Introduction

The Manhood Dilemma

“Do not cripple your friends. Do not bring them to tears,” says the organizer. “If it’s your first time at fight club,” he adds, turning to face me, “you fight first.” He hands me a rounded nine-inch training knife, padded gloves, and a fencing mask. My opponent, Mike, has a knife, too. Unfortunately for me, Mike actually knows how to use his. I have no fight training or experience, and it’s about to be painfully evident.¹

I try not to think about the language in the release form I just signed: “I the participant, am knowingly risking injury, which typically includes bruises, bumps and scrapes but can include serious injury and death from either fighting or watching.” Bruises. Bumps. Scrapes. Death? It’s unlikely anybody will come close to dying today—at least not of anything more than humiliation.

Mike and I are fighting under the auspices of the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club, a San Francisco Bay Area group formed in the late 1990s. In GFC’s history, there have been few serious injuries. This fact, along with the thickly padded gloves and sturdy mask, alleviates most of my concerns. Still, I am tempted to repeat the prefight instructions to Mike: Please do not cripple me or bring me to tears.

“Fighters ready?” the timekeeper asks. I tighten my fingers around the handle of the training knife and square off with my opponent. “Fight!”

It is Fight the Professor Day at GFC, a onetime gathering organized at my request. It’s a comforting sign of the GFC “bring you up, not beat you down” philosophy that my original title—Punch the Professor—was rejected. Suddenly it doesn’t sound as funny as it did when I first suggested it. While typical GFC novices fight in a suburban garage, today we’re on a concrete patio and
grass in a fenced-in backyard. Despite my lack of fighting ability and the jarring reality of staring at a knife-wielding opponent of greater skill and experience, I’m not gripped with fear. I have watched enough GFC fight footage to have some sense of what to expect. I know that fights usually end after 60 seconds, when fatigue overpowers most amateurs. I’m hoping a lifetime of competitive sports and good reflexes will offset some of my disadvantages.

Also, I did a lot of sandbagging to get my opponents to underestimate me. This was not difficult. I doubt they worried that the longhaired, 5’9” professor with no fight training or experience might discover and unleash his inner Bruce Lee. To ensure as much, I sent messages beforehand noting my chronic back injury, and on the day of the fights, I complain of jet lag and lack of sleep (all true). As we boil mouthpieces and wait for all the fighters to arrive, I add a healthy amount of self-deprecating humor. I’ve done everything except have my mother place a pleading phone call to Mike right before our knife fight. My strategy works. I find out later that the consensus was I would last only one fight.

The last of the day’s participants arrive, and we head outside to the backyard. Everything is in place, including the generously supplied athletic cup. It’s time to fight.

My brother, whom I persuade to drive with me to the event and be an observer, is assigned the role of timekeeper. This responsibility is accompanied by two others. First, depending on the extent of my dismemberment, he will either rush me to the hospital or just drop me off at the hotel. Second, he will have to make a convincing argument to our family that he was an unwilling participant forced to attend the event—a hostage, really—who tried to talk me out of it, failed to do so, and despite his strong reservations about my choosing to fight, felt obligated to watch over his younger brother.

His story is mostly true. “You’re an idiot!” he admonished when I told him about my plans to fight. He added a well-placed expletive to avoid any subtlety. Proving him right, I aggravated my balky back several days before the event. A physical therapist friend realigned my rotated sacrum and manipulated my vertebrae back to their proper positions. She was surprisingly nonjudgmental about my upcoming foray into fighting. Other reactions ran the full gamut. One friend got teary eyed at the thought of me fighting. I suspected she lacked confidence in my abilities. Another friend questioned my sanity, but he sent a supportive text the day of the fights: “Good luck today you crazy s.o.b.”

At dinner one night, a couple friends were skeptical and gave me some gentle ribbing when they find out about my research topic. (“I know you can’t talk about it, but if you’re in a fight club, put your thumb on the table.”) Several others questioned me about the risk of injury and expressed curiosity, excitement, and enthusiasm. I considered inviting a linebacker-sized friend to help me with prefight “body conditioning”—a fighting euphemism for getting
punched and kicked during training to acclimate the body to getting hit—but later changed my mind. When I finally told him about my now-abandoned idea soon before my fights, he replied, “There’s still four days left!”

My then-partner may have been the most enthusiastic, which means our families later questioned her thought process as much as they did mine. Shortly after “Fight the Professor” was confirmed, it came up during a casual conversation at home. She asked me why I wanted to fight. Unjustifiably defensive, I questioned her motives for asking. Effortlessly, casually, she peeled back the layers of my psyche that I naively thought were hidden. “I just want to know the truth,” she said nonchalantly, as she turned the page in the magazine she was skimming. I stumbled through a response about my responsibilities as a researcher. She has a degree in anthropology and sociology, yet I heard myself delivering a SOC 101 lecture about best practices when studying human behavior, about the importance of participant observation, of not really being able to understand the fighters and their experiences unless I’ve experienced it myself. All of it is true and half-true.

“I have no delusions,” I told her, finally directly addressing what was unspoken. “I know that I have no training and no fighting experience, and I’ll probably get my ass kicked.” I sensed that she was waiting for a “but,” yet she said nothing, and the conversation ended. The qualifier I suspect she awaited lingers in my mind. Why am I fighting? Is it for some of the same reasons the other GFC fighters do—to test their skills and toughness, to conquer their fears, and in some cases, to try to restore a sense of masculinity and control they lost during experiences of boyhood emasculation? Shouldn’t being married and having a good job offset or eliminate these boyhood anxieties?

“I’d like to think these guys are different than me. I was not picked on or bullied as a child. I live, work, and go out in areas that seem safe. I rarely think about having to defend myself and have no desire to take martial arts training. And I have been studying, reflecting upon, and trying to free myself from many of the burdensome and destructive aspects of masculinity for years—the expectation to be tough and capably violent chief among them.

But here I am. Knife in hand. Curious how I will do against more experienced and trained fighters, wondering if I have more than an amateur’s 60 seconds’ worth of fight in me. Sure, participant observation will benefit my research in ways that interviews and mere observation cannot. But even during interviews with GFC fighters many months ago, well before I decided to fight, I occasionally thought, or perhaps fantasized, about what it would be like to fight some of them. Why am I here?
Body and Breadwinner Failure

As with the men who fight at GFC, an honest answer requires an exploration of a lifetime’s worth of experiences. Although I was not a target of bullying, I do recall feeling insecure and fearing violence from other boys throughout my childhood. These were due to being small; my parents didn’t exactly hand me a winning genetic lottery ticket. Worse, I entered puberty painfully late, seemingly after every other boy in my grade. Eventually I arrived at about average size for an American man but only after suffering daily frustration and embarrassment over many formative years. I hated exposing my small, hairless body while changing in middle and high school locker rooms.

