



# Masculinity

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*To know what men are, anthropologists look beyond dictionary definitions, personal experience, and opinions and study societies across the globe and throughout history. They study not only people who call themselves men, but also people who call themselves men only some of the time, people who have testicles but know they're not men, people with ovaries who know they are men, and many more. Until the early 1980s, anthropology's contribution to the understanding of men, maleness, and masculinities was more talk than actual empirical study of men as having gender. Among the major anthropological contributions to the study of gender and society in general are grounded ethnographies of men as gendered human beings (i.e. 'men-as-men'), as well as synthetic work across subdisciplines, linking cultural and biological, contemporary and historical approaches to issues like reproductive health, aggression, and fatherhood. Anthropologists pay special attention to the language used in reference to men and masculinities, including terms such as 'toxic', 'dominant', 'traditional', 'alpha', etc. They try to understand not only what, if anything, biology tells us about maleness, but also what people may believe biology says about men and masculinities. This entry provides an overview of this work and examines whether anyone is indeed better served by labels like 'alternative', 'emerging', and 'new' masculinities, and whether it may be more useful to avoid sweeping categories like 'masculine' and 'feminine' in the first place.*

## Introduction

Around the world and throughout [history](#), one of the first questions asked after a baby is born is often, 'Is it a girl or a boy?'. However, today as never before, there is growing criticism of this very question, because, some believe, no one should be pigeon-holed from birth in this way, and because, it is also argued, such a binary distinction between male and female may be archaic and should be made obsolete. The controversy does not stop there, since even the terms 'male' and 'female' are contested when used with humans. They may enhance comparisons between species, which in turn may make us prone to simply assume interspecies similarities in sexual, reproductive, and other forms of behaviour that may not actually exist. Gender is thus simultaneously taken-for-granted and the subject of debate in the world today, and anthropologists are among the scholars who study it the most carefully and on a large, comparative scale.

In some parts of the world (like the United States and Mexico) it is common for anthropology departments to include not only [ethnographers](#) but also archaeologists and biological anthropologists. They combine the study of culture and biology to understand human male patterns and disparities (e.g. Gutmann, Nelson & Fuentes 2021). Sometimes this is done by comparing humans with nonhuman [animals](#), like chimpanzees and bonobos (e.g. Bribiescas 2005 and Fuentes 2012). Instead of repeating a hierarchy of components that starts with evolution, throws in anatomy, and mixes a dollop of culture, such biocultural analyses usually

seek to combine a focus on pan-human physical traits and an attention to the vastly different cultural manifestations of human life on equal terms. And, sometimes anthropologists discover significantly different 'local' biologies, proving that superficially male and female anatomies cannot always be easily or profitably compared (see Lock 2017).

In order to better understand masculinity, it is helpful to consider the meanings of related terms like 'gender' and 'sex'. Notoriously slippery concepts, for some researchers and practitioners 'sex' is the biological constant while 'gender' is the cultural variable (see WHO 2021). Many feminist scholars in recent decades have found this formulation problematic, arguing firstly that gender and sex are too mutually related and dependent to separate them off so neatly, and secondly that gender is often based on perceived sex differences, just as sex is often shoehorned into perceived biological differences (see Rubin 1975; Butler 1990). What is most important for our purposes here is that neither gender nor sex can easily be defined by universal dictionary definitions. That doesn't mean people don't use words like 'man', 'woman', 'nonbinary', 'male', 'female', 'transsexual' to address the world they live in. It just means that people tend to associate a broad range of different meanings with each of these terms. A widespread premise for the study of masculinity is the understanding that men, too, 'have gender' and that 'manhood', 'masculinity', and related terms refer to the symbolic, embodied, performative, and practiced natures of real engendered persons. The complex and dynamic nature of masculinity is part of the challenge and charm of the anthropological study of men, masculinities, and maleness. This entry addresses the part of gender studies in anthropology that focuses on men and masculinities, a topic that is both obviously relevant to gender overall, and one whose significance has often been underrated outside gender studies.

