

critically analyzing all forms of injustice, the movement arrived at the understanding that feminism is a social justice movement intended to bust down the walls of inequity, constraint, and mandatory gender conformity. Feminism is about justice understood through the lens of gender.

Chapter 3

Constructing Masculinity: Putting the How and the Why in the XY

FOR MOST PEOPLE, TALKING ABOUT GENDER is like a fish talking about water. Gender is such a huge part of our daily routine that we just take it for granted. For most of us, questioning how we “get gendered” occurs to us just about as often as we wonder whether the sun will come up. In other words, even though we’re constantly creating and identifying gender roles, we don’t tend to think about it.

Gender refers to the complex web of social meanings—qualities such as pretty, tough, or reckless—that are attached to biological sex. This process gets started early in our lifetimes—sometimes before we’re even born, when parents decide how to decorate the nursery (pastel pink, blue, or yellow?) or when they choose a theme for baby shower invitations (baseball or fluffy bunnies?).

Feminism explains that masculinity and femininity are things we learn to perform, not behaviors we’re born with. Gender shapes our relationships, skills, interests, and how we understand ourselves. But gender roles aren’t carved in stone: We make them up. And because gender roles are culturally constructed, they can also be changed.

For example, we think of the color pink as gentle and soft—traits we associate with girls—and we think of the color blue as solid, firm, and tough—adjectives we link with boys. But the current pink-is-for-girls and blue-is-for-boys assumption wasn’t uniform until the 1950s. In the past, these traits and colors were reversed. According

to Jo Paolletti, an expert in textiles and American studies, people used to think that pink was masculine because it was a muted version of red, representing strength, the planet Mars, war, fire, and blood. Blue, on the other hand, was considered feminine because the color evoked peace, harmony, water, the sky, and Heaven.

Pink and blue—like so many other gender signifiers—are social conventions. We like our babies dressed in pink or blue. People tend to get anxious if the sex of a baby is not immediately obvious, argues Paolletti. But still, we'll take a baby in a gender-neutral pastel before we're likely to feel comfortable dressing a little boy in pink frills. This says a lot about how deeply invested we are in gender distinctions and about our attachment to the meanings and traits we associate with masculinity.

We carry in our minds plenty of unexamined presuppositions about masculinity and about what it means to be a guy. Ask people what they associate with masculinity and there's a good chance you'll hear responses such as guys are providers and protectors, they're physically strong, they're unemotional or emotionally reserved, and they're sexually in charge. They fix things, solve problems, kill spiders, and open jars. Violence and anger might even get thrown into the mix.

Yet along with deeply reinforced assumptions about gender, our culture also presents us with ambivalent—or contradictory—messages about masculinity. When it comes to being a guy, these are interesting times. Warrior masculinity is reinforced through military conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe, while the term "metrosexual" also rolls easily off our tongues. So on the one hand, we have visions of rugged soldiers toughing it out in the elements and risking their lives to "protect and serve." At the same time, style magazines and movie stars promote images of men concerned with manicures, facials, and sleek, trim figures to carry off the latest fashion trends with aplomb. More American men are contentedly doing domestic work, but the popularity and aggressive excitement of men's mixed martial arts (MMA) is simultaneously at record highs. After four-on-the-floor MMA training, guys can tune in to TLC to watch Curtis

Stone, the *Take Home Chef*, whip up a crème brûlée with fresh berry topping (young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are the covered demographic for prime-time cooking shows). While this range of examples might represent an opening up of possibilities for how men want to live their lives, it also tells us something about our culture's anxieties around masculinity. So what does it mean to be a man in the twenty-first century, and what has it meant in the past?

High Heels or Combat Boots?

Gender expectations and ideals have shifted throughout history, and with them our ideas of what is "normal." For example, getting ripped and buff might be the style of the day, but these physical standards have changed through time. For studs in seventeenth-century France wore high-heeled shoes, red velvet jackets, and frilly white lace shirts, lots of blush, and white powder makeup. Particular ideas about masculinity existed in the 1600s, just as they do today. But instead of wearing high heels, a "guy's guy" today is more likely to wear sagging baggy pants or the latest in J. Crew gear. Depending on the scene, gay men might express masculinity through cars or gym memberships. Frat guys in Southern California often go for raised trucks, flip-flops, Axe body spray, and wraparound sunglasses to express their masculinity. It's no doubt pretty easy to picture badass punk guys with shaved heads and tough tattoos, or Latino lowriders with pimped-out cars, or attorneys with hard-shell briefcases and power to spare. In Jewish culture, men are often expected to accomplish the ideals of masculinity through savvy scholarly debate and professional or intellectual achievement. But all of these examples of masculinity are stereotypes, often replete with prejudices about class, race, and ethnicity. Media and niche advertising perpetuate these stereotypes even though most people don't conform to them. The reason? Because they represent an image, not real life.

Since gender ideals shift culturally and historically, through time and place, these stereotypes are called into question. Here's an example of one such stereotype exposed: In the early twentieth century, Jews were often denied entry to universities. Recent Jewish immigrants from

Eastern Europe were often poor or working class. Barred from higher education and facing poverty, they found that one available avenue for money and success was boxing, not a sport that's conventionally associated with Jewish men today. In fact, Jewish men aren't often associated with sports at all in the United States. In his book *When Boxing Was a Jewish Sport*, author Allen Bodner writes that between 1910 and 1940, there were twenty-six Jewish boxing champions, including men such as Benny Leonard, Barney Ross, and "Slapsie" Maxie Rosenbloom. By 1928 Jews were the majority ethnic group in U.S. professional boxing.

This example indicates not only that masculinity is historically contingent, but also that gender expectations and stereotypes are linked to ethnicity and class. References to the generic term "masculinity" often involve the invalid or unspoken assumption that when we say "men" we're talking about white, heterosexual, American, able-bodied, and middle-class people. This unexamined default setting reinforces privilege by making entire groups of men invisible.

We often also assume that masculinity equals dominance and aggression, a situation that social psychologist Robert Brannon sums up in three short words: no sissy stuff. This phrase dominates our collective imagination by invoking unrealistic expectations that men are by nature stoic, unemotional, aggressive, and interpersonally detached. Consistent with these stereotypes of masculinity, physical contact among men is never okay unless it takes place on the wrestling mat, on the football field, or in a fight. Author Clint Catalyst adds that "for males who don't pull off the role of 'straight-acting,' life isn't exactly carefree." In Catalyst's experience, the consequences of being a "sissy" have included sexual rejection, social ostracism, and even blatant job discrimination.

