

# A Qualitative Analysis of Perceptions of Precarious Manhood in U.S. and Danish Men

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Manhood and masculinity have been studied extensively in different academic disciplines and in a variety of contexts. Research shows that becoming (and being) a man in the United States is not an easy task, as manhood is a precarious status that must be actively and publicly achieved and maintained. Previous research has not, to our knowledge, asked men to explain their own perceptions of precariousness or contrasted modern, industrialized countries that differ on key cultural variables, such as egalitarianism. In the current study, we interviewed college-aged, heterosexual, Caucasian men (9 from the United States and 9 from Denmark). We asked how manhood is achieved, how it is maintained, if it can be lost, and the role of masculinity. Results showed similarities in the men's understanding of manhood (e.g., U.S. and Danish men both talked about manhood in terms of acting like an adult and protecting others), but the 2 groups also differed in important ways. The U.S. men described the need to show manhood through athleticism (what the male body "does") and the rejection of femininity whereas the Danish men described the physical embodiment of manhood (what the male body "is") and the importance of having a feminine side. Furthermore, U.S. men contrasted manhood to womanhood whereas Danish men contrasted manhood to boyhood. Based on these conceptualizations, we argue that the Danish men viewed manhood as less precarious than the U.S. men did, and conclude that understandings of masculinity and the precariousness of manhood vary cross-culturally and are tied to broader sociocultural values.

*Keywords:* precarious manhood, masculinity, cross-cultural, Denmark, United States

*Supplemental materials:* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000062.supp>

In contemporary United States, it seems that traits such as bravery, grit, and strength have been inextricably bound with the state of being a man. Men are implored to "grow a pair" or "man up" when they behave in ways inconsistent with these traits. If they fail at the task of being a "real man," they might not only be punished socially but their very status as a man may be threatened. Thus, being a man in the United States today seems to be a rather difficult undertaking, both in terms of obtaining the status of manhood and maintaining it. Indeed, theorists and researchers studying men and masculinity have long argued that manhood is often a precarious status, earned only by those men who demonstrate socially accepted characteristics of masculinity (Kimmel, 1997; Levant, 1996; O'Neil, 2008; Pleck, 1976). In addition, once manhood has been achieved, it must be constantly reasserted through continual demonstrations of masculinity, resulting in men

feeling a constant need to maintain their manhood through outward demonstrations of masculine behaviors (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). In the United States, such public displays of masculinity include demonstrations of physical prowess, aggression, and success in work-related endeavors (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) as well as avoidance of femininity (Brannon, 1976; Cicone & Ruble, 1978; Gallagher & Parrott, 2011; Pascoe, 2003, 2005).

Research suggests that the mechanism of maintaining one's manhood is demonstrating masculinity, and much research shows that threatening men's manhood leads to increases in behaviors consistent with traditional masculinity. A common experimental paradigm involves the researcher threatening a man's manhood in one of two primary ways, both involving femininity: giving false feedback on a questionnaire (suggesting that the participant is more similar to women than to men) or instructing the participant to engage in a stereotypically feminine task (such as braiding hair). Studies using this paradigm have found that men respond to manhood threats with feelings of anxiety (Dahl, Vescio, & Weaver, 2014; Vandello et al., 2008) and react with thoughts and behaviors consistent with stereotypical masculinity: an increased need for a masculine gender identity (Italian sample; Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011), greater prejudice against feminine gay men (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007), more sexism (Dahl et al., 2014; in Australian men, Hunt & Gonsalkorale, 2014), thoughts of physical violence (Vandello et al., 2008), more physical aggression (Bosson et al., 2009; Cohn, Seibert, &

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This article was published Online First July 25, 2016.

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This research was funded by a grant to the first author from the Student International Research Fund, awarded by the Center for Global Study and Engagement, Dickinson College.

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Zeichner, 2009), more aggression against gay men in particular (Bosson, Weaver, Caswell, & Burnaford, 2012; Talley & Betten-court, 2008), and increased risk-taking (Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson, 2013). Gay men whose manhood was threatened with this paradigm reported feeling more similar to masculine gay men and had less of a desire to associate with feminine gay men (Italian sample; Hunt, Fasoli, Carnaghi, & Cadinu, 2016).

Nearly all research on precarious manhood and masculinity has taken place in the United States or focused on a single cultural context. However, because what is considered masculine is culturally defined and socially determined (Gilmore, 1990; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vandello et al., 2008; Winegard, Winegard, & Geary, 2014), the way that men achieve manhood will vary over time and cross-culturally. For instance, sociological research shows that the way American men define manhood and masculinity has changed across time, moving from the refined, sophisticated landowner to the competitive, aggressive "self-made man" (Kimmel, 2012). These changes in the definition of manhood occurred due to the shifting social landscape as the United States developed from a colonial settlement to a nation, and faced the challenges of the Industrial Revolution, world wars, and the radical social change in the late 20th century. Connell (2005) documented similar shifts in definitions of masculinities among Australian men, noting that men construct manhood within specific social contexts, power relations, and in relation to the hegemonic masculinity of their culture and time.

