

**Unmasking Manly Men:
The Organizational Reconstruction of Men's Identity**

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This paper presents a case study of offshore oil platforms—a workplace that has traditionally rewarded men for masculine displays of prowess and interactions centered on proving masculinity—in which such displays and interactions were absent. We use this case to develop theory about how organizational features, such as work practices and norms, can disrupt conventional masculine identity-construction processes. In this case, organizational features designed to enhance safety and effectiveness had the unintended effect of changing how men enacted their masculine identities at work. Interview and participant observation data show that the major reorientation was away from seeking to garner masculinity credentials and towards seeking to learn how to perform their jobs more safely and effectively. The latter required that workers engage in mutual expressions of vulnerability: they acknowledged their physical limitations, learned from their mistakes, and attended to their own and others' emotions. As a result, these men expressed a broader repertoire of personal qualities, including qualities that run counter to conventionally masculine scripts. Our findings point to the mutability of masculine identity as a social status achievement and to how organizations can disrupt such tendencies and stand to gain in the process.

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Where “gender” once was equated with women, gender scholars now commonly recognize that men, too, have a gender and that masculinity—the values, experiences, and meanings a culture ascribes to men (Alvesson and Billing, 1997: 83)—is a central component of gender relations worthy of study. Masculinity can characterize individuals and broad domains of social life, such as organizations, occupations, (Britton, 2000) and societies (Hofstede, 2001). At the individual level, masculinity refers to how successfully a person conforms to societal expectations for men, and at broader levels it denotes how successfully structures and practices preserve a gender order in which men predominate and the cultural attributes of manliness hold sway (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Britton, 2000). Of interest to organizational scholars is the interplay between these levels in organizations: the organizational structures and practices through which societal images of masculinity are routinely translated into scripts individual men use to negotiate a masculine identity at work (see, e.g., Barrett, 1996). Yet organizational features can also disrupt these traditional scripts, prompting men to see and present themselves in alternative ways. Our purpose in this paper is to develop theory about the role organizations can play in reshaping masculine identity-construction processes at work and to illuminate how alternative identities are linked to critical organizational capabilities, such as learning.

Conventional masculinity is associated with power (Alvesson and Billing, 1997: 83). In its idealized and stereotypical forms, it connotes aggression, autonomy, strength, heterosexuality, rationality, a facility with tools and technology, emotional detachment (e.g., Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1987), and more generally, the reverse of “anything that smacks of femininity” (Kilduff, 2001: 599). Masculinity has been described as an identity men strive to achieve by beating “lesser men” in contests of manhood (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993: 672); those

seeking it as “preoccupied with . . . differentiating self by out-performing others [and] validating self by negating others” (Barrett, 1996: 141); and those attaining it as “never secure,” dependent on others’ confirmation “to affirm and reaffirm to themselves and to others who and what they are” (Barrett, 1996: 141; see also Bird, 1996; Messner, 2005).

Organizational ethnographies and interview studies have examined the costs of masculinity displays in specific contexts, from the military (e.g., Barrett, 1996) to manufacturing (e.g., Collinson, 1988) to high tech (e.g., Martin and Meyerson, 1998). Men’s attempts to achieve or maintain masculine status interfere in the training of recruits (Chetkovitch, 1997; Prokos and Padavic, 2002), compromise decision quality (Maier and Messerschmidt, 1998), marginalize women workers (Britton, 1997; Chetkovitch, 1997; Gray, 1984; Padavic, 1991; Prokos and Padavic, 2002; Schultz, 1998), entail civil and human rights violations (Schultz, 1998), and alienate men from their health, feelings, and relationships with others (Messner, 2005). Thus, the costs of men’s masculine striving are high, and both individuals and organizations pay the price.

Organizations are integral to the maintenance of these dynamics (see, e.g., Acker, 1990), via institutionalized systems that test and rank men, for example, but research is lacking on how organizations can change these systems (Ely and Padavic, forthcoming). While organizational scholars have long recognized how organizations shape members’ identity, they have tended to focus on organizational and occupational rather than social identities (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Hill, 1992; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, and Samuel, 1998). Gender scholars, for their part, recognize how organizational contexts influence gender identities, but have tended to focus on organizational features that reinforce the gender status-quo (e.g., Acker and Van Houten, 1974; Kanter, 1977; Kondo, 1990; Pierce, 1995). The small body of work that specifically examines how organizational features might alter gender addresses gender equity rather than gender

identity as an outcome (see, e.g., Merrill-Sands, Fletcher, and Acosta, 1999; Bailyn, Rapoport, and Fletcher, 2000; Ely and Meyerson, 2000a; Reskin and McBrier, 2000) or addresses gender identity theoretically rather than empirically (see, e.g., Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Ely and Meyerson, 2000b). Hence, we know little about how organizations can change conventional processes of masculine identity-construction.

This paper presents a case study of offshore oil platforms—a dangerous workplace traditionally known for encouraging masculine displays of prowess and interactions centered on proving masculinity—in which such displays and interactions were markedly absent. We use this case to develop theory about how organizational features, such as work practices and norms, can disrupt conventional masculine identity-construction processes. In this case, organizational features intended to enhance safety and performance had the unintended effect of profoundly changing how men enacted masculinity on the job. Interview and participant observation data show that, rather than seeking to enhance their masculine image to others and to themselves, men engaged in mutual expressions of vulnerability in order to perform their jobs more effectively: they acknowledged their physical limitations, learned from their mistakes, and attended to their own and others' emotions. The result was deeper, more intimate coworker relationships in which men could express more broadly-defined selves. Oil-rig workers who had used machismo to prove their competence now had a more nuanced sense of their personal capacities, particularly a capacity for vulnerability, the antithesis of the traditional masculine ideal. Our findings point to the mutability of masculine identity and suggest how organizations can disrupt its negative elements by changing norms and work practices to the benefit of individual workers and the organization as a whole.

More broadly, we argue that problems associated with masculinity lie not in masculine attributes *per se*—many tasks require aggressiveness, strength, or emotional detachment—but

rather, in men's efforts to *prove* themselves on these dimensions, whether in the dirty, dangerous setting of an off-shore oil platform or in the posh, protected surroundings of the executive suite. When enacted in service of the work rather than in defense of a self-image, masculine attributes can be a valuable resource. Finally, we draw out the implications of these insights for research on team learning and on women.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINE IDENTITY AT WORK

Recent research on gender has replaced static conceptions of masculinity reflected in such constructs as the male sex role or masculine personality with a social constructionist model of masculine identity that better reflects the complexities of gender (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Whereas “role” and “personality” refer to behavioral expectations and traits associated with a relatively fixed social *position*, “identity” refers to a dynamic social *process* by which meanings are developed and maintained through social interactions enacted in specific social contexts (Goffman, 1977; Deaux and Major, 1987; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Bird, 1996).

In this view, subjects do not have experience; rather, they are constituted through it (Scott, 1992). A man encounters—and learns to anticipate—others' expectations of him as a man; he responds, others react, and through this back-and-forth, he comes to see and present himself in particular ways (Padavic, 1991). Masculine identity is how he sees and presents himself *as a man*.

Such interactions do not occur *ex nihilo*, but are shaped by culturally available ideologies about what it means to be a man (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Deaux and Stewart, 2001; Goffman, 1977). These ideologies contain multiple forms of masculinity (see Connell, 1987). Depending on the historical and social context, certain forms become dominant. The dominant form, often referred to as “hegemonic masculinity,” is the “most honored way of being a man” in a given setting (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 4). Importantly, idealized images do not

correspond closely to what most men are like, and even exemplary men exhibit contradictions (Kondo, 1990). Nevertheless, large numbers of people support and aspire to these ideals and are judged according to them.

Although its content varies across time and place, ideal forms of masculinity tend to be opposite and complementary to ideal forms of femininity. In contemporary societies, idealized masculinity emphasizes authority, autonomy, and strength, whereas idealized femininity is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men and therefore emphasizes dependency, nurturance, and compliance. Other forms of masculinity, often referred to as “subordinated masculinities,” are taken to be culturally inferior to the idealized form and are established through their identification with femininity (e.g., Kimmel, 1994).