Hypermasculine ideology pressures guys to be bigger, stronger, faster, and harder. Summer of 2008 marked the release of *Bigger, Stronger, Faster*, a film about how American culture rewards speed, strength, winning, and being hard. In the United States, men are encouraged to do anything it takes to achieve these goals, to the extent that top

athletes, high school students, and everyday gym rats are on the hot seat for taking performance-enhancing drugs. The media rightly point out that these drugs can be risky to people's health, but what often gets left out or glossed over in public debates about competition, performance, and steroids is how cultural assumptions about masculinity play into our ideas about being top dog and what it means to win.

Performance-enhancing drugs are a health issue, but they are also a gender issue. While some women are also incredibly competitive, taking steroids or amping up their athletic records by other dubious means, being bigger, stronger, faster, and harder is usually a guy thing. It is part and parcel of hypermasculine culture. And the pressure on guys to accomplish these traits shines a bright light on the social norms and ideas about masculinity that we often take for granted.

This picture of masculinity is restrictive to men and oppressive to all. Moreover, these default settings are just plain inaccurate. Conventional masculinity is a style of manhood that many men (and women) are complicit in upholding, although few actually embody. There is nothing traditional, universal, or eternal about our current conventions of masculine gender.

There are actually many versions of masculinity—not just the dominant mainstream model of hyperaggressive manhood. And what it means to be masculine can look very different depending on a person's sexual orientation, class, religion, ethnicity, or race. Masculinity comes in many forms and packages, which are also influenced by personal predilections. Clint Catalyst, for example, is a self-described prancy boy who favors flamboyant clothes and expressive affect. Stay-at-home dads may care for small children with tenderness. Writers, artists, and musicians can be thoughtful and perceptive. A dancer may be lithe, competitive, and hirsute; a bodybuilder might be burly, submissive, and hairless. The possibilities for how men select from the "gender buffet" are endless. Australian social scientist Raewyn Connell (herself formerly male) argues that there is not *one* true version of masculine identity. Instead, there are many aspects of, and multiple ways of performing, *masculinities*.

On Masculinity

Anyone with a handlebar mustache is a real man. Like Lemmy from Motörhead. That's a real man.

—Tyler Lewis, twenty-two-year-old student

To my Asian family, I am the eldest son and expected to act accordingly. My responsibilities namely include caring for my mother in her old age and watching my younger brother so long as he lives. On my white side, I am considered a flamboyant failure of a man, because I am not masculine enough. My white family expects that I'll marry a woman and have many children. Being queer puts quite a damper on this hope. I consider my manhood self-taught through life obstacles. Masculinity, in general, is nothing more than a guise. A mask that people hide behind to create a faux alpha-male positionality in society. It creates fear and intimidation. My natural butch/masculine appearance keeps people at a distance and works against me when talking to many gay circles who assume my sexuality is bent.

For me, the qualities of being a man include: an unyielding desire to grow as a human, a nurturing connection to all peoples, a constant struggle to understand my place as not being above any other person, and finally, being a man means constantly challenging any and all unconscious thoughts that are rooted in societal/cultural designs of misogyny. Being a man takes a lot of work because there is nothing natural about it. Manhood/masculinity/man are all performances. And performances take an awful lot of practice. Often those performances fail, other times they lead to an Oscar. Either way, masculinity is a performance of a lifetime.

—Benny LeMaster, twenty-seven-year-old barista

When I was about five years old, my father pulled me into the bathroom after dinner and told me to take off my clothes. I thought something was up because it wasn't my bath time and he had closed the door quickly,

as if he were trying to hide something. Being a kid, though, I took off my clothes and my dad took out a can of lime Barbasol and covered me from head to foot. I didn't like this at all and I tried to run out the door, but my dad grabbed me and told me that men should be hairy and that shaving me now would result in increased hairiness as I grew older. I didn't buy this for one second and started screaming for my mom. My dad tried to shut me up, but I kept crying louder until my mom yelled at my dad to open the door. She gave a little scream when she saw me standing there, covered completely in shaving cream and my dad with a razor in his hand, looking appropriately guilty. That crazy bastard.

—Ted Kim, thirty-nine-year-old news producer

According to Webster's American Dictionary College Edition, masculinity is defined as "pertaining to or characteristic of a man or men, such as strength or boldness." Last time I checked women could also have these qualities. I think we need more conversations about what masculinity means to both men and women.

—Cassie Comley, twenty-one-year-old student and surfer

My twenty-five-year-old male friend says masculinity is being strong physically and mentally. Being tough. But I'm not sure there is an easy way to define masculinity anymore. The thing is, just like women, men have always been changing what it means to define them. Physically, emotionally, psychologically, all men are different and we're always re-defining ourselves. What makes one man feel more masculine might make another feel less so.

—Aaina Chamberlain, twenty-three-year-old community organizer

To me, masculinity is about everything I've done for the sake of feeling more comfortable with other men, feeling more attractive to women, or feeling that my father approves of me.

—Chad Keoni Sniffen, thirty-four-year-old sexual-assault prevention coordinator

It's even the case that masculinity is not something that only guys do. Women can be masculine, too. So despite all the stereotypes we might carry around in our heads, masculinity can actually take on many forms. And if that's the case, then what is masculinity and where does it come from? Can we change it? And would we want to?

The Nature/Nurture Debate

Biological factors contribute somehow to creating manhood. The question, though, is how much of being a man (or a woman) comes from nature and how much from nurture? The jury is still out on this question, but it's an important one.

Through the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, arguments for nature or nurture as the primary explanation for gender have swung back and forth like a pendulum. In one era, social explanations take the lead in explaining human attributes. In the next generation, biology takes the front seat. We're now in the "nature" phase of this pendulum swing, so it's common to see headlines splashed across magazines and Internet sites emphasizing the so-called science behind masculinity and femininity and how men's and women's behavior is allegedly "hardwired." A 2007 FoxNews.com story exclaimed that men are "hardwired" to ignore their wives. In 2008 Star.com reported that men are "hardwired" to be extreme (whatever that means). Researchers at UCLA have claimed that women under stress are hardwired to form friendships with other women because of cascading brain chemicals. Some popular magazine articles even suggest that men are hardwired to cheat on their partners, which presumes that women never do and which provides a biological excuse for infidelity—a decidedly socially driven activity.