Cross-cultural anthropological research has further suggested that concepts of manhood may be shaped not only by the social environment but also by the physical environment. Much of this work has built on Gilmore (1990), whose cross-cultural research revealed that the conceptualization of manhood as a precarious state is common in most societies, with notable cross-cultural variation. Gilmore documented two cultures in which manhood was not precarious (the Tahiti of French Polynesia and the Semai of Malaysia), and he concluded that there are cross-cultural differences in the structure of manhood (precarious or not) just as there are cross-cultural differences in constructions of masculinity.

However, most of the contemporary psychological research does not acknowledge these possible variations, and instead suggests that the precariousness of manhood is universal (see Vandello & Bosson, 2013). The present study attempts to broaden the scope of the existing research to include a cross-cultural perspective. Furthermore, because most of the contemporary work on this phenomenon has been quantitative in nature, the present study utilizes qualitative methods to explore men's own understandings of manhood and masculinity.

### The Present Study

Comparing Denmark and the United States with respect to precarious manhood is theoretically useful. The countries are similar in that they are modern, industrialized, democratic countries with a highly advanced economy and a high level of individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Yet they also differ in important ways. Compared to the United States, Denmark's population is much smaller (5.6 million people) and more homogeneous linguistically, ethnically, and religiously. Furthermore, the social and welfare benefits are more extensive in Denmark than in the United States and personal income tax is correspondingly higher in Denmark.

One important aspect on which the two cultures vary is level of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2014). In examining the relative gender equality of Denmark compared to the United States, one can look to the Global Gender Gap Index, which examines factors such as gender equality in educational attainment, health, political empowerment, and economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2014). In 2014, Denmark was ranked fifth (the first four countries were Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) and the United States was ranked 20th, preceded by countries such as Rwanda, the Philippines, Burundi, and South Africa. In addition to economic and political equality, Danish cultural values are also consistent with relative gender equality. Specifically, on Hofstede's cultural dimension of "masculinity," Denmark scores much lower (16) compared to the United States (62; Hofstede, 2014). Denmark's low score on this dimension indicates greater concern for having a good quality of life rather than being driven by competition, achievement, and success and that Danes value traditionally feminine values such as caring for others and liking what you do (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, a recent study of Danish men showed that they scored very low on Levant's Male Role Norms Inventory, indicating low support for traditionally masculine ideals such as dominance, aggression, and restrictive emotionality (Bloksgaard et al., 2015).

Because of the cultural differences in emphasis on competition and achievement as well as the differences in masculine versus feminine cultural values, we would expect Danish and U.S. men to speak differently about masculinity and the precariousness of manhood. Furthermore, we would expect Danish men to talk about their manhood as being less precarious than American men because of their more egalitarian cultural values and beliefs; in a culture with more resources and less competition for these resources like Denmark, and with a greater emphasis on gender egalitarianism, then according to Gilmore's (1990) theoretical perspective on manhood cross-culturally, manhood will be less precarious.

In the present study, we interviewed Danish and American men about their perceptions of precarious manhood and masculinity. Although researchers have examined the concept of precarious manhood and its consequences using survey and experimental research, no one has, to our knowledge, actually asked men to explain their own perceptions and experiences of precariousness. Furthermore, research has not previously contrasted industrialized modern countries that differ on egalitarianism such as Denmark and the United States. Thus, in this study we examine how men actually talk about their own manhood and its precariousness, and whether men in cultures that differ in gender and social equality differ in their descriptions of the precariousness of manhood. To analyze these data, we draw on multiple perspectives on gender, manhood, and masculinity, as these diverse literatures all contribute useful (and unique) theoretical tools to help make sense of our findings.

### Method

#### Participants

Nine men from each country participated in the study. To be eligible for participation, men had to be between 18 and 24 years of age, Caucasian, heterosexual, and a native of the country. There

are several reasons why we chose a sample with these specific characteristics. First, research shows that this particular age, often referred to as emerging adulthood, is an important time for men's constructions of masculinity attitudes and gender role development more generally, as they are not adolescents, but also not yet adults (Arnett, 2004; Marcell, Eftim, Sonenstein, & Pleck, 2011; O'Neil, Egan, Owen, & Murry, 1993). Second, research indicates that perceptions of manhood differ as a function of socioeconomic status, ethnicity (Bloksgaard et al., 2015; Marcell et al., 2011; Thompson & Bennett, 2015), and sexual orientation (Berkowitz & Belgrave, 2010; Hennen, 2005; Kahn, Goddard, & Coy, 2013). Because most research has been conducted with white, middle-class, young adult men, we wanted to expand existing research by interviewing this group and not by interviewing men who varied in age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Finally, qualitative research often focuses on homogenous groups when the purpose is to come to a deep understanding of a group (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), which aligns with the purpose of our research. Therefore, we selected a homogeneous group of white, middle class, men from ages 18 to 24 in each country.