Sociological research on gender typically portrays organizations as principal purveyors of traditional gender ideologies (for review, see Britton, 2000). Organizations import occupational norms that define ideal workers, and most occupations are associated with a gender, envisioned in idealized forms (Acker, 1990). Occupations conceived of as masculine require qualities that men (and not women) ideally possess, and thus are deemed suitable only for men. Engineering, for example, is labeled masculine because it requires a facility with math that men are presumed to have. The masculine identity of such jobs is further enhanced by men’s numerical dominance in them. Organizations tend to conflate masculine characteristics with job requirements, defining competence in part by how well one fits the desired masculine image (see, e.g., Bailyn, 1993).

Thus, traditionally-male jobs become a proving ground for masculinity, and organizational structures and practices provide the means to demonstrate proof. Practices in the military, for example, “chronically [create] trials that separate the weak from the rest” (Barrett, 1996: 81). Telling and retelling stories of such tests provide occasions for collective sense-making, producing bonds among those who pass and legitimating their status. In these contexts,

those who come closest to embodying the masculine ideal are the elite, a distinction further institutionalized through rewards of higher pay and better opportunities (Kimmel and Messner, 1989). On the flip side, men who fail often receive harsh penalties, further highlighting the organization's masculine standards (Ely and Padavic, forthcoming).

In short, organizational practices communicate norms against which people can be measured, compared, found lacking, and corrected (Ely and Padavic, forthcoming). Thus, organizations can shape men's gender identity "from the outside in" by instilling in them categories and standards (Covaleski, et al., 1998: 298) that define masculinity. At the same time, men's need for affirmation of their masculinity leads them to appraise themselves, using these same categories and standards to define masculinity "from the inside out" (Covaleski et al., 1998: 299).

Yet organizations need not reinforce traditional definitions of gender. An empirical study of law firms, for example, showed that sex roles were more stereotypical and more problematic in law firms with low proportions of women in powerful positions than in those with high proportions (Ely, 1995), suggesting that organizational features can relax traditional gender scripts. Such findings (see also Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2004) point to the importance of organizational context in shaping gender identity construction (Britton, 2000; Deaux and Stewart, 2001) and beg the question of how organizations can disrupt, not merely reinforce, the effects of traditional gender ideologies on masculine identity-construction processes at work.

In short, the construction of masculine identity is a social process in which societies, organizations, and other people participate (Deaux and Stewart, 2001). Social interactions are a core mechanism by which this process occurs, and organizations are a primary site (Ely and Padavic, forthcoming; Padavic, 1991). Organizations can reinforce a culture's dominant notions of masculinity, as when men are recognized for feats of bravery but not compassion, or they can

disrupt them, as when norms release men from pressures to engage in such displays. Hence, organizations can be sites for intervention and change. We turn now to dangerous work settings to examine these dynamics more closely.

DANGEROUS WORK

A prime site for the conferral and expression of masculinity is dangerous workplaces. Dangerous work involves physical risk, which is the *sine qua non* of masculinity. No other setting evokes more vividly the dominant cultural image of the ideal man: autonomous, brave, and strong. Hence, dangerous workplaces are a particularly rich venue for studying masculinity.

Ethnographic accounts of men doing dangerous work in coal mines, fire departments, and elsewhere contain vivid descriptions of men asserting masculinity. Invulnerability loomed large in all these descriptions. Men went to great effort to appear physically tough, technically infallible, and emotionally detached in order to prove their merit as workers and as men. Work norms encouraged such displays, and organizational practices rewarded them.

Appearing Physically Tough

Demonstrations of physical prowess are one important way that men in such jobs affirm their masculinity (Connell, 1987). They serve as a metric of competence, confer social status, and provide a forum for competition.

The literature on male workplaces offers numerous examples of the idealization of strength. Language likening weaker men to women was particularly potent. Police-academy recruits who didn't measure up were "pussies" (Prokos and Padavic 2002: 452), and Naval Academy instructors discredited complaining recruits as "girls, pussies, weenies, and wimps" (Barrett, 1996: 133). Women's accounts of working in male dominated jobs corroborate these findings. A woman construction worker, for example, described a male coworker fighting with her over how to move a heavy object: when she suggested they move it together, "he got really

angry. . . . He felt like it could only take one person, and he would be the one to do it”
(Eisenberg, 1998: 138).

Men also demonstrated their physical toughness by displaying bravado in the presence of physical danger. Shortly after a fatal crash, a naval pilot dismissed the physical threat of his job: “We’re aviators. We laugh in the face of death” (Barrett, 1996: 134). Another commented, “Each time we go out, we never know if we’ll be back. So we live for today. We do tend to be wild and take more risks.” Other accounts also point to the manly disregard for physical safety. Workers in a virtually all-male power plant shunned the use of face masks as protection from clouds of coal dust (Padavic 1991), oil refinery operators refused to wear required safety belts (Hirschorn and Young, 1993), and men doing automotive repairs sometimes withstood electrical shocks instead of using insulated tools (Weston 1990).

Appearing Technically Infallible

A second way the literature indicates that men uphold an image of invulnerability is by putting on a guise of being technically infallible, which means refusing to admit to or reveal evidence of failures, mistakes, or lack of knowledge. Ironically, “training” often encouraged this orientation by providing few opportunities to ask questions without being scorned for not already knowing the answers. Training to become a firefighter, for example, required demonstrating the ability to aggressively handle the nozzle, including fighting to hold onto it. A newcomer who failed this test would be removed from this high-status job rather than receiving coaching in the proper technique (Chetkovich, 1997). As a result of pressure to prove themselves, typical recruits in these settings hid their lack of knowledge, doubt, and mistakes.

Once men are accepted as insiders, they are expected not only to defend their own image of infallibility, but also that of their higher-ranking coworkers, which can lead to covering up others’ mistakes, as was common among firefighters (Chetkovich, 1997). Similarly, the decision

process that led to the Challenger Shuttle disaster has been interpreted as a case of contract engineers deferring to the judgment—and protecting the masculinity—of the more powerful NASA managers (Maier and Messerschmidt, 1998).

Appearing Emotionally Detached

The final attribute of masculinity that the literature highlights is the need to present oneself as emotionally detached, unshakable, and fearless. The ability to hide fear was crucial to masculinity. Fire-fighters who were lionized, for example, were those who “would face a fire but look almost like [they’re] not breaking a sweat” (Chetkovich, 1997: 125). Such men become trusted leaders: “At fires it’s like . . . if you’re the guy who goes through the front door and they [other fire-fighters] see well, ‘he’s not afraid, he’ll go in and he’ll do it’. . . then they’ll kind of trust you” (Chetkovich, 1997: 87).

Socialization processes such as hazing instruct newcomers in the virtues of remaining cool under pressure. Coal miners, for example, gained status and acceptance by demonstrating their ability to control their temper when subjected to degrading body-centered games (Vaught and Smith, 1980).

Many examples of the importance of emotional invulnerability come from the ethnography of the Naval Academy (Barrett, 1996). Flight school deliberately tests recruits’ capacity to stand up to pressure. According to one Academy official, instructors are often “dicks” who “ask you to do these maneuvers, and if you blow it, they start screaming at you.” Men who remain unflustered win masculinity credentials (Barrett, 1996: 145).

Outlets for personal stress were nonexistent in these contexts. A pilot at the Naval Academy recalled how, just after his son was born, he was “a bundle of nerves.” The organization provided no legitimate way for him to address his feelings as a factor that might compromise his performance. Instead, he performed poorly and simply had to endure in silence

the humiliating insults broadcast over the radio by his training officer (Barrett, 1996: 135).

In sum, men in dangerous, male-dominated work settings gain respect by demonstrating and defending their masculinity, defined in stereotypical terms, and training and socialization reinforce this tendency often to the detriment of individuals and organizations. Efforts to appear invulnerable block precisely the kinds of actions that encourage safety and effectiveness (Maier and Messerschmidt, 1998; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 1999). Covering up mistakes, for example, curtails learning and allows for the repetition and escalation of errors. In complex systems with high degrees of interdependence, small errors that go unrecognized can cascade into large accidents (Perrow, 1984; Weick et al., 1999). Moreover, practices that conflate competence with toughness lead workers to ignore precautionary measures and take unnecessary risks. The question remains as to what organizational conditions can thwart these processes and replace them with more constructive ones.