From its earliest days, and for several decades as a discipline, anthropology was ostensibly about men. There were important and prominent exceptions (such as Margaret Mead's 1928 *Coming of age in Samoa* [1961] and Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 *Mules and men* [2008]), but anthropologists were most often men, and the people on whom they concentrated their attention were as well. In fact, men were generally considered the best representatives of 'their people', so male anthropologists often did not bother studying with and about women. In the early days of the discipline, if a male anthropologist had any interest in learning about the women in the area he studied, he often recruited his spouse to do so (for example, in his study of Andalusia, Stanley Brandes writes, 'My wife ... provided me access to the world of Monteros women' [1980, 15].) The problems with this neglect of women's lives only began to be systematically addressed in the 1970s. At that point, a boom of feminist studies in anthropology began to fill in the blanks and indeed transformed our understanding of basic concepts of politics, religion, kinship, language, economics, medicine, and much more (a very early exemplar is Wolf 1960; see also, Weiner 1983). Two major collections of feminist anthropology published for English readers in the mid-1970s were crucial: *Woman, culture and society* (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974) and *Toward an anthropology of women* (Reiter 1975). Both collections powerfully made the case that no society can be understood if the nature and the

activity of women remain under-studied. Other pioneering studies include *Myths of male dominance* (Leacock 1981), a book that challenged the universality of female subjugation and foregrounded the frequently [egalitarian](#) gender relations across societies. These volumes in turn contained key essays by Sherry Ortner (reprinted in 1996), Gayle Rubin (1975), and Karen Sacks (1975), among others, that became cornerstones in the anthropology of gender and sexuality, and proved similarly influential in the anthropological study of men and masculinities.

Feminist anthropologists soon invigorated debates and discussions even further by challenging the universality of the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture' that underlie patriarchal stereotypes of universal male dominance (see, for example, MacCormick & Strathern 1980). In their studies of men and masculinity, unfortunately, male anthropologists too seldom engaged directly with these dialogues or, for that matter, explored conceptual differences among themselves.

The first noteworthy contribution of anthropology to the study of men and masculinity was simply to look at men as having gender at all. Inspired by the catalytic impact of feminist anthropology that had itself been launched by feminist and gay liberation movements in the 1970s, anthropologists began to turn a more critical eye on men and masculinities in the 1980s (Brandes 1980; Herdt 1981). They discovered that there had previously been plenty of talk about men but precious few actual studies of men-as-men that treated them as having gender and not just as the textbook exemplars of particular societies. To a large extent, early studies on men and masculinities focused exclusively on interactions between men, conversations with men, and observations of men. Women were, at most, implied in the lives of men.

The second set of contributions that anthropologists provided to the overall study of men and masculinities came in detailed, grounded ethnographies from around the world. This research used a new, gendered lens to examine a broad set of issues like sexuality (including sex between men in [Latin America](#) [Parker 1999] and New Guinea [Herdt 1981], and masculinities and multiple sex partners in southern Africa [Hunter 2005]); fatherhood (everything from 'paternity uncertainty' in Palaeolithic times, when doubts existed about who had fathered whom, to 'milk fathers' in Brazil who provide baby formula to children they have not biologically fathered); the possibility of evolutionary origins of men (Bribiescas 2005); the link between masculinity, [colonialism](#), and [racism](#) in South Africa (Morrell 2001); [relations](#) between nationalism and manhood in Hawai'i (Tengan 2008); AIDS, masculinity, and privilege in Africa (Wynod 2016); the role of language, 'gender-variance' (nonconformity with gender binaries), and [humanitarian](#) work in Syria (Saleh 2020); masculinity and suicide in northern China (Wu 2009); masculinity and [work](#) in Eurasia (Marsden 2019); [money](#) and masculinity in Nigeria (Smith 2017); and the links between masculinity and violence, including in the Turkish military (Açıksöz 2012), the police in the *banlieues* of Paris (Fassin 2013), and gender-based violence in India (Baxi 2021).