Participants from the United States were all from the Eastern United States and participants from Denmark were all from Copenhagen, the country's capital. The U.S. participants were recruited through the Dickinson College psychology department's participant pool and received course credit for their participation. Danish participants were recruited using snowball sampling and word-of-mouth, and were paid the equivalent of \$20 for their participation. Interviews were conducted during the spring of 2013 (United States) and the spring of 2014 (Denmark). All of the participants were university students except one of the Danish participants. The U.S. sample was, on average, slightly younger ( $M = 19.1$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ , range 18–21) than the Danish sample ( $M = 21.5$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ , range 20–23). Participant information can be found in Table 1. Throughout the results, "Danish" and "American" are used to refer to the two samples or to individual men within each sample, and do not imply generalizability to all Danes and Americans.

### Interview Schedule

The interviews followed a semistructured protocol with a series of open-ended questions that prompted participants to speak freely about the subjects of interest in the study. Questions focused on the research questions: How is manhood achieved, how is manhood

maintained, can manhood be lost, and how does masculinity play a role in manhood?

Questions were posed in a conversational way so as to aid in the natural flow of the interview. Participants were first asked to think about what makes someone a man and at what point he becomes a man. Subsequently, participants were asked about the extent to which actions could cause a man to become less manly, the extent to which manhood can be challenged and what kind of challenges exist. In addition, contextually specific examples were given and the participants were asked to explain how they would feel if they violated a culturally accepted standard of masculinity or manhood (e.g., "How would you feel if someone made you wear pink nail polish for a week?"). Participants were also asked to relay stories of instances where they felt a friend had done something that made them think of him as less manly and if they themselves had experienced a similar event. Finally, participants were asked several demographic and background questions. For full interview schedule see online Supplementary Material. The interviews lasted 20–45 min and were audiotaped and transcribed word for word.

### Procedure

All interviews were conducted in the native language of the participant by the first author, who is fluent in English and Danish. American participants were interviewed at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and Danish participants at DIS (Study Abroad in Scandinavia) in Copenhagen. The U.S. data were transcribed by the first author and checked by the second author. The Danish data were transcribed professionally, translated by the first author, and double-checked by the third author (a native Danish speaker.) The quotes reported here were edited for clarity by taking out utterances such as "um," "uh," and "like."

### Analytic Strategy

The data were coded using MAXQDA, which is qualitative data analysis software that helps organize and manage codes and themes within the data. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author conducted all steps of this thematic analysis on the U.S. and Danish samples separately, under the supervision of the other authors. The first stage of analyzing the data was thematic analysis and the second stage was comparing the findings from each country.

Following the methodology of thematic analysis, the first author (in consultation with the other authors) carried out the six analysis steps, first examining the U.S. data and then separately the Danish data. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data, taking note of initial ideas. Second, we systematically and carefully read all of the interviews and created initial codes (small groupings of related quotes). Third, we began searching for themes (collections of codes that are essentially patterned responses representing something important about the data in light of the research questions). Fourth, we reviewed these themes and made sure that the underlying assumptions and smaller codes made sense within each theme. Fifth, we defined and named the themes, keeping in mind a larger structural narrative (e.g., what patterns did we see in what participants said and how did these patterns relate to one another). The sixth and final step involved selecting examples that illus-

Table 1  
Participant Information

American		Danish	
Participant pseudonym	Age	Participant pseudonym	Age
Tyler	18	Silas	20
Drew	19	Mathias	20
George	21	Nikolaj	22
Luke	20	Hans	23
Jacob	18	Ole	20
Mason	18	Lasse	22
Will	20	Anders	22
Chris	18	Johan	22
Justin	20	Rasmus	23

trated each of the themes and codes within the themes and sub-themes. Themes, codes, and the structure of the analysis for each separate data set were then discussed among all three authors, with modifications made via consensus.

Subsequently, we began a cross-cultural comparison of our findings. This second stage of analysis began with the first author recoding each set of data using the other data set's codes and themes. In this stage of analysis, we went back and reexamined the themes and organized them into a structure that could encompass both data sets. This stage involved refining, redefining, and renaming some of the themes. Specifically, we examined all of the themes for both data sets and searched for similarities and differences in the ways in which men spoke about these issues and looked for themes that incorporated both data sets.

