



Precarious manhood and muscularity: Effects of threatening men's masculinity on reported strength and muscle dissatisfaction



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ABSTRACT

The precarious manhood perspective proposes that men respond with aggression when they experience threats to their masculinity. Consistent with this view, we hypothesized that men would represent themselves as stronger and more formidable after their masculinity was threatened. A recent study, however, found that men reported less physical strength when threatened (Hunt, Gonsalkorale, & Murray, 2013). In the current two studies ($Ns = 193; 450$), men were given false feedback about whether they were substantially less masculine (masculinity threatened) or more masculine than average (masculinity reassured). Men reported how much weight they could curl, how many push-ups they could complete, and/or measures of satisfaction with muscularity. In most analyses, threatened men reported greater strength than reassured men. Effects of masculinity threat on muscle dissatisfaction varied by outcome measure. The studies highlight the importance of replication studies, and of using experimental approaches to understand connections between precarious manhood and male body image.

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1. Introduction

Dissatisfaction with appearance is common among men (Fallon, Harris, & Johnson, 2014; Frederick, Forbes, Grigorian, & Jarcho, 2007; Frederick, Peplau, & Lever, 2006; Frederick, Sandhu, Morse, & Swami, 2016; Peplau et al., 2009). Men feel pressure to be fit and muscular, which causes them to desire greater levels of muscularity (Bergeron & Tylka, 2007; McCreary & Sasse, 2000). In a study of 11,138 heterosexual men and 332 gay men, only half of heterosexual men felt satisfied with their muscle tone and size (48%), with the rest feeling neutral (21%) or dissatisfied (30%). Among gay men, only one-third felt satisfied (34%), and the rest felt neutral (21%) or dissatisfied (45%) (Frederick & Essayli, 2016).

Men experience benefits from displaying muscularity. Many women report greater attraction to muscular men (Gray & Frederick, 2012), particularly for short-term affairs (Frederick & Haselton, 2007). One advantage experienced by muscular men is that they are seen as more formidable (Sell et al., 2009). Formidability can enhance a man's attractiveness to some women (Snyder et al., 2011), enhance his ability to exhibit behavioral dominance

(Sell, Hone, & Pound, 2012), and increase the extent to which he is seen as a good leader (Lukaszewski, Simmons, Anderson, & Roney, 2015).

Men perceive a host of benefits to becoming more muscular. Most college men in one study stated they wanted to be more muscular because it would make them feel stronger, sexier, more confident, healthier, more attractive to women, better able defend themselves, better at sports, and better able to intimidate other males (Frederick, Buchanan et al., 2007). Of particular relevance to the current study, 74% of the men stated they wanted to be more muscular so that they would "feel more masculine." In interview studies, men in the United States (but not Netherlands) strongly tied masculinity and manhood to athleticism (DiMuccio, Yost, & Helweg-Larsen, 2016). These findings are in line with the proposal that masculinity and muscularity are tied for men (Luciano, 2007). Paragons of masculinity in society are often muscular, including stars of action movies, men featured in popular magazines (Frederick, Fessler, & Haselton, 2005; Lanzieri & Cook, 2012; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010), GI Joe action figures (Baghurst, Hollander, Nardella, & Haff, 2006; Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999), male video game characters (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011), popular athletes, and wrestling stars.

Understanding the links between masculinity and muscularity can help illuminate men's motivations to become more muscular.

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Using the lens of the precarious manhood perspective (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008), and recent extensions of this perspective (Winegard, Winegard, & Geary, 2014), the current project explores how men's representations of their strength and their feelings about their muscularity are affected when their masculinity is challenged. The current study serves as a conceptual replication and extension of research conducted by Hunt, Gonsalkorale, and Murray (2013), who tested the effects of threatening men's masculinity on their reported strength and attitudes towards their muscularity.

1.1. Precarious manhood and responses to threatened masculinity

A man's masculinity, and the status of his manhood, impact how he is judged and valued by others in society (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vandello et al., 2008). The precarious manhood perspective proposes that manhood must be earned and achieved through socially prescribed acts and behaviors. Once manhood is achieved, however, it can be lost if a man fails to publicly display the behaviors or hold the statuses that affirm he is a "real man." This causes men to feel anxiety regarding the status of their masculinity. The fact that manhood can be lost and impugned at any moment makes manhood precarious, and explains why men engage in wide variety of behaviors to demonstrate their masculinity, including taking bold risks, engaging in difficult and dangerous physical feats, and showing they can dominate other men.