This 'ethnographic moment' in anthropological studies of men and masculinity that began in the 1980s has

been anything but parochial and atheoretical. It has often been aimed at upsetting views that posit all-encompassing categories of men and masculinities; for example, 'honour/shame societies'. In the decades following World War II, anthropologists tended to make broad generalisations about men in societies circling the [Mediterranean](#) (both European and North African), arguing that the honour of men (acting in manly ways, whatever that might mean) and shame of men often in relation to not being manly enough (whatever that might mean) were both ubiquitous and could broadly explain attitudes and behaviour from marriage patterns to animal husbandry. Among the many problems with the 'honour/shame' complex, as it was sometimes known, is that there are widespread beliefs and practices that are nonetheless anything but uniform in the real world; one man (or woman) can feel an act honourable or shameful (for instance, premarital sex, the theft of animals, being able to drink, fight, or play [sports](#) well) that others may not worry about whatsoever. Variation by age, class, and other factors were deemed less important than the ideology of honour and shame as motivators and constraints on life in this region (for a critique of the honour/shame concept and 'problems in the comparative analysis of moral systems', see Herzfeld 1980).

At the same time, important work in anthropology as well as history has shown clearly that the impact of empire, colonialism, imperialism, and racism on men and masculinities worldwide has been profound if not uniform. Franz Fanon (2008 [1952]) has shown that racialised black masculinity is part and parcel of the repression inherent in colonial regimes in Africa and elsewhere. Tom Boellstorff's (2005) study of same-sex desire in non-Western contexts such as Indonesia has shown how [post-coloniality](#) shapes gay subjectivity, while Rick Smith's (2021) writings on 'queer molecular ecology of colonial masculinities' describe the gendered effects of white conquest of Native American lands. Today, as gender theorist Raewyn Connell writes, 'a gender order is emerging in transnational space' that is both contested and is marked by changing power structures related to masculinities (Connell 2016).

Drawing on their broad interest in all things human, from testosterone to tea ceremonies, sociocultural, archaeological, linguistic, and biological anthropologists have thus been at the forefront of debates around how nature and nurture affect human sexuality and gender, seeking a biocultural synthesis that emphasises human malleability and environmental factors (often emphasising poverty, colonialism, and oppression) as key to understanding human relationships and activities. More recently still, synthetic work across subdisciplines within anthropology, linking biology and biocultural approaches to cultural ones, have challenged our understanding of topics like gender-based violence (Gutmann, Nelson & Fuentes 2021), trans politics (Rogers 2020), and reproductive health (Inhorn 2012).

Apart from anthropology's contributions of paying attention to men as engendered and engendering, and offering ethnographies rich in detail and conceptual framing of men, maleness, and masculinities, a third major contribution of anthropology to the study of men and masculinities has been a series of conceptual debates over whether and how maleness is relevant to understanding cognitive frameworks and actual practices—in human and all species—or whether cultural preconceptions have fostered more than a few

erroneous ideas about innate qualities of maleness, males, men, and masculinities. This discussion about human maleness has been complicated further by major cultural developments witnessed by anthropologists and other scholars, charting the growing independence of women politically and [financially](#), and assertions of bodily autonomy, together with the ensuing backlash among some men who deem these changes unwarranted and unwelcome. Studies of male rape of females show this 'backlash' clearly, as male rapists attempt to reassert male privilege violently in this way (see Sanday 1990).

In general, anthropology's insights regarding men and masculinities may be nothing surprising: they illustrate that there is a diversity of ways of being a man and thinking about men, just as there is a wide range of opinion (within and across societies) about what constitutes a more 'manly' man, a good or a bad man, father, or son. The rest of this entry will outline some of these insights, focusing on sex and power; language and religion; hormones and violence; and renegotiating the gender binary.

### **Sex and power**

Take sex, for instance. Based on their meticulous [ethnographies](#), archaeologies, and field research, anthropologists have tended to expand our appreciation of the variety of ways humans think about and engage in sex. This is not surprising given that not all men have penises (Rogers 2020) and some men who have low levels of testosterone are violent (see Jordan-Young & Karkazis 2019). Some of the most significant work has focused on people who identify as men who have sex with other people who also identify as men. These studies have reshaped our understanding of what it means to be gay—whether this is an identity that permeates and determines people's daily lives, a sexual practice, an emotional state, or something else entirely. Guillermo Núñez Noriega (2014), for example, has written an ethnography of cowboys in northern Mexico, many of whom are married to women with whom they have sex, while they also have sex with other men from time to time. They do not identify as gay in any sense that they understand the term. Núñez Noriega has also questioned old-fashioned descriptions of 'active' and 'passive' sexual acts (who penetrates, who is penetrated). The binary way of looking at men who were said to be 'active' versus men who were thought 'passive' in sex simply didn't hold up, as men do all sorts of things sexually at different times. Among other things, this was part of a refutation of the older notion of males being 'active' and females 'passive' in sex that has come to seem ridiculous to almost all students of sexuality. Noriega and other scholars have also illustrated that asexuality can defy simplistic notions of biological male sexual drives.