I avoided confrontations and sometimes even interactions with boys who used shoving and punching as their two primary forms of communication. I feared the violence that was so prevalent between boys, even acquaintances and friends. I watched teammates put on muscle, run faster, and jump higher, while my athletic exploits were developmentally stunted. Dating and girlfriends were alien concepts. All these experiences left me with an overwhelming desire to get bigger and stronger. I wanted to—felt like I had to—fix what I saw as broken. I did not have a word for it at the time, but I felt emasculated.

All that changed, though, when my body did. I turned 17 and turned the corner. A year later, in college, I looked and felt age appropriate for the first time since elementary school. I was determined to transform my body into a source of pride rather than shame, to go from feeling imprisoned within it to fulfilling what suddenly felt like its untapped and unconstrained potential. I committed myself to weight lifting even though I didn’t enjoy it. What I did enjoy was how I looked and felt as my body developed. Steroids never appealed to me, but I knew plenty of guys who used them and recognized in them the same insecurities and desire for change. My anxiety-fueled workout routine produced 15 added pounds of muscle my freshman year of college.

I finally felt like a man instead of a boy. My confidence was growing. My athletic abilities were peaking. I still mostly avoided confrontations and did not get in fights, but I was not as intimidated by others. If my friends and I played a friendly game of tackle football, I expected to do and did just fine. I welcomed taking my shirt off at the pool rather than fearing having to do so. Dating became, well, at least a little less of an alien concept.

My physical peak was short-lived, though. I was overdoing my weight lifting and exercising, even for a teenager. The result was a severe lower back strain, which repeatedly left me unable to move for hours on end. A range of initial treatments proved worthless. I was 19 years old, and my body was disappointing and failing me. Again.

In an obsessive effort to repair what felt broken as a boy, I permanently injured myself as a young man. It could have been much worse, though; years
of physical therapy has allowed me to stay active. But my back still affects how I sleep, sit, stand, work out, and live on a daily basis and will continue to do so for the rest of my life. My injury is a relatively mild example of the “costs of masculinity,” or the downside of the pursuit of and access to power and privilege: “The promise of public status and masculine privilege comes with a price tag: Often, men pay with poor health, shorter lives, emotionally shallow relationships, and less time spent with loved ones.”

My injury has also helped shape my research interests. In a narrow sense, my motivations for fighting at GFC are quite different than the other members’. Broadly, though, we arrived here for the same reasons. Our interests, choices, aspirations, insecurities, identities, relationships—our lives—are defined and sometimes plagued by what American boys and men are expected to be and do and, perhaps more important, how we respond when we do not meet (or just think we don’t meet) those expectations. These in turn are shaped by our race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and much more.

The list of expectations is long. I argue that the two primary ones placed on men revolve around their bodies and work. Men must demonstrate mastery and control over their bodies and achieve a sense of status and identity from their work to stake a claim to American manhood. Failing at either generates a range of powerful, mostly toxic emotions and responses.

This book examines four groups of men who grapple with body and breadwinner ideals: members of a fight club and an online penis health club that attracts men who seek to improve their size and sexual performance, and unemployed men and stay-at-home dads. The body and breadwinner ideals men are expected to fulfill lie mostly beyond their reach. Whether men pursue and partially obtain or fall far short of these ideals, the results are destructive for everyone. Manhood must be reimagined and redefined in such a way as to make it achievable for men and healthy for all.

Is it possible that being a man could be defined and practiced in a way that is much less toxic, even antisexist? Maybe a new ideal manhood marked by disinterest in power and control, nonviolence, and intensive parenting could become the new most celebrated, ideal version. Or will this merely produce a kinder, gentler patriarchy? Should we instead pursue a world where those arbitrary social constructions of “femininity” and “masculinity” are eradicated, entirely disconnected from female and male bodies? If so, how will we get from our current patriarchal system to a gender-free one? I take up these questions in more detail at the end of the book. For now, whichever objective we might pursue, I propose the starting point for gender reform or revolution must be a fundamental change to men’s body and breadwinner ideals.
Controlling Bodies and Work

Control, and especially men’s fears of being dominated and controlled by others, is the central feature of what it means to be a man. This imperative was amplified and peaked first at the turn of the 20th century and again in the second half of that century. Both times, native-born white men’s statuses and identities were threatened by sweeping structural and cultural transformations. In the early 1900s, industrialization and capitalism were making obsolete the agricultural and artisanship-based work that had long sustained native-born white men and their families. These men were thrust into the new marketplace where hard work alone was no longer enough to guarantee security. They were forced to migrate to cities to enter the paid labor force and compete with other men (and women and children), many of whom were new arrivals to the country or recently unshackled from the institution of slavery, in the case of many African Americans. In a massive wave of immigration from 1881 to 1920, 23 million people emigrated to the United States, most of them from Europe. Prior to this era, manhood was contrasted with boyhood. It implied an inner quality that, although not preordained, could be fairly easily achieved and maintained by demonstrating maturity, responsibility, and autonomy. In the unpredictable new economy, manhood was replaced with masculinity—something to be worn for all to see and constantly proven—and it was contrasted with femininity. Industrialization and capitalism stripped away many men’s firm control over their ability to work and provide for their families.

Native-born white men reclaimed some of this control by limiting and excluding women and other men from newly defined masculine arenas such as organized sports and fraternal organizations, and most notably the workforce. Doing paid work, and especially being successful enough at it to support a family without financial contributions from wives, became the middle-class standard against which all men were judged. Being a breadwinner and earning a family wage was the primary and ultimate manhood ideal. An unintended consequence of this arrangement was that boys were around men less. This produced in many men a fear of boys’ feminization and a desire to segregate and differentiate boys from girls and women. It is this time in U.S. history when many of today’s gendered differences in dress, play, and activities were created or greatly expanded. Boys—mostly privileged and white—were removed whenever possible from the perceived soft, civilizing clutches of women and cities. They were sent to the newly formed Boy Scouts or the Boone and Crockett Club, or the YMCA with its new emphasis on physical activity. Later, they attended gender-segregated colleges. Men also began worrying more about their bodies during this time, with an eye toward controlling them. Strength, appearance, and performance were important in a competitive
marketplace. Exercise, escape from urban areas, proper diet, and resisting masturbation were all seen and sold as ways for boys and men to be masculine and successful. The new emerging breadwinner ideal was elusive, but at least men could attempt to maintain some sense of control by gaining command over their bodies and by excluding women. The Allied Forces’ World War II victory was a collective win for American manhood, too. War has long served in literature, lore, mythology, and cross-cultural history the role of ritual proving ground for men. American GIs returned to a hero’s welcome and a booming New Deal economy, both temporarily cooling off many men’s status anxieties.