Historian Carl Degler writes in his book *In Search of Human Nature* that biological paradigms for explaining human behavior go in and out of favor depending on the ideological or political inclinations of an era. The focal points of biological explanations shift, too, so where biological arguments once focused on reproductive systems, the emphasis these days is on how the brain functions. This indicates that culturally these

explanations serve to prop up what are largely ideological concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Biological models for understanding human behavior rely on the idea that innate biological differences between males and females "program" distinct social behaviors for men and women. This is called biological determinism. Socially based frameworks, such as those coming from the fields of cultural anthropology or sociology, look at variations in behaviors and gender attributes. These approaches highlight the socialization process that teaches boys and girls to live up to the expectations for their respective genders. Either approach on its own—biology or socialization, nature or nurture—is inadequate for explaining complex human beings and why we do what we do.

Science definitely has its place in helping us understand our biological selves. But in our culture these days science puts the seal of approval on issues that often have political components as well as biological ones. Ask evolutionary psychology expert Martha McCaughy or biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling about this, and they'll explain that science does not equal fact. Science equals fact plus ideology plus politics. As science writer Keely Savio puts it in her blog, "Science—you slap that label on something and in most circles it instantly attains a level of credibility that almost nothing else can equal. But what trickles into the popular media as science news is far from infallible, following a circuitous process riddled with bias, judgment, and ideology."

Take, for example, the story of the sperm and the egg. This presumably innocent explanation of human conception is actually a profoundly gendered metaphor. The conventional sperm-and-egg rhetoric exposes how political ideas or cultural narratives can be foisted onto science.

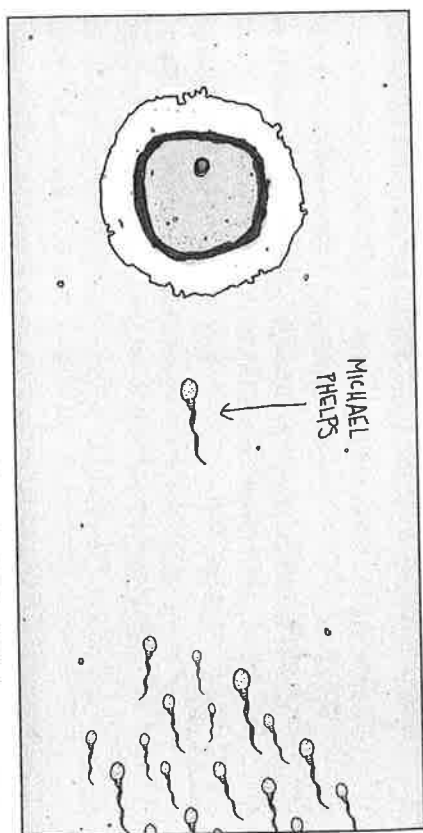
The actual mechanics of conception are pretty straightforward: Egg meets sperm and meiosis follows. The story gets politically interesting, however, when we begin to think of sperm as male and eggs as female, imbuing sperm and eggs with gendered qualities. In our culture's narrative of conception, the ovum is described as "large and passive" and sperm are characterized as "active," "streamlined," and "strong."

Further scientific investigations, writes Annamarie Sheets of MIT, "have made it clear that these descriptions are influenced by cultural dualisms rather than observable data." Sperm come from men and eggs come from women, but that doesn't mean that sperm are masculine and that eggs are feminine.

Anthropologist Emily Martin explains that skewed imagery and gendered metaphors have permeated the story of reproduction. This illustrates "how cultural myths can turn into scientific myths, and vice versa." According to author David H. Freedman, who profiled Martin's work in *Discover* magazine, until very recently most biologists and school textbooks portrayed sperm as "intrepid warriors battling their way to an aging, passive egg that can do little but await the sturdy victor's final, bold plunge." In fact, when it comes to fertilization, Martin insists, "the egg is no passive lady-in-waiting." What's closer to the truth, Freedman reports, is this:

A wastefully huge swarm of sperm weakly flops along, its members bumping into walls and flailing aimlessly through thick strands of mucus. Eventually, through sheer odds of pinball-like bouncing more than anything else, a few sperm end up close to an egg. As they mill around, the egg selects one and reels it in, pinning it down in spite of its efforts to escape. It's no contest, really. The gigantic, hardy egg yanks this tiny sperm inside, distills out the chromosomes, and sets out to become an embryo....

Martin was surprised to find that popular literature, textbooks, and even medical journals were crammed with descriptions of warrior sperm and damsel-in-distress eggs.... Less mysterious, in Martin's opinion, was the motivation for such biased language. Men link potency to strong sperm, she says. You'd like your sperm to be like you; no wonder everyone believed sperm were torpedoes.... [but] from the early 1970s on, studies of the sperm and eggs of many species have revealed that molecules released by the egg



This cartoon, which jokes about olympic swim champion Michael Phelps, and which quickly spread on the Internet in 2008, humorously reflects cultural stereotypes that associate sperm with "masculine" traits such as competition and speed.

are critical to guiding and activating the sperm.... The notion of fiercely battling, competitive sperm suggests that they're battling each other in a race to the egg.... The macho image of sperm not only obscures this reality; it actually reverses what's been observed.

What's significant is how masculine and feminine stereotypes are superimposed onto the sperm and egg. The resulting story of conception illustrates how we create and reinforce ideas about masculinity as aggressive and competitive. We shape science with our cultural ideas; in this case, science is not fact but fairytale.

Other times science is used to explain supposedly inherent traits of masculinity; these skewed biological explanations for what is perceived as gendered behavior must not be confused with fact. As McCaughy points out, these myths of masculinity wend their way into pop culture and politics specifically when arguments rely on so-called scientific experts to explain questions such as why men rape, why men dig big-breasted women, or why men like porn. When sociobiological theories are presented as science, McCaughy says, it reveals more

about American culture than it does about scientific data. For instance, she reports that "Our Cheating Hearts," a 1994 *Time* magazine cover story on infidelity, offered an evolutionary explanation for why men cheat on their partners; *Muscle and Fitness* magazine used a theory of male and female sexual psychology in its 1994 article "Man the Visual Animal" to "prove" that men are born to leer at women; "The Biology of Attraction," featured in *Men's Health* magazine, explained to readers in 2005 that alleged primal evolutionary fertility signals give the green light to men to ogle young girls. Each of these justifications for *some* men's behavior provides, as McCaughy puts it, "a means by which heterosexual male readers can experience their sexuality as cultural [and] primal" through messages that tell men staring at women is biological destiny. These science-based rationalizations ignore other explanations for human behavior, such as how institutions and social practices create a context that gives men access to women's sexualized bodies.

