additionally precarious given their race. Young black men in the study also showed an awareness of societal stereotypes that often took the form of subtle and explicit forms of racism that challenged them as men. In short, in addition to the expectations of men in general, black men face additional challenges in enacting and negotiation their masculinity.

*Co-sexual masculinity.* Adequately serving co-sexual men's experiences with masculinity is a challenging prospect. I almost feel I lack the language to properly serve the sophisticated, nuanced, and often elegant way these men discussed their masculinity in relation to their gendered identity. I continue to use the label co-sexual to deconstruct the linguistic inequality that often accompanies descriptions of those not aligned with heteronormative descriptions. Co-sexual men possess perspectives that describe masculinity with a multitude of meanings and labels. These young men navigate in a world of masculinity that is complex, nuanced, and loaded with experiences that further complicate the precarious discourse of masculinity. They operate in a world where hyper-masculinity is at once derided and embraced. They engage in efforts to rehabilitate co-sexual and hegemonic masculinity. Yet this rich perspective also seems to be empowering for these young men and provides them with a wide range of options concerning masculine identity.

My discussion with Craig, a white middle-class cis-gender man, about his personal masculine identity captures the flavor of this co-sexual experience of masculinity. The early part of our interview discussed the precarious experience of becoming a man for a person who had struggled with conventional perspectives of masculinity. But through those early experiences he seems to be very comfortable with expressing multiple forms of masculinity. He expresses a confidence in his masculine identity that was not often present in most of my participants:

Craig: I got very involved in the LGBT community here on campus and learned that, you know, like, masculinity can mean so many different things. It doesn't just have to be a football jersey or, you know, like that. And learning to express myself and my gender in different ways. And, like, I still identify as a man no matter how much I do that might look non masculine to other people. You know I perform drag professionally now and so I wear, you know, 10 pounds of makeup

and like three wigs and heels and all that stuff or whatever; and I feel just as much like a man when I'm in it as you know when I'm wearing a hoodie and jeans or something. It just depends on how other people are perceiving me. But I like that I'm able to express myself in multiple different ways. I still feel very much like a man inside.

Craig, like many of the co-sexual men I interviewed, described a high level of comfort in expressing his masculinity in a multitude of contexts. While he described many instances of precariousness, he also possesses an extremely flexible perspective of masculinity. Although it might seem that co-sexual men would face many challenges to their masculinity, most of the men I interview demonstrated the same fluid conception of masculinity.

Co-sexual men possess the most sophisticated view of masculinity I have observed. Highly conscious and informed about gender issues, they not only navigate in heterosexual world where hyper-masculinity is often valued, but navigate a complex world that recognizes multiple approaches to gender. This is in sharp contrast with the dichotomy of the straight men I interviewed in this study. Co-sexual men navigate sophisticated views of masculinity on a continuum that was often confusing to follow during interviews. The exchange I had with Charles concerning my confusion is illustrative of this rich gender differentiation:

Charles: Cisgender. So that's the opposite of transgender. So transgender beyond that is the idea that the gender that you believe you are is not the same as the gender that society puts on you. You know when you're born they say 'oh it's a boy.' It's when you just say 'you know, I disagree with what my mom and dad and the doctor said what you raised me as.' To be Ciss is like the Latin opposite, because Trans in Latin means change. Like back in the Roman Empire they had the trans Alpine's, I mean the trans alps, excuse me, and then the Swiss, Cis alps right. So the Cis Alps were the same side as the Roman Empire, and the Trans were on the opposite side. So transgender is that I identify as something different than what society might put on me, cisgender is everyone else.



The co-sexual men in this study navigate a world of meaning about masculinity that is rich, fluid, and not fixed. The discourse they use in negotiating issues of masculinity is nuanced. Charles easily describes several ways of experiencing masculinity as he tries to help me understand his experiences.

*Serving Hegemonic Masculinity within the co-sexual community.* While the co-sexual men in my study seemed quite confident in their descriptions of masculinity, they were not without challenges because of this richness. Like other participants in the study, they describe navigating worlds where masculinity was challenged in multiple contexts and in multiple ways. Co-sexual men are expected to serve hegemonic forms of masculinity within the co-sexual community. Craig describes this dynamic in comparison with heterosexual norms:

Craig: I feel like the expectation for men is that they're heterosexual and that they're having sex with a lot of women. And if you are not heterosexual, then you aren't masculine. But what's very interesting is that even within the gay community, you're still supposed to desire masculinity over being feminine. And like, you know, I'm looking at a partner... like there's this kind of running joke that it's like, 'mask or no mask'. So it's like someone who is gay but they're hidden. I'm very masculine. I'm sporty and I want that in a partner as well. So even in a community that is deemed feminine by heterosexual males is demonizing itself by saying I want to be masculine, that I want other people who wear a mask. And so you have this kind of weird dynamic of just like really pushing away anything that would be non-masculine.

Craig described a dynamic that was common in my interviews with co-sexual men.

Hegemonic forms masculinity often denigrate behaviors that are feminine in the straight world. Co-sexual men are often framed by the straight community as being feminine.

Craig and others described the many instances in which they had been challenged in straight contexts for their perceived effeminate behaviors. Yet, they also operate in co-sexual communities that value more masculine characteristics of the non-masculine. So

while co-sexual men are often targets for scorn in the straight world, they also often have to prove their masculinity in the co-sexual world. In terms of gender capital, they are managing two types of masculinity currency at once. Co-sexual men have one type of capital in co-sexual contexts where more masculine behavior is rewarded. At the same time, they lack masculine capital in heteronormative contexts and their masculinity is suspect.

There is a spectrum of masculine roles within the co-sexual community that makes the process of becoming a man an even more challenging process. Charles describes what he considers the most valued type of masculinity with the co-sexual community:

Charles: So it's still the men who are strictly on top, the men who strictly penetrate. Those are the most valued masculinities, especially if they're, you know, if they are white. If they are upper middle-class. You know if they dress like manly, if they play sports versus you know... that's when you get into cisgender which is, you know, a whole other spectrum of the LGBT community.

In this quote, Charles is describing a world where there is a complex hierarchy of masculinity at play. Performing masculinity within such a hierarchy involves knowing a somewhat complicated set of discursive and symbolic rules to navigate personal masculinity. Learning to recognize and perform valued masculinity in co-sexual contexts presents a multitude of challenges for men. Performing other forms of masculinity with the community can subject a man to oppression, and challenges, from both co-sexual men and straight men:

Charles: There's absolutely there's still oppression that happens inside the community. For example, I'm a cisgender, so I agree with the gender identity that society gave me. I'm pretty middle-class. You know I don't make a lot of money but my parents do. And my family hasn't abandoned me like a lot of queer people have. I'm white. I project a pretty standard masculinity, you know, kind of shortish hair (I need to get a haircut). I wear my khakis. I wear my jacket. I don't

walk around with earrings or whatever. I don't like that. I used to but I stopped. So that's another problem I have. It's called passing privilege when people pass me on the street they just assume I'm straight. So like really the only oppression that I face then is, you know, being gay. And even then. It's like I - so even within the queer community I'm still very privileged and still very... I have a lot of authority.

While Charles seems to have a lot of advantages in the co-sexual community, this quote demonstrates the challenges many co-sexual men face when managing their personal masculine identity. Charles can “pass” in the straight world and is not often subject to ridicule in the straight community. Others are not so lucky. While he has passing privilege, other co-sexual men are challenged for their status as men. His further comments point to value that the co-sexual community places on class and race as well. Charles enjoys a privilege within the co-sexual community of being white and upper-middle-class. Those who identify as a different race or lower-class have to answer additional challenges to their manhood.

Even though Charles passes as straight, his interactions with the straight world of masculinity are often complicated when his sexuality is revealed:

Charles: Straight men often think we view them as sexual objects the same way that they look at women as sexual objects. So men might look at women as, you know, as a as an object. And then they fear when men do it to them. I think it's very ironic.

Interviewer: Right, women are often under the gaze of men.

Charles: Women learn how to cope with that from a very young age. Their mothers their sisters tell them ‘this is what's happening and here's how to deal with it.’ Men are never taught that. And so when I'm gay they immediately feel uncomfortable. ‘Oh my God. He is looking at me kind of weird.’ It's like ‘he's standing a little too close’ or definitely don't hug them.

Charles notes that his masculinity is questioned when other men in the straight community find out he is gay. Ironically, he is not necessarily seen as effeminate but is suddenly seen as a predator. Suddenly straight men become uncomfortable and think he

is looking at them as potential sexual partners. The result, as he describes, is engaging in discourse that reorients his masculinity vis a vis other men. Charles is essentially engaged in efforts to rehabilitate his personal masculinity to align with this new reality.

Charles also faces challenges concerning his masculinity that many straight men would face when interacting with women:

Charles: The immediate thing is that I am six foot two, 250-60 pounds. I'm a big guy. And again not everyone knows I'm gay just by looking at me and I'm completely open about it. You know I have a boyfriend for two years. I don't pretend to be straight but that doesn't mean people don't put those hegemonic characteristics on me just because I deviate in one way. I can still be very intimidating when I want to be. I still stand a foot taller than a lot of women. I still have to be very conscious about where my hands or where my eyes are looking in order to make them feel more comfortable with me around.

