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## Work as a Masculinity Contest

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## Work as a Masculinity Contest

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*We propose that a key reason why the workplace gender revolution has stalled (England, 2010) is that work remains the site of masculinity contests among men. In this article, we outline a theoretical framework for thinking about work as a masculinity contest, beginning with a brief review of scholarship on masculinity and exploring how the workplace is a context in which men feel particular pressure to prove themselves as “real men.” We identify different dimensions of masculinity along which employees may compete and how the competition may differ by work context. We propose that organizations with Masculinity Contest Cultures (MCCs) represent dysfunctional organizational climates (e.g., rife with toxic leadership, bullying, harassment) associated with poor individual outcomes for men as well as women (e.g., burnout, low organizational dedication, lower well-being). We discuss how papers in this special issue contribute insight into MCCs and end with*

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*a discussion of the contributions made by conceptualizing work as a masculinity contest, and directions for future research.*

In February 2017, Susan Fowler, an engineer at Uber, published a blog post about serious problems at the company (Fowler, 2017). She documented repeated sexual harassment from her manager and how her attempts to get human resources (HR) to act went nowhere, in part because her manager was considered a “top performer.” Fowler’s account also described an organization characterized by a “Game-of-Thrones” like environment in which managers actively fought with their peers and sought to one-up and sabotage their own supervisors (e.g., by withholding business critical information) in attempts to take their supervisor’s job. Such behavior was not hidden, but openly bragged about.

These bad behaviors resulted in business paralysis: Priorities were continually reordered, projects were abandoned, and employees worried that their teams would be dissolved. Summing up Fowler said, “It was an organization in complete, unrelenting chaos.” Subsequent investigation by the *New York Times* unearthed employee accounts describing Uber as a “Hobbesian environment . . . in which workers are pitted against one another and where a blind eye is turned to infractions from top performers” (Isaac, 2017, February 22). After Fowler’s viral post, other damaging information came to light. Uber was accused of using a software tool to hide its drivers from regulators to avoid investigation; a video showed CEO Travis Kalanick boasting about Uber’s tough company culture and telling an Uber driver who suffered financial losses to take responsibility for his own problems; the CEO and other executives visited an escort bar in South Korea and board member David Bonderman notoriously commented that having more women on Uber’s Board of Directors would just lead to “more talking” (Rawlins, 2017). In the end, lawsuits were filed, Travis Kalanick was forced to resign as CEO, and the company suffered major reputational damage.

While Uber may be an extreme example, it is certainly not the only organization that has this kind of toxic culture. Indeed, Silicon Valley as a whole has been under attack for its “bro” culture, rule-breaking, and sexism. Recent examples in other sectors include Fox News, the Weinstein Company, and the Trump Administration; all have received considerable negative press for toxic leadership, bullying, and sexual harassment.

Though exposés of rotten administrative and organizational cultures are nothing new, this special issue presents a new framework for understanding what goes wrong in them and why. Our framework centers on toxic masculinity, which “involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others” (Kupers, 2005, p. 713). Work becomes a masculinity contest when organizations focus not on mission but on masculinity, enacted in endless “mine’s bigger than yours” contests to display workloads and long schedules (as in law and medicine) (Blair-Loy, 2005; Kellogg, 2011), cut corners to out-earn everyone else (Roth, 2006), or shoulder

unreasonable risks (as in blue-collar jobs or finance) (Iacuone, 2005; Meyerson, Ely, & Wernick, 2007; Nelson, 2012). The coin of the realm shifts in different industries but the role of toxic masculinity does not. We argue that much of what simply appears to be neutral practices and what it takes to get ahead at work is actually counterproductive behavior aimed at proving manhood on the job.

Dropping a bias training, diversity initiative, or work–life program into workplaces dominated by the masculinity contest does not serve to effect meaningful change (Williams, 2013). This special issue aims to inspire research that will arm practitioners to take more consequential and sustainable steps toward promoting diversity and work–life goals by addressing the underlying issue of the masculinity contest. The result will be workplaces that are more efficient and effective in achieving their business objectives—and are healthier and happier for women and for most men, who are either excluded from the masculinity contest, have no interest in playing it, or are destined to lose. Eliminating the masculinity contest will help organizations focus on efficiency and profitability rather than on macho showmanship, and will help all workers who want to be left in peace to do their work with dignity.

Much of our own work has exposed how masculine pressures on men motivate them to engage in “bad but bold” behavior (Glick et al., 2004)—including sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007a), physical aggression (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009), and extreme work hours and cut-throat competition (Cooper, 2014; Williams, 1999). This special issue represents the culmination of a collaborative research project to theorize and study workplace culture as a masculinity contest: A zero-sum competition played according to rules defined by masculine norms (e.g., displaying strength, showing no weakness or doubt).

We gathered an interdisciplinary research team from psychology, sociology, management, engineering, and law<sup>1</sup> to analyze workplaces that foster masculinity contests by rewarding those who emerge as winners as the “real men” who are entitled to status and resources. We introduce a new tool to help identify Masculinity Contest Cultures (MCCs; Glick, Berdahl, & Alonso, 2018) as a first step in documenting the costs of this way of doing business, which damages organizations and individuals long before those companies’ toxic cultures make headlines.

This introductory article outlines a theoretical framework for thinking about MCCs. Subsequent papers in this special issue represent initial studies into measuring MCCs (Glick et al., 2018), assessing their consequences (Alonso, 2018; Glick et al., 2018; Matos, O’Neill, and Lei, 2018; Reid, O’Neill & Blair-Loy, 2018; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018), analyzing their ideological

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<sup>1</sup>The team met four times over the course of three years (2014 to 2017) in Vancouver, British Columbia, and included the authors in this special issue in addition to Janine Benedet, Victoria Brescoll, Elizabeth Croft, Cynthia Emrich, Elizabeth Hirsh, Fiona Macfarlane, Corinne Moss-Racusin, Lakshmi Ramarajan, Toni Schmader, and Sheryl Staub-French, each of whom attended at least one meeting.

underpinnings (Kuchynka, Bosson, Vandello, & Puryear, 2018; Munsch, Weaver, Bosson, & O'Connor, 2018), and considering potential interventions (Ely & Kimmel, 2018; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018).