Research Questions

Dangerous work need not entail working dangerously (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Weick, et al., 1999). Some organizations perform hazardous work and are male-dominated—and in these respects are similar to the organizations described above—yet they function safely and effectively. According to some scholars, the explanation of the difference lies in these organizations' "cognitive infrastructure" (Weick et al, 1999:82): organizational practices give rise to a distinctive set of cognitive processes directed at failure (rather than success) and reliability (rather than efficiency), leading to better outcomes. We conjecture that a distinctive set of relational processes accompanies this cognitive activity—men who attend to failure, for example, would relate to each other differently than would men who are focused on success—with implications for how men construct their masculine identities. This possibility raises several questions about masculine identity construction processes: How do men construct masculine

identity in high hazard workplaces that emphasize safety and effectiveness? What relational processes are involved, and what organizational features support and sustain these processes?

Answers to these questions may shed light on how organizational features can influence masculinity constructions at work. We conducted ethnographic research on two off-shore oil production platforms that were designed to maximize safety and effectiveness to address these questions.

RESEARCH SITE AND METHODS

Research Site

Our team of researchers gathered interview and participant observation data from workers on two offshore oil platforms, which we call Rex and Comus, in the Gulf of Mexico. On offshore oil platforms, the work can be hazardous and the primary workforce is traditionally male; thus they could be expected to manifest evidence of masculinity similar to that found in other such workplaces.

Yet organizational practices on these platforms differ from other traditionally-male, high-hazard workplaces in part because of cultural and operational changes the company undertook to systematically increase safety and effectiveness. Rex and Comus, built in the mid 1990s, were designed from the start to reflect the company's new priorities. A senior manager described the company's initiative as follows: "We were more and more frustrated with the fact that people kept getting hurt. [I]n the early nineties we made the commitment [to reduce injuries] that became known as Safety 2000." Organizational changes resulted in a decline in the company's accident rate by 84 percent; in the same period, the company's level of productivity (number of barrels), efficiency (cost per barrel), and reliability (production "up" time) came to exceed the industry's previous benchmark. As top performers on each of these indices of safety and performance, Rex and Comus are exemplars of the company's efforts to create a new kind of

offshore operating environment. Early discussions with senior managers of the company led us to believe that organizational features of this operating environment differed from those of traditional masculine workplaces, making these platforms an ideal site for investigating alternative processes of masculine identity-construction at work.

Rex and Comus are “deep-water” platforms tethered to the ocean floor. Each facility contains space for outdoor work, production facilities, power generation, drilling operations, control rooms, living quarters, offices, library, gym, recreation area, and cafeteria. With the exception of those in housekeeping and catering jobs, the workforce is predominantly male. Most regular workers have at least a high school diploma and are un- or semi-skilled laborers, including painters, roughnecks, and roustabouts; about a third are skilled technicians or trades people, such as plumbers and electricians; and about ten percent hold advanced degrees, typically in such fields as geology or engineering. The Offshore Installation Manager (OIM) is in charge of the facility.

Several factors conspired to make these workers a close-knit group, and in this regard, they were similar to workers on traditional platforms. First, regular workers, including company employees and contractors, live and work together offshore for two weeks (called a “hitch”) followed by two weeks off-duty. Most regular personnel work on one of four crews, and each crew works a hitch together on a rotating, staggered schedule. Second, in addition to their crewmates, workers also have intimate contact with their counterparts in other crews and shifts because they share accountability for tasks that require intensive coordination. Finally, the standard work day is long—12 hours—and everyone is on call 24 hours a day. The facility is operational 24 hours a day, year round.

Operations on each facility involve “drilling”—extracting gas and oil from beneath the ocean floor—and “production and surveillance”—managing its flow to onshore plants and

maintaining equipment. The hazards of the job come from working with volatile gasses and liquids under high pressure and from moving heavy equipment, often in rough weather.

Data Collection

Data come from interviews and nonparticipant and participant observation gathered during five site visits to each platform over 19 months. The research team was made up of five people (three women and two men) who visited the sites alone or in pairs. We traveled to the platforms by helicopter alongside employees making hitch changes, and donned regulation steel-toed boots, hard hat, goggles, and ear plugs. At the beginning of each site visit, the OIM introduced us at the regular 6:00 a.m. all-personnel meeting and asked everyone to speak candidly with us, whether in informal conversations or formal interviews. We assured the group of confidentiality, explained how the goal of our project was to advance mutual learning, emphasized our independence from management, and invited questions. During each visit, we ate meals and shared living quarters with employees.

The first set of site visits entailed non-participant observation and informal interviews. For 5 days (2.5 on each platform), we observed day-to-day work activities, interacted casually with workers, attended meetings, and informally interviewed more than 20 employees (including the OIMs, team leaders, deck operators, drilling foremen, and contractors). Handwritten field notes captured our observations and information we gleaned from interviews. The workers seemed at ease during the informal interviews, and spoke with candor even about “hot button” issues such as race and gender. The Comus visit ended just as the September 11, 2001 catastrophe struck, forcing an unplanned evacuation by boat of all but a skeleton crew. The lengthy (eight-hour) trip and the extraordinary circumstances led four of the men with whom we traveled to reflect on their jobs and their lives with exceptional openness.

The next two site visits on each platform, which lasted 3 days each, entailed semi-structured interviews, averaging an hour, with a representative cross-section of employees and contractors. In total, we interviewed 37 men across both facilities. Their tenure with the company ranged from six months to 27 years, and on these particular platforms, from six months to six years. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The final source of data came from participation observation and interviews conducted by a female member of the research team, who worked a two-week hitch on each platform as a production operator. A crew-change in the middle of each hitch enabled her to work in the same capacity with two different crews on each platform, so that in all, she worked with four different crews. Employees were aware of her identity as a researcher studying “diversity” in their work environment. She recorded observations throughout the day on a note pad she kept in her back pocket. In addition to participant observation, she conducted informal interviews with coworkers during lulls in the work. Because people live at the work site, there were many opportunities to interview coworkers after hours as well. At the end of each day, she typed up her field notes and sent them electronically to the authors, who discussed them and made suggestions for following up on particular issues.

Our participant observer’s gender does not appear to have compromised the validity of her data. Her experiences and observations corroborated data collected by male data collectors. Furthermore, her male coworkers did not treat her in the manner reported by other female workers or female participant observers in similar work settings (see, e.g., Fink, 1998; Padavic, 1991; Padavic and Prokos, 2002)—they neither patronized nor harassed her—attesting to the atypicality of this setting with respect to gender, a fact that was consistent with our findings.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data in three stages, following an iterative, inductive process of theory

development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). First, we analyzed field notes from the initial site visits for themes to explore in formal interviews. Second, we analyzed the interview data for macro themes. Based on emerging themes in the first set of interviews, we refined the interview protocol. Once formal interviews were completed, we independently read through field notes and a subset of interviews to identify additional themes and develop a set of macro categories (e.g., gender, physical safety) into which we parsed all of the data. Finally, we compared data from all sources with relevant literature on masculinities, as well as on emerging topics of importance, such as psychological strategies of self-enhancement, psychological safety, and high quality relationships. In this step, we further refined our category system, adding codes (e.g., definitions of competence, handling of conflict) that enabled us to systematically probe the data more deeply and to begin theorizing relationships. As our emergent theory took shape, we returned to the literature on masculinity in dangerous work settings to provide additional points of comparison, leading to further refinement of the theory. Throughout this process we compared data from the two platforms but detected no differences and so draw equally from both sites to illustrate findings.

MASCULINITY ON REX AND COMUS

The platforms of ten years ago were like the masculine workplaces described in the literature—where masculine identity centered on appearing physically tough, technically infallible, and emotionally detached—but Rex and Comus were different. These platforms, built and staffed in the new, safety-conscious era, presented a stark contrast to the platforms on which many employees had started their careers. An OIM and 27-year veteran of the company reflected on these differences:

[Then] the field foremen were kind of like a pack of lions. The guy that was in charge was the one who could basically out-perform and out-shout and out-intimidate all the others. That's just how it worked out here on drilling rigs and in production. So those people went to the top, over other people's bodies in some cases. Intimidation was the name of the game. . . . They decided who the driller was by fighting. If the job came open, the one that was left

standing was the driller. It was that rowdy. But it's not like that at all now. I mean we don't even horseplay like we used to. There's no physical practical jokes anymore. Most stuff now is just good-natured joking.

An electrician offered the following reflection:

Ten, twelve years ago I just couldn't imagine sitting down with somebody like you and talking about these kinds of things. It was way more macho then than it is now. It was like, "Hey, this is a man's world. If you can't cut it here, boy, you don't need to be here." Now there is a little bit more of, "Let's learn what people are about," a little bit more about the personal and interpersonal relationships and that kind of stuff.