In another example, Gilbert Herdt (1996) describes boy-to-man ritual practices among the Sambia of New Guinea in which boys as young as seven years old are taught and compelled to perform fellatio on older boys. When these same boys become adolescents themselves, they are fellated by younger boys. When they are a few years older, they marry young women and, according to Herdt, never resume sexual relations with boys or men. Among the Sambia, the belief was at the time of study widespread that this practice

enabled boys to develop their adult sense of masculinity.

Anthropologists have also contributed important studies of heterosexual men and masculinities, including in regards to birth control, circumcision, impotence, and infertility. For example, Everett Zhang (2015) discusses an 'impotence epidemic' in China, distinguishing between biomedical doctors there who see erectile dysfunction (ED) as mainly a result of lack of blood flow, while [practitioners](#) of traditional Chinese medicine more often see ED as a series of problems throughout a man's body, often requiring more attention to kidneys than penises.

The anthropology of heterosexual men and masculinities has been especially useful in showing the influence that women have on men, including but not limited to sexuality and sexual conduct. From circumcision of adult men in Japan (Castro-Vazquez 2015)<sup>14</sup> to vasectomies in Oaxaca, Mexico (Gutmann 2007), anthropologists have countered a commonplace view that the primary power of women over men is the relationship of mothers with their boys. In the case of vasectomies, for example, men may not just decide to get sterilised because they have had enough [children](#) but also because their wives have had to shoulder the burden of birth control, pregnancy, and childbirth over the years, and men now consider it to be their turn (Gutmann 2007).

Through their fine-grained studies of diverse populations across space and time, anthropological ethnographies and archaeologies of men and masculinities have also contributed in important ways to our understanding of basic questions of power and privilege; for example, at the level of governments, economies, and cultural institutions, as well as in more intimate spheres of family and neighbourhood life (see, for example, Peletz 2021). The more we learn through [historical](#) reconstructions, the shibboleth that in the distant past there was a rigid division of [labour](#) in which all men were [hunters](#) and all women were [gatherers](#) has proved less accurate than some firm believers in the gender binary wanted to believe. It now appears clear that women, too, participated to a far greater extent in hunting, and men in gathering, and that cultural bias may have contributed to looking back at the past through contemporary gender prisms (Widlok 2020).

Relatedly, the notion that men through the millennia have had little to do with their children beyond procreation is remarkable for its pervasiveness and its historical inaccuracy. On many matters relating to paternity and paternal investment in offspring, of course, debates among anthropologists mirror wider social disagreements about what men do and don't do, what men should and shouldn't do with children. Certain realities, however, are beyond dispute. To begin with, the variety of paternal patterns in societies around the world today and in the past belies simple generalisations about fathering. What is more, in every agricultural society on earth for at least the last 10,000 years, human males have been more actively and regularly involved in day-to-day '[childcare](#)' than is true in modern, urban settings, because, among other reasons, men in cities can no longer take their children to [work](#) with them (see Gutmann 2006

[1996]).

This does not negate the very real burden for women and mothers of a ‘second shift’ after wage labour, that includes housework and childcare, which have become commonplace for women in contemporary [households](#). (‘Second shift’ is a term coined by feminists to emphasise when domestic labour is carried out by women far more than men, thus forcing women to work so much extra that it constitutes an essentially second job shift each day.) The point anthropologists have emphasised, instead, is that men shirking their share of childcare is not simply a matter of attitudes and ideologies, but also structural changes in societies worldwide that have contributed to these challenges. In recent decades, in parts of southeast Asia and other locations where women and not men have had to migrate for better employment opportunities in order to support their families [financially](#), anthropologists have showed clear changes in parenting practices. In these situations, fathers may assume the lion’s share of every aspect of childcare (Thao 2015). The rapidity of such transformations in nurturing and support of children is a testament to the malleability of patterns that have been commonly taken for granted in recent decades.