While Nathen does not subscribe to hegemonic norms, he is still subject to the stereotypes associated with them. He is very conscious of the perspective that strange men alone with a woman can be considered dangerous. Because of this physical size and demeanor, he is particularly conscious of intimidating women. Charles tries to adjust his body and movements to prove he is not a threat. Again, this is an example of rehabilitation, a core component of college men's' masculinity, interacting with the intersectional characteristic of sexual identification. Charles is engaged in rehabilitating hegemonic forms by providing a personal example of his masculinity.

Navigating masculinity for co-sexual men is challenging. They have to serve hegemonic forms of masculinity in the co-sexual community while dealing with additional stigmas within the straight community. They engage in personal and collective efforts at rehabilitation. This intersection of gender and sexual identity makes the experience of manhood a particularly precarious one that is fraught with threats to masculinity. Mick, however, faces additional challenges as a black, gay man:

Mick: Most black men I think have to have hardened bodies. Bodies that are ready for physical altercations. Like, rough handsome... there's different types of physical and physical traits, physical stereotypes with black men. There's many different kinds of things and I never actually think of it much other than they [black men] are ready for physical altercation. When dealing with strictly sexual gay sex acts that's definitely something that has to be done. Even the stereotype of the big black cock. Definitely, something I have had to wrestle with. Like the hyper masculinity and physicality of certain body parts and certain distinctions or definitions. I think that's something I have had to deal with.

Mick describes his perception of black masculinity as representing hardened bodies. For him, black men represent strength and toughness. They are rough and handsome as well as endowed with high levels of virility and stereotypically are well endowed. Mick has to deal with a community that, while largely considered effeminate by the straight community, also values qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity. On top of that, Mick feels the pressure to have a hardened body, ready for physical altercation, and to be well endowed. Mick often has to navigate between these performances to demonstrate manhood to respective audiences. This complicates efforts at managing emerging masculine identity.

Co-sexual men operate in multiple contexts that make discourse concerning their gender complex and precarious. They serve multiple conceptions of masculinity in a variety of contexts where they have to carefully manage expectations of their manliness that are often contradictory and complicated. Viewed as effeminate in heteronormative contexts, but often valued for traditional masculine forms in co-sexual environments, co-sexual men have to juggle concurrent expectations of masculinity and deal in multiple currencies related to gender capital. Discourse about masculinity then becomes a precarious process that has to be managed in a highly strategic manner. The process is made even more tenuous when intersectional issues like race and class are introduced. I

have offered examples concerning race and co-sexuality. I now turn to a discussion of another important material circumstance—class.

*Class and masculinity in college.* Discourse concerning class complicates the process of managing masculinity for college-age men. While college men sometimes have difficulty consciously locating how class might affect their experiences with masculine identity, their discourse indicates an implicit engagement with class issues that contribute to precarious discourse and requires strategies available to manage personal masculinity. Put simply, college men who identify as being members of different classes engage in discourse about masculinity with different approaches, sometimes using common terms, but reflecting distinct positions within the perceived class hierarchy. These discursive positions provide varying levels of linguistic flexibility for those who locate in different classes and enable or impede the ability of men to express masculinity.

Language that working-class men use often reflect and reinforce performances of class and manhood. For example, working-class neighborhood men engage in language that communicates position in the community (Phillipson, 1989). Working-class men use language that highlights physical toughness and often denigrates managerial masculinity, while concurrently, knowledge class men highlight professional managerial values (Collinson, 1998). Early discourse of working-class boys reflects the value of working-class professions and downplays, or even mocks, desire for education that might lead to class mobility (Willis, 1979). In short, the language of working-class and knowledge class can vary significantly.

In analyzing descriptions of the items requested of the participants, this phenomenon is conceptually supported in the current study. The sample of this study

included 18 college men who identified as middle-class, six men who identified as lower-class, and only one man who identified as upper class. Initially, the items offered concerning conceptions of general and personal masculinity appear similar. Both lower-class and middle-class men offered items that are associated with what one can reasonably equate with the dominant form of masculinity in western society. For example, several of the items were of sports equipment like footballs and baseball gloves, weights and dumbbells, pictures of dominant athletes playing physical sports, tools, and outdoor equipment. These items represent a sphere of convergence for lower-class and middle-class men alike. Members in both categories exhibited proficiency in linking masculinity to items associated with the physicality that can be linked to the body (working) class. Terry, white and lower-class, offered his bodybuilding pictures to describe personal and general masculinity:

Interviewer: So in your eyes weightlifting and your body is an important piece of your masculinity?

Terry: It's extremely important. You know at the beginning of lifting and bodybuilding I didn't try to think of my appearance as like the most important thing. But now it's to the point where like I've been doing it for so long I just look at my body as this thing that I build and sculpt and represent in a certain way or manner and yeah demonstrate that to other people.

Terry described his perception that weights and powerful bodies represent the power and strength that men were expected to exhibit to society. For him, representations of muscular bodies are consistent with dominant forms of masculinity. Men are expected to demonstrate strength and powerful bodies.

Kevin, white and middle-class, supplied a football as his item associated with general masculinity. He describes the significance of his item:

Kevin: This one [he holds up a football] is mine for general. I've always loved football. I think football is a manly sport. I think of men playing football, big tough guys, getting hurt, knocking heads, getting paid a lot of money to get hurt.

Interviewer: the physicality of it kind of represents manhood?

Kevin: Yeah. Toughness. Violence and toughness.

Kevin expertly encapsulates the standard description of dominant masculinity in Western society. He associates general masculinity with men who are tough. They “knock heads” and commit violence in service of masculinity. They get paid to get hurt (and to hurt others). Men are expected to sacrifice their bodies and display aggression and dominance.

Chris, black and lower-class, offered a picture of a famous boxer looming over a defeated opponent and seemingly taunting his fallen foe:

Chris: That's from a poster in my room and one of my favorite pictures. But when I think of like masculinity, I think of competitiveness and just someone who is dominant. That picture to me just epitomizes what I think of as masculine Ali standing there over Sonny Liston and he just knocked him out. Just dominant. I think that's what society tells me. I think it has a lot to do with when you look at a man and see if he's dominant.

Chris exhibits fluency in describing a common framing of dominant masculinity in Western society. Mohamad Ali hovering over Sonny Liston is an iconic image. It is one where one man has completely dominating another man physically and stands as a paramour of masculinity. Ali is muscular, stands over a vanquished opponent, and proudly displays his domination over other men. Chris readily identifies this image as one that is consistent with how society portrays dominant masculinity.

Eddie, white and middle-class, referenced a baseball glove to represent general masculinity. His choice to bring his baseball globe generated this exchange concerning masculinity:

Eddie: I find that sports, not to be sexist, but it just makes you a little more masculine in my eyes. If you play sports you have a drive, you have initiative, you



have stuff like that. And so just having sports in your life I think just makes you a little bit more built (muscular) and you have a lot more mental toughness.

Interviewer: So that when you say build, you mean like body wise?

Eddie: Yeah, body-wise, mental wise, emotional wise. Because you have to learn how to go through the emotional rollercoaster of playing sports. I'd say it makes you more masculine than some others. So having that athletic body or having an athletic type just presents you as a more masculine person.

Like the lower-class men earlier, Eddie describes several characteristics consistent with dominant forms of masculinity. Like Chris and Terry, he describes strong bodies and toughness associated with masculinity. He also references internal mental toughness and the ability to maintain emotional control—characteristics also commonly ascribed to dominant masculinity.

These, and most of the men interviewed, converged on descriptions of general masculinity and demonstrated a common engagement with dominant masculinity. College men of every class exhibit a linguistic proficiency when engaging in discourse about these aspects of masculinity. Upon closer look at the offered items, however, one can observe a divergence in how lower-class and middle-class men engage in discourse about masculinity. Middle-class men, in addition to the above-mentioned items, were more likely to offer and describe the significance of items that can conceptually be linked to the knowledge activities associated with middle-class.

Middle-class men in the study offered credit cards, academic books, golf clubs, wallets, and markers associated with extracurricular activities that cater to members of the middle-class. Even more interesting is the larger linguistic repertoire demonstrated by middle-class men when describing the items in relation to masculinity.

In comparison to lower-class men, middle-class men seem to possess additional grist for describing masculinity based on their class.