Everyone—workers, managers, contractors—attributed the difference to the company-wide initiative to make safety its highest priority: "macho" behavior was unsafe and therefore simply unacceptable. We question that analysis. Our data suggest that the company's safety initiative was indeed the catalyst that made Rex and Comus different from their predecessors, but our data also show that the difference represented more than a response to prohibitions about acting in unsafe ways: rather, it arose from a *transformation in how men experienced themselves and their relationships with one another*. This transformation—spurred by organizational practices and norms stemming from the safety initiative—released men from the performance of masculinity traditionally associated with dangerous work.

Drawing on research in other dangerous workplaces (reviewed above), as well as workers' accounts of their earlier experiences on other platforms as points of comparison, we use our data to develop theory about organizations' role in masculine identity-construction. We begin by describing how men's internal goal orientation gave rise to relational processes that influenced their constructions of masculine identity at work. We then describe how the organization produced and institutionalized these processes.

Internal Goal Orientation

The pivotal difference between the men depicted in previous studies of masculinity and the men in our study was the nature of the goals that motivated them. Whereas men in the

military or fire service, for example, were often motivated by self-validation goals—particularly, the goal of proving their masculinity—platform workers on Rex and Comus were largely motivated by goals larger than themselves: the safety and well-being of their coworkers and the effective accomplishment of their work. As one worker noted, worrying about impressions undermined these goals. “When we need to get to the root cause of a problem or to troubleshoot something, we talk freely to each other rather than worrying about what he thinks of me.”

Social psychological research on the self suggests that these two goal orientations reflect fundamentally different motivational systems for the self and have different consequences for how people relate to each other (for review, see Crocker, Nuer, Olivier, and Cohen, 2006). The orientation in which one strives to construct, enhance, and defend desired self-images is well-learned and habitual and thus tends to be automatic when threats or subtle cues in the environment activate self-image concerns. In this goal orientation, the self is an *object* to be evaluated or judged by the self and others. People typically spend a lifetime perfecting strategies to project their desired self-images. The potential rewards include affirmation of one’s worth and enhanced status. As illustrated in the masculinity research reviewed above, however, the process of seeking to validate such images can also be costly (for review, see Crocker and Park, 2004).

But people also have the capacity for an alternative goal orientation in which they are driven by concerns with contributing to something larger than the self, such as another person, a team, an organization, or a social ideal (Crocker et al., 2006). In this goal orientation, the self is an *agent* acting in service of such ends. In certain circumstances, this goal orientation may supplant the other one, enabling people to risk self-image for something they consider more important. Enhanced feelings of self-worth may be an unintended consequence, but positive self-evaluations or feelings of self-worth are not an end in themselves.

These different goal orientations manifest in distinct kinds of relational processes. Below,

we describe how platform workers' orientation to goals larger than themselves appear in their relationships with each other.

Relational Processes among Men

Platform workers' internal goal orientation was most apparent in the way they related to each other in three domains: the *physical* domain, comprised of situations posing physical risk or calling for physical strength; the *technical* domain, comprised of situations raising questions about technical competence, such as typically occurred when one was a novice, made a mistake, or did not know the answer; and the *emotional* domain, comprised of stressful or fear-inducing situations. In other dangerous workplaces, including platforms of an earlier era, these situations prompted men to engage in stereotypically masculine displays—acting in ways that made them appear strong, infallible, and emotionally detached. In contrast, these platform workers, seeking to enhance safety and effectiveness, readily conceded their physical limitations, publicly revealed their mistakes and shortcomings, and openly shared their fears and anxieties while demonstrating sensitivity to others'. In short, workers on Rex and Comus acknowledged their vulnerability. We refer to this behavior as the expression of *purposeful vulnerability* because it involves expressing one's vulnerability in service of work goals. Men's mutual expressions of purposeful vulnerability had a profound effect on their sense of who they were and could be as men.

The physical domain. Nowhere was workers' openness about their vulnerability more apparent than in how they approached the physical risks inherent in their jobs. In the face of physical danger, instead of persevering (as is typical in other dangerous work settings), they stopped what they were doing and insisted that others do likewise. Examples were plentiful. When production operators lacked the requisite safety gear for the job they were doing, a mechanic reminded them to don it. When a member of our research team tipped back in his chair

during a meeting, a worker politely asked him to stop, explaining, “That’s not safe.” Workers responded with compliance and gratitude: “It’s for the safety of us out here,” one explained, “and I appreciate that.”

Men were equally swift to call attention to situations that jeopardized their own safety. In these situations, such as a helicopter ride that was particularly rough, they did not hesitate to declare publicly, “I don’t feel safe.” These statements were taken seriously, typically prompting immediate inquiry and a verbal report on the correction.

While many of the workers were large and muscular and many tasks were physically demanding, gratuitous displays of strength were absent, and workers offered help freely. When a heavy lifting task could be accomplished alone but only with a gargantuan effort, men were not reticent about asking for assistance (e.g., “We need three guys on this”). If anyone looked like he was exerting too much physical effort, others automatically stepped in to help. A contractor remarked on the difference in this respect between Comus and other platforms he had worked on:

All the [other platforms] I've been through are nothing like this platform, man. Everybody watches out for each other here. They really believe in safety. Like if I'm doing something and they see me straying behind, they would stop and help me. They see you putting on anything too heavy, they'll help you. Or they see you doing something wrong—squatting down the wrong way to pick something up—they'll let you know, just bend your knees.

In sum, displays of daring and physical strength—defining features of conventional masculinity, and thus status, in other dangerous workplaces—played no discernable role in delineating a hierarchy among male workers on these platforms. Driven by safety concerns, workers routinely acknowledged their own and others’ physical limitations while doing their jobs.

The technical domain. Rather than hiding limitations or mistakes stemming from a lack of knowledge, workers on Rex and Comus brought them to the fore. When they were new, they

welcomed guidance; when they didn't know how to solve a problem, they sought input from others; and when they made mistakes, they analyzed them. In short, these workers were engaged in a virtually continuous process of learning. As a result they routinely encountered their own and others' limitations as they interacted in the technical domain of their work.

The learning process begins with newcomers, who are taken under the wing of veterans.

One informant gave the following example:

Take well-testing. I went two or three hitches going with a person [teaching me], learning how to take a well out of test, how to put a well in test, getting all the parameters set on all of the equipment--how to do all those jobs. They just make sure that you know what you're doing. And once they let you do it [on your own], they're going to still be there with you, watching you to make sure that you do it right.

Contrast this experience to that of a newcomer on other platforms before the safety initiative:

When I hired on, until you made bones [a Mafia reference meaning "until you kill someone and therefore can be trusted"], you were just the new person. You were a risk to them, a hazard to them because you didn't know nothing, and they didn't help you because you were a waste of time.

Learning was not restricted to newcomers. Coworkers at all levels of experience routinely sought and offered advice, and even newcomers' input was welcomed. According to a man with several years of experience on Comus:

There's people that I learn from out here that may be below me on a technical level, skill level, but they look at something with a different set eyes than I do. Even if it's something that I may have a particular expertise in or whatever, they're looking at it from a different angle. So they've got something to teach me about it.

Coworkers routinely invited feedback on their ideas and generally appreciated being corrected. A team leader, for example, described being corrected by his counterpart on another crew: "I didn't realize I was doing it wrong until he explained it, and that allowed us to do our job better, so I encourage him to give me that type of feedback."

Observational data corroborated these self-reports. We frequently observed people—even

highly experienced ones—“putting several heads together” to make sure they were “making the best and safest decision.” In one case, a senior mechanic asked a coworker to demonstrate a task that was “easy, but also easy to screw up,” and then asked him to watch as he did it to ensure he did it correctly.

Everyone agreed that mistakes were inevitable and an occasion for learning: “If you're out doing something, you're going to make mistakes. It's all part of the learning process.” When people were proven wrong, they acknowledged it without defensiveness. One informant described a time when a coworker had disagreed with the team's approach, which turned out to have been right. At the next meeting he acknowledged his error and “gave kudos to those he'd argued with the day before.” Conversely, when people did something right, others acknowledged it, often by giving “recognition,” a formal practice of publicly acknowledging coworkers whose efforts went “above and beyond the call of duty.”