We begin with a brief review of theory and research on masculinity, considering masculinity's relationship to dominance over women and other men, how different masculinities are hierarchically ordered with hegemonic masculinity on top, and how masculinity is precarious. We then consider the connections between masculinity and work, exploring how the workplace is a context in which men feel particular pressure to prove themselves as "men." We identify different dimensions of masculinity along which employees may compete and how the competition may differ by context. We then introduce the concept of MCCs in organizations, and how and why MCCs are likely to be linked to a host of undesirable organizational maladies such as toxic leadership, lack of psychological safety in work groups, reduced employee well-being, lack of work-life balance, sexual harassment, and bullying. Throughout, we make connections to how papers in this special issue contribute insight into MCCs, including efforts toward changing or eliminating them.

### **Masculinity**

Conventional understandings of gender assume that masculinity and femininity are rooted in biology and that personality attributes associated with men and women represent natural expressions of inborn and immutable traits: Men and women behave in certain ways simply because they are men (e.g., "boys will be boys") or women (e.g., a motherhood instinct). Gender scholars have upended these confluences of biology with culture and sex with gender, highlighting how social structures create and reinforce gendered behavior. Like race and social class, gender is a system of stratification that operates at the individual, interactional, and organizational level (Acker, 1990; Berdahl, 2007a; Martin, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman & Davis, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, masculinity and femininity are not simply different things that have the same value, but reflect a gender system in which (masculine) men have higher status, more power, and greater privileges than women (or less masculine men; Ridgeway Smith-Lovin, 1999). Far from being a biological given, gender represents a socially created, enforced, and reproduced axis of power and inequality.

Critical studies of men and masculinities have investigated these social processes—the practices, characteristics, expectations, interactions, and institutional dynamics culturally associated with, and thought to be prototypical of, men (e.g., tough, stoic, breadwinner, risk taker, aggressive, dominant, leader). And, in turn, how these social processes and ways of being become the means by and through which individuals constitute themselves (and come to be seen by others) as "men" (Connell, 1987; Kimmel, 1986; Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). Central to the

definition of what it means to “be a man” is “to not be a woman.” These ideologies and practices become the means by and through which men subordinate, and come to be viewed as superior to, women.

### *Dominance*

In many cultures around the world, males become men through dominance—by controlling other people, “making things happen,” eliciting deference, and resisting being controlled by others (Cuddy et al., 2015; Ezzell, 2016; Glick et al., 2004; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Such “manhood acts” are not merely self-presentations or neutral ways of behaving, but constitute acts that involve “valorizing males, men, and masculinity; of devaluing females, women, and femininity; of excluding women from networks, jobs, and positions of power; and of coordinating acts of domination in war, business, and politics” (Schwalbe, 2014, p. 31). They also operate to create hierarchies among men, defining as “real men” those who win masculinity contests and all other men as not “real” men. Culturally, masculinity is, at its core, about achieving dominance: over women, but also over other men (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018; Pleck, 1974; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Dominance is both necessary and sufficient for achieving hegemonic masculinity, and being dominated by others (e.g., showing vulnerability or weakness) destroys one’s masculinity (Bosson & Vandello, 2011).

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Messerschmidt, 2018) represents the most culturally honored form of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005)—“the form that is not only most revered when enacted by individual men, but most effective in maintaining power and privilege for men when enacted collectively” (Schwalbe, 2014, pp. 31–32). In contemporary western cultures, the hegemonic masculine ideal for men is to be rich, White, heterosexual, tall, athletic, professionally successful, confident, courageous, and stoic. Even if very few men enact and embody all aspects of hegemonic masculinity, its idealization makes these dimensions widely normative (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Those who cannot or do not want to meet its requirements (e.g., gay men, men of color, humble men) may nonetheless appropriate, emphasize, or engage in some dimensions of hegemonic masculinity in how they act or think about themselves (e.g., sexualized talk, obsession with sports, financial ambitions). Such hybrid masculinities reify dominant masculinity tropes and reinforce gender inequalities, even among men who fail to or choose not to completely measure up (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Pascoe, 2007), and reward men who meet hegemonic standards higher status and more power and influence.

Importantly, definitions of manhood and masculinity are not fixed, always and forever the same. Rather, what it means to be masculine varies both historically and culturally, and is malleable from one context to another. Thus, Cuddy et al. (2015) found that in the West, where individualism is a central value, gender stereotypes associate men with individualistic or agentic traits and women with less valued communal traits. By contrast, in nations that value individualism less and communalism more, the male-agency versus female-communality gap closes significantly; indeed, in a few nations, such as Japan, men are viewed as more communal than women. Masculinities thus differ along dimensions such as region, historical period, race and ethnicity, social class, and sexuality (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Cheng, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hamada, 1996; Kimmel, 2006). These masculinities are hierarchically ordered and connected; relative to cultural definitions of hegemonic masculinity, other masculinities have lower status.