Michael Kimmel writes in *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* that boys and men face a complex social scene in which their attitudes, their relationships, their rules, and their rituals are shaped. This complex social scene includes everyday activities such as video games and music and even extreme events such as violent fraternity initiations, sexual predation, and school shootings. Masculinity is shaped through social institutions such as the military, marriage, pornography, mainstream sexuality, sports, work, pop culture media—and even science itself. But science-based explanations for behavior ask us to ignore these cultural and social influences.

In their introduction to *Men's Lives*, Kimmel and coeditor Michael Messner point out that the transformation from factual information to ideological story is a sleight of hand where "observed normative differences between women and men that are assumed to be of biological origin are easily translated into political prescriptions." In other words, "what is *normative* (i.e., what is prescribed) is translated into what is *normal*." This point is important. It is a magic trick that happens every day. And it has real consequences when science is used to justify what are actually cultural beliefs about gender.

When observed normative differences between women and men are assumed to have biological origins, we end up with arguments that reinforce stereotypes about gender and ultimately serve as excuses to keep women from achieving equality. For instance, author George Gilder argues that male sexuality is, by nature, "wild and lusty"—unless women control it. If women don't control men's sexuality, Gilder writes, they are abandoning their "natural" function. According to this line of thought, employment opportunities, sex education, abortion, and birth control all encourage women to turn their backs on their so-called natural roles.

Like Gilder, University of Virginia professor Steven Rhoads argues that gender equity is a pipe dream because men and women are born with different "natures." Rhoads relies on evolutionary theories to presume that any biological difference necessarily results in prescribed gender roles in the workplace, home, and family. Along similar lines, a June 2008 *Washington Post* article on education reported that boys and girls should be taught differently in school. According to family therapist Michael Gurian, brain studies show that boys don't hear as well as girls and that girls are more sensitive to light; boys fidget more and girls are more likely to behave and pay attention in class. Gurian and others such as Leonard Sax use these ideologically driven claims about how boys and girls are "hardwired" to promote sex-segregated classroom policy. But renowned education and gender scholar David Sadker counters Gurian's findings by calling them "stereotypes of the first order" that limit children's options and creativity.

Scientists and scholars such as Gilder, Rhoads, and Gurian are engaged in knowledge production. When biased perspectives on masculinity get picked up as quotes in pop culture outlets such as *Men's Health* magazine or the six o'clock news, scientific explorations become conflated with fact and we begin to assume that the suggestions of the "experts" are truth. Underlying bias or ideological assumptions get overlooked and, instead, biological arguments for men's behavior are commonly accepted as causal explanations. But the leap from discussions about biological differences to arguments that women and

The Caveman Mystique

Quips and quotes on gender issues provided to popular media by scientific experts become "part of popular consciousness, a sort of cultural consensus about who men are," writes Martha McCaughey in *The Caveman Mystique: Pop-Darwinism and the Debates over Sex, Violence, and Science*. These scientific explanations of gender become the cultural myths of our era. And, McCaughey points out, as French theorist Roland Barthes wrote in his book *Mythologies*, "Influential cultural myths work as taken-for-granted systems of meaning—particularly when people don't understand the historical conditions that gave rise to those myths." Without a historical context for understanding how scientific stories emerge to explain men's sexual behaviors and feelings, biology as destiny has become the paradigm through which many people understand men. McCaughey calls this the "caveman mystique."

The basic version of the mystique is that when humans lived in caves, men did the hunting and women gathered berries. This story becomes transformed into assumptions about human nature: If a man wanted sex, he threw a woman over his shoulder and dragged her back to the cave. We are told this is a biological imperative. This myth is used to justify all kinds of masculine sexual aggression, and it reinforces stereotypes about female passivity.

Myths of masculinity also use biology to prop up ideologies of gender

men *should* participate in different behaviors is misleading. There is no logical reason to assume that biology causes behavior in a linear fashion.

Does It Have to Be Either/Or?

Our ideas about masculinity and femininity run deep and are reinforced, in part, because of something called dichotomous thinking, or dualistic epistemology. What this means is that we tend to think in terms of opposites. We tend to structure our thought in pairs.

Binary categories often get overlaid with value judgments in which one side of the equation seems more important than the other. In our culture, masculine traits tend to be judged more worthwhile. This

difference. For instance, it's a biological fact that men can produce between fifty million and five hundred million sperm with each ejaculation and women produce about four hundred mature eggs during the course of their lives. The myth is formed when this factual information is used to argue that men are thus biologically less "invested" in their offspring than women are or that because of the biological differences in the number of eggs and sperm produced, reproductive "success" for men means getting as many women as possible pregnant in order to make good use of that sperm. These kinds of narratives remove free will and morality from the realm of human behavior.

As economic conditions deteriorate in the United States, the mythical caveman identity—productive, protective, aggressive, and heterosexual—is available to those whom McCaughey calls "men in crisis." As men confront unemployment, corporate downsizing, and unstable economic markets, some worry they are becoming less socially powerful. McCaughey writes that the caveman mystique offers men a reassuring identity as virile, manly men.

Unfortunately, such Darwinian discourse is sometimes used to excuse antisocial behavior. For example, one man, who was videotaped participating in New York City's Central Park group sexual assaults in the summer of 2000, is heard on video telling his sobbing victim, "Welcome back to the caveman times." McCaughey wonders, "How does a man come to think of himself as a caveman when he attacks a woman? 'What has made so many American men [and women] decide that it's the DNA, rather than the devil, that makes them do it?' she asks.

thought process generally does not occur on a conscious level, and our presuppositions go unexamined. We don't think to ask important questions, such as why we would choose *either/or* in the first place. What if we revised how we structure knowledge to incorporate what postmodern philosophers call the "both/and"? In other words, a revised thought process wouldn't require dividing things into *either* nature *or* nurture, yin *or* yang, good *or* bad, masculine *or* feminine. Instead, we might conceptualize our surroundings as influenced by *both* nature *and* nurture, yin *and* yang, good *and* bad, masculine *and* feminine. Historically and around the world there are plenty of examples of cultures that think of individuals as a blend of both masculine and

feminine traits, or that accept the existence of more than two genders. Anthropologist Margaret Mead explained as early as 1935 in her book *Sex and Temperament* that there are examples of cultures in which no one gender role was assigned to men or to women. Instead, each of us shares personality traits and temperaments and an infinite variety of human potential. In her essay, "Night to His Day," Judith Lorber expands on this issue:

Western societies have only two genders, "man" and "woman." Some societies have three genders—men, women, and berdaches or hijras or xaniths. Berdaches, hijras, and xaniths are biological males who behave, dress, work, and are treated in most respects as social women; they are therefore not men, nor are they female women; they are, in our language, "male women." There are African and American Indian societies that have a gender status called many hearted women—biological females who work, marry, and parent as men; their social status is "female men." . . . They do not have to behave or dress as men to have the social prerogatives of husbands and fathers; what makes them men is enough wealth to buy a wife.