Examples of analyzing mistakes rather than locating blame were plentiful. Many stories concerned “shut ins” that occurred when a safety valve was accidentally tripped, stopping production. One person who had accidentally shut in the platform explained having learned from the mistake the importance of “going over my work and thinking before I act because it's not good for anybody to rush anything out here.” His learning was not just personal; he went on to explain: “I shared with the team what I did wrong and what I did to mitigate it. And they were glad I told them, because then they developed a procedure and a checklist so it wouldn't happen again.”

Observational data again substantiated these claims. The following story is illustrative. When a gas alarm went off, a response team was assigned to investigate. Although the problem was solved, the team was not satisfied with its process, as one of the newer members had failed to bring the gas tester. A discussion ensued about the need to train new people in the procedure.

Sharing responsibility for the mistake, a more experienced member countered, “I think we all need to get this training again, because I didn’t do it either. I ran out, too, and I forgot to grab it, too. We get into bad habits, and we are all guilty.”

In short, men routinely experienced and worked on their own and others’ shortcomings in the technical domain of their work as they sought to achieve work goals. These experiences provide a sharp contrast to those of men in other dangerous work settings, who were bent on proving their infallibility.

The emotional domain. In contrast to other dangerous workplaces, where manliness required hiding emotions, men on Rex and Comus freely shared them. As one team leader noted, “I don’t view this place as being macho, because individuals open up a lot more than they stay closed up. There are lots of things that are shared.”

Family problems were a common source of emotional stress, viewed as legitimate reasons for being tense and as legitimate reasons for offering support. When a man was having “a hard time at home,” for example, teammates advised each other to not “push him too hard,” as the following story illustrates:

Three nights before [a team member] came to work, his daughter was shot at in a car, and he was struggling with it pretty bad. So when he got here, he says, “This is what I’m dealing with at home. If you all would please keep me focused and understand if I’m a little distracted, I’d appreciate it.” And people were very supportive of him for that.

Rather than hiding family problems from people in positions of authority, workers turned to them. According to one interviewee, “if the people have a problem they can always go to the team leader and talk to him about it, and if it’s something that the team leader can help them with, he will.” Another felt similarly:

I went through a divorce while I was working in South America [building Rex], and I found out that my wife left me. I called the team leaders to let them know that I may not be working my best and to keep an eye on me in case I drift away. The OIM told me a story about the recent death of his brother in front of his 9-year-old girl (something fell on him and trapped

him when he was camping). That helped me put my life into perspective. [The asset manager] used to come down, and we'd talk about it. He convinced me to go work with him [at headquarters] so I could be near my kids during this difficult time. He knew if he took care of his workers, the workers would take care of him.

Family matters were not the only arena of vulnerability. Workers also displayed raw fears in our presence, with no indication of shame. During the September 11th evacuation, as we were lowered by crane from the top of the platform to the deck of a boat 400 feet below, men trembled and prayed aloud and offered no apologies afterwards.

Men also addressed their fears of each other openly and thoughtfully, as revealed in a shut-in investigation. A young, relatively inexperienced worker had precipitated a shut in by turning a switch upon the advice of a co-worker—a “well-intentioned,” 6-foot-4, 300-pound, retired Chicago police officer. In the investigation, the young worker admitted that he had done so against his better judgment because he had felt intimidated by his co-worker's imposing presence, making him reluctant to question his instruction. This exchange led to a larger team discussion about the need to guard against one's potential to intimidate—however unwittingly—or to be intimidated.

As these data indicate, platform workers were far less reticent about expressing their feelings than were their counterparts in other dangerous work settings. They were forthcoming because they believed that giving and receiving emotional support would make them safer and more effective.

In sum, by replacing self-validation goals with goals outside of themselves—in this case, enhancing safety and effectiveness—platform workers became engaged in a different process of masculine identity-construction. The process was no longer defensive, centered on demonstrating machismo to prove competence; rather, it was generative, oriented toward contributing to others' safety and to their shared work. The result was deeper, more intimate relationships with

coworkers in which men expressed more broadly defined selves. We develop this notion of men's changed sense of themselves in the next section.

Men's Masculine Identity

The constancy of men's outward expressions of vulnerability in the service of doing their jobs changed them. No longer driven by the goal of affirming their masculinity, they expressed a broader repertoire of personal qualities, including qualities that their conventionally masculine scripts had precluded their acting on in the past. In short, men in this environment enacted behaviors that were responsive to the dictates of their work rather than to the dictates of conventional masculinity.

Men's sense of themselves had enlarged to include traditionally "subordinated" forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995), qualities that, when men exhibit them in other dangerous work settings, are devalued by virtue of their identification with femininity. A production operator, who described the platform environment of the past as "macho," noted that now "there's room for both the softer side and the other one. But the change was very hard," he explained.

[We had to be taught] how to be more lovey-dovey and more friendly with each other and to get in touch with the more tender side of each other type of thing. And all of us just laughed at first. It was like, man, this is never going to work, you know? But now you can really tell the difference. Even though we kid around and joke around with each other, there's no malice in it. We are a very different group now than we were when we first got together—kinder, gentler people.

An example of men's newfound ability to adopt elements of subordinated masculinity comes from a lunchtime exchange we witnessed in which one worker, who appeared to us the essence of blue-collar masculinity—6-foot-5, 300 pounds, pony tailed, fu-manchued, with a heavy Southern accent—described a tape he had made as a gift for a coworker's newborn: "Sent home a tape of that Mozart and Chopin for Joe's baby, because it's real important for them babies to listen to music like that. Real soothing." The other six men around the table nodded and

commented in agreement—saying things about how their babies had enjoyed listening to their mothers sing to them—while Joe described how his baby was, indeed, calmed by the music.

Some men reflected on what it meant to them to be manly, and often this meant consciously differentiating themselves from stereotypical images of men—being a man, one noted, “doesn’t mean I want to kick someone’s ass,” nor, another noted, does it mean “being macho or arrogant.” Others invoked stereotypically feminine traits, such as the worker who explained that “a man is a man when he can think like a woman,” which meant “being compassionate, in touch with my feelings.” These statements are further evidence that, unlike their counterparts in other male-dominated work settings, many of these workers did not feel compelled to distance themselves from stereotypically feminine domains as a way to affirm their masculinity.

Importantly, men did not repudiate all traditionally masculine characteristics—they still exerted their physical strength and expressed their technical expertise—but they were not focused on proving them. Likewise, these men did not abdicate power, but they expressed it with less bravado. A 40-year-old production operator observed this difference as follows:

I started working offshore when I was 17. Back then, there was much more profanity, much more posturing. If you didn't posture yourself in a position of power, then you set yourself up for ridicule. But over the years, with company training in the personal and interpersonal areas, people have learned that you don't have to present yourself in that fashion to gain power. You don't have to use profanity to make a statement that carries power.

While these examples allude to how men’s sense of themselves had changed, a number of men directly addressed the issue of personal transformation. One worker told about how he had become less blaming and more attentive to others’ feelings:

I'll be honest with you, when I started here, I wasn't a person who handled mistakes too well—especially if we shut the platform in. Early on, it really bothered me if there was something done that I thought could have been easily avoided. That was one thing I had to work on, and I've gotten a lot better with it. You realize you need to change when you see a

look on someone's face after they made a mistake like that—and you see the hurt. Because that's something they didn't want to cause.

A mechanic, John, described his change process as follows.

[A coworker] told me that the guys call me Father John, because they say, “he's going to take care of everything.” And after I heard that, I got to thinking one night, I said, “OK. Why are they saying that?” And I had to take a look at myself. I said, “Well, they're saying that because that's the way I'm acting. Like I know everything, I have to know everything, I have to be first with the answer, and I'm not giving them a chance to say, ‘Hey, look, I know the answer, too.’” So I think it was like a self-realization that hey, you need to change your ways.

In sum, men's mutual expressions of vulnerability in the physical, technical and emotional domains of their work had a profound effect on their sense of who they were and could be as men. Relational processes characterized by mutual vulnerability may create the “micro-contexts” in which people can safely learn about unfamiliar thoughts and feelings, as they “acquire, develop, and experiment with . . . new ways of being” (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003: 274). New identities in turn may enable greater intimacy and further strengthen relational processes. Paradoxically, expressing vulnerability may have supported a more secure masculine identity for these men.