Racial hierarchies have often been expressed and enforced as brutal hierarchies among men, both historically (e.g., lynching) and today (e.g., the shooting and incarceration of Black men by police; Alexander, 2012; DuRocher, 2011). Workplace consequences include the “Teddy Bear effect,” whereby Black men need to do extra “identity work” to ensure that White colleagues do not feel threatened (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Livingston & Pearce, 2009), and the “authority gap,” in which the gap in authority at work is greater between Black and White men than between Black and White women (Sidanius & Prato, 2001). Class hierarchies, too, are often expressed as hierarchies among men. The resulting workplace dynamics can be complex, as when a Silicon Valley engineer told one coauthor, “Guys try to out-macho each other [by working the longest hours] . . . It’s not like being a brave firefighter and going up one more flight than your friend . . . He’s a real man; he works 90-hour weeks” (Cooper, 2000). Note how the masculinity contest among professional-managerial men is fueled by a desire to prove themselves more manly than blue-collar men. Workplace masculinity contests also express and enforce heteronormativity, as when construction workers’ displays of heterosexuality become integral to workplace honor (Iacune, 2005). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is an important way workplaces reinforce not just gender, but also race and class hierarchies and heteronormativity.

### *Precarious Manhood*

Although definitions of masculinity may change depending on time and place, several constants remain: Masculinity is defined through dominance, contains an antifemininity mandate, and must be *proven*. As phrases like “man up” attest, *being* a man is an achieved status, above and beyond being biologically male. Whereas people tend to view womanhood as an ascribed characteristic, manhood must be earned, over and over again (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, &

Weaver, 2008). Men feel continual pressure to demonstrate, often publicly, to themselves and to others, that they are “real” men. And, because manhood is socially attained (e.g., being dominant over others, being a breadwinner), it depends on others’ views and deference, which makes manhood conditional and tenuous. Therefore, masculinity can be easily lost (e.g., by displaying sentimental feelings) and readily undone (e.g., by becoming unemployed).

As a social status, then, manhood is precarious—hard to achieve and easily lost (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Numerous studies have demonstrated the ease with which one can make a man feel like “less of a man,” for example, by having him think about job loss (Michniewicz, Vandello, & Bosson, 2014), or interact with a confident and ambitious woman who considers women equal to men (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003), or by telling him he has a “feminine” personality (Alonso, 2018). The need to repeatedly prove masculinity can lead men to behave aggressively, embrace risky behaviors, sexually harass women (or other men), and express homophobic attitudes, when men feel that their masculinity is threatened (Alonso, 2018; Bosson et al., 2009; Maass et al., 2003; Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson, 2013; Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2013).

Masculinity is proven through manly displays and feats as well as by eschewing and devaluing traits, characteristics, or interests that are culturally coded as feminine (e.g., refusing to wear pink or derogating caretaking). This antifemininity mandate is culturally sanctioned and reinforced as boys and men are typically punished more than are girls and women for exhibiting gender-atypical behaviors (Moss-Racusin, 2014; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Sullivan, Moss-Racusin, Lopez, & Williams, 2018). Because people view gender as innate and biological, when a man transgresses gender boundaries, others may take it as evidence that he inherently lacks masculine qualities and is not a “real” man. Thus, by transgressing gender boundaries, men forfeit status as they move from exalted masculinity to devalued femininity. When women transgress gender boundaries, they too challenge innate assumptions about gender and face backlash (e.g., Berdahl, 2007a, 2007b; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008; Rudman, 1998), but they may also elevate their status in male domains by demonstrating that they have “what it takes” to succeed (e.g., having “balls”). While a girl might be admired as a “tomboy,” a boy is shamed as a “sissy.” This is not to deny the often violent repercussions that follow women’s gender transgressions, especially when power is involved (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). But the antifemininity mandate of what it means to “be a man,” makes acting like a “girl” or a “woman” one of the worst things a male can do.

In addition to being precarious, masculinity (and gender relations more broadly) are prone toward “crisis tendencies” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Social movements (e.g., women’s rights) and economic changes (e.g., declines in working-class men’s wages) can threaten (some) men’s hold on power and



legitimacy. Thus, larger social, political, and economic transformations, from feminist victories to neoliberalism, can upend what masculinity is or can be, and, in turn, determine how different groups of men respond when faced with demands for change or threats to their status. Such transformational moments or epochs can spark both progress (increase in women's labor force participation) and retrenchment (growth of men's rights groups).

### *Masculinity at Work*

If behaving like a girl is the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity and dominance is its defining feature, then enacting dominance in “manly” ways can help to secure manhood. A manly way of enacting dominance is being the family breadwinner by doing “men’s” work, which also secures economic resources that can be used to gain physical and social resources (e.g., Pratto, Pearson, Lee, & Saguy, 2008). And, because dominance over others is achieved by having relative control over valued physical, social, and economic resources (e.g., Fiske, & Berdahl, 2007), the workplace is a primary location in which men attempt to secure manhood and dominance over women and other men (Britton & Logan, 2008).

Masculinity contests thus often manifest as contests for resources, and emerge in “men’s work” domains where resources are up for grabs. Contests occur in various venues: sports provide opportunities to demonstrate physical strength and stamina; in politics, elite institutions, and clubs, men vie for and exercise social influence to gain resources. However, the workplace represents the venue in which money—the ultimate resource in modern economies—is to be made, making it a central context for resource acquisition and establishing dominance. Dominance in the workplace comes with the ability to control others’ attempts to acquire resources through work, but also with the ability to control one’s own and others’ lives outside of work, including financial independence, societal standing, and family breadwinner status. Because work is a site where men can acquire valued resources that enable dominance over others, it is primary site in which men attempt to prove and negotiate their manhood.

Research on gender and work has examined how hegemonic forms of masculinity are embedded in companies, organizations, and workplaces. This research has revealed how gender inequalities are built into the organization of work itself (highly paid male jobs, lower paid female jobs) and how gender is constituted both within occupations and in everyday practices and interactions on the job (Acker, 1992; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Martin, 2004). We propose that masculinity contests are most prevalent—and vicious—in male-dominated occupations where extreme resources (fame, power, wealth) or precarious resources (risky or dangerous “men’s” work; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Zaloom, 2006) are at stake—where the spoils of winning, or the cost of losing, the contest are particularly high.