For example, Hank, middle-class and white, offers an item and description that is illustrative of being able to pull from multiple conceptions of class. Hank brought in a barbell, a common item presented in this study, to represent general masculinity and described men as tough, physical and strong, unmovable. His second item, however, was silly putty. He notes:

Hank: Silly putty absorbs images, it presses up on something and the object leaves an impression. It goes into memory

For Hank, who is training in business, masculinity is flexible and beyond physical impressions. In his descriptions of masculinity, Hank offered images of that centered on a variety of factors that included professionalism and success in commerce. Silly putty is also a toy frequently seen in many childhoods. It is a toy associated with creative intent and, I would argue, more closely aligned with middle-class pursuits. When I talked to my lower-class participants, their descriptions of upbringing involved either unsupervised play or work on streets or farms. Hank, however, seemed able to indulge in creative play that served to prepare him for creative work later in life and to describe masculinity with an expanded linguistic flexibility. While Hank's example might seem a tenuous connection with differences in class and discourse of masculinity, my additional discussions with middle-class men reinforce this conjecture.

Two of the middle-class participants referenced golf equipment as their items associated with masculinity. You may recall Anthony from an earlier passage as he lamented that golf was often not considered a physically tough sport. He offered evidence of the physicality he possessed as a golf athlete in a way to rehabilitate his personal masculinity and preferred sports. Anthony also, however, stressed the mental aspect and strategic approach needed to be successful in his sport. He also associated these qualities

as representative of personal masculinity. Despite recent efforts to open golf to those of varying backgrounds, it remains a middle and upper-class activity. For young people, playing competitively requires expensive equipment, green fees, relatively high entry fees, and travel expenses. The sport is largely cost prohibitive to lower-classes. Later in life, golf is considered a venue to conduct business, network, and build professional relationships. For Anthony, the relative advantage of participating in a middle-class activity also expands his linguistic flexibility in expressing masculinity. In comparison to lower-class participants, his avenues for the discourse of masculinity expands with the privileges afforded by class. Anthony can highlight the physical toughness and endurance associated with working-class masculinity. But, if he doesn't feel "tough enough", he can also pull from middle-class conceptions to expand his discourse and rehabilitate his masculinity when challenged.

One particularly germane example of the relative advantage of middle-class masculinity is encapsulated in an exchange I had with Mick. Mick is black, gay, and middle-class. Earlier, I explored the challenges he might experience as a black, gay man. But when speaking about class, Mick explains the flexibility he possesses given his middle-class status:

Interviewer: Does being a black man, middle-class make masculinity harder, easier?

Mick: I think it allows for a lot more flexibility in choosing which type [of masculinity] you want. But I think once you've chosen or when you're kind of in that spot, it's kind of fixed. I think that middle-class black men do have the ability to kind of be both, especially middle, class and educated black men can either go around looking "thuggish", or professional.

Mick highlights the additional flexibility that a middle-class college man might have when stabilizing his masculinity. While Mick notes that he might become somewhat

locked into a performance of masculinity at times, his status as occupying a middle-class position gives him options. He can choose from multiple scripts given a particular context in which he is operating. With access to a more varied inventory of masculinity discourses, he can more effectively build gender capital in a specific context.

In comparison, a lower-class college man does not possess the early experiences in activities associated with access and privilege in fields that might prepare one for success in the middle-class. Therefore, he has less gender capital to pull from in middle-class contexts. He has fewer resources, linguistic and otherwise, to tap when negotiating masculinity. Clearly, this relative disadvantage complicates the process of becoming a man and adds complexity to the precarious discourse that permeates college men's efforts at managing emerging manhood.

Even when lower-class and middle-class men largely agree on common characteristics of masculinity, the tenor and tone of their descriptions often reflect a wide difference in perspective and likelihood of success in a given context. Take the issue of financial success that both lower-class and middle-class men often describe as central to being a successful man. Leo, who identifies as black and lower-class, chose a sweaty shirt as his marker of personal masculinity:

Leo: A sweaty shirt.

Interviewer: Why does that represent you as a man?

Leo: Hard work. That's what it means to me. Just working hard and everything there is that you can do whether that's being in school or playing sports, working a nine to five job or something like that just completely working hard, working hard as a father. You know things like that.

Later in our conversation, however, he described emerging from a background where men were expected to make money “legally or illegally” as a marker of true masculinity.

Leo stated that “money is king”. Financial success for his class and race is paramount even if the activities leading to money are illicit. Leo equates hard work, physical labor, and sweat, as associated with making money, not necessarily wealth. Leo’s tone concerning financial success revolves around lower-class activities. He lacks the background to discuss financial success in a manner consistent with middle-class men’s conceptions of financial success.

Chris, also black and lower-class, had a similar outlook. His description of success in his class including discussing the three avenues to make money- pro sports, drug dealing, or rapping. For Chris, middle-class financial success is not a given, and his route to the managerial class is fraught with risks:

Chris: My friend is lower-class and he was going to school and he dropped out. And I just called him the other day. When I heard the news that he's not going to school anymore, I was like ‘what are you doing?’ He's like ‘turning in these papers isn't getting me paid. I got to go make money. I got to try to go overseas and get a contract to play basketball. He's like ‘my grades are slipping. I was going to fail and then just end up being back home. Leaving is my best option.’ I still think he made the wrong decision dropping out. At first I thought ‘you're an idiot’, but after talking to him, I understood. When he said turning papers in isn't getting me paid right now. That's what he thinks he's got to do. So I kind of saw his reasoning behind it made me think differently about it.

Chris’s description of his friend dropping out of school to make immediate money is revealing. While Chris is initially shocked at his friend’s decision, he also grew up in the same area where most young men come from poor backgrounds. For his friend, and for Chris, the imperative to make immediate is paramount for survival and to be perceived as a man. He does not have the security that might come from a middle-class background. Both professional success and personal masculinity are constantly at risk.

Leo and Chris’s descriptions concerning money and masculinity are grittier in tone and less optimistic. Financial success is related to breaking through in professional

sports, striking it rich in music, or engaging in criminal activity. While both Chris and Leo are training in college to gain middle-class success, the linguistic resources available to describe future financial success are vague and speculative. For these two men, imagining financial success and the masculine bona fides it provides is not a given and is distant. It is also more dangerous and risky. They are much more likely to focus on immediate, current needs of their family when they talk about money. In addition to their academic and athletic commitments, they work part-time jobs so they can send money back to their families. Chris, for example, is proud that he can buy Christmas presents for his siblings that his mother might not be able to afford. The idea of anything financial success beyond the immediate functional needs is something that might come in the future. Much like I discussed earlier concerning manhood being a future accomplishment, lower-class men see the masculinity associated with the knowledge class as a ghostly state in the future.

Contrast lower-class discourse with Eddie, white and middle-class, who provides evidence that middle-class men possess additional linguistic resources when discussing success and masculinity. While lower-class men focus on a fairly straightforward conception of material success, Eddie is more analytical and circumspect in his description of masculinity and wealth:

Eddie: I think anybody who has weight behind their name or they are rich... You don't have to be super rich. You have power that some people don't. It makes you a little bit more masculine because it means you have the upper hand compared to the other person. They have power or they have a name. Name and power go together very well because if you know somebody who is higher up in the chain it means you have what I would call weight. I myself have seen people who are great people but can't afford to do anything because they're on a lower economic class.

Eddie describes a masculinity where wealth and power are intertwined and can separate real men from the pretenders. For him, financial success is more nuanced and can provide privilege and “weight” that lower-class men cannot experience. Eddie, who often expressed admiration for working-class masculinity, can also frame real manhood as equated with wealth and accompanying power. Again, his position as middle-class gives him additional options in framing and negotiating masculinity.

Devin provides another description that speaks to the difference in tenor concerning financial success. In his discussion concerning financial success and providing for family, he notes:

Devin: When you get there [financial success], you don’t have to equate masculinity with providing because you don’t have to worry about it. It’s a given.

Devin’s description takes on an air of middle-class success as unproblematic and “a given”. Devin’s focus is not really short term—for him, financial success and masculinity are just on the horizon. His description contrasts with the short term material needs that Chris and Leo focus on in service to their masculinity. Given his middle-class position, Devin, who also sees manhood as fully developed after college, can pull on his class position to easily visualize a time in the not too distant future where his manhood is secure. Given his position, he sees upward mobility and accompanying masculinity as largely unproblematic with regard to class. He implicitly understands that he has a broader set of masculinity concepts from which to draw on in the service of his discourse.

Young men of all classes often express admiration for qualities related to bodywork. Participants would often describe manhood characteristics as those related to the prototype rugged American working man. Roderick, for example, described his early impression of manhood as seeing his grandfather labor on a family farm. He framed his

grandfather as possessing great strength, a hard worker, and tough. Jon frames ideal manhood as a rugged frontier man carrying a log on one shoulder and pulling salmon out of a raging river with one hand. These young men admire the physical labor and bodywork that often mark lower-class jobs. For them, there is a quality to “working men” that strongly represents masculinity. They also, however, see the challenges that working-class men might face due to an expectation to be tougher as a working man. Paul, white and middle-class, notes:

Paul: Like my really close lower income friends they would try to like. Really try to be more masculine. Maybe they see that like I have more money and that maybe is something they take in their mind... that they want to be the alpha male leader, like stronger than me. Like better than me.

Paul sees working-class men as having something to prove as men. He has observed them trying to portray more physical toughness and strength so that they can prove their manly bona fides. Of course, implicit in his description of lower-class friends is an implication that they wish to become the “alpha male”. Paul implies that having more financial wealth as a man may override the physical toughness of the working-class.