Organizational Conditions

Most male-dominated organizations reinforce society's traditional gender ideology (Acker, 1990; Ely and Meyerson, 2000b), but Rex and Comus disrupted it. Organizational features, such as policies, practices, and norms, were key to this disruption by creating conditions that shifted men's energies away from the goal of proving their masculinity and instead supporting their pursuit of goals larger than themselves.

Research points to three organizational conditions that may have enabled men to make this shift: a connective purpose, psychological safety, and the decoupling of masculinity and competence. The first condition motivates the shift in goal orientation (Crocker et al., 2006), the second mitigates the perceived risk of abandoning self-validation goals (Edmondson, 1999;

2003), and the third aligns definitions of competence with the qualifications needed to achieve alternative goals (see, e.g., Ely and Meyerson, 2000b). Below, we examine how organizational features created these conditions.

Connective purpose. People need a compelling reason to place their self-image at risk, and being invested in a meaningful purpose that requires taking such risks may provide one (Crocker et al., 2006). People regard as meaningful purposes that connect them to others, such those that advance broad social ideals, enhance relationships, or make contributions to others' well being (for review, see Podolny, Khurana, and Hill-Popper, 2005). When people perceive that efforts to validate their self-image may contradict or compromise such purposes, they may be motivated to abandon self-image concerns while doing their jobs (Crocker et al., 2006).

Organizational features of Rex and Comus, such as policies, practices, and norms, oriented workers to at least three purposes that connected them to others: making coworkers safe, building a sense of community, and advancing the company's mission. Below, we describe the organizational features that helped align platform workers with these purposes.

In the past, workers found little meaning in their work, partly because they perceived the company as indifferent to their welfare. According to one, "If you didn't bust your butt 110%, 12 hours a day, they sent you home because there were a lot of folks who wanted the jobs. A lot of unsafe things [went on]. You were only a hat and shoes." A mechanic concurred, contrasting his past experiences with those he had on Rex:

A good day [back then] was a day that you didn't get your ass eaten out for doing something wrong or being perceived as not doing enough. That was a good day. Today, [on Rex] a good day is when nobody gets hurt, we make our production goals—or we make as much as we can based on the limitations of safety and the operating environment—and everybody feels like they've contributed something to that.

Rex's employee-generated goal statements, conspicuously posted in every meeting room, formalized this sentiment: "no one gets hurt," "people supporting people," "respect and protect

the environment,” “every drop as fast as possible,” and “not a penny more than it takes.” While such postings do not necessarily imply employee buy-in, the men we interviewed referred to them as sincerely representing the culture of the workplace.

Of these goal statements, the first—safety—was clearly the highest priority, and organizational features that communicated that message were a primary way of inspiring in workers a sense that they were responsible for others and that the company was taking responsibility for them. Pointing to the list, a production operator noted, “What keeps us together is our goals. Sometimes we have to make trade-offs between them—for example, ‘safety’ and ‘every drop.’ But we never compromise safety.” To a person, there was consensus on this point: “Safety, that's the number one thing. Priority number one, e-priority, however you want to label it. That's the biggest thing out here.”

Policies reinforced the priority on safety, particularly decision rules for making trade-offs that favored safety over production. For example, everyone who entered the facility, including each member of the research team, received instruction on how to shut the platform down—in other words, halt the flow of gas and oil—if safety demanded it. Instructions were clear: at first sight of a potentially hazardous situation—for example, a spark or a flame—shut the platform down; no questions asked; no repercussions for a mistaken judgment, even though shutdowns were costly. To further facilitate making the appropriate trade-offs, production goals on Rex were stated in relative terms (“every drop as fast as possible” and “not a penny more than it takes”), rather than absolute numbers (e.g., barrels per day). Workers cited such policies and practices frequently as illustrative of the company’s priority on safety.

The ubiquity of norms and practices aimed at ensuring safety continually reinforced the company’s and workers’ commitment to safety. One example is “observations,” a practice whereby a person monitors a coworker’s compliance with safety regulations. A driller explained:

You ask the person, “Do you mind if I do an observation on you while you’re doing this job?” Then you do the observation and fill out the observation card and give the person some feedback on what he did right or what he can improve on or what he should have done.

Importantly, all parties remained anonymous, and only aggregate results were reported at the weekly safety meetings.

While it is conceivable that such mandatory surveillance practices could produce “disguised dissent,” in which workers conceal and manage knowledge of each other’s behavior (see Collinson, 2005: 1430), we saw no evidence of such actions. Norms supporting observations and feedback were strong, and workers frequently mentioned the practice as keeping them attentive to safety. According to one, “In the process, both [observer and observed] get a lot out of an observation by making us both more aware of safety. The cards themselves—what’s on them—aren’t that important. . . . It’s more important to have ongoing conversations about safety and to all watch out for each other.”

Organizational features designed to develop and sustain a sense of community further communicated that people matter and thus were the second way that the organization aligned workers with a purpose that connected them to others. This value was formalized on Rex in the goal statement, “people supporting people,” and numerous practices and norms reinforced it. “Recognitions,” for example, institutionalized the expression of mutual respect and caring, a practice that everyone believed was important because it made people “feel good about what they’re doing” and “want to put out a little more.” Even if they “just washed the dishes,” one worker explained, “if they do it well, they need to know that you consider what they do important. And *they* need to think what they do is important.” People were recognized for many things: getting up in the middle of the night to help solve a problem, going out of one’s way to help a co-worker, or sacrificing the chance to see one’s child when duty unexpectedly called. Like observations, recognitions were omnipresent, and every meeting began ritualistically with

time set aside for the practice.

Many leaders embodied the company's commitment to people, further reinforcing this value. The asset manager for Rex, who was the platform's liaison with corporate headquarters, is one example. A worker described his influence as follows.

He opened our eyes to the personal side of things. He knows that the work's going to get done, but he cares more about the relationship side of everything. And the fact that he was able to take that vision and make us all see it without thinking that it was top down, driven down our throat gave us the tools and allowed us to open our own eyes to it.

Finally, organizational features designed to enhance safety and a sense of community, which communicated that the company cared about its workers, may in turn have prompted workers to care about the company, in particular, about its mission and stakeholders. Much evidence suggested that workers were invested in the company's mission of producing gas and oil. At morning meetings, workers actively discussed productivity metrics and exchanged ideas about how they could increase output, sometimes seeking data beyond the standard reports. While the source of workers' investment in productivity was likely complex, some workers' comments suggested that it may have stemmed partly from the difference they felt they were making to company stakeholders, such as consumers. A drilling foreman described feeling "great when I drive down the street and see people putting gas in their cars so they can get to work and take their kids to school. It may sound funny, but that just makes me think this a great thing I get to do out here." A mechanic's response, when asked why he went to the trouble to get guidance on a task, suggested that some workers may have found contributing to shareholders meaningful: "It gives you that warm fuzzy feeling to know that you looked at everything [carefully] and ensures you don't lose a half-million dollars in the process." We suspect that workers may have seen the production of gas and oil as an opportunity to contribute to the company's—and others'—well-being and thus as a meaningful purpose.

In sum, we surmise that organizational features infused work with meaning by connecting workers to others—whether via contributions to coworkers’ safety, a sense of community, or the company’s mission—and that these pursuits in turn provided a purpose on which workers could anchor when the temptation to drift into defending their masculine image arose.

Psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to team members’ shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, in other words, that members’ well-intentioned actions will not lead to rejection or punishment by other team members (Edmondson, 1999). Members of teams that are psychologically safe should be more willing to make themselves vulnerable in team interactions by, for example, admitting mistakes or seeking help (Edmondson, 1999: 355). Thus, platform conditions that made the work context psychologically safe likely contributed to men’s willingness to abandon self-image concerns in service of their work.

Numerous organizational features enhanced psychological safety by creating a safe environment for learning from mistakes. For example, “root cause analysis,” which sought to understand what had caused a shut-in, systematized the “learning approach” to mistakes and minimized the impulse to blame. A production operator explained that, when a shut-in occurs:

there's a form or “go-by” of certain things that have to be asked. And let’s say I did it. They're not trying to blame me or point fingers at me. Our intent is to get down to the root cause to prevent this from happening again. Was it a lack of knowledge, a lack of skill, or improper equipment? Was it an engineering issue where engineering needs to come in and take a look at this? We go through the whole thing. We have the mechanics in. We have the operators in. Very seldom do we have leadership in.