Hierarchical structures are also likely to be associated with masculinity contests as contenders compete for favor and promotion up the ranks or seek to topple those above. Finally, external pressures on organizations, such as strong competition or a high risk of failure within their industry, are also likely to feed MCCs. Examples abound, from finance and the start-up world of tech in which billions of dollars are quickly made or lost, to surgeons who perform high-stake operations with no room for error, to military and police units performing risky jobs with strict chains-of-command.

Investigations of masculinity at work in a wide range of occupations have identified how work norms are often conflated with masculinity and contests for dominance. For example, Pierce's (1996) ethnography observed that celebrated trial lawyers were those dubbed "Rambo litigators," who behaved in forceful and aggressive ways—those (men) who took control of the courtroom and "destroyed witnesses" on the stand. Studies of corporate settings have identified successful managers as being those who are instrumental, decisive, and willing to take big risks—who may well be rewarded even when those risks do not pan out, as in the financial collapse that produce the Great Recession of 2008 (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; Messerschmidt, 1995; Nelson, 2012; Pfeffer, 2010). This conflation of top performance with masculine gender performance means that masculinity and workplace success are often treated as synonymous. Success comes to focus not on meeting performance goals, but on proving you are more of a man than the next guy. Thus, being a top performer is tantamount to being a man—or for the winners, "*the man*."

The masculinity contest concept focuses on how the very acts that serve to signify an individual man's masculinity can come to define an organization's culture. In this zero-sum game, men compete at work for dominance by showing no weakness, demonstrating a single-minded focus on professional success, displaying physical endurance and strength, and engaging in cut-throat competition. We characterize a company as having an MCC when these behaviors are not just the isolated acts of a few individual men but become the way work gets done; i.e., when masculine norms determine who and what gets rewarded, how colleagues should be treated, and attitudes about work/life balance.

### **MCC in Organizations**

Organizations with MCCs valorize hegemonic masculinity, or the traits men "ought" to have—being aggressive, assertive, independent, ambitious, competitive, and strong—and disparage femininity, or the traits men "ought not" to have—sensitivity, naiveté, weakness, insecurity, gullibility, uncertainty, and indecisiveness (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). In short, masculine norms emphasize enacting agency and dominance and avoiding weakness and vulnerability. An MCC exists when an individual's or group's status and power

within an organization is associated with the insistent display of masculinity and winning masculinity contests against others.

Psychologically, we view MCC as the organizational manifestation of precarious manhood (Bosson & Vandello, 2011): an environment in which one constantly has to prove one's masculinity to others (specifically, "I have no weaknesses," "I put work above all else," "I'm stronger and have more work stamina than others," and "I'm the dog that eats all other dogs" Glick et al., 2018). As precarious manhood research has shown, the constant project to prove manhood creates unspoken anxiety for a "hard won, easily lost" status (Vandello et al., 2008). Any misstep threatens to puncture the "winner" image that individuals within these organizational cultures strive to cultivate, thus destroying their claims to status and success.

Importantly, in MCCs, men and women alike must play the game to survive or win. There are different roles to be played—to use a masculine metaphor, some will be linebackers, others quarterbacks, some coaches, and still others cheerleaders. But to survive in the organization, one must fall in line and adhere to a system in which valued resources are obtained through a willingness to uphold the game—playing as a contender or as someone who supports one. Women and men who are not part of the in-group can play, most acceptably, in supporting roles. Recent studies, for example, suggest that women and people of color who go into law and engineering are expected to play a very specific role: supporting—but not competing with—the in-group involved in the masculinity contest (typically composed almost exclusively of White men; Williams, Berdahl, & Vandello, 2016a; Williams, Multhaup, Li, Korn, 2018). Thus, studies show that, as compared with White men, women of all races report higher loads of "office housework," and that both women and people of color report less access to the glamour work, as well as more pressure to let others take the lead. In addition, both women and people of color are more likely than White men to report pushback for assertiveness, self-promotion and anger, all of which are key weapons in the masculinity contest—thus making it risky, and difficult, for women and people of color to vie head-on as contenders themselves (e.g., Berdahl & Min, 2012; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Rudman, 1998; Williams Li, Rincon & Finn, 2016b; Williams et al., 2018). Indeed, the masculinity contest is very much a White masculinity contest to the extent that hegemonic masculinity is defined by and through enacting not only male, but also White, supremacy.

Trying to win masculinity contests within these cultures comes at a risk for everyone involved: Losing means disgrace and the loss of perceived manhood for men, or of proof that one does not have "what it takes" to succeed (for both men and women). But entering into the fray of masculinity contests is particularly dangerous for women, men of color, and nonhegemonic men with resistant masculinities (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). For example, Asian Americans (men and women) who display dominance tend to be disliked (Berdahl & Min, 2012), and Asian

Americans' cultural deference to authority may be read as weakness; both handicap Asian American men in the masculinity contest (Gee, Peck, & Wong, 2015). Class migrants (professionals from working-class families) may be disadvantaged in professional jobs because they are brought up to value interdependence and distrust ambition, whereas the masculinity contest reflects elite Whites' intense focus on, and admiration for, individual achievement (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). In all these ways, the masculinity contest is heavily weighted to advantage elite White men, to whom it may feel more natural, and in whom it is seen as more socially appropriate, to engage in the raw ambition, ruthlessness, and domination necessary to win masculinity contests.

Finally, to engage in and win masculinity contests often requires not only performing hegemonic masculinity but distancing oneself from other identities. For women and men from subordinated groups, this means distancing oneself from, and putting down, other women and subordinated group members, respectively—for women, this strategic distancing is known as the “Queen Bee” phenomenon (Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, & de Groot, 2011; Faniko, Ellemers, Derks, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2017). Strategic distancing for people of color typically consists of pressures to “act White” (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016).