Another series of sweeping structural and cultural changes began unfolding in the 1970s and continues today. These changes have made American men’s chances of being sole or merely primary breadwinners more remote, thus placing manhood under even greater threat. They include deindustrialization, declining wages, a series of economic recessions and spikes in unemployment, the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands, the flood of women entering the paid labor force, the necessity of dual-earner families, and women’s own breadwinner desires and successes. Breadwinning men are becoming anachronisms. This is especially so among blue-collar, working-class men. The structure and ideology of capitalism and an open class system leave all men anxious and unfulfilled, including those whom others might see as successful. After all, there is no ceiling on income or wealth. There is always another man who earns more and has more—or is about to. A race without a finish line is a competition with no true winner.

Shaky job markets and invisible finish lines are part of the bigger picture of contemporary life for everyone, not just men. Our world is filled with uncertainty and unpredictability due to rapid social change, technological advancements, migration, media, and more. This is the cultural milieu that propels us to turn inward, to focus on and manipulate our bodies in an attempt to maintain some feeling or semblance of control. For men, as the breadwinner ideal has become less obtainable and women have enjoyed more access and power in the workforce and other social arenas, body ideals have become more important, ubiquitous, and complicated. Men are increasingly judged on the basis of their bodies, and their bodies are increasingly judged on both appearance and performance. Women, conversely, have been judged much longer and more harshly based on their appearance, and these expectations continue despite women becoming breadwinners.

The breadwinner ideal persists as the most significant and meaningful measure of manhood, but men’s body ideals are a close second. As men’s breadwinner options have deteriorated and women’s labor force participation has expanded, men have focused more on improving and differentiating their bodies and appearances from women’s. This is far from a new practice (think corsets and codpieces), especially among privileged men, who in the past wore
luxurious clothing, jewelry, powdered wigs, and skin-lightening creams to signal class and racial differences. But more recent shrinking social differences have led men to expand their long practice of creating greater physical differences between themselves and women.

Charles Atlas’s pitches to transform “97-pound weaklings” into strong and tough men telegraphed a new era of gendered bodies and American manhood. Fifty years later, in the 1980s, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone conspicuously revealed men’s new expectation to be conspicuous physical specimens. Their bodies were celebrated for how they looked and how they performed—the latter as weapons used to dominate and control other men. The fitness craze that launched in the 1970s continues apace. Weight lifting and bodybuilding; supplements, steroids, and other performance-enhancing drugs; and mixed martial arts and fight culture are primarily, albeit not exclusively, men’s realms.

Contemporary younger men are particularly attuned to body pressures. They do not yet have access to the breadwinner ideal, and their generation has always faced these body pressures. Today, men who are not strong, tough, and sexually active and skilled—men who are not in complete control of their bodies—are not fulfilling this manhood ideal. Like men who do not fulfill the breadwinner ideal, they are liable to feel like and be told they are failures.

The Manhood Impossible Study

When I began this project in 2011, I set out to study only the phenomenon of men compensating for their masculinity failures. I sought to identify and pursue data where the stakes for men are highest: in their work and in their bodies. The Great Recession of 2008–2009 piggybacked on the long-term breadwinner-undermining social changes outlined previously. It deeply undercut many men’s breadwinner aspirations, providing a tragically ideal context for my research. The more elusive breadwinning becomes, the more essential it is for men to control their bodies. These acute and chronic social changes implore researchers to better understand how men attempt to establish masculine identities in times of uncertainty and flux. I heed the long-standing call to study men’s responses to structural threats to their masculine status and identity.10

Both body and breadwinner ideals are positioned beyond most men’s grasp, leaving men “unable or unwilling” to fulfill these ideals.11 If we set men up to fail, I ask, what are the consequences for them, their families and communities, and our society as a whole when men inevitably find manhood impossible? What do men do under these circumstances? I quickly discovered that yes, they sometimes compensate, but they also respond in several other ways.
I selected four groups of men for my study, two for each ideal. For the dual key body ideals of physical and sexual competence, I interviewed and studied a group of men trying to test their toughness and mettle at a fight club, along with online members of what I call the Penis Health Club (PHC), who are focused on improving their size and sexual performance. For the breadwinner ideal, I interviewed and studied involuntarily unemployed men and stay-at-home dads. In total, I interviewed a diverse group of 55 men, collected field notes via participant and nonparticipant observation (at the fighting club and multiple job fairs), and analyzed a wealth of documents, namely online forum posts by PHC members and blogs authored by unemployed men and stay-at-home dads.

GFC members and stay-at-home dads tended to be in their 40s or younger. The Penis Health Club was composed of a disproportionate number of younger members, but plenty of older men joined as well. Unemployed men varied considerably, but my sample mirrored the bulk of the U.S. unemployed: men mostly in their 20s–50s. The 14 PHC members, 13 unemployed men, and 16 GFC fighters I interviewed occupied various relationship statuses: single, partnered, married. Gathering data on participants’ social class was more complicated. Nearly all of the unemployed men were in highly fluid situations. So were some of the stay-at-home dads, though they tended to be more stable, usually middle class. PHC members varied considerably in their socioeconomic statuses, with a wide range of educational backgrounds, occupations, and income levels. The GFC fighters I interviewed were disproportionately likely to have college or graduate degrees and be working in technology, reflecting their Bay Area location and social networks among the mostly tech workers who comprised the group’s core. However, several of these men did not have college degrees, reflecting the group’s diversity. GFC members lived all over the Bay Area, but more were concentrated near Silicon Valley, where fights were held. (See the appendix for more on this study.)

By definition, unemployed men and stay-at-home dads do not fulfill the breadwinner ideal. Some men who participated in the fighting club and online penis club joined these groups simply because they were doing what is expected of them—trying to be physically and sexually capable, not because they were motivated by a sense of failure. This kind of gender conformity explains plenty of men’s behaviors, and it is crucial for identifying and understanding what the social norms are. However, my primary focus is on how men respond when they cannot or choose not to conform. What do men do when they fail to perform gender appropriately?
Four Responses to Body and Breadwinner Failures

Building on earlier research, I find that men respond the following four ways when they are unwilling or unable to fulfill body and breadwinner ideals: (1) internalize their perceived failure, (2) attempt to repair the failure, (3) compensate for the failure, reasserting their masculine selves elsewhere, or (4) reject and redefine what it means to be a man. These four responses do not represent four types of men (“Internalizers” or “Repairers”). Men from each of the groups I study exhibit all four responses. Many wrestle with whether they should follow cultural ideals, sometimes internalizing and trying to repair what they see as their own failures, and other times deciding the ideal is flawed and in need of rejection and redefinition. In short, these four responses are how men do masculinity after experiencing what they or others judge to be gender failure.

Internalizing

The term internalizing comes from developmental and clinical psychology. It is usually joined by the word disorder to describe problem-based feelings and behaviors kept to oneself, such as withdrawal, isolation, and feelings of worthlessness. I borrow this term but use it more broadly to encompass any behaviors that are directed inward rather than outward (as a “disorder” or otherwise). Some of the men I study experience emasculation, anxiety, low self-esteem, weight fluctuation, decreased libido, disinterest in hygiene, depression, and suicidal thoughts in response to physical or sexual inadequacies or feeling like failed breadwinners. In the most severe cases, they are trapped in a negative cognitive and behavioral loop, getting slowly devoured by their perceived shortcomings.