The analysis used a realist epistemology in which it is assumed that there is a straightforward relationship between meaning, experience, and language and it is presumed that participants can accurately represent their own experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Reflexivity Statement

The authors acknowledge the limitations of interview methodology, including the effects that the interviewer may have had on the participant's responses. All of the interviews were conducted by the first author, who is an attractive undergraduate woman whose gender presentation is traditionally feminine and who thus appears normatively heterosexual. We anticipated that some men in our interviews might engage in gender performances because of a desire to appear more socially desirable (i.e., more masculine) in their responses (several female interviewers have reported such experiences with male participants; see Campbell, 2003; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005; Zurbriggen, 2002). However, the interviewer did not see evidence of these dynamics in the present study. The male participants in this study answered the questions politely and professionally, and the interviewer felt that the men were giving a great deal of thought to their responses even when they at times had some difficulty answering questions.

Our research team was comprised of three individuals who together created an important practical and theoretical balance. The first author is a bilingual and bicultural undergraduate psychology major who was born in the United States but has lived in both countries. The second author is a U.S. native with no ties to Denmark who has taught gender and sexuality classes and has extensive qualitative research knowledge. The third author was born in Denmark but has been living and working in the United

States for the last 30 years and has taught gender, sexuality, and cross-cultural psychology courses. Thus, with regards to data analysis, because two of the researchers are familiar with Danish and U.S. culture, they likely used those experiences and knowledge to inform conclusions when interpreting the data; however, this was likely balanced by the second author's unfamiliarity with Denmark and Danish culture.

## Results and Analysis

We identified three main themes that describe how the men thought and talked about manhood and its precariousness: physicality of manhood, characteristics of manhood, and manhood in contrast to boyhood or womanhood. Within each theme are sub-themes that highlight similarities and differences between the Danish and the U.S. men. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes.

### Theme 1: Physicality of Manhood

When the participants were asked what makes someone a man, they described the physical male body and the actions of the body. Both groups of men talked about using their physicality and strength to protect others, such as your wife, your children, and the weak. However, while the Danish men talked more about the physical embodiment of manhood, that is, what a manly body *is*, the U.S. men talked more about athleticism and sports, that is, what a manly body *does*. Because physical embodiment occurs as a simple developmental process of maturation whereas success in sports requires effort and practice, these findings point to a greater sense of precariousness among U.S. than Danish men.

**Protecting your wife, children, and the weak (United States and Denmark).** Both the Danish and the U.S. men talked about the need to protect and take care of family, such as your wife and children, but also to protect or stand up for those who are weaker than yourself. The way in which the men talked about protection seemed to be in a physical sense, as if that was their duty as strong men. Protection in a physical sense is also highlighted in the way the men talked about protecting the weak. Lasse from Denmark said,

I also feel responsible for people who are weaker than me. I can tease people, but I've never bullied anyone, ever. I could take care of someone that I think is being left out because I feel strong enough to dare to protect that person.

Table 2  
*Table of Themes*

Themes	Subthemes
Physicality of manhood	Protecting your wife, children, and the weak (United States and Denmark) Physical embodiment of manhood (Denmark) Athleticism and sports, and aggression in these pursuits (United States)
Characteristics of manhood	Manhood as adulthood (United States and Denmark) Manhood involves expressing femininity (Denmark)
Manhood in contrast to boyhood or womanhood	Manhood in contrast to boyhood (Denmark) Manhood in contrast to womanhood (United States)

Mathias from Denmark talked about “creating a sense of safety and security for both your surroundings generally, but also if you have a wife and kids, and for your friends.” Similarly, Will from the United States also talked about protecting the weak:

One of the biggest ones I could think of [with respect to instances of feeling masculine] [is that] I helped my father out at the little league as I got older and there was an older kid picking on a younger kid and I knew the younger kid and I actually approached the older kid and told him what he was doing was wrong and things like that and I helped the younger kid out and he was more vulnerable and I felt like that was of the things that was more masculine for me, like trying to help out that younger kid with the older kid.

In sum, it was clear that the men in both Denmark and the United States thought that an important part of being a man was to protect those you love (wife and children), but also to be able to stand up for and protect those who are weaker than you. This description of protection implies it is a manly duty (rather than an adult duty) due to men’s relative physical strength, and demonstrates a gendered interpretation that was similar for the men in the two countries. These findings are consistent with the literature in that men are expected to play the role of protector (and provider) of their families (Thompson & Bennett, 2015). Furthermore, physical strength is an important part of being a man in the United States (Cicone & Ruble, 1978; Donaldson, 1993; Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1976). This expectation of strength, coupled with the fact that men are, on average, stronger than women, may lead men in both the United States and Denmark to feel that it is their duty to protect those that are weaker than themselves.

**Physical embodiment of manhood (Denmark).** Although all of the men talked about their physical bodies, they talked about them in very different ways. The Danish men talked about what it was like to have the body of a man, which in its physical appearance is different than the body of a boy or of a woman. In addition, the Danish men said explicitly that being a man came, in large part, from the appearance of a physically masculine body.