For all these reasons, women and men from marginalized groups, and those whose values strongly reject ruthless dominance competitions, typically do not “win” in MCCs. Women and men with subordinated identities may be well represented at the entry levels of organizations with such cultures but their careers typically stall out. An example follows: A recent study of Silicon Valley found that despite Asian Americans' high representation in the workforce, Whites were 154% more likely to be executives (Gee et al., 2015). The women and men from marginalized groups who remain within organizations rife with MCCs are likely to survive by playing supporting roles to the victors.

These “losers” include not only women but also most men, who either lost the masculinity contest or refused to play it. Organizations where the masculinity contest is alive and well often are dominated by a small group of men who control the rules of the game. Sexual harassment provides one example. One study found—no surprise—that only 10% of women enjoyed “ambient sexual behavior” such as sexualized joking. The surprise is that only 43% of men said they enjoyed it, highlighting that most men feel as uncomfortable with masculinity-contest behaviors as women do (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). A dramatic example of the sometimes-sordid consequences of workplace masculinity contests is the Supreme Court case *Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services*, which involved a (straight) male oil-rig worker who was extensively bullied and ultimately sodomized with a bar of soap because his team did not accept his brand of masculinity. Male-on-male harassment based on sex is best understood as an expression of dominance in a masculinity contest (Alonso, 2018).

*Dimensions of MCC*

To theorize the likely dimensions valorized within organizations with MCCs—i.e., the dimensions on which people compete for masculine standing and dominance—we considered the physical, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions that define manhood in contemporary western cultures. Brannon's (1976) oft-quoted summary proposed the following rules for what it takes to attain adult masculinity: *No Sissy Stuff* (express no “weak,” feminine emotions), *Be a Big Wheel* (achieve status, success, power), *Be a Sturdy Oak* (exhibit toughness, self-reliance, strength, and stamina), and *Give ‘em Hell* (crush the opposition).

The most well-researched masculine norm scales reinforce and expand on Brannon's masculine prescriptions. The *Masculine Role Norms Scale* (MNRS; Thompson & Pleck, 1986), the *Masculine Role Norms Inventory* (MNRI; Levant, Rankin, Williams, Hasan, & Smalley, 2010), and the *Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory* (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) each defines masculinity as involving a preoccupation with attaining status or dominance, exhibiting toughness, and avoiding “soft” or feminine emotions and behavior. Additional dimensions on both the MNRI and CMNI include self-reliance, restricted emotionality, aggression/violence, antihomosexual attitudes, and sexual conquest. The CMNI also includes risk-taking and exerting power over women.

The specific masculinity contest norms we define closely match Brannon's (1976) masculinity prescriptions, but were derived through developing and repeatedly testing the MCC scale as reported in detail by Glick et al. (2018). Four correlated dimensions repeatedly emerged, which confirmatory factor analysis supported as comprising a superordinate dimension we label as MCC: *Show no weakness* prescribes a swaggering confidence that admits no doubt, worries, confusion or mistakes, as well as suppressing any tender, feminine emotions (“no sissy stuff”). *Strength and stamina* associates achieving workplace respect and status with being the “sturdy oak”: physically strong and athletic, with endurance and stamina (e.g., ability to work long hours without breaks), even in occupations that involve mental rather than physical labor. *Put work first* aligns with becoming a “big wheel” by brooking no interference with work from any outside or personal sources, such as family obligations, not taking any breaks or leaves (seen as signs of weakness). *Dog-eat-dog* characterizes the workplace as a hypercompetitive or gladiatorial arena where winners dominate and exploit the losers; rivals must be crushed (“give ‘em hell”) because others cannot be trusted.

Importantly, although masculinity contest norms are deeply rooted in masculine prescriptions, once infused in organizational culture they become hegemonic not just for majority men, but for women and minority men as well. To continue a metaphor, once women or minority men enter the gladiatorial arena, they must fight by the same rules to survive (or serve someone who will do it for them), even as they are hamstrung (compared to majority men) by social prescriptions

that foster distaste and punishment for dominant behavior by women and minority men (e.g., Livingston & Pearce, 2009; Rudman et al., 2012). Organizational masculinity contest norms favor, but do not specifically refer to, men: demands to *show no weakness*, demonstrate *strength and stamina*, *put work first*, and engage in *dog-eat-dog* competition can be enforced just as strongly on women and minority men (despite the double bind these groups face). In short, most everyone, including most majority men, though perhaps women and minority men especially given contradictory demands, may suffer negative consequences in MCCs.

### *Consequences of MCC*

MCCs define work as a zero-sum competition won by those who best adhere to the masculine norms outlined above. We suggest, and the papers in this special issue support, that such cultures create cascading negative consequences that flow from top down: from the organizational and leadership level to the frequency of negative behaviors in the work environment to undermining individuals' relation to the organization and (more distally) to the general well-being of individual organization members.

Administering the newly created MCC scale to two large (about 500 respondents each) working adult MTurk samples, Glick et al. (2018) found that perceiving one's workplace as high in masculinity contest norms correlates with organizational dysfunction, bad coworker behavior, and poor individual outcomes. In an economy in which organizations habitually rely on cooperative teamwork, the masculinity contest demands ruthless competition and prioritizing self-interest to achieve individual status (by conforming to masculinity contest norms and "winning" the game) rather than group or organizational goals. Success requires focusing on burnishing one's own image, favoring a narcissistic focus on personal status and advancement, often at the expense of coworkers and the organization. Masculinity contest norms explicitly define the workplace as divided into the elite "winners" and a mass of "losers" who do not have what it takes to succeed.