Other practices also acknowledged human fallibility and made mistakes an accepted fact of life. For example, Comus established the “Millionaire Club” to “honor” workers whose mistakes had cost the company a million dollars, a humorous play on the IBM sales club that recognized salespeople who had earned the company that amount.

Another practice involved placing a sticker that says “SSE” (short-service employee) on a newcomer’s hard hat. “It’s not like putting a dunce cone on his head or saying that he cannot do the job,” one worker explained, “it’s just telling everybody else that he’s never been out here so all the others will keep an eye on him.” These publicly displayed emblems of fallibility increased the psychological safety with which people could abandon self-image concerns.

Leadership was another organizational feature that encouraged psychological safety. Supportive, coaching-oriented leaders who modeled vulnerability and responded nondefensively to questions and challenges—a key element for psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; 2003)—were very much in evidence. Many oil rig workers commented on leaders’ willingness to admit and learn from their own mistakes. One leader, located in corporate headquarters, was known for his bi-weekly “fireside chats”—on-site meetings where he fielded questions from workers and listened to their concerns. Many spoke admiring of how he reacted to the “bullets [people] slung at him in those meetings.” “People talk about how brave he is to do this,” one worker noted, “because people criticize and gripe, and it rolls off him. He listens to everyone.”

The norm of gathering input from everyone served to level power differences, a move that mitigates the potential for such differences to silence people (Edmondson, 2003). As one team leader explained, it was important to “throw the stripes aside . . . without any stripes in the room, people are not afraid to voice their ideas.”

The combination of practices that routinized expressions of vulnerability and communicated acceptance of people’s fallibility, together with leaders who modeled both, made the platforms psychologically safe. Safety in turn encouraged workers to put their self images at risk when necessary to achieve their work goals.

Decoupling of masculinity and competence. Whereas most dangerous workplaces conflate masculine traits and competence (e.g., Barrett, 1996), norms and practices on Rex and

Comus decoupled them. Displays of masculinity held little currency on the platforms, which instead valued skills and behaviors that better enabled workers to contribute safely and effectively to the work at hand.

Company norms emulated not those who were “the biggest, baddest roughnecks,” but “mission-driven” people who “care about their fellow workers,” are “good listeners,” and “thoughtful,” as these were the qualities deemed necessary to perform their work safely and effectively. One production operator described the kind of person who is most respected as one who “knows what he's doing, or if he doesn't, he'll take the time to do the research to understand what he's doing. It doesn't necessarily have to do with knowledge. And they're not worried about how fast they can get something done. They take the time to learn.” These characterizations were the antithesis of the traditional masculine ideal.

Formal leaders, who both symbolize and convey organizational norms (Pfeffer, 1981; Tushman and O'Reilly, 2002), embodied these qualities, reinforcing this vision of competence and inspiring others to emulate them. A mechanic attributed the care with which coworkers treated each other to a leader's “focus on the humanity side” and to his having “raise[d] our consciousness to a person's feelings.”

Norms and practices that communicated a clear, work-related rationale for expressing vulnerability also helped to decouple stereotypically masculine traits from definitions of competence. They conveyed the belief that protecting one's self-image would make it difficult to work safely and effectively, whereas making oneself vulnerable was sometimes necessary for achieving this goal. Training is one practice that imparted this message. An OIM described insights he had gained in a ten-day, experiential, team-building program about how his personal defensive routines lessened his effectiveness as a leader. Another example is a team leader who described how, in a personal mastery course that “put us outside of our comfort zone,” he had

“developed some self-awareness” about how his need to be “in control” caused him to be “very reactionary” at times. These programs not only helped employees learn about their personal defenses and skills for managing such reactions; as one team leader noted, the fact that the company “spent overtime, spent money for you to go” also signaled that it truly valued such skills: “They're talking the talk, and walking the talk,” he said.

In sum, organizational features on these platforms served to decouple idealized images of masculinity and definitions of competence so that, in contrast to other dangerous workplaces, proving masculinity did not render men competent. Instead, practices legitimated the expression of vulnerability as an element of competence by linking such expressions to core work requirements.

DISCUSSION

This case study of offshore oil platforms demonstrated how organizational features designed to enhance safety and effectiveness unintentionally released men from societal imperatives for manly behavior. Rather than seeking to prove how tough, proficient, and cool-headed they were, as was typical of men in other dangerous workplaces, platform workers purposefully made themselves vulnerable: they readily acknowledged their physical limitations, publicly admitted their mistakes, and openly attended to their own and others’ feelings. We describe these behaviors as “purposeful” because they involve making oneself vulnerable in order to achieve work-related goals. Men’s mutual expressions of purposeful vulnerability produced deeper, more intimate coworker relationships in which they could express a broader repertoire of personal qualities—qualities that were responsive to the dictates of their work rather than to the dictates of conventional masculinity. By redefining the meaning of masculinity and supporting a generative rather than defensive process of masculine identity construction, these platforms may have avoided costs other dangerous workplaces pay for men’s masculinity

strivings.

These findings suggest a theoretical model of masculine identity construction in which organizations can be key sites for intervention and change (see Figure 1). It expands the existing perspective on masculinity as an identity largely shaped by society's idealized images of masculinity by depicting *organizational conditions* as a moderating influence on the relationship between *society's gender ideology* and the *relational processes* through which men construct *masculine identities*. Equally importantly, we add men's *internal goal orientation* as a pivotal mediator of the joint effects of societal and organizational influences on masculine identity construction processes. A society's traditional gender ideology orients men to the goal of validating an idealized masculine image, but organizational features can create conditions that shift men's energies away from that goal and redirect them toward the pursuit of goals larger than themselves. This shift in orientation supports a set of relational processes in which men reconstruct their masculine identities.

In this section we discuss the implications of our findings for research on team learning and on gender, and we note the study's limitations. We conclude with considerations of what our findings imply about the meaning of gender more broadly.

Our interrogation of masculinity on offshore oil platforms informs research on team learning in three ways, each stemming from the notion that learning requires vulnerability and thus is a relational process that "unmasks manly men" by "undoing" conventional constructions of workplace masculinity. First, our research illuminates the gendered nature of learning, which most scholars treat as gender-neutral. Defensive behavior has long been recognized as an impediment to learning (see, e.g., Argyris and Schon, 1978), and the idea that men construct masculine identities defensively is not new, but neither learning theory nor gender theory has linked these two insights. Our research explicates how men's masculine strivings may be an

impediment to learning and raises the question of the extent to which men who evade learning are defending masculinity.

Second, our research provides insights into the organizational conditions that influence people's propensity to engage in learning behaviors. Self-validation goals—whether about validating a masculine image or another desired image—inhibit learning (for review, see Crocker and Park, 2004). Conditions that shift men's energies away from self-validation goals may therefore facilitate learning. Our analysis uncovered three such conditions. Aligning people's work with a purpose that connects them to others may encourage learning by giving people a compelling reason to put their desired self-image at risk. Defining competence in masculine terms is likely to diminish psychological safety, thereby inhibiting learning behaviors. And decoupling masculine traits from definitions of competence may do the opposite.

Third, our emphasis on the relational aspects of masculine identity construction highlights the relational components of learning. Previous research recognizes relational antecedents of learning—most notably, psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999)—but it has ignored its relational consequences in favor of articulating its cognitive benefits, such as generating more ideas or better solutions. Yet learning may yield benefits that go beyond these first-order effects. The relational experiences that accompany learning behaviors—the experience of mutual, purposeful vulnerability—may have the second-order benefits of strengthening workers' interpersonal relationships by increasing the relationships' capacity to withstand strain. To reveal one's vulnerability is to risk “negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990: 708), but when one receives affirmation, trust builds, and the relationship becomes stronger (e.g., Kramer, 1999). For example, vulnerability-affirmation processes enacted in the service of work may enhance peoples' ability to express negative

emotion without risking damage to their relationship (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003: 266), enabling them to address conflicts and tensions constructively. In contrast, men who are invested in proving their masculinity are disinclined to let their guard down and reveal vulnerabilities and are thus less likely to gain either the first-order or second-order benefits of taking such risks. In short, by characterizing learning behaviors as expressions of purposeful vulnerability, our model offers intriguing possibilities for future research into the antecedents and consequences of team learning.