Like when you have external qualities that make you look like a man and not a boy. A man for me is like—maybe not exactly like the Greek statues of Adonis—but something like that. (Silas, Denmark)

I think more about the body. So something about the body - to look down at your own body and seeing that it is a man’s body—that is masculine, I think. Because the difference between a man’s body, and touching a woman’s body is huge. (Rasmus, Denmark)

The Danish men described conceptualizations of manhood via the physicality of the body simply in terms of what makes a man’s body distinct from a woman’s body or a boy’s body, whereas the U.S. men did not. This difference between the U.S. and Danish samples is interesting in that several studies conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada indicate that physical appearance, particularly muscularity, but also other markers of manhood such as body and facial hair, is important to manhood (Alexander, 2003; Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005; Ricciardelli, 2011). That is, although we do not believe the U.S. men in our study would reject the importance of appearing to be physically manly, this was not the information that they volunteered when

discussing their perspectives on manhood, suggesting that it was not among the most salient issues to U.S. men.

**Athleticism and sports, and aggression in these pursuits (United States).** Instead of talking about what a manly body is, the men from the United States talked more about what a manly body can do. They talked about the importance of being athletic in general and about the importance of being successful in sports. In contrast, the Danish men described playing sports as an optional activity that is neither strongly encouraged nor required to feel like a man. In the context of sports, the U.S. men also talked about aggression and how to show, through (aggressive) sports, that they are capable as men. In response to a question about when someone becomes a man, U.S. Participant Drew responded, “I would say freshman year maybe or like getting on a sports team like football.” U.S. participant Tyler talked about certain sports making you manly: “I got a friend [from] Mount Union, he does shot put, he’s a big guy. So I would say he’s pretty manly compared to a friend that plays tennis.” In addition, Luke talked about “bodying people up” on the soccer field and “locker boxing” after lacrosse practice (the participant described this behavior as such: “it’d be you against someone else and you’d put on helmets and gloves and then just fight each other and just see who could last the longest”).

These findings are consistent with the masculinities literature in that sports have long been seen as men’s domain, an arena in which men can prove their manhood over other men (Messner, 1990). As we noted earlier, physical strength is an important aspect of being a man (Cicone & Ruble, 1978; Donaldson, 1993; Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1976), and in the United States, this has often been demonstrated within sports. Kimmel (2012) traced this back to the late 19th century, during which sports came to be seen as “the most important vehicle to re-create manhood” (p. 101). At that time, participation in sports was thought to develop manliness, keep men physically different from women, and allow men to be fully confident in their masculinity because it was publically demonstrated; in the contemporary United States, Kimmel concludes, despite increased participation in sports by girls and women, sports continue to be seen as a male domain and a place to demonstrate masculinity. The U.S. participants in our sample discussed sports in the same fashion.

Similar to our discussion of physical embodiment, this difference between the U.S. and Danish samples is interesting in that at least one historian has argued that sports filled a similar historical role in Denmark (Bonde, 1996). At the turn of the 20th century, Danish men were employed outside of the home more, and women were responsible for educating the children. Fathers often used sports as a means of continuing to be involved in their sons’ education and particularly to instill masculinity (including skill and competitiveness). Although at that historical moment, these two countries might have been similar in their view of sports as a means of teaching masculinity, Denmark has clearly not retained such a tight connection between manhood and sports, whereas the United States has. Although it is possible that some men in Denmark would agree that sports are central to their manhood, this was not something that our participants volunteered in our open-ended interviews.

**Theme 1 summary.** There were similarities in the two countries in terms of how men viewed their physicality as a duty to physically protect others (spouses, children, the weak). However, there were also important differences in that the Danish men were

more likely to describe their manhood in physical/biological terms (which occur through the sheer nature of physical maturation) and U.S. men were more likely to describe their manhood as being, in part, attained and maintained by athletic pursuits which can also be shown through aggression. We interpret that to mean that manhood is felt as more precarious by the U.S. men than the Danish men.

## Theme 2: Characteristics of Manhood

When the participants were asked what makes someone a man, they described the actions and traits that characterize manhood. The Danish and U.S. men all had very similar descriptions of mature or adult characteristics. The one important difference in their descriptions was that the Danes, but not the Americans, mentioned female or feminine characteristics such as having a feminine side, being caring, and being loving.

**Manhood as adulthood (United States and Denmark).** All of the men thought that part of becoming a successful man was becoming a successful adult. They also thought that there were various things you had to *do* (i.e., move out, get an education, get a job, think more about other people) and things that you have to *be* (i.e., future oriented, confident, respectful, responsible, independent).