The college men in this study often described an uneasy dichotomy when talking about class and masculinity. College men, who are training to reach the knowledge class, seem to feel the need to serve two concepts of manliness at the same time. Middle-class college men can more easily serve different flavors of masculinity. They can borrow from working-class conceptions of masculinity when needed. But if they somehow lack on those qualities, they can draw on resources they have access to as a result of their social position.

**Summary of the chapter.**



College-age men navigate rocky terrain when enacting and managing their masculinity identity. The Theory of Strategic Masculinity has been offered to explain this complicated process and provide a model to understand the various dynamics that contribute to becoming a man in modernity. The model highlights central characteristics that at once problematize and enable young men in the process of becoming a man. The model reveals insight into the complex strategic approach in which men engage in order to discursively stabilize, destabilize, and restabilize masculine identity.

The model provides a useful frame for examining emerging masculinity in practice and form. Utilizing Strategic Masculinity, the current study has proven valuable in contributing to the area of research, theory, and practice in masculinity and organizational studies. The following chapter provides a discussion of these issues and explores future avenues of inquiry.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

The time spent in college represents a pivotal phase in the development of masculine identity for young men (Kimmel, 2008). For men, the college years represent a time when they are not entirely considered men, nor boys, but occupy a time in between when they are exploring and coming to understand their personal masculinity (Harper & Harris, 2010). While a variety of disciplines have developed approaches for examining this crucial developmental time, there exists space for a discursively centered perspective that adds understanding to the complex process of how young men negotiate masculine identity. This study offers such a perspective, utilizing grounded theory to examine the discursive efforts of college men to enact, manage, and negotiate masculine identity at a crucial developmental age for exploring gender.

Semi-structured interviews with 24 college-age men were conducted to examine the precarious nature of masculinity and offer a new theory. The theory, labeled Strategic Masculinity, provides a discourse centered model that can provide unique insight into identity efforts of college men. Strategic Masculinity offers an explanatory perspective that can inform and guide scholars in understanding the discursive processes of young men in the service of their personal masculine identity. The theory outlines a process where men use a sophisticated set of communicative strategies and gender capital to navigate the complicated process of becoming a man.

The current chapter explores the significance of the proposed theory based on the findings of the present study. I first examine insights generated from research questions offered at the outset of the study. I then turn to a variety of implications to existing theory arising from Strategic Masculinity. I then examine the practical implications and value

that Strategic Masculinity can offer practitioners. Limitations of the current study and future avenues of development for masculinity studies are then explored. The chapter concludes with parting comments concerning the continued development of the theory.

### **Discussion of Research Questions.**

Three research questions were offered as a starting place to explore how men developed and managed masculinity in a college context. The research questions provided a useful starting point in exploring the strategic nature of masculinity discourse. The research questions offered an initial frame to explore the various influences in masculine identity efforts.

*RQ1: How do college men discursively enact and maintain Precarious Masculinity?*

College men approach the enactment and maintenance of masculinity strategically. The nature of discourse for college men concerning masculinity is precarious, speculative, and uncertain. When discussing masculinity, college men readily reference popular conceptions of manhood and seem to endorse hegemonic forms of masculinity. For example, college men readily associate masculinity with physical strength, highly controlled emotional expression, sexual virility, decisive action, ongoing risk-taking, financial success, and dominance over others in professional and personal contexts. However, the discourse concerning these forms is interrogated closely by college men. Men question the efficacy and accuracy of dominant forms. College men openly question endorsement of the forms when reflecting on personal pivotal gendered experiences and role models. While men seem to have a relatively fixed conception of manhood, they demonstrate significant fluidity in their discourse concerning masculinity. The result is reflected in discourse that is at once declarative and speculative when

discussing the various issues surrounding masculine identity. Enacting emerging masculinity, therefore, is a discursive process that is subject to significant change and uncertainty.

Maintaining masculinity for college men is a process that is marked by precarious discursive efforts among a myriad of possible meanings to masculinity. Men defend, or rehabilitate, their personal conceptions of manhood by discursively addressing challenges in the social environment. College men draw from a sophisticated pool of discursive strategies in addressing challenges to their masculinity. College men are strategic when faced with challenges to their masculinity. For example, some challenges are left unanswered because they do not strike at characteristics close to the subject's valued identity. Reflecting the social component of identity processes, men often depend on friend groups to answer challenges on their behalf. It is only as a last resort that men directly respond to challenges and confront those who might question their personal masculinity.

College men stabilize masculine identity through efforts at rehabilitation on both personal and collective levels. Discourse concerning manhood involves an awareness that while there are dominant forms of masculinity that are valued in a patriarchal society, the performance of those forms can lead to negative behavior and adverse outcomes. College men are keenly aware of negative connotations associated with acting out dominant forms of masculinity, and they engage in discourse that attempts to rehabilitate men writ large. Through this interrogation of dominant forms, men try to address negative aspects of dominant masculinity. Efforts at rehabilitation also involve reclaiming the moral high

ground of masculinity in discourse by engaging in discourse centered on ethics of manhood.

Previous research suggests that manhood is subject to ongoing challenges and men have to respond immediately and consistently through the use of overt actions to restore masculine identity (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). The data offered in this study suggests otherwise. The discourse offered by college men suggest that men possess a toolbox of cognitive and discursive skills that reduce potential threats to personal masculinity. While discourse for college men is precarious, it is also characterized by flexible strategies that preclude immediate direct action in addressing issues of masculinity.

*RQ2: How do social structures impact the discursive enactment and maintenance of Precarious Masculinity?*

Scholars have noted that Hegemonic Masculinity has often been used as “as a social structural concept to explain the legitimization of masculinities through social institutions and social groups” (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger; 2012). I adopted this approach to examine how a variety of social groups might impact the discourse of masculinity in a college context. Not surprisingly, results indicate that social structures do indeed play a significant role in the enactment of masculinity for college students. Social entities such as media, family and community institutions, extracurricular groups and sports teams, and college campuses impact how men enact and manage their masculine identity. College men are strategic in how they address the impact of social structures on their masculinity.

Media represents a powerful influence on conceptions of masculinity (Craig, 1992). College men claim that media characterize desired masculine tropes such as physical strength and stamina, sexual conquest with multiple partners, dominant behavior, financial success, power, aggression, and emotional control. Overall, college men see the media as offering a presentation of masculinity that reinforces hegemonic, and sometimes destructive, forms. Subject to these ongoing messages, college men do feel pressure to live up to the norms portrayed by media. At the same time, the discourse men engage in often manifests in an interrogation of these forms as men wrestle with failing to live up to idealized norms. Therefore, while media messages influence college men's gender identity efforts, men talk about these forms critically and explore alternate forms of masculinity that are inconsistent with dominant forms.

Family, community, and early institutions like high school, extracurricular groups, and sports teams represent a significant influence on how men talk about manhood. College men often use discourse that reflects pivotal role models, usually family members, which formed their early notions of manhood. These early influencers provide a baseline model from which to base idealized conceptions of masculinity. As they move into new experiences in college, these models are challenged as men modify and form their conceptions of masculinity. For college men, local community norms from their pre-college experiences also provide models for desired masculinity. As described by participants, these local definitions can problematize efforts in defining personal masculinity. Standards of local masculinity represent powerful institutionalized forms that privilege certain forms of masculinity and disparage alternate views. As men move into college, they report experiencing masculinity in a variety of forms that might

challenge the localized forms. As a result, college men often have to navigate contradictory forms of masculinity in enacting and maintaining their conceptions of masculinity.

Extracurricular groups and sports teams often serve to legitimize particular forms of masculinity for college men. Several of the participants in this study were former and current athletes whose masculinity was influenced by sports teams. Participants often pull from their sporting experiences to reflect on masculine norms, and they experience pressure to live up to those norms. These norms are often challenged when men are exposed to a variety of alternative masculinities in college. Part of enacting and maintaining their personal masculinities concerns the reconciliation of forms of masculinity endorsed by sports teams and emerging alternative forms men experience in college.

The college environment itself is another structure that exerts influence on the identity efforts of men. College men describe college as an environment that is open to multiple conceptions of masculinity and encouraging of experimentation with gender norms. Men often describe their discourse as expanding during college to embrace a variety of masculine norms. College is a structure that is enabling because of its open environment with a variety of subcontexts. While college offers a variety of contexts and new experiences that enable experimentation, it can also represent a political environment that may serve to suppress certain expressions of masculinity. Several participants noted political correctness marks discourse on college campuses when exploring forms of masculinity.

The final structure that exerts influence on college men concerning their masculinity is an expectation concerning future masculine norms post-graduation. College men speak of masculinity as a future state where different norms might apply to them as men. College serves as a training ground for the middle-class where dominant masculine norms seem to favor financial and career success above the physical traits associated with hegemonic norms. Therefore men not only navigate expectations from their past communities, and from the varied and political atmosphere of college, but are training for unknown masculine standards in future professions.