### **Language and religion**

In the terminology of linguistic anthropologists, by calling attention to the gendered identities and practices of men-as-men, one ‘marks the unmarked’. Men as a category have long been the implicit stand-in for ‘people’, ‘[citizens](#)’, ‘residents’, and other generic categories, and therefore are said to be unmarked for special notice. In one of the earliest anthropological studies of men-as-men, Stanley Brandes (1980) explores the language of and about men as exemplified in the folklore of Andalusia, Spain. Men reported that there were two factors central to their conception of masculinity: their place in the social hierarchy and their relationships with women. ‘Just as a man in infancy depends on milk to survive, so too he relinquishes *his* milk in adulthood in order to produce children’, Brandes was taught (1980: 83).

The language used by and about men in other contexts reflect similar concerns, as descriptions of masculinity and maleness can have a regulatory effect, turning mere ‘norms’ into normalising political projects. For example, the label ‘alpha male’, ostensibly adopted from primate studies has the cachet of [scientific](#) rigor, derived from observational research in the wild. Indeed, the phrase has become ubiquitous in English-language disparagement of certain kinds of controlling male demeanour that usually have nothing to do with any primate behaviour, in the wild or in captivity. Similarly, anthropologists have showed that the casual invocation of words referring to anatomical qualities considered by some to incarnate maleness—like testosterone and Y chromosomes—usually tells us more about particular social mores of those employing these words than it does about boys or men themselves—or girls and women, who after all also carry testosterone.

The term ‘testosterone’ didn’t even exist before 1905, and for most of the twentieth century it was simply

one component of male (*and* female) bodies contributing to the functioning of various other body parts. Since the 1990s, however, more due to the prevailing winds of evolutionary psychology and an overreliance on biology to explain human behaviour than any especially noteworthy new discoveries related to the hormone, testosterone has come to take on an outsized role in explaining male sexuality and aggression. Beliefs that high testosterone levels, for example, necessarily lead to violence are as specious as they are widespread. In men who have between 20 percent and two times normal levels, there is generally no correlation whatsoever between aggression and testosterone (see Sapolsky 1997; Fuentes 2012; Bribiescas 2006).

Of critical importance in discussing language related to men and masculinities, and more broadly gender, sex, and sexualities, is the fact that, because of the global influence and dominance of English and English-language texts, even when it can be argued that key words in English reflect important social relationships, identities, and struggles, these same words do not necessarily translate well in non-English-speaking contexts. To show how this can work, Fadi Saleh (2020: 49) discusses 'the risks of the global institutionalization of [the word] *transgender*', linking the introduction of the name in Syria in the context of war, migration, and asylum by [human rights](#) workers from Europe and the United States. Although the term 'transgender' may capture what these advocates think they encounter in Syria, an anthropological approach instead favours local ways of describing and naming gender variance. Saleh thus shows that local terms that denote gender variance are not simply subsumed by the term 'transgender'. Instead, local terms continue to exist alongside it, carry different meanings, and remain useful, not least because they avoid the negative stigma of being seen as 'Western' impositions. Saleh writes of one person:

Sara, despite fully presenting as a woman in public and applying at the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] as a transgender woman ... adamantly identifies as a tant, a word that within al-Jaw ['a community-invented word that literally translates as "the atmosphere" and refers to the large, well connected, imagined, and real queer and gender-variant communities across the big cities of Syria and now in the diaspora as well'] indexes an array of ways of being gendered, including feminine gay men, cross-dressers, and transfeminine persons pre-op or feminine gay men taking birth-control pills aiming for a more androgynous (read: female) body, but ultimately, any person assigned male at birth who has no problem with being given a female name or addressed with feminine pronouns, even if they were presenting as masculine within al-Jaw or in their everyday lives' (2020: 45).