Winegard et al. (2014) provided another layer to understanding precarious manhood by focusing on how human evolutionary history shaped these behaviors (see also Geary, Winegard, & Winegard, 2016). They noted there are substantial benefits to having higher status in many species, including greater access to mates and resources. One route to gaining status is to display dominance, which entails maintaining status through force or threat of force. In humans, there are other routes to achieving high status besides dominance. One alternative route is to attain status by gaining "prestige," which is when people freely confer deference to another person because they display desirable traits or occupy desirable roles (Gil-White & Heinrich, 2001). Displaying masculine traits is one way to attain high status through dominance or prestige, which leads to greater pressure on men to display traits associated with masculinity.

According to Winegard et al. (2014), signaling one's masculinity to other men can be critically important, particularly when a higher authority is not available to intervene when conflicts between men arise. If a man is not perceived as masculine, he risks facing challenges to his status and being viewed as exploitable by other men. This places his life, resources, and family at risk. These pressures facilitate the development of a "culture of honor" in which men are expected to display aggression against men who impugn their manhood (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). This pressure to be perceived as masculine is further exacerbated by the fact that men create elaborate coalitions with other men, and more formidable men are in a position to build larger or more effective coalitions. Men who display masculine traits are signaling to other men that they are deserving of high status, are not easily exploited by others, and would make good allies.

These perspectives on precarious manhood suggest that men should react strongly to situations that threaten their masculinity. One reaction is to assert increased support for attitudes or behaviors that are linked to masculinity. For example, when men were told that their masculinity was relatively low or experienced a threat to their masculinity, they reported more negative attitudes towards homosexuality, more support for the Iraq war, stronger desire to purchase a sport utility vehicle (Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2014), greater amusement in response to sexist and

anti-gay jokes (O'Connor, Ford, & Banos, 2017), greater pain tolerance, greater feelings of aggression (Berke, Reidy, Miller, & Zeichner, 2017), and riskier financial decisions (Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson, 2013).

Another way for men to reassert their masculinity is through demonstrations of aggression and strength. In a series of experiments, men's masculinity was threatened by having them engage in tasks stereotyped as feminine, such as braiding dolls' hair. Compared to men in control groups, these men were more likely to prefer to do an aggressive boxing activity rather than a puzzle, and also punched a pad with greater force (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009).

1.2. Precarious manhood and muscularity

Based on the precarious manhood perspective, we expected men would respond to threats to their masculinity by increasing their representations of their physical strength. The precarious manhood perspective potentially dovetails with a perspective in the body image literature that has been labeled the "threatened masculinity" hypothesis (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; see also Hunt et al., 2013; Luciano, 2007). The threatened masculinity perspective proposes that representations of muscularity have become more common in the media because of changes in gender roles in the 20th century. Masculinity can no longer be primarily defined by being a breadwinner because women can now occupy this role. One thing men can ostensibly control is their muscularity, which can differentiate them from women and therefore takes on a greater importance as a signal of masculinity.

Based on the threatened masculinity perspective, Hunt et al. (2013) hypothesized that men whose masculinity was threatened would *decrease* their confidence in their physical ability. This contrasts with the hypothesis we derived from the precarious manhood perspective, which led us to reason that threats to masculinity would cause men to portray themselves as having *greater* strength and formidability. A separate group of researchers independently derived and tested a similar hypothesis using the precarious manhood perspective: they found that men created more muscular computer-generated avatars after their masculinity had been threatened (Lee-Won, Tang, & Kibbe, 2017).

1.2.1. Effects of masculinity threat on reported strength

The Hunt et al. (2013) study, hereafter referred to as the "original study," asked college men to complete the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (Mahalik et al., 2003). The men were then given false feedback about their level of masculinity.

Consistent with their hypothesis and contrary to our expectations, the original study found that men told they had below average masculinity (threatened) reported they could do fewer push-ups than men told their masculinity was towards the higher end of average (affirmed). The effect size when comparing mean differences between the two conditions was quite large ($d = 0.85$). The effect size for the main effect of threatened masculinity in regression analyses ($\beta = -.32$) could be considered a practically significant effect for social science data (Ferguson, 2009; $d = .41$; β or $r = .20$). Actual level of conformity to masculine norms did not moderate the effects of the experimental prime.

1.2.2. Effects of masculinity threat on attitudes towards muscularity

The original study also examined the effects of threatened masculinity on men's attitudes towards muscularity. The original study used a silhouette-based measure for assessing current and ideal muscularity in Study 1 (Hildebrandt, Langenbacher, & Schlundt, 2004). In Study 2, the original study relied on the Swansea Muscu-

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