Contemporary transgender debates add important perspectives to our conversations about masculinity and complicate our ideas about masculinity and femininity as either/or conditions. Transgender scholar Susan Stryker points out that while many people believe that masculinity is rooted in biology, the biological "cause" of gender identity has never been proven. Think of it this way, Stryker suggests: Humans have a biological capacity to use language, but that doesn't mean we're born knowing how to speak French. "Likewise," Stryker says, "while we have a biological capacity to identify with and to learn to 'speak' from a particular location in a cultural gender system, we don't come into the world with a predetermined gender identity."

Similarly, Judith "Jack" Halberstam proposes that masculinity cannot be reduced to the male body. The presence of what she calls

"female masculinity" requires that we expand our limited gender categories to account for tomboys, butch lesbians, and other gender benders.

In her book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, author C. J. Pascoe explains that practices called "gender maneuvering" challenge our assumptions about masculinity. During a year and a half she spent hanging out in a working-class high school doing research, Pascoe noticed girls who appropriated clothing styles, sexual practices, and interactional dominance usually associated with boys, calling into question our assumptions that masculinity is the sole domain of men. These continuing debates confront essentialist assumptions about gender.

According to psychologist Sandra Bem's classic research on psychological androgyny, masculinity and femininity are in many respects orthogonal—not oppositional—to each other. In other words, instead of thinking about masculine and feminine gender traits and characteristics (which are also associated with sexual traits and characteristics, or assumptions) as being polar opposites on the same axis, we should actually visualize them as existing on different, perpendicular dimensions. Therefore, they are independently variable.

Bem rated people on two scales: One scale measured stereotypically female-ascribed traits and the other measured stereotypically male-ascribed traits. In asking respondents how strongly they rate themselves in possessing supposedly gendered traits—such as self-reliance, helpfulness, cheerfulness, loyalty, need for power, independence, or shyness—Bem found that many people score high on both scales. She also found that many people score low on both. And—most important—Bem found that a high score on one does not predict a low score on the other. What this means is that male does not equal masculine and female does not equal feminine. Instead, explains gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, some people are more *gender-y* than others. But there's no rigid, hard-and-fast thing called masculinity or femininity. Gender is constructed and it is changeable and it's something we can all

The Sexual Continuum: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough

Anne Fausto-Sterling, professor of biology and gender studies at Brown University, has written extensively on sexual and gender identity. In this excerpt from *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Fausto-Sterling writes about Levi Suydam, a young person who today might be described as intersex. This story provides an example of how two sexes—male and female—don't adequately describe the full range of human sexual existence.

In 1843 Levi Suydam, a twenty-three-year-old resident of Salisbury, Connecticut, asked the town's board of selectmen to allow him to vote as a Whig in a hotly contested local election. The request raised a flurry of objections from the opposition party, for a reason that must be rare in the annals of American democracy: it was said that Suydam was "more female than male," and thus (since only men had the right to vote) should not be allowed to cast a ballot. The selectmen brought in a physician, one William James Barry, to examine Suydam and settle the matter. Presumably upon encountering a phallus and testicles, the good doctor declared the prospective voter male. With Suydam safely in their

perform in myriad ways. The Bem Index actually confronts the sorts of gendered assumptions about men and masculinity that are reinforced through cultural myths, media, and everyday pop culture.

Of course, none of this is to insist that men and women are exactly the same. Rather, the real questions are why binary gender standards are so strictly enforced and why gender distinctions still come at a price—such as lower wages for women, or fewer opportunities for men to nurture and parent. Why is our culture so heavily invested in policing and enforcing particular types of behaviors and prohibiting others? Why are traits that are associated with men or masculinity (e.g., logical reasoning, autonomy) considered better, more valuable, and more worthwhile than traits associated with women or femininity

column the Whigs won the election by a majority of one.

A few days later, however, Barry discovered that Suydam menstruated regularly and had a vaginal opening. . . . No one has yet discovered whether Suydam lost the right to vote. . . .

European and American culture is deeply devoted to the idea that there are only two sexes. Even our language refuses other possibilities: thus to write about Levi Suydam . . . I have had to invent conventions—*s/he* and *his/her*—to denote individuals who are clearly neither/both male and female or who are, perhaps, both at once. . . . Whether one falls into the category of man or woman matters in concrete ways. For Suydam—and still today for women in some parts of the world—it meant the right to vote. It might mean being subject to the military draft and to various laws concerning the family and marriage. . . .

But if the state and the legal system has an interest in maintaining only two sexes, our collective biological bodies do not. While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies, bodies such as Suydam's that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. The implications of my argument for a sexual continuum are profound. If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits. Reconceptualizing the category of "sex" challenges cherished aspects of European and American social organization.

(e.g., emotion, interaction, relational reasoning)? These are political arguments—not biological ones—and they affect who gets access to the resources and rewards of our culture.

Morphing Biological Males into Men

In 1949, French existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in *The Second Sex*, "Woman is made, not born." We can borrow from de Beauvoir to say also that man is made, not born. Antiviolence activist Jackson Katz explains that if we can understand masculinity and gender as fluid, and if we can see certain outcomes of gender socialization (e.g., violent behavior), then we can change the institutional arrangements that encourage, support, and prop up these behaviors.

In an *Atlantic* journal article, Josep M. Armengol points out that "this gendering process—the transformation of biological males into socially interacting men—is a central experience for men," just as it is for women. The biological condition of a boy's birth is only one aspect of his *becoming* a man. Pivotal points through the course of a lifetime create masculine identities. We've already seen the ideological impact that pastel colors such as pink and blue carry with them. Institutions such as kindergarten, Boy Scouts, sports teams, fraternities, advertising, pornography, prostitution, gangs, the sex industry, and the military teach us about masculinity and how guys are supposed to act to be considered "real men."