I think that it's when you've finished high school and you have to go out and stand on your own two feet: find an apartment, find a partner, look for jobs yourself and so forth. That's where I think a lot of things happen, when your mom isn't part of every decision. Like that you stand on your own two feet. (Lasse, Denmark)

It's also about some degree of autonomy and you show that by getting an education and getting a job that supports it. (Johan, Denmark)

[You're a man when] you're responsible and when you can take care of yourself and other people. (Justin, United States)

Well for me it was kind of like I was a little wild child growing up and in high school I seemed like I calmed myself down and I started to focus more on what I wanted to do in the future. I started thinking about where I wanted to go to school after high school and a lot of my friends kind of didn't take that route, they kind of just kept slacking off and just kept going through the motions but for me it kind of was a turning point in my life where I knew I had to settle down fast and get everything under me and continue with my career. (Will, United States)

Men in both countries described manhood in terms of maturing and the tasks and characteristics involved in being an adult male. This is not surprising for a sample of men in emerging adulthood who are in the midst of getting an education, moving out, or finding a job. In fact, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has proposed that it is precisely this period of time (ages 18–25) where self-exploration and the transition into adulthood occurs (Arnett, 2004). Thus, the age range of the participants presents a unique period of exploration and independence developmentally, which likely contributed to the salience of these topics in our interviews.

**Manhood involves expressing femininity (Denmark).** The Danish but not U.S. men described the characteristics of manhood in terms of traditionally feminine traits or pursuits. Silas directly said that a man should be “caring and loving.” Rasmus mentioned the importance of men having empathy and being considerate of

others. He also said, “I also think it's a good quality if men are caring. That is something I think is a big part of being a man.” The Danish men also described feminine characteristics when speaking about their relationships with friendship groups. That is, when talking about male friends, many of the Danish men described the desire to hug their friends, tell them they loved them, have long phone conversations with them, and just express their affection for friends in general.

This finding is consistent with other research on how Danish men think about their manhood. For example, in a recent mixed-methods study, Danish men described the importance of having an emotional side and of being a caring and involved father, not just a provider (Bloksgaard et al., 2015). Similarly, in a study of male leaders, Danish men constructed a complex model of leadership that incorporated both femininity and masculinity into men's transformational leadership styles (Madsen & Albrechtsen, 2008).

**Theme 2 summary.** Although men in both samples described adult characteristics as making up manhood, the Danish men further described manhood as including the feminine characteristics of being caring and loving and having close, intimate relationships with friends. None of the U.S. men described such characteristics.

## Theme 3: Manhood in Contrast to Boyhood or Womanhood

When the U.S. and Danish men tried to explain what manhood was, they inevitably also described manhood in terms of what it is not. Although the men gave similar descriptions of what manhood is (as described in Theme 2) they differed in their descriptions of what manhood is not. The Danish man contrasted manhood with childhood or boyhood whereas the American men contrasted manhood with girlhood, femininity, and gayness. The men expressed these contrasts in the form of behaviors, clothing, and simply the way that they talked about manhood. Although all of the men talked about the traits of manhood as being traits of maturity and adulthood (see Theme 2), only the Danes consistently talked about manhood in terms of not being immature or not being a boy. The U.S. men, on the other hand, rarely mentioned boyhood as the contrast to manhood and talked much more about not behaving in a girly or feminine way.

**Manhood in contrast to boyhood (Denmark).** Overwhelmingly, the Danish men answered the questions regarding manhood by talking about manhood in contrast to boyhood or immaturity. When they described their friends who they felt were not men or were not acting like men, they labeled them as being immature boys. In fact, there is a Danish word for immature boy that doesn't exist in English: *drengerøv* (a term used to refer to men who behave in an immature or childish way). The Danish men used this term several times to refer to their immature friends or to themselves when they felt they were not being mature.

Done something not so manly? I mean I would say that it would be something that was boyish. For example, when I got this [pointing to a scar on his face], that was at a Christmas party where I was drunk and did a stunt. That was probably pretty childish, so that was not all that manly. So acting like a [drengerøv]. (Nikolaj, Denmark)

[In response to a question about men who beat their wives] Letting your aggression affect the person that is closest to you is just a

childish thing to do. So clearly . . . it's immature and childish and idiotic. But of course you lose respect for them as a fellow manly man. (Anders, Denmark)

In addition to talking about manhood in this developmental way, the Danish men also mentioned, unprompted, that women would go through the same milestones and have to develop the same traits and skills. Some of them even thought that a woman could lose her womanhood the same way a man could lose his manhood—namely by failing to be a competent adult.

I also think that in order to be a real woman you have to be caring and be protective and be able to be trusted. If you cannot take care of your kids, then it all falls apart too. There can obviously be many reasons for it, but if it's because you just do not feel like it, or because you have something better to do like sitting and drinking at a bar, then I think that womanhood suffers too. (Mathias, Denmark)

In sum, the Danish men did not only speak much more about manhood in contrast to childhood or boyhood, but they also thought that women had many of the same roles and duties as men to be successful adults. This finding is consistent with [Bloksgaard et al.'s \(2015\)](#) research on Danish masculinity. These scholars concluded that the hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Denmark is not traditional patriarchy with a focus on antifemininity, but is instead “gender equality friendly masculinity.” This masculinity is in line with Danish/Nordic societal norms of gender equity, which are associated with less of a belief in strong gender differences. Thus, when Danish men in our study pointed out the similar tasks facing women and men as they enter into adulthood, it sounds as if they were describing a common cultural construction of masculinity and manhood in Denmark.