*RQ3: How do intersectional issues of race, class, and sexuality impact the discursive enactment and maintenance of Precarious Masculinity?*

College men adopt a strategic approach to manage masculinity impacted by race, class, and sexual identity. Intersectional circumstances complicate the process of enacting and negotiating masculine identity. Race, class, and co-sexual gender conceptions impact the process of becoming a man and make the process precarious. As intersectional issues interweave with the standard processes of exploring masculinity, men of color, working-class men, and co-sexual men have to serve multiple communities of masculinity. These intersectional issues offer additional challenges and hurdles to maintain masculine identity strategically.

The current study explored African American and Caucasian men to discern how race might impact college men's experiences and discourse concerning the enactment and maintenance of masculinity. Race impacts men on several levels with concern to masculinity, but in very distinct ways. A sharp contrast exists in how white men and black men talk about the impact of race in serving masculinity. Issues such as race



consciousness, perceptions of institutionalized and personal racism, and the general salience of race complicate the experience of forming masculine identity.

Many of the white college men interviewed downplayed the impact of race in the formation of their personal masculinity. The discourse of white men often indicates a lack of race consciousness in relation to masculine experience. These men discursively separate being a man from race and claim that masculinity overrides issues of race. Even when white men acknowledged a form of white privilege, they often refused to engage in speculation as to how race affects the manner in which they discuss masculinity. White college men expressed hesitancy to engage in discourse concerning race. Either race was not relevant or was a taboo subject when it came to discourse concerning masculinity.

Black men had no such hesitancy to discuss race in relation to their masculine identity. Race is a salient issue that affects the performance of masculinity and complicates the process. Black college men in this study expressed the need to serve multiple, and often conflicting, forms of masculinity. They note that in serving the black community they carried a standard of hyper-masculinity, where they are expected to display physical strength and sexual prowess. They are also expected to meet standards of masculinity that highlight financial success, legal or otherwise. In the white community, they often expressed that they feel that black men have to prove their masculinity in an attempt to represent black men as a whole. As a result, black men are discursively carrying the banner for black masculinity.

In addition to serving multiple communities of masculinity, black men wrestle with the material reality of historical and current instances of personal and institutionalized racism in America. Cognizant of the history of racial tensions in this

country, black men are further affected by often being treated as less than men by law enforcement. Several note that their masculinity has been challenged by being framed as “boys” or detained by authority figures in a symbolic and material form of control. In addition to institutional forms of racism that challenge masculinity, many noted the subtle, but significant daily interactions that framed them as dangerous black men. Young black men are in a bind that makes the identity process of becoming a man a difficult one. They are expected to act out hyper-masculinity in some contexts while proving they are worthy of respect from others.

Co-sexual men navigate a labyrinth of masculine contexts that make the process of becoming a man very difficult, yet empowering at the same time. Co-sexual men are expected to serve Hegemonic Masculinity in co-sexual communities that have a sophisticated view of gender, serve the straight community by acting out feminine forms, and yet are still subject to the view that men are potentially dangerous in their interactions with women. Co-sexual men are subject to holding up norms of Hegemonic Masculinity in co-sexual contexts. Co-sexual college men described communities where hegemonic forms are valued over other forms; where men who are “tops” or more masculine in a classic sense are desired in their communities. Despite often being framed as feminine in straight society, they are often expected to perform dominant forms in the co-sexual community. While serving multiple communities complicates the masculine identity process, this results in a discourse that is strategic and highly adaptable.

While serving dominant forms in the co-sexual community, non-heterosexual men are often seen as effeminate in the straight world and subject to ongoing challenges concerning their masculinity. Even when co-sexual men can “pass” for straight, they are

often subject to being seen as potentially dangerous by women. In other words, they are often subject to rehabilitating men in general to prove they are not dangerous. Ironically, when a co-sexual man is revealed as gay, he is often seen as a potential sexual predator by other men.

It seems as co-sexual men navigate these multiple, and often contradictory, contexts of masculinity, they develop a highly nuanced vocabulary of gender. Co-sexual men display a complex and highly fluid conception of masculinity that is empowering in many ways. It seems that co-sexual men have wrestled with issues of gender and are often the ablest to handle the precarious nature of masculine discourse.

Class intersects with masculinity to problematize the discursive efforts of becoming a man for college men. Discourse about masculinity and class for college men is problematic. Lower-class and middle-class men converge in their endorsement of physical toughness, strength, and virile qualities associated with working-class masculinity. Middle-class men, however, enjoy an additional layer of linguistic flexibility when navigating masculinity. Middle-class college men occupy a social position that allows them to borrow from working-class conceptions of masculinity. But when middle-class men fail to measure up to those common standards, they can borrow from additional conceptions of masculinity consistent with the managerial class to frame and manage their personal masculinity. So a middle-class man who might not demonstrate physical toughness might highlight his potential for upward mobility and financial wealth.

Lower-class men often lack the discourse and background to draw from middle-class conceptions of manhood as they navigate their masculine identity. Serving working-class masculinity is familiar territory for lower-class men. But when a lower-class man

fails to live up to a masculine standard, he faces a more difficult challenge than his middle-class counterpart. Lower-class men lack the experience of middle-class masculinity and cannot draw from those experiential resources to manage masculine identity. For lower-class men, the managerial and middle-class is a speculative experience. While they are often training to enter knowledge jobs and enter the realm of the middle-class, they might lack the discourse to express that masculinity.

### **Implications for Theory**

The current study has a variety of implications for several areas related to masculinity studies. The proposed model can be used to further understanding into the Precarious Manhood model, answers discursive concerns from the theory of Hegemonic Masculinity, and opens new possibilities concerning the exercise and use of Gender Capital. Additionally, the perspective of Strategic Masculinity offers several promising avenues of potential development in examining gender identity processes. Finally, the concept of precarious discourse within the larger model can itself serve as a frame for considering masculinity processes. The following sections discuss each of these implications in turn.

***Precarious Manhood.*** Precarious Manhood has proven a suitable frame to examine how men symbolically manage threats to their masculinity (Vandello & Boson, 2013). Laboratory examinations of Precarious Manhood have yielded a high degree of support for the central claims of the theory. The current study builds on these successes by addressing the three central tenets of the theory.

Precarious Manhood posits that manhood is earned in public through symbolic actions by men whose manhood might be challenged (Vandello et al., 2008). The current

study is supportive of this claim. College men do indeed perceive challenges to their masculinity and feel the need to directly address those challenges by restoring their manhood in public. College men also, however, utilize a wide variety of discursive tactics to address challenges to manhood. Men approach the management of masculinity in a strategic manner. Before taking action, men carefully weigh a variety of factors, including context, peer group, and saliency of identity threat, before choosing an appropriate symbolic or discursive tactic. The Precarious Manhood approach could be served by more closely examining the array of tactics available to men beyond providing immediate and direct proof of manhood.

Closely related is the claim of Precarious Manhood that manhood requires ongoing public proof of masculine credentials (Vandello et al., 2013). Again, the tenet is somewhat supported by the current study. College men do feel the pressure to provide proof of manhood in social contexts. Again, however, men approach when and where to provide proof in a strategic manner. In certain peer groups or contexts, men possess gender capital that can influence the degree to which they feel the need to give proof of manhood. In some groups, a man may have proved his manly bona fides repeatedly and rarely feels the need to engage in providing ongoing proof of manhood. Conversely, there are other contexts where he might lack capital and need to engage in ongoing displays. The Precarious Manhood approach can be extended by examining when context and peer groups might problematize efforts at public proof of manly credentials.

Perhaps the most important claim of the Precarious Manhood approach is that manhood can be easily lost through a failure to perform an action or acting outside of masculine conventions (Vandello et al., 2008). Precarious manhood suggests that men

operate in an anxious and stressful state when maintaining manhood. The underlying contention is that men are in a constant state of stress with dealing with masculine identity and in that masculinity is a fragile construct in general. The current study provides mixed support for this claim. There is little doubt that men experience stress and anxiety in relation to performing manhood. College men report a variety of stressful experiences in acting manly, particularly when intersectional issues of race, class, and sexual identity are included. However, the data suggests that male identity processes are quite resilient and that men utilize sophisticated strategic approaches that reduce the angst that might accompany the performance of manhood. “Losing” manhood for college men is a matter of saliency and degree when performed in different contexts. The current data suggest that the loss of manhood is something that takes time, multiple challenges, and in salient contexts for college men. The Precarious Manhood approach can be extended by reexamining the degree of fragility associated with men.

Young men are buffeted by a variety of forces. Multiple social contexts, structural influencers, and intersectionality can make the process of becoming a man one that is fraught with threats to personal masculinity. However, when viewed from a discursive perspective, young men demonstrate remarkable flexibility and selective addressing of challenges to masculinity. College men are armed with a toolbox that provides a variety of methods to either cognitively dismiss potential threats, joint social addressing of challenges, or direct confrontation. As development of Precarious Manhood moves forward, the theory should benefit from these insights.