As a result, negative organizational climate and leadership styles should be more likely to thrive. Glick et al. (2018) found that people reporting workplaces high in MCC were more likely to report having a toxic supervisor or leader (Reed, 2004; Schmidt, 2008). MCCs seem likely to spawn leaders who care about looking individually successful at all times and at any cost. Subordinates represent tools to be exploited to achieve the appearance of the leader's success, as well as convenient scapegoats to blame for failures. Dog-eat-dog competition can foster suspicion toward talented underlings, who represent a threat, causing toxic leaders to demand loyalty above all else, including no complaints when the leader grabs all the credit for successes and shifts blame onto subordinates for any failures. As a result, as Glick et al. (2018) found, psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) is likely to be low in MCCs as people jockey for position,

seek to appease toxic leaders, and attempt to undermine colleagues in a dog-eat-dog, zero-sum competition.

Matos et al., 2018 explore the connection between MCC and toxic leadership. Surveying currently employed, college-educated individuals, they found that the higher employees rated their workplace on MCC norms the more they reported toxic leadership behaviors from their direct supervisors. These authors also found significant psychological and organizational costs in high MCC workplaces. The higher employees viewed their workplace on MCC, the greater their stress, work–life conflict, and lower intent to stay at their jobs. Employees subjected to toxic leaders reported greater stress, work–life conflict, and lower intent to stay, as well as reduced work engagement and job meaning.

As Matos et al.'s findings illustrate, organizations with MCCs can prove inhospitable to work–family balance, which directly contradicts the *put work first* norm. Thus, even though the organization may have family leave policies, informal norms clearly communicate that taking leave scuttles a career (e.g., Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Even expressing commitment to caregiving for one's family (e.g., a child, an elderly parent) may be inhibited as people seek to prove they are "ideal workers" who let nothing come before their work commitments (Williams, 1999).

When it comes to workplace behaviors, because winning the masculinity contest depends on exhibiting dominance, these norms should increase the likelihood of various problematic behaviors. Organizations with MCCs are likely to be rife with bullying as the "strong" exploit the "weak," demonstrate their toughness, and show they are not to be crossed (i.e., they are the big dogs who eat the little ones). In addition to promoting workplace bullying and incivility, masculinity contest norms—which incentivize exploiting others' weaknesses—are likely to promote exclusion and harassment toward historically disadvantaged groups and men with resistant masculinities (Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018). Consistent with this reasoning, Glick et al. (2018) found that perceiving one's workplace as high in MCC was associated with greater likelihood of experiencing or witnessing not only sexual or gender harassment but also ethnic harassment as well as a more sexist organizational climate.

The unfavorable organizational consequences can be expected to create negative effects on individuals. First and foremost, the individual's relationship to the organization and their work can be expected to suffer. Facing a hypercompetitive workplace rife with toxic leaders as well as bullying and harassment from coworkers can be expected to negatively affect organizational dedication, work performance, and job satisfaction, while promoting burnout and turnover. In such organizations, exposing any chink in one's armor (e.g., by showing any "soft" emotion) may prove fatal, crumbling a carefully constructed façade presented at work. Therefore, the constant pressure to *show no weakness*, demonstrate *strength and stamina*, *put work first*, and come out on top in *dog-eat-dog* competition



is likely to exacerbate masculinity contests' negative effects on individuals, increasing burnout and workplace stress. Glick et al. (2018) confirmed that MCC workplace norms are associated with poor individual outcomes, especially those involving the individual's relationship to work: greater burnout, higher turnover intentions, and lower organizational dedication.

Munsch et al. (2018) showed that the negative consequences of MCCs may be heightened for those who see MCC norms as incompatible with their own ideals about how organizations should function, but who believe (falsely) that their coworkers view MCC norms as ideal (a form of pluralistic ignorance). Specifically, Munsch et al. found that individuals who believed coworkers endorse MCC norms more strongly than they do report reduced job satisfaction, job engagement, and mental health, along with increased relationship conflict with their spouse or partner. Although MCCs are likely to more strongly affect the individual's relationship to work, because work forms such a large part of adult life, they also may erode individuals' general well-being, both psychological and physical (i.e., mental and physical health).

In their analysis of policing culture as a masculinity contest, Rawski and Workman-Stark (2018) shed light on MCCs' negative consequences. Policing often is a high MCC environment, accompanied by curtailed advancement for female officers, seeing family responsibilities as at odds with norms to "put work first"; commonplace sexual harassment (toward both women and men); substance abuse problems resulting from repressing emotions; and even risks to the public because masculinity threats can lead officers to use excessive force. Their empirical study of a policing organization confirmed links between MCCs and adverse organizational and individual outcomes: lower levels of inclusion and psychological safety, job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions, and reduced psychological well-being.

### *Why MCC Persists*

Two papers in this issue specifically explore aspects of precarious manhood, or how threats to masculinity can motivate and help maintain behaviors and beliefs associated with MCC. Alonso (2018) examined male-male sex-based harassment (MM-SBH). She finds that a prior masculinity threat exacerbates men's propensity to harass other men (by sending offensive sexist jokes to another man even after he indicated he did not like those jokes). Participants who were told they scored as feminine on a personality test (prototypicality threat) sent more sexist jokes to their male partner than when they were told they achieved a masculine score (prototypicality affirmation). Tellingly, the worse participants felt about being told they were feminine, the more sexist jokes they sent. Thus, Alonso's study illustrates that, as with male-female SBH, MM SBH is exacerbated by a desire to reassert one's masculinity in the face of personal threat.