And that’s just what they are: perceptions. Symbolic interactionism explains that our social realities are far from objectively true or real. A shared understanding of reality is a production, dependent upon people assigning similar meanings to objects, groups, and actions. Human bodies exist, but cultures and individuals determine what bodies are attractive or unattractive, normal or disordered, useful or a burden. Bodies have no inherent meaning. Perception is what guides men’s interpretations of their bodies and work. Many men with average or above-average penis sizes and a biography free of humiliating sexual performances remain convinced they are inadequate. When a global recession kicks millions of men out of the paid labor force, most will view their own job loss as a personal failure. Our deeply held beliefs swat away contradictory facts like a hockey goaltender’s pads deflect opponents’ shots. In another culture or another time, men wouldn’t be so emasculated by having an average-sized penis or losing breadwinner status.
The four responses I identify do not represent a linear stage progression of responses. An internalizing response may coexist or be succeeded by one or more of the three others, or it may be the only one men experience. For each of the last three responses, though, internalizing is a preceding step. Our cultural configurations ensure virtually every American man experiences some sense of internalized failure and feels badly about it, at some point during his life.

Repairing
Wherever possible, men seek to restore their masculine selves by directly repairing what they believe to be broken. Some members of the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club join the group to restore what they lost when intimidated and bullied as kids. Fighting as adults helps them exorcise their boyhood fears by directly confronting their perceived flaws: physical weakness, passivity, and loss of control over their bodies. Of course, this repair work may be fleeting, reflecting the tenuous nature of manhood itself. Men flock to the online Penis Health Club to learn about stretches, workouts, and devices purported to improve what many of these men see as fatal flaws in their penis size and sexual performance. Members log countless hours trying to address these, regardless of whether they are small, average, or even above-average in size, or how gratifying or embarrassing their sexual histories are. And for failed breadwinners, there is a single avenue of repair: returning to a good job in the paid labor force.

Compensating
Restoring a sense of a masculine identity via repair is not always possible; what’s broken cannot always be fixed. Physical limitations or economic recessions can block repair work. In response, men sometimes assert a masculine self in one area to compensate for their failures in another. Unemployed men seek to control other parts of their selves, including their bodies, or are quick to use anger to control a situation. Some GFC fighters restore a sense of lost power and control by fantasizing about using their fighting skills to dominate other men in a barroom brawl or, more commonly, playing superhero to victims of distress. The popularity of fantasy sports and violent video games, television shows, and movies suggests that the realm of fantasy allows many men to restore their lost sense of control in reality. In more extreme cases, mass shooters such as Elliot Rodger and George Sodini play out these fantasies, using murderous violence against women and other men in response to their inability to gain women’s sexual interest. Their homicidal violence is the most abhorrent reassertion of control. Such violence is a response to “the fear of shame and ridicule, and the overbearing need to prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead.” The initial internalization of
failure, experienced as shame and ridicule, is supplanted by an externalizing response: compensatory violence, used to restore a sense of self.

Repairing and compensating are both attempts to restore one’s lost manhood—which is often mostly illusory—and thus they reproduce and reinforce men’s domination and control. Internalizing does not reproduce gender inequality, but neither does it challenge the gender order. These three types of responses illustrate the many personal, relational, and social problems that can be traced to men’s struggles to meet current body and breadwinner ideals.

Redefining

There are contradictions and tensions, though, as new ideals compete with older models of manhood. Some men reject restrictive manhood ideals in favor of less destructive and more attainable ones. They discard the expectations placed upon them, instead choosing to define manhood in ways that clash with hegemonic standards and practices. In the process, they begin to redefine what it means to be a man. Men in the Penis Health Club, especially its older members, encourage men to abandon unattainable, pornography-driven penis size and sexual performance ideals, revealing them as fabrications. Instead, they preach body diversity and acceptance. Some stay-at-home dads define their unpaid work as fathers as the ultimate demonstration of manhood. The most ideologically committed ones are bolstered by supportive partners, families, and peer groups and enjoy more financial stability. Some stay-at-home dads chose to leave the paid labor force, while others were pushed into their new roles. Regardless, they conclude that ego and selfishness (not a desire to be a provider) is what motivates men to be breadwinners, whereas leaving their careers to raise their kids is the most responsible and manly thing to do. Their embrace of feminine-marked, low-status, unpaid work is one of the missing pieces of stalled gender equality. Women have flooded into domains previously dominated by men, but the reverse has not occurred. Perhaps more men doing carework will lead to less devaluation of women and femininity.

Extrapolating the Four Responses

Some of my case study groups may appear unique or exotic, which could suggest my research is confined to these exceptional men. I argue that men’s experiences of emasculation are near universal, as are the various kinds of internalizing, repairing, and compensating responses. True, not every physically emasculated man joins a fight club or tries to enlarge his penis, and not all unemployed men become psychologically paralyzed. No human experience is universal. However, a common thread unites American men’s experiences. The importance of the dominant culture’s body and breadwinner ideals colors the experiences of men in every corner of American society. A suburban
fighting club is uncommon, but asserting masculine identities via fight culture is not (as seen in boyhood fighting culture, gang and prison cultures, bar fights, and the practice and popularity of boxing and mixed martial arts). An online penis enlargement club is unusual, but men’s deep concerns about their size and sexual performance are not (as seen in erectile dysfunction sufferers and a booming ED drug industry, a continuous stream of ads for these drugs and various enlargement products and devices, and extensive discussion of these issues in popular books and magazines).

Perhaps the group of non-breadwinning men in this book appear less exceptional given the common experience of unemployment. There are an increasing number of stay-at-home dads, but they remain a small minority. Today’s new fathers, though, are more interested and active participants in childrearing than previous generations. Engaged fatherhood is becoming the norm, so more and more American men are faced with the now separate, competing demands of being good breadwinners and good dads. This book does not examine all American men’s responses to not fulfilling body and breadwinner ideals. No qualitative study can do so. But my sample includes diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and age, allowing me to identify processes and experiences that generate common responses across a wide range of groups and contexts. The broadest context, the one that all these men share, is accountability to American manhood ideals.

**Gender Accountability and Inequality**

To understand manhood, we must first understand sex and gender. *Sex* refers to the biological characteristics that are used to distinguish females, males, and intersex people: genes, hormones, genitalia, and internal reproductive anatomy. Conversely, gender lies outside of biology. *Gender* is a social construct, a set of arbitrary meanings and expectations mapped onto the biological categories female and male. We enact femininity and masculinity in our interactions; they are performances that are fluid, ones that vary from one situation and context to another. Neither femininities nor masculinities are identical in prisons, offices, parties, and funerals; the 1820s, 1920s, and 2020s; or the United States, Zambia, India, and Chile. Boys holding hands or men controlling family finances are actions that are interpreted differently by context. And we as individuals will behave in culturally defined ways that are both feminine and masculine over the course of our lives—if not each day. None of us succeeds (if it is our goal) in being 100% masculine or feminine, especially given that these are moving targets, as social norms shift over time. Gender is associated with sex, but not determined by or dependent on it.