**Manhood in contrast to womanhood (United States).** Although the U.S. men also thought that manhood involved being an adult, they did not explicitly describe the alternative to manhood as being childhood. The U.S. men made many more comments regarding what men should look like (so as to not be too feminine in physical appearance or clothing) and how they should behave (not showing too much emotion). Specifically, the men spoke about the necessity of not acting feminine or “like a girl.”

Not me but my roommate this semester I would call girly, like feminine qualities, but not like gay girly. He cries over little things like a 5-year-old girl. (Tyler, United States)

I'm sure you know guys that surround themselves with a lot of girls and do not associate with that many guys and I was gonna say that's kind of portraying actions that make them less of a man. (Luke, United States)

[Did your brothers ever correct you if you did things that were unmanly?] Yeah, I mean beating up on me a little bit and calling me a girl. (Drew, United States)

Additionally, the men also talked about not behaving in a way that is too emotional. Drew from the United States said, “[Being masculine is] not really saying your feelings to other people and really keeping it to yourself. I guess like dealing with your problems with yourself and not opening up.” Similarly, George spoke about the advice that his dad would give him about avoiding being moved to tears in front of others because it was feminine. And

Mason described the need to appear manly, rather than womanly, in how one dresses.

These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of manhood as the opposite of womanhood. Many scholars of masculinity have argued that the antifemininity mandate, which holds that men should avoid all things feminine, is the defining feature of the U.S. male role ([Brannon, 1976](#); [Thompson & Pleck, 1986](#); see also [Pascoe, 2007](#); [Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)) and that men should demonstrate their manhood by avoiding feminine cognitions, emotions, and behaviors ([David & Brannon, 1976](#); [Thompson, Grisanti, & Pleck, 1985](#)). The U.S. men in our sample were highly aware of the need to avoid femininity in order to be perceived as manly by themselves and others.

**Theme 3 summary.** The American men spoke much more about manhood as entailing not being emotional or feminine instead of not being boyish or childish. Although all of the men spoke about being a man in ways that are consistent with a developmental trajectory of not being a child anymore, they viewed many aspects of this process quite differently. Specifically, Danish men not only described manhood in contrast to boyhood (“you're a man when you're not a boy”), but also contributed their opinions about women also having some of the same responsibilities. The U.S. men, in contrast, described manhood in contrast to womanhood (“you're a man when you're not a woman”) and described manhood as distancing oneself from being girly.

Interestingly, [Kimmel \(2012\)](#), in his analysis of the shifting definition of manhood over time in the United States, found that U.S. men defined manhood in contrast to boyhood prior to the turn of the 20th century; however, at the turn of the century, the concept of manhood was replaced with the concept of masculinity, which was defined in the United States as behavioral traits in opposition to femininity. This shift occurred as a reaction against perceived cultural feminization that was taking place at the time, something that many men resisted. The differences found in our samples, then, may reflect the different current cultural values in the United States (which now are focused on individual achievement and competition) and Denmark (around equity and living “the good life”).

## Discussion

The results of this study showed both similarities and differences in how these U.S. and Danish men spoke about the precariousness of their manhood and their sense of masculinity. Consistent with past research, the U.S. men described manhood as associated with a need to protect the weak, show power through athleticism, and the rejection of femininity. The Danish men did, like the U.S. men, think that being protective is important to manhood and that manhood is associated with adulthood. However, the Danish men did not mention the importance of athleticism (what the male body “does”) nor did they contrast manhood to womanhood. Instead, they emphasized the importance of the physical embodiment of manhood (what the male body “is”), contrasted manhood to boyhood, and described the importance of men expressing feminine qualities. Overall, the Danish men described manhood as a process that was less fraught and less gendered than the U.S. men described it. In addition, because the Danish men described the tasks of becoming a man in more developmental terms (the body changes to become manly and with

adulthood comes manhood) the results suggest that Danish men viewed manhood as less precarious than the U.S. men did.

One particularly noteworthy finding is that Danish men viewed manhood in contrast to boyhood (e.g., “you’re a man when you’re no longer a boy”) whereas the U.S. men viewed manhood in contrast to womanhood (e.g., “you’re a man when you’re not a woman”). The antifemininity mandate is a prominent aspect of the U.S. male role (Thompson & Pleck, 1986) but not the Danish male role (Bloksgaard et al., 2015). Here Danish men actually saw femininity as an important part of manhood.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Danish men, without prompting, volunteered that the tasks of reaching adulthood would also be shared by women (something that the U.S. men never did), showing a lack of distancing themselves from femininity or women’s tasks.