Kuchynka et al. (2018) explored how men respond to system level threats to gender hierarchy, i.e., when men's in-group advantage is jeopardized. Specifically, they examined whether women's workplace advances elicited gender-based, zero-sum thinking ("women's gains equal men's losses") among men. In one study, male (but not female) college students presented with information about the substantial gains women have made (system threat condition) more strongly endorsed zero-sum thinking compared to when they were informed that women still experienced inequality relative to men (no threat condition). Moreover, men in the threat condition reported less support for gender equity norms (e.g., raising awareness about cultural issues related to women at work) and work/life balance norms (e.g., flexible work arrangements) than did men in the no threat condition. Women's support for gender equity and work/life balance norms was unaffected by the threat condition.

Taken together, Alonso's and Kuchynka et al.'s studies highlight the role status threats—both to the individual's masculinity and to the gender hierarchy more broadly—tend to generate behaviors (harassment, bullying) and beliefs (put work first, not family) that engender and maintain MCCs. Masculinity's precariousness and men's desire to hold on to their group's higher status position elicit behaviors and reactions that reinforce MCC norms and undercut support for policies (e.g., flexible work arrangements) that could undermine MCC by creating more gender fair work environments.

In addition to status threats, MCC norms can also be maintained by "pluralistic ignorance," which describes when workers think that coworkers support masculinity contest norms more than they do. In their survey of U.S. workers, Munsch et al. (2018) found that few respondents personally endorsed masculinity contest norms as an "ideal work environment," but often believed that coworkers subscribed to these norms. In other words, respondents falsely believed that coworkers approve MCC norms, creating a situation likely to foster MCC norms' persistence. For example, to fit in, employees may publicly act as though they support these norms even when they personally reject them. Employees are likely to be loath to challenge the MCC norms if they believe them to be widely embraced. In fact, compared to other norms, the MCC may be especially hard to challenge because doing so may be seen as weak and whiny—complaints by wimpy losers who "can't cut it."

### *Variants of MCCs*

As gender scholars have noted, masculinity is neither universal nor monolithic. Rather, masculinities may differ by location and vary by dimensions such as race and ethnicity, social class, etc. Accordingly, MCC may not always and everywhere be the same, but rather will vary from one context to the next. For example, in any given workplace some dimensions of the contest may be more salient or

central than others to winning the competition. In addition, the MCC's form will likely be shaped by which resources are even available to play the game or which resources signify achieving dominance in the particular setting. For example, among computer programmers the contest may center on the number of hours worked (*put work first*), whereas for firefighters an individual's readiness to run into a burning building (*strength and stamina, show no weakness*; Cooper, 2000).

Reid, O'Neill, and Blair-Loy (2018) conducted a comparative case analysis of three male-dominated occupations—consulting, firefighting, and business executives—to examine such variations across occupations. They found important differences in how MCCs were enacted based on three occupational features: the structure and organization of *teams*, the *temporal* structure of work, and *core tasks*. For example, because firefighters work in shifts, with clear demarcations between when they are on and off the clock, the *put work first* norm was less salient than for consultants and executives who are expected to work long hours. Yet, even among consultants, for whom 24/7 availability and work devotion are commonplace, team dynamics exacerbated or curtailed this norm. Some teams prioritized work/life balance and worked together to enable team members to meet family responsibilities. Thus, MCCs are neither inevitable nor are MCC norms universal; rather, MCCs can be more or less intense and masculine norms can be exacerbated or attenuated depending on occupational features that favor specific dimensions as the means for proving one's masculinity.

Because work is a primary site where men must portray a masculine image of themselves to others, we expect MCC are more likely to exist in historically male work environments such as the military or the tech industry. Just as sexual harassment occurs more frequently in male-dominated work environments, so too should masculinity contests. Two papers in the current issue found some support for this claim. Glick et al. (2018) showed that MCC scores positively (though weakly) correlated with perceived percentage of men (vs. women) in leadership positions. Additionally, Munsch et al. (2018) showed that workers in jobs with a higher percentage of men experienced greater pluralistic ignorance: They were more likely to believe that their coworkers endorsed MCC norms much more than they themselves did.

### *Changing MCCs*

The last two papers in this special issue address ways to change MCCs. Rawski and Workman-Stark (2018) review how currently used training interventions to prevent or remedy negative effects associated with MCCs (e.g., sexual harassment) tend to fail or even backfire (e.g., create more harassment) in policing organizations. They argue that men in high MCC organizations are more likely to react negatively to commonplace interventions and offer new ways to conceptualize trainings aimed at creating organizational change. Finally, Ely and Kimmel's

(2018) concluding paper considers how the research featured in this special issue refutes the notion of rational economic man and instead underscores the deeply emotional nature of men's "gender doings" at work. From there, they offer possible ways forward for organizational practice and policy aimed at changing undesirable workplace cultures.

### Contributions and Future Directions

Researchers and practitioners have spent decades discussing why women and minorities continue to be so underrepresented in well-paid occupations and positions of leadership, despite legislation passed over 50 years ago outlawing sex and race discrimination at work (1964 Civil Rights Act Title VII) and decades of diversity initiatives. A proliferation of studies, books, seminars, and consultants have offered explanations and solutions for the stalled gender revolution. Ely and Meyerson (2000) summarized three common approaches to addressing the problem. One approach—fixing the women—assumes that women lack the confidence and skills to succeed in male-dominated domains, and need special training to adapt and compete (e.g., Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Kay & Shipman, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Another—valuing the feminine—assumes that women have unique qualities to bring to traditionally male domains, leading to interventions that promote the value of diversity in improving creativity and performance (e.g., Bart & McQueen, 2013; Woolley & Malone, 2011), but inadvertently reify stereotypes (e.g., valuing what is stereotyped in different groups). A third approach—addressing implicit bias—assumes the problem lies with accidental bias in selection and promotion, leading to bias training sessions for decision makers that teach them to learn to recognize and avoid their biases when evaluating employees (e.g., Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Lebrecht, Pierce, Tarr, & Tanaka, 2009).