Gender is not innate or static; it is a performance and accomplishment rooted in social interaction. It is not something we are born with but rather
something we do. Briefly, if a person looks and acts more or less like we expect a man should (i.e., if they appear cisgender), we assume that person is male. They might not possess all (or any!) of the biological characteristics of a male, but if they put on a good performance, then based on their appearance and behavior, we somewhat unconsciously place that person in the social category man. We then interact with this person accordingly.

Just because our gender differences are not biological or predetermined doesn’t make them less real or consequential. We are always accountable to gender norms. We are always displaying ourselves for judgment and evaluation, self-regulating our performances, and judging others’ performances against cultural criteria. Conforming to cultural prescriptions serves to reinforce what is “gender-appropriate.” Violations of these socially constructed gender norms reveal how we are gender accountable. Doing gender inappropriately—to be a feminine man, or openly and proudly intersex, or transgender—may lead to being ostracized and marginalized, challenged, bullied, and even violently victimized: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions).”

Even if we reject the norms, we know what they are, we usually feel compelled to follow them, and (most) others will expect us to conform. Cultures take the broad spectrum of gender diversity and reduce and confine this array to two categories, or sometimes three (e.g., the hijra in India, or the kathoey in Thailand). Through gendered socialization, interaction, and rewards and punishments, girls and boys and women and men are expected to (and often do) behave differently enough to make these normative differences seem natural. Doing gender appropriately reinforces gender inequality because it makes gender differences—men’s domination and women’s deference—seem normal and inevitable. We see gender and assume we are observing sex.

A performance is something that is done with an audience in mind. In interaction, performances convey to others the most public aspect of our selves—our identities—or who or what one is according to oneself and others. Gendered performances are attempts to communicate to others a gender identity—and therefore most typically one’s status as a competent (American) woman or man. Identities that are salient in almost all situations and interactions, such as a gender identity, are deeply meaningful, core parts of our selves. People who do gender inappropriately—who put on a bad performance—often place their gender identity at risk. Research reveals that men commonly try to “correct” behaviors that undermine claims to masculine identities, at times going to extreme lengths to do so. In some cases, they may try to display the specific behavior judged lacking (repair), such as getting in a
fight after being called soft. In other cases they may find an alternative way of laying claim to a masculine identity (compensation), like bragging about their penis size after getting beat in a competition.

Without question, how we perform gender matters. Our clothing, hair, bodies, mannerisms, speech, and actions often reproduce patterns of difference and inequality. Doing masculinity appropriately brings many rewards: social approval, sexual and romantic access to women, status and respect, power and resources, and much more. It is no wonder most men attempt to conform, even if they only access some of these rewards. When they do gender inappropriately, they are likely to lose all access. Yet many people intentionally do gender inappropriately. They attempt to redo gender in a way that challenges cisgender expectations. These performances can be both subversive—fostering changing beliefs about gendered norms and altering the accountability structure—and subject to overt, even violent “corrective” responses.\textsuperscript{30}

Gender’s reach extends well beyond interaction and identities. Gender is also built into our society. Groups, organizations, institutions, culture, and social structure are gendered.\textsuperscript{31} That is, they are organized around gendered expectations, unwritten and written rules and policies, and ultimately, inequalities. Our opportunities and choices are influenced and constrained by the gendered worlds given to us. Children are born into families with gendered and unequal caretaking, housework, and paid labor roles. They graduate from babies to girls or boys by demonstrating not only greater cognitive and emotional development but gender competence. Outside of their homes, they are confronted by a gender-segregated and unequal world: scouting groups, toy aisles, bathrooms, sports teams, dress codes, and later, body products, magazines, college dorms, sex norms, jobs, and workplaces. Their bosses and their boss’s bosses are more likely to be men. So are their legislative representatives. Workplace policies and cultures privilege and reward those who do not bear or rear children and are more likely to marginalize, derail, or jettison those who do. State and federal policies—such as the United States’ minimal and unpaid family leave, lack of free or affordable childcare, a weak social safety net compared to similar nations, and a large proportion of the federal budget allocated to national defense—reinforce gender inequality and devalue much of the unpaid work that (mostly) women do. Gendered socialization, organizations, and institutions place women at a disadvantage in a competitive, capitalist society. Greater economic and social power is conferred to men because their gendered behaviors, expectations, and responsibilities are what our society rewards most. As I discuss throughout this book, social norms, practices, and policies further divide and disadvantage groups by sexuality, social class, race, ethnicity, age, and more.
Men’s Power Paradox

Doing masculinity appropriately requires the devaluation of femininity and women. Cultural ideals and patriarchal gender relations reveal a hierarchical and complementary relationship between masculinity and femininity; masculinity is enacted and institutionalized at the expense of and on the backs of women. Women disproportionately suffer from sexual harassment and various forms of intimate violence, including homicide, sexual assault, and rape. Women work jobs that pay less, and they are paid less for doing the same work as men. They encounter glass ceilings in work and politics and lack political representation. Women’s lesser social, economic, and political power is exacerbated by their continued primary caretaking responsibilities, which produce more part-time women workers or burden them with the bulk of the second shift—childcare and housework duties upon returning home from a full-time job.

As a group, men enjoy privileges that women experience as discrimination and oppression. But not all men enjoy them equally. Critical feminist theorists introduced the concept of intersectionality to sharpen our understanding of the multiplicative of identities and statuses we possess—categories that we may have viewed as disconnected or discrete. For example, the gendered experiences of a resource-poor immigrant man from Guatemala doing seasonal farm work will be pretty dissimilar to that of a U.S.-born African American man who is CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Borrowing this intersectional approach, masculinities scholars have highlighted how men who are poor, queer, undocumented, disabled, and/or of color enjoy fewer or few gender privileges.

Ironically, most men often feel powerless despite their relative position of privilege and influence. Author Michael Kaufman explains,

The very ways that men have constructed our social and individual power is, paradoxically, the source of enormous fear, isolation, and pain for men ourselves. If power is constructed as a capacity to dominate and control, if the capacity to act in “powerful” ways requires the construction of a personal suit of armor and a fearful distance from others, if the very world of power and privilege removes us from the world of child-rearing and nurturance, then we are creating men whose own experience of power is fraught with crippling problems. This is particularly so because the internalized expectations of masculinity are themselves impossible to satisfy or attain.