Our findings have at least two implications for research on gender. First, the notion of proving and defending one's manhood may have some parallels for women. Women may be invested in sustaining a cultural ideal of femininity (Connell, 1995), especially in traditionally female jobs. To the extent that such jobs conflate feminine traits with definitions of competence, they can become a proving ground for women, with costs similar to those identified for men. A woman social worker, for example, invested in proving her emotional availability (a socially-approved "feminine" trait sometimes required on the job) may foster dysfunctional dependencies in her clients. Although particular women's investment in the dominant cultural ideals of femininity may vary by race and class (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Collins, 2000), subcultural ideals may hold similar sway but simply offer a different set of standards. The impact of such standards on women and organizations is worth studying.

The situation is likely more complex for women in traditionally-male jobs. They may assess their self worth by seeking to fit both the culture's idealized image of femininity, on the one hand, and the organization's idealized image of a worker (i.e., masculinity), on the other. Some women manage this contradiction by carefully treading a thin line between the two (see, e.g., Ely and Meyerson, 2000b). Our research suggests that such efforts may be futile, however, not only because striking the right balance is difficult, but also because such efforts are

defensive, enacted to project a desired self-image rather than to accomplish work goals.

Alternatively, asymmetries between men and women may create a weaker parallel for women. Women may be less invested than men in sustaining gender ideals because they stand to gain less from conformity. If the stakes are higher for men, the tests may also be more grueling. Additionally, women have greater latitude than men to cross gender boundaries (Chetkovich, 1997; Connell, 1995), at least in Western cultures. Hence, women may be less invested than their male counterparts in proving their gender credentials. Research comparing the impact of gender ideals on men's and women's gender identity-constructions could address these issues.

Second, our research speaks to debates about the relative merits of “masculine” versus “feminine” traits. Leadership scholars, for example, have begun to question heroic models of leadership (e.g., Badaracco, 2001), favoring a more relational approach often associated with femininity (Fletcher, 2003). Some gender scholars, for their part, have touted women leaders as more effective than men because of their unique relational abilities (e.g., Rosener, 1997) and have lamented organizations' under-appreciation of these abilities (e.g., Fletcher, 1999). Our findings suggest that such debates may focus on the wrong question because *how* people enact their gender identities—defensively versus generatively—may be more consequential than *what* traits they display. Importantly, the reconstruction of masculine identity on the platforms was not simply a case of men replacing the *content* of one masculine identity with the content of another and then setting out to prove the new image—revealing mistakes strategically, for example, or competing in displays of sensitivity. It also involved a transformation of the *process* of identity construction from one anchored in self-validation goals to one anchored in the real demands of their work. We conclude that questions about which traits are better—masculine or feminine—become moot when identity construction processes are no longer defensive.

Our study has at least two limitations. First, our data allowed us to generate but not to test theory. Our data lacked systematic variability from which we could infer relationships among the constructs in our proposed model. Instead, we used descriptions from studies of other dangerous workplaces and interviewees' accounts of work on other platforms as points of comparison. Some elements of the model, such as internal goal orientations, arose inductively, while others, such as particular organizational conditions, arose through an iterative process of comparing data with existing research and theory. Hence our model, although tightly linked to data, remains speculative. Testing proposed relationships in studies of masculine identity-construction processes under different organizational conditions, whether experimentally induced in the laboratory or naturally occurring in the field, is an obvious next step.

The second limitation concerns the generalizability of our model to other work settings. Platform workers, who live and work together for weeks at a time in a confined space, are captive to their work environments in ways that most workers are not. Hence, it is conceivable that the institutionalization of work practices and norms we observed would be difficult to replicate in other settings. Research on change processes is therefore needed.

More generally, it is possible that offshore oil platforms are too exotic to compare meaningfully to “the prosaic world of everyday organizations” (Scott, 1994: 25). We hope this is not the case. We share with other scholars the sentiment that “[t]he study of high-risk organizations needs to be better integrated into the study of organizations in general” (Scott, 1994: 25; see also, Weick et al., 1999; Perrow, 1984). Following their lead, we use these organizations' “distinctiveness as the occasion to see all organizations in a different manner” (Weick et al., 1999: 104)—particularly to see that masculine identity is far more malleable and organizations far more influential than organizational scholars have typically understood.

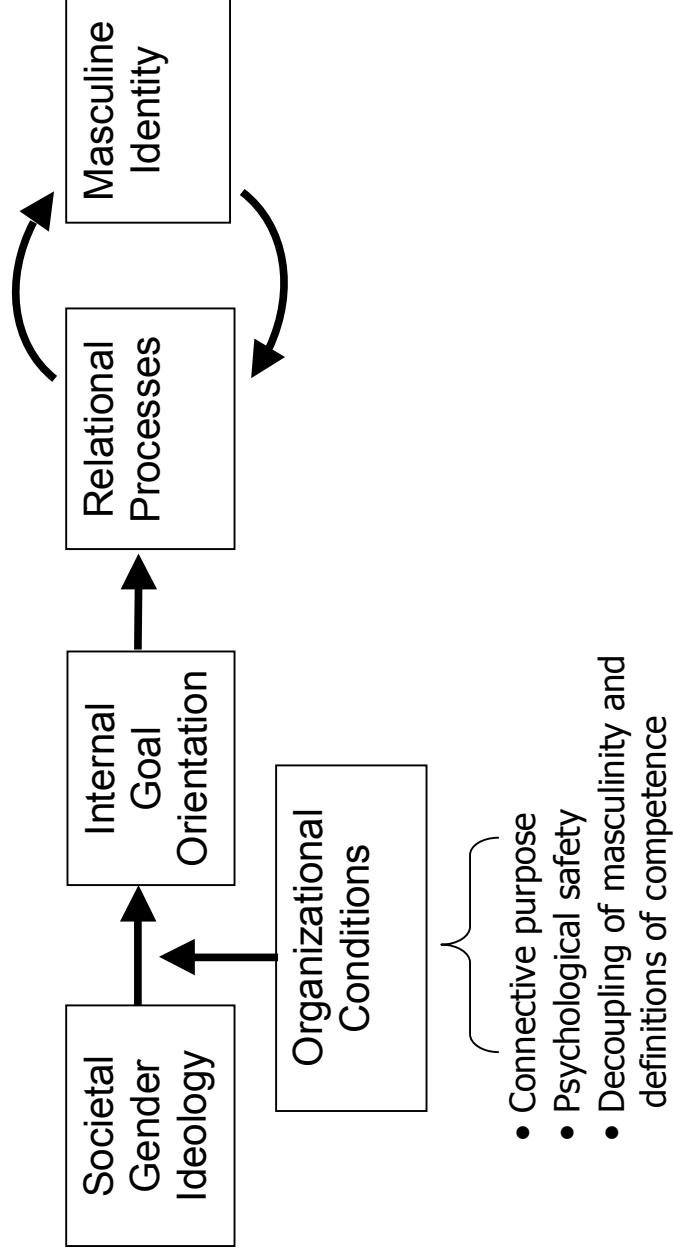
Despite these organizations' unique characteristics, the concept of masculinity has broad

relevance across organizational settings. We focused on masculine identity-constructions in dangerous workplaces because such settings evoke vivid cultural images of the ideal man, but masculinity is also pursued in other work settings. Research has documented how mainstream organizations conflate stereotypical masculine traits with effective performance in white-collar jobs, such as manager, scientist, and lawyer (e.g., see Meyerson and Kolb, 2001; Pierce, 1995). Hence, these jobs too are proving grounds. By the same token, mainstream organizations should be able to disrupt such processes by instituting policies, practices, and norms that anchor people in meaningful work, encourage psychological safety, and decouple masculine traits from definitions of competence. In short, dangerous workplaces provide a window on how processes associated with masculinity construction unfold in mainstream organizations, and highly effective dangerous workplaces provide a window on how they can change.

This study's findings raise a final set of questions concerning the meaning of masculine identity for men who neither conform to conventional images of masculinity nor define their identity as connected to their being male: what is an "unconventional" construction of masculinity that has no particular reference to maleness, conventionally defined or otherwise? This question takes us to the heart of the meaning of gender and to the question of what role, if any, gender would ideally play in society. If masculinity narrowly construed is problematic, does broadening its meaning make it less so? Do gender categories merely constrain human activity in oppressive ways? Or would we lose valuable social meaning if gender categories were abandoned? These questions are philosophical, not empirical, but research that exposes instances when traditional gender conventions are disrupted provide evidence that may help inform an answer.

FIGURE 1.

Model of Masculine Identity Construction Processes at Work



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