Despite the popular and intuitive appeal of these approaches, they have not yielded much progress to date. Some women have made it in male-dominated roles, but women still comprise a small fraction of top leaders and occupations remain highly segregated by sex, with male-dominated occupations paid more than female-dominated ones, even when all else (e.g., education and training) is equal. In other words, women's progress has been uneven, and in many ways it has stalled (England, 2010). Women now comprise 57% of college graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) and almost half (46.8%) of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017), but make up only 5% of CEO positions in the S&P 500 (Catalyst, 2018), 15.1% of architects and engineers, 21.3% of employees in protective service occupations, and 4.7% of those employed in the natural resources, construction, and maintenance sectors (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Most women are clustered in "pink collar" jobs, representing 87.6% of employees in healthcare support occupations; 94.5%

of secretaries and administrative assistants; and 95% of teaching assistants, kindergarten, and elementary school teachers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017).

The three popular approaches to addressing the underrepresentation of women in male-dominated occupations and roles—fixing the women, valuing the feminine, and reducing bias—have helped some women succeed, but have ultimately kept intact organizational cultures that reflect and reinforce norms and values of White and class-privileged men (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Williams et al., 2016a). In this special issue, we propose that a key reason why the workplace gender revolution has stalled is that work remains the site of masculinity contests among men. To the extent that men's status at work depends on perceptions of their masculinity and performance as men, they are motivated to prove their manhood in the workplace, often at the expense and exclusion of women and non-hegemonic men. These workplace gender pressures make organizational culture change difficult, dooming many workplace diversity efforts and making gender equality in caregiving roles elusive (Williams et al., 2016). Methods of proving masculinity are likely to vary across domains and occupations, but the general criteria of physical and social dominance in men, and a lack of weakness and vulnerability, remain highly valued qualities in workplaces marked by an MCC.

This issue presents an integrated set of studies that examine norms and values in MCCs. It examines how even when “what it takes to succeed” in most workplaces may appear neutral on the surface, these values may in actuality engage gender identities so that “real men” are the ones most likely to thrive. In this article, we conceptualized MCCs in organizations, and the following papers develop and validate a measure to study them (Glick et al., 2018), examine some of their consequences (Alonso, 2018; Glick et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2018; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018), explain why they persist (Kuchynka et al., 2018; Munsch et al., 2018), show how MCCs may vary by occupation (Reid et al., 2018), and discuss what might be done to address or change them (Ely & Kimmel, 2018; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018).

This special issue should be seen as a beginning. We have only just started to demonstrate the power of thinking about work as a masculinity contest, and how this lens on organizational culture can predict meaningful consequences for organizations and individuals, as well as how understanding the MCC's dynamics may offer opportunities for intervention and change. This research raises many more questions than it resolves. Questions for future research include investigating how MCCs develop, including when MCC norms go from being held by a minority of individuals to becoming institutional norms, and what role do leaders and occupations play in fostering MCCs. Also important is further exploration of how MCC norms vary by occupation or industry, by the demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation) of those employed by an organization, and by the country or culture in which the company or organization is located. Needed, too, is further exploration of the widespread and seemingly

false assumption that MCCs help organizations achieve their business or other organizational goals.

Also important is further exploration of exactly how masculinity contests are fought by individuals vying for power. This question may best be addressed via qualitative research or analyzing biographies and organizational histories through the MCC lens. This volume begins to sketch out ideas about how MCCs are sustained (e.g., through pluralistic ignorance) but exactly how are they enforced? For example, are dominant men allowed to violate some aspects of the MCC with impunity (e.g., get away with taking a leave)? What kinds of contests take place between men from dominant versus marginalized groups, and what kinds of contests take place within marginalized groups of men and women, to define hierarchies between and within them? How are women and marginalized men policed into the helpmate role expected of them?

Conversely, exploring the exceptional women and people of color who have managed to win in an MCC, despite the odds, might reveal effective strategies by which members of marginalized groups might advance in MCC workplaces. Does the success of these exceptional individuals' change or reinforce MCC norms? On the one hand, successful women and minority members may provide counterexamples to hegemonically masculine norms about success. On the other hand, they may overshoot these norms by behaving in even more masculine ways than others to prove their mettle, and their success stories may be used by leadership to justify the organization's practices, policies, and masculine norms as fair.

Much more work will be required to understand how and why MCC norms vary (e.g., between and among industries, occupations, and countries). What structural characteristics are associated with MCCs? For example, the masculinity contest dimensions at play in any given organization may depend on the resources available and what is at stake. It may also depend on larger macroeconomic trends such as levels of income and wealth inequality, or the availability of social welfare supports. Occupational characteristics may focus the contest on some dimensions rather than others, such *strength and stamina* in physically demanding jobs, *put work first* in jobs structured around working long hours, or *dog-eat-dog* in occupations structured to promote internal competition (e.g., sales commissions). And, when occupations allow men to prove masculinity on one dimension, are they permitted to violate masculine norms on other dimensions? For example, do men in physically demanding occupations who embody *strength and stamina* feel that the masculinity box is sufficiently checked to allow more freedom with respect to the other masculine norms? Do men in high-paying occupations focus on financial competition, or do they engage in compensatory masculinity by emphasizing the aspects of masculinity called into question by their occupational choice, such as athleticism?

Personal experience has shown us that the masculinity contest at work is a touchy subject (Berdahl, 2015; Canadian Association of University

Teachers, 2015). Yet, it is important to begin the discussion. We hope this special issue encourages readers to look at organizations through a new lens that provides insights for practitioners and organizational leaders as well as academics. Further, we hope that the concepts and tools (especially the MCC scale) provided here spur future research. In both cases, we believe that understanding the MCC better will help practitioners and researchers to find ways to promote healthier workplaces in which people are able to thrive based on genuine and meaningful contributions to work, rather than the ability to win masculinity contests.

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