*Hegemonic Masculinity.* The current study contributes to the ongoing development of Hegemonic Masculinity. Proponents have identified three areas of

development from this perspective that deserve additional examination (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The first issue concerns the exploration of discourse in practice to understand how men negotiate masculine identity in relation to dominant forms. A second area involves how men engage in discourse that manages anxiety arising from being subject to hegemonic forms. A third area concerns identifying how men might engage in resistance to hegemonic forms. The proposed model contributes to addressing each of these issues.

The current study moves understanding forward for examining discourse in practice by college men in relation to dominant forms of masculinity. College men understand that there is a preferred performance of masculinity that is endorsed by social structures such as educational, political, and organizational institutions. Many men learn to endorse dominant forms and perform them accordingly. However, men engage in a strategic approach to manage expectations in their performances. They carefully select when and how to discursively perform dominant forms by measuring a variety of factors. Utilizing precarious discourse allows men to negotiate personal identity while reducing the risk of violating dominant norms. Precarious discourse marks the relation between personal masculine identity and expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

The expectation to perform hegemonic forms gives rise to anxiety and stress in men. Very few men can successfully achieve idealized forms of masculinity for a sustained amount of time. Men have learned to engage in the strategic management of masculinity in order to control anxiety and reduce associated stress. They utilize a variety of independent and interactive discursive tactics to manage and negotiate personal masculinity in the face of hegemonic expectations. Additionally, they accumulate a form

of gender capital in maintaining strategic management with hegemonic forms. This strategic approach to masculinity allows men to operate within the norm of hegemonic forms while exploring potential areas of resistance.

College men engage in discursive resistance of hegemonic forms of masculinity. College men understand that there are negative outcomes related to the performance of current dominant forms of masculinity. While they often endorse and perform consistently with hegemonic forms, they identify space for resistance through the interrogation of those form. College men interrogate the efficacy and outcomes related to characteristics common to dominant forms and modify their personal masculinity as a result. Ongoing resistance also takes the form of rehabilitation of personal and collective masculinity. College men seek to distance men in general and their selves personally from characteristics of dominant forms that lead to outcomes. For example, a college man might interrogate the trope that men need to remain unemotional by declaring that he is different from the norm or by claiming that the majority of men actually endorse emotional expression. As development of Hegemonic Masculinity continues, there is potential in exploring rehabilitation tendencies in men as containing potential in deconstructing dominant norms further.

*Strategic Masculinity.* The proposed theory of Strategic Masculinity makes a significant contribution to theory in the field of communication and can be extended to additional disciplines. The contributions of the theory are numerous. First, the theory offers a discursively centered frame to examine masculine identity processes in action. Second, the theory is explanatory of the so-called crisis of masculinity. Third, the theory addresses a common perspective of framing masculinity as a monolithic construct. Forth,



the theory addresses the often stated criticism that most masculinity theoretical treatments represent a deficit approach to viewing and exploring men's issues. Finally, the theory reveals that men utilize conscious and unconscious strategic planning to manage their masculinity.

Strategic Masculinity is a communication-centered theory. Scholars have noted the centrality of communication in the construction and performance of gendered identity (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Others have created and called for ongoing development of communication theories related to masculinity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Strategic Masculinity is within this tradition and positions discourse as central in understanding how men manage their emerging masculinity. The proposed theory is distinguished from other perspectives on several fronts. Strategic Masculinity is the only communication centric theory of masculinity that examines the important developmental stage of college-age men. The theory should prove efficacious in examining men in a manner that does not universalize men's experiences. The theory also possesses flexibility for application in other contexts. For example, the college discursive community could be substituted by an organizational discursive community and still serve as an adequate frame to examine ongoing masculine identity processes. The theory has significant potential to highlight the strategic manner in which men from many different backgrounds and ages manage threats to masculinity.

Strategic Masculinity offers a possible frame for examining the recurring theme of a masculinity crisis. Many scholars and practitioners have either directly or obliquely referenced the crisis of masculinity (Kimmel, 2006). Most iterations of this phenomenon suggest that the process by which we produce men in modern societies is somehow

broken or flawed. Strategic Masculinity suggests a different framing of this issue. I frame the crisis of masculinity in the light of the many factors that problematize becoming a man in a postmodern society. While media and other social structures still frame traditional forms of masculinity as laudable, those same forms are also attacked for the negative consequences associated with their performances. Young men are put in the difficult position of rehabilitating masculinity in general while finding their way as men. In short, a crisis of masculinity is an illusion, but the perception of men is reality. Strategic Masculinity can remove that illusion and frame the ‘crisis’ in a more productive manner.

Theories concerning masculinity have been criticized for framing masculinity as a monolithic construct that downplays or ignores the complexity of modern structural contexts (Winegard, Winegard, & Geary, 2013). Strategic Masculinity addresses this issue in offering discourse as a central construct around which to explore masculinity issues. The theory examines a multitude of social structures, intersectional issues, and linguistic strategies that counterbalance the precarious nature of masculine identity processes. The theory also provides flexibility to examine masculinity within a variety of contexts to observe how contextual masculinity standards might influence identity efforts of young men. Strategic Masculinity offers a flexible, nimble approach that allows examination of the masculine construct without framing masculinity as a universal experience.

Theories of masculinity have been criticized for representing deficit models in addressing manliness (Heesacker & Snowden, 2013). Deficit models use as a starting point that men are framed as a problem—a negative force and contributes to societal ills.

Deficit models look at what is wrong with masculinity rather than examining influences and factors that might contribute to processes that create masculinity. Strategic Masculinity addresses the deficit approach by providing a more optimistic view of masculinity in the postmodern world. The proposed model offers a frame to approach the study of masculinity as one that focuses on potentially positive, negative, and neutral influences. The theory focuses on process rather than offering implicit judgment concerning men in general. Additionally, the data in the current study opens the potential for discussion concerning ethics and masculinity. Participants own accounts of masculinity center ethical behavior and discourse as central in the process of becoming a man. I see this theory as an optimistic approach that addresses alternative deficit models.

A final important implication of the theory concerns the strategic element of managing masculinity. Earlier theories suggest that men manage masculinity by reacting to social challenges or engaging in resistance to dominant forms (Connell, 2005; Vandello et al., 2008). Strategic Masculinity, however, suggests that men are proactive in addressing masculinity and they develop a variety of strategies for dealing with challenges. Men are strategic in maintaining and negotiating masculinity. Men develop general strategic plans of action to project a desired masculine identity. A strategic approach suggests that men develop a discursive toolbox for dealing with potential challenges to their masculinity. Men carefully assess their standing as men in different contexts and draw from a pool of strategies in service of their strategic goals.

***Gender Capital.*** One of the most important findings from Strategic Masculinity concerns the phenomenon of gender capital. Gender capital is not a new concept. A handful of researchers have noted the construct and explored the construct's usefulness in

masculinity studies. Precarious Masculinity has extended this understanding and points to potential for further development. Bridges (2009) references gender capital as a form of Hegemonic Masculinity that provides men in specific cultural regimes with resources to manage masculine identity. He highlights gender capital in the specific context of bodybuilding and demonstrates how athletes in the field manage capital in maintaining certain images of manhood. Bridges also notes research should “pay close attention to the contextual fluidity of gender capital, as well as the gender-political implications that it resists, expresses or attempts to hide.” Gender capital as conceptualized in Strategic Masculinity explores exactly these issues. Strategic Masculinity has examined gender capital in the college context and in relation to intersectional issues of race, class, and sexual identity.

One significant finding concerning gender capital is the context-dependent nature of the construct. Within different peer groups and varying contexts, gender capital takes on different meanings and characteristics for men. College men can possess a significant amount of capital in one college context while experiencing a deficit in others. Men carefully manage gender capital within a variety of contexts to strategically manage masculine identity. Men build gender capital by performing consistently with expectations for a particular context. Men save this important resource to draw from in times of identity crisis. Consistent performance builds capital that they can later draw from as a resource when their masculinity is challenged. While not fully conceptualized within specific contexts, the theory has uncovered a strategic resource for men in negotiating and managing masculinity.

Strategic Masculinity also addresses gender capital implications concerning intersectional issues. One of the more interesting findings in this study concerned how men of different races, classes, and sexual identity manage multiple masculinities. Each intersectional issue complicates the process of managing identity. Specifically, black co-sexual, and lower-class men initially lack the gender capital that white, straight, and middle-class men enjoy. Men in white, straight, and middle-class status occupy privileged positions that are more closely aligned with notions of dominant masculinity in Western society. Therefore, they enjoy what is essentially built in gender capital with regard to masculinity. Black, co-sexual, and lower-class men, in contrast, occupy positions that complicate the process of building and using gender capital.

Black men operate from a position that problematizes the process of building gender capital. Given the history of institutionalized racism and experiences of personal racism, black men often operate from positions of gender capital deficits. In day to day interactions, black men often have to prove their worth to be considered equal to their white male peers. They have to work harder to build gender capital in contexts where they might be compared to white male masculinity. Complicating the process even more, black men often come from communities where they have to perform forms of hyper-masculinity that make building gender capital crucial. Therefore, black men have to build capital in multiple contexts to strategically manage multiple masculinities.