Men are under constant scrutiny by other men to measure up. Approval among guys involves organizing mainstream U.S. masculinity as a competition to rank as *not* feminine, *not* gay, *not* afraid. All that aggressively stylized and sweaty showing in the pit at a punk show? Guys who jump in are taking part in homosocial bonding, connecting with each other nonsexually. The same goes for masculine solidarity in hip-hop or the huddle before a football game. When groups of guys carcall a girl, it has little to do with believing that she'll turn around and have sex with them. It's actually about guys performing for other guys. In this instance, guys are bonding with each other using sexist means. Similarly, calling someone a "faggot" has little to do with the targeted person's sexuality. It's about reinforcing masculinity by holding contempt for anyone who seems feminine or untough.

Michael Kimmel has a standing bet that he can walk onto any playground in America where six-year-old boys are happily playing and provoke a fight simply by asking, "Who's a sissy around here?" "One of two things is likely to happen," Kimmel writes.

One boy will accuse another of being a sissy, to which that boy will respond that he is not a sissy, that the first boy is. They may have to fight it out to see who's lying. Or a whole group of boys will surround one boy and all shout, "He is! He is!" That boy will either burst into tears and run home

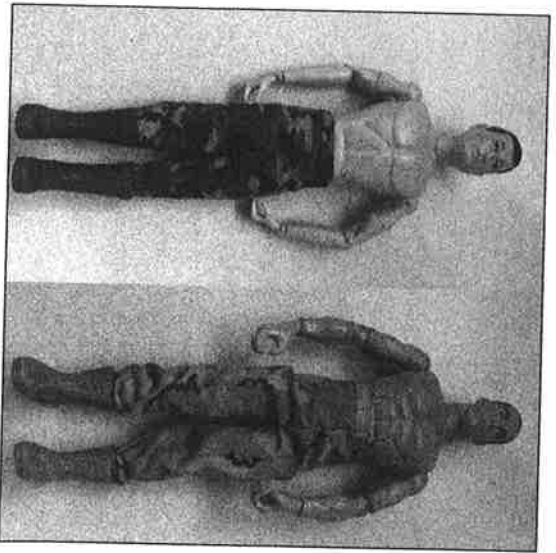
crying, disgraced, or he will have to take on several boys at once, to prove that he's not a sissy. (And what will his father or older brothers tell him if he chooses to run home crying?) It will be some time before he regains any sense of self-respect.

Mainstream gender lessons for and about boys tend to promote a model of dominant—or hegemonic—masculinity. C. J. Pascoe notes that sexuality is one area in which young men experience particular pressure. Asserting sexual dominance, she writes, is somewhat paradoxical. The high school guys she observed while researching her book talked a big talk about who "wanted" them and who they "did." But these stories about "girl-getting rituals" were less about sexual desire and actually more about, as Pascoe writes, "proving their capacity to exercise control on the world around them, primarily through women's bodies."

With the recent surge in popularity of Viagra, the little blue pill has emerged as a potent way for understanding masculinity as essentially about virility. Viagra creates a metaphor suggesting the male body is like a machine. If it's broken, masculinity can be fixed or regained. This obviously presumes a corporeal masculinity, with its source in the penis. The "Viagra Model" of masculinity also presumes that sexual pleasure is about penetrability and hardness—concepts that are as much ideological visions of masculinity as they are about physiology. In the age of Viagra, writes Meika Loe in "Fixing Broken Masculinity: Viagra as a Technology for the Production of Gender and Sexuality," most medical practitioners and consumers "agree that loss of erectile function appears to be synonymous with loss of manhood." Viagra's emphasis on erectile function also reinforces assumptions that sex equals heterosexual intercourse. We might ask what it means symbolically now that Viagra is promoted for daily use, as a preventive measure, and for nighttime to facilitate nocturnal erections.

Messages about masculinity also involve a huge preoccupation with men's physiques. The media besieges guys with images of muscular male bodies. The message guys get from the time they're little boys is that

Photographs by Betty Holmes



Between the 1960s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, GI Joe's biceps and chest grew disproportionately large compared to the rest of his body.

seven inches; chest measurements increased dramatically from about forty-four to fifty-five inches during the same period.

Pop culture is a powerful source of the stories we are taught about masculinity. Katz argues that males who feel powerless in the broader society—particularly men of color and working-class white men—often turn to their own bodies as a source of power. That explains why we tend to associate sports such as boxing and basketball, or jobs such as construction and street-level drug dealing, with poor men or men of color. Wealthier, privileged (and often white) men have access to economic, social, and political forms of power that do not require this kind of physical posturing. Men with privilege have additional options.

Pop culture media are more than happy to reinforce this image of men—especially working-class men and men of color—as hard, hyperaggressive, or criminal. Authors Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie

Y. Moore write in their book *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation* that black males, for example, “make up about six percent of the U.S. population, yet they loom colossal in their constructions as broadcast by media all over the world via sports, crime, and entertainment. In mass media, stereotypical portrayals of ethnic groups have been a tried-and-true shortcut to character development.”

According to Byron Hurt, director of the acclaimed film *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, if men do not live up to the ideals of aggressive masculinity, guys risk getting ridiculed for not being man enough. When guys refuse to act out this aggressive version of masculinity, Hurt explains, they risk getting called names such as “soft,” “weak,” “pussy,” and “faggot.” Mainstream hip-hop repeatedly reinforces these messages about aggressive masculinity and what it means to be a man. In American culture, being “a real man” is equated with “being hard.” Not showing any weakness or emotion is a crucial aspect of being hard and therefore considered “manly.” According to Hurt, oftentimes male hip-hop artists feel as if they have to project an image of themselves as thugs, “even if that doesn’t reflect who they really are, or who they really want to be.” As a result, Hurt says, “this need to conform to the narrow definition of manhood in hip-hop is a trap for men, boxing them into a restricted, unhealthy style of manhood and masculinity.”

In *Taking the Field: Men, Women, and Sports*, Michael Messner explains how sport often encourages men to take on the stereotypes of dominant masculinity. One way this is accomplished is by establishing masculinity in opposition to—or not like—gay men or women. Melding dominant masculinity with homophobia and misogyny is reinforced when words such as “faggot,” “pussy,” and “woman” are used as insults by male athletes, and even by coaches who want their players to be more aggressive.