Our findings are also important in terms of the distinction between the *content* of beliefs about manhood and their *structure* (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Although it is widely recognized that culture can play a role in one’s definition of a man and in expressions of masculinity (e.g., antifemininity or profemininity mandate), some scholars have argued that the structure of manhood as precarious is universal (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Our findings suggest, as others have argued (e.g., Gilmore, 1990), that culture plays an important role in both the content and the structure of manhood, such that precariousness is not universal.

When considering cultural variation, egalitarian ideals in the broader society are important. Danes are more egalitarian than Americans not just in the domain of gender. For example, in a country comparison, the United States scores higher than Denmark on Hofstede’s dimension of “power distance.” Hofstede defines this dimension “as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). The Danish society is organized around values of equality and both men and women have free education, free health care, extensive parental leaves, subsidized day care, and support in other areas in which the state redistributes resources. This means that Danish men have less of a need to be aggressive or tough to succeed in society, because the structure of the Danish society does not link success with aggression. In fact, the Danish men suggested that acting aggressively was unmanly because it was childish. Furthermore, Danes do not particularly think that men should be the sole providers of the family, possibly due to gender equality in employment policies (Bloksgaard et al., 2015) and the Danish welfare state also places emphasis on helping those who cannot help themselves. Thus, Danish men’s role as protector does not need to include providing because a social welfare network will provide, if needed.

Our interview findings, along with these societal differences between the United States and Denmark, align with Gilmore’s (1990) theoretical arguments about the cultural variability of manhood. Gilmore observed that in cultures where strength and toughness are required, cultural prescriptions for men involve a more aggressive masculinity, whereas in cultural environments where circumstances do not favor risk-taking, competition, hierarchy, or warfare, men are freed from such prescriptions. Gilmore concluded that an ideology of manhood as precarious arises in harsh environments to compel men to internalize and live up to expectations for manhood that will promote survival (this perspective has been further taken up by other men’s studies scholars: see

Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012). Thus, different physical and cultural environments can lead to different gender role expectations, and manhood is not seen as precarious everywhere. Just as men’s studies scholars have long recognized variations in masculinities, so too do we see cross-cultural variations in the extent to which men describe manhood as precarious.

This study has several strengths and limitations inherent in this topic and in qualitative methodology. Interview methodology is well-suited to studies on gender in that it gives the participants a chance to articulate, in their own words, their perspectives on manhood, and scholars have called for more qualitative research on manhood (Whorley & Addis, 2006). However, manhood and masculinity are complex topics and participants in both countries sometimes found it difficult to articulate their thoughts. For example, men in both countries had a hard time explaining when they thought someone became a man (e.g., even though they knew it was not necessarily biological, they could not pinpoint any single action or milestone). Thus, a greater voice was inevitably given to those participants who were better able to express their thoughts. Also, the purpose of the present study was to conduct a rich, credible, and trustworthy in-depth analysis of the thoughts and feelings of a small group of men in two countries, whose findings may be transferable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010); however, a small sample cannot fully capture the beliefs of all Danish and U.S. men, or even all young, middle class, heterosexual men in these countries. Future research should consider larger samples that are more diverse, in terms of age, social class, race, and sexual orientation.

One interesting avenue for future research is to examine further how cultural context affects the link between traditional masculinity and violence, particularly violence against women. Several studies suggest that it is antifemininity beliefs in particular that are closely linked with men’s violence, both against women (Corprew, Matthews, & Mitchell, 2014; Reidy, Shirk, Sloan, & Zeichner, 2009) and against other men (especially those who violate masculinity norms: Parrott, 2009; Parrott, Peterson, Vincent, & Bakeman, 2008). The present study found that Danish men did not view manhood as precarious and they did not support the antifemininity mandate. Interestingly, violence in Denmark is low in general and much lower than in the United States (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), which is consistent with the idea that men might have little need to protect others through violence or risky heroic acts in a highly egalitarian country with extensive social supports. Winegard, Winegard, and Geary (2014) suggested this very link: the more violence that exists in a given country or culture, the more necessary it is for men to be strong and aggressive to do their ‘duties’ of protecting and providing. From this, albeit correlational observation, it seems likely that other egalitarian countries may similarly have manhood expectations that embrace rather than reject femininity. Perhaps, in these cultures as well, violence would not be a critical component of masculinity. Future research should examine further the links between precarious manhood, masculinity (including the antifemininity mandate),

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, however, that although the Danish men spoke about manhood in ways consistent with a more egalitarian culture, they did recognize some gender differences and some at times spoke in traditionally patriarchal ways.

and violence, taking into account the importance of cultural context and cultural variation.

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Received September 30, 2015  
 Revision received June 13, 2016  
 Accepted June 24, 2016 ■