Lower-class men also face an uphill battle when it comes to building gender capital to manage masculinity strategically. Lower-class men, like their middle-class counterparts, navigate the acquisition of gender capital adequately when proving characteristics consistent with working masculinity—those of strength, physical and

emotional toughness, aggression, and emotional control. When it comes to building gender capital that is consistent with middle-class, however, lower-class men have more difficulty proving their masculine bona fides. Men from middle-class backgrounds have some idea, albeit it sometimes speculative, of how men might perform in middle-class contexts. They have some basis to build gender capital and to spend it accordingly. Lower-class men, however, lack the experience of middle-class masculinity from which to build adequate gender capital. Therefore, building gender capital becomes a more complicated process.

Co-sexual men likewise face challenges when utilizing gender capital to assist in strategically managing masculinity. Co-sexual men occupy positions in heteronormative contexts that are often marginalized. Men who are openly co-sexual are often viewed as effeminate in heteronormative contexts and are often not considered to possess masculine characteristics consistent with dominant masculinity. Co-sexual men are at an instant disadvantage when attempting to build gender capital in these contexts. Complicating the process even more is the premium that is placed on dominant masculinity in some co-sexual contexts. Characteristics consistent with dominant forms of masculinity are often valued in co-sexual contexts while devalued in other co-sexual contexts. Therefore, building and managing gender capital resources becomes a more difficult process.

Strategic Masculinity extends understanding of gender capital by linking it directly to the management of masculine identity processes. Examinations have linked gender capital to masculinity in organizational contexts such as nursing, social work, hairdressing, and exotic dancing and how men may frame their occupational identity. (Huppertz, 2012). However, the proposed model demonstrates that gender capital

occupies a central role in stabilizing and re-stabilizing masculinity within precarious discourses that distinguish men's talk in relation to masculine identity. Gender capital assists in stabilizing masculine identity when college men experience challenge to their masculinity.

***Precarious Discourse.*** The discourse of masculinity is precarious for college men. This central concept of Strategic Masculinity represents a significant contribution to both masculinity and communication research. The discourse of college men is one of tentative speculation when engaging with masculinity. The language of men is at once uncertain and declarative as they seek to stabilize, destabilize, and re-stabilize their masculine identity in response to rehabilitative efforts and intersectional issues. Utilizing a frame of precarious discourse highlights the ongoing, tension-filled process of negotiating masculine identity in action and allows researchers to identify moments of change in conceptions of masculinity.

Locating how men engage in the management of fluid concepts of masculinity through precarious discourses has potential to provide practitioners and researchers alike tangible strategies to address more destructive behaviors that often accompany hyper-masculine performances. The concept offers a holistic approach that accounts for various factors that impact discursive efforts. Researchers who frame the process as a precarious one can identify variables that influence identity processes and develop sound solutions to address them. Such an approach can serve to reconcile the perspective that men are privileged, but can also feel attacked for what many consider to be somewhat natural tendencies.

*Contribution to identity research.* Strategic Masculinity has been presented as a central frame to examine how men enact, manage, and negotiate masculinity. The approach also has relevance and utility concerning identity research writ large. The theory highlights a process of gendered identification that is in an ongoing state of negotiation and flux, offers a perspective that can be effective in examining numerous identity demographics, and suggests that individuals engage in the active strategic management of various identities.

Identity represents a processual state that is in flux at any given time (Eisenberg, 2001). Identity is ever evolving, shifting, and changing even while giving the appearance of stability and fixedness. The offered perspective of Strategic Masculinity provides a perspective that frames a vibrant process of masculine identity and captures a sense of the dynamic between fixed and fluid gendered identity. The theory also highlights precarious discourses that enable navigation among multiple masculine identities that are subject to various influences in context. The theory contributes an approach that explores gendered identity as it unfolds through communication. The potential of this perspective should contribute to an understanding of identity processes and offer a path that moves identity scholarship forward.

Strategic Masculinity extends beyond gender identity processes and presents a theoretical lens that can be germane to examine a variety of identity demographics. The theory offers an approach that could be used to reveal the communicative processes concerning the process involved in the management of racial identity, sexual identity, and class identity dynamics.



The Theory of Strategic Masculinity offers a model of identity development that contributes to an understanding concerning racial identity processes. The study specifically examines black masculinity, but provides a model that provides “tools for understanding how individuals achieve awareness of their sense of self in relation to race within larger society” (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001, p.1). The model offers a perspective that accounts for a variety of contextual, intersectional, and historical factors that impact black men’s identity efforts. Rehabilitation, in particular, is a useful concept that considers personal and collective rehabilitation efforts in light of the historical institutionalized racism of black men. Given the current state and historical context of race relations in the United States, the theory is timely and could be particularly useful in understanding how other racial demographics communicatively negotiate rehabilitation efforts and gender capital in managing racial identity.

Sexual identity research efforts could similarly benefit from the use of Strategic Masculinity. Cosexual men in the current study describe sophisticated efforts to masculine identity in multiple contexts. The model offers a perspective through which to glean insight as to the communication efforts that cosexual men engage in to rehabilitate and manage personal and collective notions of masculinity. The model could effectively examine the various sub-categories that comprise cosexual men. For example, differences likely exist for men who identify as gay, cisgender, transgender, and other various self-identified gender categories. Strategic Masculinity presents researchers with a frame to delineate unique identity management strategies within these groups further.

The proposed theory contributes to class identity research. Of particular usefulness concerning class identity processes is the finding concerning the management

of gender capital with the model. The results suggest that managing class is interrelated with the careful negotiation of capital in various contexts. Understanding of how gender capital is accumulated, developed and spent in the production and management of class advances knowledge concerning the how class identity is managed.

One final contribution of the proposed frame concerns the active strategic manner in which social actors manage identity. Men engage in numerous strategies tied to various contexts to impact how they and others perceive their masculinity. It follows that other demographics engage in similar strategic efforts to negotiate and manage identity efforts. Strategic Masculinity opens the door to examining the strategies and approaches that are used in class, racial, and sexual identity processes to name a few.

### **Implications for practice**

Sound theory contributes to understanding and the advancement of knowledge for academic disciplines. However, the true value of theory is when that knowledge can be applied to solve real world issues. In short, good theory is practical and useful (Van De Van, 1989). The proposed theory of Strategic Masculinity has great potential for practical application in a variety of contexts. This perspective could usefully be deployed in several forms on college campuses, organizational settings, and counseling contexts.

Early in this study, I outlined an array of consequences related to the performance of hyper-masculinity on college campuses. Anxiety and stress related to the performance of masculinity in some contexts has conceptually been linked to violence (Courtenay, 2000; Messerschmidt 1993), men's health (Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Connell 2005; Robertson, 2007), risk-taking (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999), relational satisfaction (Burn & Ward, 2005), and substance abuse (Iwamoto et al., 2011; Courtenay, 2011). Yet

while it is clear that these issues can at least partly be associated with hyper-masculinity, there remains minimal support on college campuses concerning men's issues (Kimmel, 2011). There continues to be a perspective that young men do not require guidance to perform masculinity. The evidence offered in this study suggests that college campuses might better serve their student constituencies in changing this perspective.

One practical area that can begin to address the Model Gender Majority Myth (Harper & Harris, 2010) is a renewed focus on masculinity studies offered in college. While a wide array of curriculum focuses on feminism issues (and rightly so given the patriarchal nature of Western society), few focus on examining how men manage masculine identity in relation to dominant forms. Curriculum focused on men's issues can reveal how men of different backgrounds manage the precarious discourse that characterizes masculinity experiences. A focus on the strategic management of masculinity can provide young men with the discursive tools to effectively negotiate forms of masculinity that might be more socially responsible and ultimately more democratic. Courses teaching effective discursive strategies and informed interrogation of hegemonic forms can bring conscious management of masculinity to the forefront for young men and encourage the development of additional tools to reduce the uncertainty associated with gender performance.

Counseling services on college campuses could benefit significantly from the adoption of Strategic Masculinity as another tool to address issues related to masculinity. The current theory has yet to outline what effective strategic management of masculinity might look like after further development. However, the potential for uncovering and developing effective strategies based on the current theory is promising. Professional

counselors utilizing such a perspective could potentially train effective strategies to deal with precarious discourses and reduce the likelihood of destructive performances of masculinity in college men and beyond.