Men have created the rules that provide them with social privileges, but the consequences of pursuing and actually obtaining social power causes them pain and alienates them from others. These costs arise from the spoils of being
the dominant group, but men experience them as costs nonetheless. Men’s expectations to compete, show no weakness, and to control themselves and others, leave them emotionally and socially disconnected from others, especially other men. Men are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of violence (mostly as strangers), suffer the health effects of breadwinner pressure and the expectation to bottle up their emotions, be more emotionally stunted and socially isolated, and ultimately die younger than women.38

Just as the privileges of patriarchal gender relations are not equally shared among all men, neither are the costs. Not only do working-class white men and men of color enjoy fewer resources than middle-class white men, but the former groups also suffer from worse health, higher rates of violence, and shorter life spans.39 All of these problems may arise from gender conformity but are more likely to occur following gender failure. Unmet body and breadwinner ideals cause men to internalize a sense of failure and often redouble their efforts by trying to fix or compensate for their perceived shortcomings. This pursuit of manhood creates countless individual and social problems. Today’s version of ideal manhood is impossible to sustain, and as I argue, it is ultimately destructive for everyone. It is not inevitable, though. As the stay-at-home dads I interview reveal, men can reject the breadwinner ideal and begin redefining manhood away from power and control.

Masculinity and Manhood

The terms masculinity and manhood are often used interchangeably, but they are not equivalent. Masculinity is a performance, something that is done. As with all performances, it is fleeting, tenuous, and influenced by past performances. It comes and goes. Anyone—males, females, intersex people, women, men, transgender people—can do masculinity, but their performances are tied to their social categories. Girls and women, for example, are not accountable to masculinity as are boys and men.40 Girls and women may enjoy some of the privileges of masculinity, such as status and respect for their athleticism, or money and power for their workplace accomplishments, but their gender identities are not undermined by not doing masculinity. Quite the opposite, as women who act “too masculine” often have their gender or sexuality called into question; when they do masculinity, it challenges the hierarchical and complementary gendered expectations and patterns of American society.41

Boys and men are highly accountable to masculinity. If they do not do masculinity appropriately, they or others may question their manhood. The term manhood suggests an overarching sense of self that arises from the accumulation of credible masculine performances.42 Doing masculinity appropriately over and over again may lead to a sense of manhood. However, manhood is elusive because boys’ and men’s gender accountability is more restrictive as
compared to girls’ and women’s. Early in their lives, boys learn that they have to fit their behaviors into the narrow confines of the “act-like-a-man” box or others will force them back into it. “Man up!” they’ll say, perhaps teasingly, even affectionately. More often it is used as a challenge or as a put-down or attack.

There are three key reasons manhood is so inflexible compared to womanhood—that is, why girls and women have more freedom to do masculinity than boys and men have to do femininity. First, manhood is constructed in opposition to womanhood but less so is the reverse true. Second, manhood must constantly be proved. Third, our society offers more and greater rewards for masculine-marked behaviors, tasks, careers, and so forth.

Being a man is more restrictive first because it usually means convincing others that you are not being a woman—or more precisely, that you do not say, think, feel, or do anything that is associated with femininity. How do boys insult and demean other boys? They call them “girls,” “crybabies,” “wimps,” and “sissies.” When they are older, they use “gay,” “fag,” “bitch,” and “pussy,” equating who their targets are and what they do with derogatory terms associated with women, femininity, and being perceived as effeminate. They are called a “pussy” when they are dominated by other boys or men and “pussy-whipped” when accused of being controlled by women. Men are admonished to “Man up!” or, in some locations, “Cowboy up!” The more provocative and confrontational insults use male genitalia as symbols of social manhood, such as when men’s “testicular fortitude” is questioned and they are told to “grow a pair” and “sack up” or “nut up.” Language is powerful. It both reflects and shapes our behaviors. These kinds of challenges to manhood are endemic in men’s interactions, revealing and reinforcing men’s power over women; they are attempts to assert power over each other, usually due to fear of being on the receiving end of such attacks.

It is important to point out that the reverse mostly is not true. Women don’t tell each other “Woman up!” or “Ovary up!” when they aren’t being feminine enough. Challenges to women who are perceived as too masculine are more circuitous. Women get called “sluts” (not “men”) for wanting and having “too much” sex. They may get lesbian-baited if they are deemed too muscular or athletic, fight for equal rights, or aren’t dependent on men. Or they may be called a “bitch” if they are perceived as noncompliant or “bossy.” These stigmatizing labels—mostly but not solely wielded by men—are used to attack women who embody the masculine-marked qualities that help sustain men’s dominance. They are enough to discourage some girls and women from doing what they otherwise would choose to do. And women often alter their behavior to prevent or end this kind of labeling, by doing femininity in other ways such as emphasizing their heterosexuality and
enacting more “feminine” styles of leadership. Still, significant numbers and in
some cases majorities of women pursue casual sex, build muscle and compete
as athletes, and seek economic and political power. In other words, an increas-
ing number of girls enthusiastically embrace being a stud, tomboy, and boss.48
The rewards for these identities, behaviors, and statuses, as well as their greater
social acceptance compared to just a generation ago, often outweigh any nega-
tive consequences. Women don’t flee from masculinity quite as fast and far as
men do from femininity. The fears and insecurities that haunt women do so
for different reasons.

The second reason manhood is more restrictive is that it is highly
precarious—regularly subject to threat and capable of being undermined.
There is a long list of possible sources of emasculation for boys and men, a
seemingly endless inventory of manhood. Failing to be big, tough, strong,
athletic, heterosexually active, stoic, independent, aggressive, competitive,
successful, and in control—or simply thinking one is not living up to these
standards—in invites masculine anxiety. So does walking, standing, sitting, run-
ning, talking, eating, dressing, greeting others, flirting, checking yourself out
in the mirror, petting a cute dog, doing handiwork, and literally, I argue, every
conceivable behavior, if it is done in a way that could be judged feminine.
Everything men do has the potential to discredit their masculine selves. Doing
masculinity appropriately, or at least not femininely, may bring rewards. Or
it may fly under the radar—just the daily routine of a guy doing what guys
are supposed to do. Men don’t always have to give an award-winning mascu-
line performance, but they better not give one that audiences see as too femi-
nine. (Conversely, masculine anxiety is not provoked by failing at empathy,
kindness, patience, expressions of love, and so forth. Men, though, could be
held accountable for doing these things too skillfully.)

Not all behaviors and expectations are equally important across all loca-
tions and situations. Men who are not handy, do not follow sports, are not out-
doorsy, know nothing about cars, have some body fat, don’t know how to grill
food, or can’t tie a tie may occasionally feel a fleeting sense of shame or embar-
rassment, but these masculine-marked expectations are not core concerns of
manhood. Research suggests that physical, sexual, and economic competence
and accomplishments are those to which men feel most accountable.49 Nota-
bly, a single perceived failure on these—getting beat up or publicly humiliated
by another boy, experiencing erectile dysfunction, losing a job or breadwinner
status—is often enough to threaten one’s manhood identity and status. People
police themselves so harshly—they are so fearful and vigilant—that they
often see shortcomings in themselves that others do not. This helps explain
why many men whom others would view as manly (because of their physical
or economic status) may see themselves as impostors, unworthy in some way.
Today’s masculine failures, whether called out by others or conjured internally, lay waste to yesterday’s accomplishments and claims to manhood. Manhood must be constantly proved.