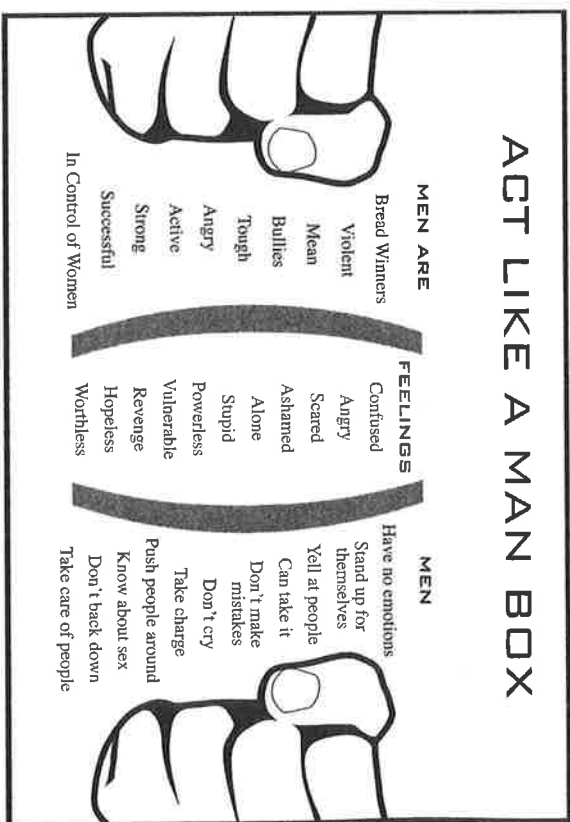
Sports culture places a powerful emphasis on winning, not being weak, and not having your goal penetrated by the opposing team. For an athlete, these messages about what it means to be a guy are part

of a competitive package in which the male athletic body becomes a weapon to fend off other people and forcefully keep them off his turf. This aggression can be translated off the field as violence. For instance, data show that male college athletes are more likely to be violent than other college males. This tells us that sports play a strong role in constructing gender in ways that combine masculinity with dominance and aggression. Messner argues that sports are one institutionalized way "in which boys and men learn and are often rewarded for disciplining their own bodies, attitudes, and feelings within a logic of violence," which can be focused against themselves, other men, or women. Yet again, these attitudes are not innate or unchanging.

Escape from the Man Box

The Man Box is a conceptual framework developed by violence-prevention educators Allan Creighton and Paul Kivel for understanding the dominant standards and norms of masculinity. These boundaries and limitations of dominant masculinity include traits or stereotypes that are familiar to us: Boys and men don't cry; they are tough, big, aggressive; they enjoy competitive sports; they're sexual and powerful. Outside of the Man Box is where we put qualities not associated with mainstream masculinity, such as creativity, kindness, sensitivity, gentleness, and attentiveness. These are human qualities, but if judged against the norms portrayed and perpetuated by mainstream culture, they're generally traits that would cause men to perceive other men as weak. They are also the qualities we tend to associate with femininity. The Man Box constructs masculinity in opposition to femininity, and the traits inside the Man Box tend to be more highly valued than those outside of it. (The national organization A Call to Men points out that in the space beyond the Man Box is where we often find the dancers, poets, writers, and artists.)

The rules of the Man Box make it seem as if all guys are tough, have lots of sex (or say they do), drink with their buddies, and step up and unequivocally take charge. Yet there's a paradox: Nobody



Courtesy of Paul Kivel

The Man Box provides a conceptual framework for understanding how assumptions about masculinity limit the "acceptable" roles, emotions, and behaviors for men.

can really front like this *all the time*. But instead of acknowledging the diversity and complexity of masculinity, pop culture has recently given us a version of manhood that revels in escape. Movies and TV shows in the "failure-to-launch" genre, such as *Superbad*, *The Simpsons*, *Pineapple Express*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* portray men languishing in a perpetual adolescent state without tons of responsibility.

Journalist Lakshmi Chaudhry, writing for *In These Times*, notes that "commercials for cell phones, fast food, beer and deodorants offer up an infantilized version of masculinity that has become ubiquitous. . . . A recent cell phone ad, for example, features a guy who responds to being dumped by his girlfriend—because 'you're never going to grow up'—by playing, on his cell phone, an '80s pop song that tells her to get lost." This image is a corporate executive's dream customer, says Chaudhry: "a man-boy who is more likely to remain faithful to their product than to

his [partner].” The 1950s image of the benevolent patriarch, Chaudhry writes, “has been replaced by an adult teenager who spends his time sneaking off to hang out with the boys, eyeing the hot chick over his wife’s shoulder, or buying cool new toys.” If we are to believe these sorts of ads, guys can’t be trusted with the simplest domestic tasks. We’re supposed to believe that guys are so innocently—even humorously—incompetent that they can’t be trusted “cooking dinner for the kids or shopping for groceries.” (The role of women in these setups, says David Denby of the *New Yorker*, is to tolerate men’s antics and to make the men grow up.)

Michael Kimmel reveals the hidden world of what he calls “guyland” in his groundbreaking book by the same name. According to Kimmel, guyland is the social environment that every boy navigates on his way to adulthood. Entertainment, for example, has always been a fun version of escaping from everyday life. What’s astounding, Kimmel notes, is the level of dedication, time, and money that guys today exhibit. Escape from daily life often becomes guys’ top priority. (X-Box or *World of Warcraft*, anyone?) So is it any wonder, Kimmel asks, that guys on their way to manhood so closely resemble boys?

These slacker assumptions are at odds with the take-charge version of dominant masculinity that’s also imposed on men. These images present competing cultural messages to boys and men to take on a stoic hypermasculine pose *and* remain eternally irresponsible, coyly helpless, childlike “kidults.” Both versions of masculinity are so extreme and unrealistic, and neither serves men and boys well. Guys are also told that they have power over others. But while men as a group have power over women, many men lack power in other areas of their lives.

Men are both powerful *and* powerless. In fact, guys can sometimes feel really powerless, says Rocco Capraro in his article, “Why College Men Drink: Alcohol, Adventure and the Paradox of Masculinity.” Race, class, nation of origin, sexual orientation, and other identity factors further complicate this experience of relative powerlessness. Men make up the “rules of manhood.” But not all men are equal.

And the sad irony is that while men’s social power is the source of individual privilege, it’s also the source of individual pain and

alienation. Fitting into a box, feeling restricted, experiencing pressure to perform or to provide can take a heavy toll. Women have a role in this and, as bell hooks writes, as long as they continue to fall for the bad boy, women will remain complicit in upholding these rigid rules of hypermasculine manhood.