While the current study examined a sample of men from the ages 18-24, the perspective holds potential to inform practitioners about men entering organizations at a later age. There is anecdotal, and emerging empirical data that suggests that young people are delaying many of the traditional markers of adulthood (Thompson, 2012). Young men and women are entering marriage later (if at all), delaying homeownership, entering permanent careers, and starting families at later ages than earlier generations. It is not a great intuitive leap to posit that men may come to the workplace without an effective strategic skill set to manage masculinity issues. Human resources professionals involved in training and development and legal compliance issues concerning sexual harassment might benefit from the Strategic Masculinity approach. Training men to strategically approach challenges to masculinity could reduce negative outcomes in the workplace. By training men in the positive development of gender capital, a host of issues with negative impact in the workplace could be addressed.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

**Limitations.** The topic of masculinity continues to generate interest on the part of scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields. Fresh approaches are beginning to remember the forgotten gender and place men central in examinations of gender. Such an approach advances understanding of gendered identity processes and provides an explanatory frame for men specifically. This study attempted to reframe masculinity by examining the discourse of young men at a crucial developmental stage and offering a

practical theory to advance understanding of male identity processes in action. As with any study, there are limitations that should be explicated in order to inform future research on the proposed theory and advance the topic in general. Despite the potential use of the proposed theory, the current study does have limitations that might be addressed in future studies. Of concern in the study is sample type, and the utility of the theory beyond the college context.

The sample of the current study is admittedly narrow in scope and possibly suffers from a regional bias that might affect the proposed model. The study looked specifically at men based on the factors of race, class, and sexual preference. The sample examined generated rich data and revealed a variety of viewpoints concerning the discourse and experience of masculinity for college men. While an exploratory study, samples of co-sexual and black men were small. The co-sexual population proved difficult to locate and results may have suffered from self-selection bias since I located these men through the local college LGBTQ organization. Members of such organizations may already possess an interest in gender and be more informed on the accompanying issues. While black men were easier to locate, the two colleges were predominantly comprised of white, middle-class men. To modify and build on Strategic Masculinity, additional members of these populations need to be examined in the future.

A second limitation of the proposed theory concerns the generalizability beyond the college context. The theory offered examines a specific age group of men during a crucial developmental stage for gender. This characteristic of the theory may limit the context in which it may be used. However, the model may prove useful beyond the college context. While the college context is important, other contexts may be able to

substitute in the model and prove useful in examining those men who do not have the opportunity to attend college. Future endeavors might modify current theory to account for young men in a variety of contexts.

**Future research.** The current theory offers multiple opportunities for future research. Future efforts include continued development and testing of the full model, animation of theory components, a closer examination and enunciation of gender capital, and exploration of tactics used in the strategic management of masculinity.

Strategic Masculinity offers a holistic approach to examine the discursive performance and management of masculinity. This initial illustration of the characteristics and properties provide room for further development and manipulation of the model. Furthermore, the properties of the central components could be further described and refined through ongoing development of the model. Additionally, the model would benefit by utilization in a variety of contexts including those beyond college campuses.

I have offered initial speculation concerning the animation of the proposed model. The proposed interaction between the elements of the model are speculative and derived from close engagement with the data. However, directions of influence need to be further teased out through additional testing and empirical observation. Such observation could yield a model that is more effective in predicting college men's behaviors or measuring the efficacy of strategic approaches to managing personal masculinity.

The concept of gender capital offers a rich area for possible future development. How men are granted or earn gender capital is yet to be addressed. Additionally, examinations might explore the "currency" aspects of gender capital. For example, how

does context affect how gender capital is earned and how long it persists? How do men spend gender capital in service of their masculinity beyond managing challenges to masculine identity? Can gender capital be pooled and shared by communities of men in service of masculinity? The concept lends itself to a variety of research that might extend knowledge and practice in how men manage masculinity.

A final area of development concerns developing further understanding concerning the tactics used in the strategic management of masculinity. This study identified several communicative strategies used to address challenges to masculine behavior in social contexts. The active, interactive, and passive strategies may only represent a small set of tactics available to men in the service of their masculinity. The tactics should be explored in more detail to tease out additional discursive resources that men use to strategically manage their identity.

### **Conclusion**

Negotiating the pitfalls associated with masculinity in a modern society represents a process that is uncertain and precarious. I have offered a communication-centered theory that frames this precarious process and can advance understanding of how young men discuss and experience masculinity in an ever more complex world. The model offered here contributes to knowledge concerning a stage of development that is crucial in a young man's life. It is a theory that can help to explain and predict multiple issues that contribute to young men's identity processes.

I started this project concerned with the state of masculinity. Like many men of my age, I wondered what was going on with this generation of men. I was concerned with my nephew's language and defensiveness concerning manhood and my son's difficulty in

defining a clear path to manhood. This project has shined a light on the process and the difficulties a man can experience in a modern world. Young men live in a complicated world. It is a world that is ever more complex, contains copious amounts of information, uncertain economic and political environments, and is in many ways a dangerous world. We currently inhabit a political environment that is increasingly divisive concerning race, class, and other intersectional issues. I believe many of these current political issues to be conceptually linked with masculinity. Understanding how young men come to make sense of their masculinity is crucial to arm them with knowledge to engage meaningfully, and ethically with this complex world.

Strategic Masculinity shines light on just how complicated and problematic this process can be. Manhood has been called the forgotten gender (Harper & Harris, 2010). Strategic Masculinity explores the forgotten gender and reminds us to attend to even in a society where they seem privileged in many ways. Utilizing this frame has taught me to appreciate the quality of young men today. I discovered the young men I interviewed for this study faced substantial obstacles in defining their masculinity, yet I found them to be thoughtful, generous, reflective, and to possess a strong ethical center as they found their way. While the world of defining gender might be precarious, I discovered young men who possessed character that suggest they are well up to the challenge of becoming outstanding men. I hope that this theory might help them in their journey to manhood.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

Tell me about the first object you brought with you today and how it represents masculinity in general.

How so?

Tell me more about that.

Why did you choose the object?

Tell me about the second object that you brought with you today and how it represents your masculinity.

How so?

Tell me more about that.

How did you choose the object?

What does masculinity mean to society?

How did you learn what it meant to be masculine?

How would your friends describe masculinity?

How might you act as a man in front of male friends?

How might you act as a man in front of female friends?

What experience indicated to you that you were a man?

When you and your friends talk about masculinity, what does that conversation sound like?

Tell me about a time when you handled a situation where your masculinity was in question?

How has your physical stature effected the way your understand masculinity?

How has your race effected the way you understand masculinity?

How does your economic class affect the way you understand masculinity?  
Is there anything else you think I need to understand better about masculinity?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

## Appendix B

### Introductory Script for participants

I am exploring how college men talk about and experience masculinity. For the purpose of this interview, I sometimes use the terms “masculinity” and “manhood” interchangeably.

What I am interested in is how you talk about masculinity with me and how you talk about masculinity with your friends, family, and others. I am also interested in how you perceive how societal forces – like the media, schools, and other larger influences – communicate masculinity to you and your peers.

I am also interested in how you perceived potential threats to your manhood. That is, if you have personally, or if you have seen, manhood threatened by the way you act or speak.

Finally, I am interested in how you think your race, economic class, or sexual preference has shaped how you see yourself as a man, and you talk about manhood. I am interested in what you have to say, not what you may think I may like to hear. I hope you will see this as an interesting conversation about a topic you may not often have the opportunity or desire to talk about.

Do you have any questions before we move forward?

**Table 1***Table 1 Participant demographics*

Participant	Race	Sexual identity	Perceived class	Age
Davis	White	Heterosexual	Middle	19
Eddie	White	Heterosexual	Middle	21
Paul	White	Heterosexual	Middle	20
Devin	White	Heterosexual	Middle	20
Curt	White	Heterosexual	Middle	20
Kevin	White	Heterosexual	Middle	19
Tommy	White	Heterosexual	Middle	19
Jon	White	Heterosexual	Middle	21
Terry	White	Heterosexual	Lower	21
Ted	White	Heterosexual	Middle	23
Seth	White	Heterosexual	Upper	18
Chris	Black	Heterosexual	Lower	22
Leo	Black	Heterosexual	Lower	21
Charles	White	Co-sexual	Middle	22
Anthony	White	Heterosexual	Middle	23
Steven	White	Heterosexual	Middle	21
Roderick	Black	Heterosexual	Lower	22
Wren	White	Heterosexual	Lower	20
Hank	White	Heterosexual	Middle	19
Mick	Black	Co-sexual	Middle	22
Craig	White	Co-sexual	Middle	21
Tony	Black	Heterosexual	Middle	22
Dean	White	Heterosexual	Middle	20
David	White	Heterosexual	Middle	19
Graham	White	Heterosexual	Middle	18

**VITA**

Ken Akers serves as Chair and Assistant Professor in the Business Administration Department at Columbia College. He began teaching at Columbia College in 2012. He taught as a Teaching Assistant at the University of Missouri from 2006-2009. He earned a B.S. in Political Science in 1989 and a M.S. in Corporate and Professional Communication from Radford University in 2004. Ken was an enlisted service member and later a commissioned officer in the Army Reserve for 14 years. He has worked in several industries including restaurant management, electronics, small systems computing, technology training, HR, and education. He has taught university level courses in Speech, Communication Theory, Organizational Communication, Management, Business Communication, Organizational Theory, Business Information Systems, Organizational Behavior, and Business Ethics. He teaches at the undergraduate and graduate levels. His research interests include instructional technology, masculinity, identity processes, socialization and assimilation, leadership, and management studies. Ken is married with one grown son.