Third and last, our patriarchal society provides most of the material and symbolic rewards to men and masculinities, thus further restricting manhood. Political and economic power is concentrated among men, especially men who fulfill masculine ideals. Jobs and activities associated with women and femininity, such as paid and unpaid carework, are devalued. Breadwinning is rewarded more than caretaking, accomplishments are respected more than appearance, competition yields more rewards than cooperation. Men who do femininity relinquish not only some semblance of their masculine identities but also material rewards and social power. The societal pressure on girls to focus on caretaking and appearance is intense beginning in childhood, as they are expected to express interest in dolls, hair, makeup, jewelry, and generally, being pretty. And even when girls and women do masculine-typed things, they aren’t rewarded as much or are punished for doing so, because they are behaving gender inappropriately. The tough, assertive, career-oriented, accomplished woman is too often labeled a cold, ballbusting bitch and a terrible mother. This is changing somewhat, certainly more rapidly than are men’s norms. But women are expected to find an elusive balance between feminine and masculine characteristics and behaviors: simultaneously caring moms and career-oriented professionals. Womanhood impossible!

**Doing Dominance**

If gender norms and arrangements are arbitrary, though, how did those of the United States come to be the way they are today? Anthropologists have documented a range of manhood ideals across cultures. Why is U.S. femininity the antithesis of masculinity? Why is manhood so tenuous—and thus virtually unobtainable? Why are men and masculinity privileged at the expense of women and femininity? Sociologist R. W. Connell’s concept of *hegemonic masculinity* provides answers. It borrows from an early analysis and critique of capitalism that deployed the concept of cultural hegemony. According to cultural hegemony, the ruling class maintains power not simply through economic or political coercion, or force and violence, but through cultural coercion. The dominant group maintains its power and legitimacy by imposing its ideology. The ways of the dominant group become normative and are embedded in organizational practices and institutional policies. These arrangements and beliefs are so pervasive that even those who suffer from them (the resource poor and working class) usually are complicit in following them. Subordinate groups adopt the ideology of the dominant group because everything associated with the latter group is held up as the cultural ideal. The ideal
becomes so prevalent that it appears natural and inevitable. For example, the American political and economic system is deeply tilted toward the privileged and severely limits class mobility. However, most people continue to accept the entrenched ideology of rugged individualism in our capitalist, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps American culture. It is so accepted that it’s often used to shame others (or oneself) for lack of success.

With hegemonic masculinity, gender substitutes for social class. The ideology and practices of the dominant social group—men—are upheld by processes of not only domination and control but coercion and complicity. All men are expected to adopt the ideology and practices of hegemonic masculinity, even if almost none of them can hope to fulfill its ideals. Women are similarly expected to uphold the status quo, even though it ensures their secondary status. For example, women are expected to and often do slut-shame other women and view non-breadwinning men as less desirable. As it was originally formulated, hegemonic masculinity was explained as “the currently most honored way of being a man[,] it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.”

It is normative, if not the norm. Women mostly conform even though doing so translates to having less material and symbolic power. They, too, are accountable to gendered ideals. Women and men must do gender appropriately because their “competence as members of society is hostage to its production.” Being appropriately feminine may validate women’s identities and provide some material benefits. Deviating can be costly. Women’s complicity is key to hegemonic gender relations; the subordinate group must somewhat buy into and uphold the institutional arrangements that oppress them. Yet women, gay men, and others also often resist and challenge these oppressive gender relations; it is a process.

Two key insights from Connell’s work are well supported by years of research: there is a plurality of masculinities, and they are arranged hierarchically. The ideal type, hegemonic masculinity, sits at the top. Men who enact complicit masculinity conform to the ideal type as best they can but do not fulfill it and therefore do not enjoy many of its privileges. Still, their ideology and actions help ensure a hierarchical and complementary relationship between masculinity and femininity. The term marginalized masculinity is used to explain how resource-poor men or men of color may benefit from gender privilege but suffer discrimination and oppression from their other lower-status social categories. Subordinated masculinity lies at the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy. It represents failed masculinity; men who are subordinated are equated with women and thus subject to discrimination, violence, and oppression. Gay men and associated stereotypical behaviors are the most subordinated in American culture because they are typecast as feminine and passive—the opposite of hegemonic masculinity. Subordinated men lie near
the bottom of the hierarchy because of their extramen identities and statuses. That is, gay men are subordinated because our heterosexist society discriminates against their sexuality. Overall, women are very likely to enjoy lower statuses and fewer resources than similarly situated men.

As influential as this concept has been, it suffers from some shortcomings and contradictions and therefore has its critics. Some wonder why we should use the term masculinity at all given that anyone—biological females, social women, transgender people—can do masculinity. Sociologist Michael Schwalbe thinks researchers should focus on any and all of men’s actions—individually and collectively—that subordinate women, as well as other men. He proposes we focus on manhood acts, which are “aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation,” and thus reproduce inequality and preserve patriarchal gender relations.

In these ways, manhood acts are the realm of men because their purpose is to maintain men’s power over women. For example, men who feel threatened economically, or who perceive their woman partners as not sufficiently submissive are more likely to use violence against them to reassert a sense of masculine authority. Boys and young men who feel as though they are not fully in control of their bodies sometimes assert their masculine identities by stigmatizing other men with the label “fag,” drinking heavily, physically and sexually victimizing younger peers, and sexually harassing women. In short, when men do masculinity appropriately—when they make a claim to manhood—what they are doing is attempting to align themselves with the dominant group (men as a gender class) at the expense of the subordinate group (the gender class of women).

Of course, not all men are situated equally. They have access to different kinds of manhood acts depending on their education level, social class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, age, and more. They are subject to the gender binary, but they use the tools they have available. For non-breadwinning men (younger, poorer), bodies become a more likely site of manhood acts. They may use their bodies to resist others’ control (e.g., not doing “women’s work” around the house) or to control others, such as through intimate violence. Presenting oneself and being labeled a man is not a difficult accomplishment. Manhood acts are what enable men to access a high-status identity and its accompanying benefits.

The idea of doing masculinity is still a useful concept insofar as it speaks to how our embodied displays of gender are always accountable. We are evaluated based on our performance as well as our social categories. Masculine behaviors are not determined by biology, but they are differentially performed, experienced, judged, and responded to when they are done by women, men, or transgender people. Masculine performances are situated—that is, they are determined and judged based on the characteristics of the person, the audience
the situation, and locally prevailing masculine ideals. Southern, rural, white masculinity is not identical to East Coast, urban, Latino masculinity. Further, individual men in either context will assert their masculinity in numerous ways. This is why some question whether there is a monolithic cultural standard against which all men are measured. It is true that tremendous variation exists. But we must guard against being too reductionist. We mustn’t ignore the commonalities among local versions that comprise the cultural ideals, which are what ensure systemic inequality.