Prescriptive messages about masculinity—mixed as they sometimes are—can create shame and even depression in men. These messages can present a real danger when they limit guys’ options for exploiting what they want to do and who they want to be. When men attempt to live up to prescribed roles, they can experience discomfort that comes from both conforming and not conforming to these roles. Capraro points out that if guys fail to live up to cultural and peer group standards they’ve internalized, the resulting discomfort (or role strain) is experienced specifically as shame. The core of this shame is a painful self-judgment. Shame can be a catalyst for transformative decisions about behavior. But often for men, shame is deeply repugnant, Capraro says. Because shame is so antithetical to the expectations of masculinity in the first place, men are less likely to transform shame into positive avenues for self-realization.

Michael Kimmel explains that fear and shame are linked: Men become afraid that other guys will find out that on the inside, they’re actually scared of not measuring up, of being emasculated. Not measuring up would make us not real men, Kimmel says. Shame is related to fear—that is, “fear of shame” and “shame of fear.” A vicious cycle. As Michael Kimmel puts it, fear and shame are at the center of men’s identity.

To handle this, Kimmel says, men become distanced from anything associated with the feminine (mothers, feelings, nurturing, intimacy, vulnerability). In other words, men and boys internalize male gender roles to avoid shame. They also learn through this process that dependency needs are shameful. Another vicious cycle. Depression also becomes a risk for men especially because of dissociation from feelings and related destructive behavior.

And if dissociative behavior is the only option available to men to transform uncomfortable feelings, and it’s a limited option at that,

then men learn to manage shame, depression, and fear in particularly harmful ways, especially through drinking. Heavy or binge drinking is one way that men may act out these emotions. It's socially sanctioned. Women might cry or eat chocolate. That's what women are "allowed" to do. Men are "allowed" to drink.

In every study of college drinking, men drink more than women. Women and men report drinking to be social. But men are more likely to report that they drink to escape and that they drink to get drunk. And yet while men might drink to feel powerful (or just tanked), the paradox is that drinking decreases men's power, particularly through the loss of control of emotion, health, and basic motor functions.

There are, however, other ways for men to deal with the gap between the cultural myths about masculinity that surround them every day and the realities of who they are and how they choose to live their lives. Mainstream American culture might fetishize a version of masculinity that objectifies women and is unable to connect intimately with another person, yet research reveals that American men today do more work at home than their fathers did, and they are happy doing it. In a report from the Radcliffe Public Policy Center, Leslie G. Cinton found that 71 percent of men between twenty-one and thirty-nine years old were willing to give up pay and promotions if it meant they could have more time to spend with their families. Single men are beginning to explore options in surrogacy and adoption in order to become fathers.

Mainstream culture gives men all sorts of mixed and negative messages about masculinity, but research tells us that men's lives don't really conform with the messages they're shown. "College guys believe that 80 percent of their friends are getting laid each weekend," reports Tony Dokoupil in a 2008 *Newsweek* article about how "Peter Pans aren't as happy as they seem." Despite bravado, sexual posturing, or assumptions about what their friends are doing between the sheets, the actual number of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old guys hooking up is closer to 10 percent. After college, "the percentages merely get worse," Michael Kimmel says. And the fact is, men seem to do well in monogamous relationships. A slew of recent studies suggest that

On Being a Man

The violence of men. It appears so senseless, so random, but if we look deeply at the culture, at the spiritual losses and the capitalist relations that place property rights over human rights, material goods over spirituality, then the violence begins to make a lot of sense . . . [but] no man can find his essence, can get a hold of his own true self, as long as he participates, whether willfully or not, in a world that is predicated on man's power over woman.

—Luis J. Rodriguez, "On Macho"

Un hombre que es macho is not hypermasculine or aggressive, and he does not disrespect or denigrate women. Machos, according to the positive view, adhere to a code of ethics that stresses humility, honor, respect of oneself and others, and courage. What may be most significant in this second view is that being "macho" is not manifested by such outward qualities as physical strength and virility but by such inner qualities as personal integrity, commitment, loyalty, and, most importantly, strength of character.

—Alfredo Mirandé, *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture*

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*

Manliness consists not in bluff, bravado, or lordliness. It consists in daring to do the right [thing] and facing consequences whether it is in matters social, political, or other. It consists in deeds, not in words.

—Mahatma Gandhi

coupled men “are happier, more sexually satisfied and less likely to end up in the emergency room” than their uncoupled counterparts, Dokoupil writes. The sexual rhetoric-reality gap is similar to the gap between locker room talk and real-guy talk. The reputation is that guys’ locker-room talk is full of bawdy bravado, but Michael Messner says most guy talk actually involves “quiet, dyadic discussions of relationships, fears, and doubts,” and hopes, dreams, and desires.

Our ideas about masculinity are propped up by all sorts of cultural sources such as religion, family, schools, fairytales, sports heroes, science, and everyday myths that are so common that they become invisible to us. Yet even though the politics of masculinity are so often invisible to us, gender politics are everywhere. When we make gender visible, then we can start talking about the possibilities of positive masculinity. The question is what would that version of masculinity look like? And how would we make it happen?

The good news is that there are infinite possibilities for creating positive masculinity. Being a real man doesn’t have to mean setting oneself up in binary opposition to femininity. Masculinity doesn’t have to hinge on power and control over others. Real masculinity can involve valuing a wide range of emotions, experiences, preferences, desires, and accomplishments in all people.

Chapter 4

Gender Advantage: Checking In on Masculine Privilege

MASCULINE PRIVILEGE IS THE IDEA THAT society confers certain unearned advantages on men simply because they are male. Masculine privilege operates in everyday events. Sometimes it’s really obvious, as in the fact that Congress remains overwhelmingly male. But masculine privilege also flies under the radar. Institutional practices and ideological beliefs about masculine superiority seem so normal or natural that we’ve learned not to notice when a man’s opinion is taken more seriously than a woman’s or that calling a boy a “girl” is considered an insult.

Exposing invisible patterns and practices allows us to think critically about the links between gender privilege and sexism. One way masculine privilege operates is in how men (and women) are taught to see sexism as “individual acts of meanness,” says feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh. What’s really going on, though, is that sexism is supported by invisible systems that perpetuate and maintain dominance for men *as a group*.

This process is similar to how racism and white skin privilege work. McIntosh comments in her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” As a white woman McIntosh can turn on the TV or look at the front page of the newspaper and assume she’ll see people of her race widely represented. Jewel Woods draws parallels with his status as a man; he writes in “The Black Male Privileges Checklist” that as a man he can assume that his financial success or popularity as an