Redefining and Reimagining Gender

Focusing solely on inequality-reproducing manhood acts reduces multiple masculinities to a binary and seems to negate the possibility that an inclusive, egalitarian (or any other) masculinity ideal could emerge to challenge current patriarchal ideals and arrangements. Let’s remember that gender and gender arrangements are arbitrary artifacts of culture. The concept of doing gender was so revolutionary because it bridged micro and macro levels of analysis by deftly accounting for individual agency, social structure, and social change. People might choose to do gender inappropriately, but they face social consequences for doing so. However, gender accountability shifts in response to changing historical and structural conditions as well as people challenging gender norms both individually and collectively. Cultures categorize and do sex, gender, and sexuality quite differently.

Based on my interviews with stay-at-home dads, countless conversations with college-aged youth, and the emergence of more alternative, inclusive masculinities among younger men, I think widespread social change is possible, if far from imminent. Whatever optimism one may have is likely tempered by how deeply entrenched are current American hegemonic ideals and gender arrangements. At the heart of this inequality is the importance of control for masculinity. I argue that boys’ and men’s bodies and breadwinner status/identity are the two primary sites for their expression of control. Controlling selves and others and resisting being dominated and controlled is most connected to men’s bodies and work.

Reading Manhood Impossible

Part 1 of this book, “The Body Dilemma,” examines the manhood ideals that boys first encounter: the expectation to control and master their bodies by proving their toughness and displaying heterosexual competence. Chapter 1 discusses how the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club uses the manhood ritual of interpersonal combat to afford adult men the opportunity to confront their fears and test their fighting skills and selves. Fighting culture arises due to the
absence of rites of passage for American men, along with conformity to body ideals. In chapter 2, I examine GFC members’ internalizing, repairing, and redefining responses to not fulfilling body ideals. A subset of men who were physically controlled and dominated as boys internalized a sense of failure. GFC provides fight therapy—it allows these men to directly repair their earlier losses of physical control and sense of emasculation by fighting as adults. They restore a sense of control, paradoxically, by choosing to give up control and place themselves at risk. Even when they lose a fight, they demonstrate their ability to withstand violence and thereby begin repairing their damaged masculinity. Yet responsible adult men are not supposed to fight. Some GFC fighters see others’ negative reactions as evidence of a society gone astray, one that threatens not only fight culture but men’s natural predispositions. They blame the civilizing forces of modernization and urbanization or feminists for undermining ideals of physical toughness. Fighting becomes GFC men’s expression of both personal and political manhood, a primal, tribal act in opposition to contemporary society.

Chapter 3 examines men who have joined the Penis Health Club in hopes of improving their penis size and sexual performance. Anxiety-producing locker room experiences, devastating comments by peers and sexual partners, racial stereotypes, inconsistent sexual performances, and distorted images from pornography produce in many boys and men an internalized sense of body failure. They conceal their bodies, avoid sex and relationships, and in some cases suffer from depression and suicidal thoughts. The Club provides size and performance therapy, and an opportunity to repair broken manhood both by helping men change their negative perceptions about their penises and actually improving their size and performance. They feel empowered by the mere possibility that they can change something they previously thought was static. (Re)claiming a sense of control over their bodies begins to repair some of the damage of internalized inadequacy.

Compensatory responses by both GFC and PHC members are the focus of chapter 4, along with high-profile cases of extreme compensatory masculine violence. GFC members sometimes slip into seemingly harmless fighting and superhero fantasies to compensate for their all-too-normal and mortal bodies. Younger PHC Club members lash out at women they derisively label “size queens” for desiring large penises, thereby causing men to feel small and incompetent. Sculpting and building the rest of their bodies helps some men offset some of their anxieties about their below-average or merely average penis size and sexual skills. The most serious and consequential cases of compensatory manhood acts include men who commit various acts of intimate violence and violence toward strangers.

Part 2 of the book, “The Breadwinner Dilemma,” examines the manhood ideal to which adult men are most accountable: their ability to provide for
themselves and their families. Chapter 5 introduces the unemployed men and stay-at-home dads who are the focus of this second half of the book. Men’s status as breadwinners has been slowly eroding for decades and has always been more tenuous for men of color and working-class men. Despite sweeping changes to gendered work-family arrangements, the expectation for men to maintain breadwinner statuses and identities largely persists. In the midst and aftermath of the Great Recession, many men were forced out of or left the paid labor force. My job fair observations and conversations capture the structural obstacles that unemployed men (and others) often experience as personal failures: too many job-seekers, not enough jobs. A number of these men involuntarily became stay-at-home dads, while others chose to because they and their partners determined this is the best arrangement for their families.

Chapter 6 discusses the internalizing and compensating responses of unemployed men. Joblessness most affects men who are forced into unemployment, fail to live up to their own and their partner’s expectations, have little support, and are struggling financially. Many of these men internalize their struggles, suffering from severe depression, insomnia, physical deterioration, withdrawal, and ultimately, a sense of emasculation. Others externalize their feelings of being failed breadwinners, expressing anger and aggression and asserting themselves more in attempts to control others and situations. Some milder forms of compensatory masculinity include behaviors that would be perceived as positive, such as getting in shape, acquiring higher levels of education, and trying to satisfy a partner’s needs. I return to high-profile cases of violence, namely, mass shooters and terrorists, to illustrate more extreme, costly examples of compensatory manhood acts in response to being a failed breadwinner.

In chapter 7, I examine men who have embraced their status and identity as stay-at-home dads. They reject and redefine the expectation that men must be financial providers for their families, instead defining themselves as responsible providers because they prioritize their children’s well-being over family income or their own ego or careers. Transcending the breadwinner ideal is a constant challenge, though. These men struggle with a sense of loss of status and identity, feeling unappreciated and, when finances get tight, guilty. They also face negative reactions in a culture that has not fully embraced men as primary caretakers—or for gay stay-at-home dads, same-sex parents in general.

The concluding chapter assesses how body and breadwinner ideals have been transformed over the last several decades and predicts the pace and prospects for continued change. Men from all four groups overwhelmingly reject a separation of spheres for women and men. They hope that American culture will purge some of the unattainable expectations that plague and emasculate men, oppress women, and contribute to countless social problems. Still, many men continue to believe that to “man up” requires them to be leaders, protectors,
and breadwinners—and ultimately, not women. I argue that demographic trends (younger Americans are more likely to embrace gender equality), an economy that will continue to require multiple incomes, and the possible introduction of more progressive work-family laws and policies (to counter the neoliberal dismantling of many family and social support systems) will foster continued change. Finally, advocates and agents of change—feminists and profeminists, antiviolence activists, gender benders, breadwinning moms, stay-at-home dads, and many others—will also help American society redefine what it means to be a man, making manhood less violent and destructive, and the achievement of it more possible.