Since studies such as these enable anthropology to develop new ways to think and talk about gender, they can put the discipline itself at odds with institutions who aim to determine gender discourse. The Vatican, for example, issued a major statement on 'gender theory', in the summer of 2019, weighing in on terminology and beliefs related to the gender binary, masculine mentality, transgender politics, [queer](#), and 'third gender' (a concept invented to name and emphasise people who do not consider themselves and/or

are not considered by others to fit neatly into the gender male-female binary).

The text, entitled 'Male and female He created them' (Versaldi & Zani 2019) took square aim at putative 'gender confusion' in the world, invoking medical science and the Almighty to counteract the growing and pernicious influence of ... yes, anthropologists in particular. The substance, agenda, and theoretical armature of anthropology as a discipline were called to task for spreading gender 'confusion', and as an impediment in resurrecting the gender binary to its once hallowed and unchallenged place in the hearts and *minds* of Catholic parishioners. Gender and the gender binary, according to the Vatican document, are not social constructions, as anthropologists aver, but unchanging and unchangeable. The crux of the argument is that the wishful thinking of gender theorists have deterred them from accepting the material world of 'the actual *biological difference* between male and female', and in so doing, have taken scholarship too far afield from the realities of nature (emphasis in original, Versaldi & Zani 2019: 12).

Anthropologists have therefore challenged not just Church doctrine, but what might be even more damning: they are held to have attempted the 'denaturalization' of the gender binary through talk of sexual indeterminacy and the like. The authors of the report criticise what they believe is pandering to the hope that individuals have more control over their lives than God and nature actually will allow. As they put it,

the underlying presuppositions of these theories can be traced back to a dualistic anthropology, separating body (reduced to the status of inert matter) from human will, which itself becomes an absolute that can manipulate the body as it pleases. This combination of physicalism and voluntarism gives rise to relativism (Versaldi & Zani 2019: 11).

In particular, the text in question contends that the Church, and societies more broadly, needed to reaffirm an appreciation of 'the values of femininity' and the place of husbands within the family as *pater familias*. No good will come, they argue, if anthropologists persist in spreading these 'wilful untruths'.

This forceful statement points to the interplay of gender (and masculinity) and religion. A recent collection of essays on the anthropology of religion and masculinities shows that,

By considering the stakes of masculinity for the religious and the wages of religion for the masculine, we hope to highlight religion's role as a strategic avenue of identity formation for many actors, men included, and to uncover new areas of cultural reproduction, contestation, and change (see Dawley & Thornton 2018: 15).

At the least, the Vatican document should provide encouragement to those who seek to break down the gender binary; if these efforts had not had such a powerful impact among youths and others around the world, there would have been no need to launch such a broad scale critique of anthropology's contributions to gender studies.

## Hormones and violence

Hormones are frequently invoked to explain male behaviour when it comes to sex and violence. Yet, as stated above, when you know a man's testosterone level, you cannot predict the likelihood he might come to blows. Instead, work on militaries, militarism, and masculinity, for example, has shown that appeals to social attributes (service, sacrifice, protection, invincibility, determination) matter to male violence and are frequently couched by militaries and the general public in terms of men and masculinities. For example, Kimberly Theidon (2009) examines masculinity among ex-guerrillas in Colombia, while Andrew Bickford (2011, 2020) addresses manhood among German and US troops. These anthropologists and others have shown that the allures of participation in armies—in invasions, conquest, war, and occupation—are routinely expressed as the highest form of patriotism and [citizenship](#), and that a soldier, usually male, never epitomises masculinity more than he does in taking life and putting his life in harm's way. Killing and masculinity are here culturally conflated. Centring her archaeological study on Black male soldiers in the 1870s US-Mexico borderlands, Laurie Wilkie uses historical artefacts to trace 'opportunities for reimaging the confines of racialized categories of manhood' among Black soldiers, specifically performances of masculine gentility that reveal their ambitions and experiences as freedmen and citizens (2019: 135).

Rape, in wartime and in all times, has become a pivot point in discussions in about men's supposedly natural proclivities toward aggression, violence, and physical domination of others. In gender studies broadly, including in the anthropology of men and masculinities, forms of gender-based violence like rape are examined to understand the role of power and control, and the enormous variations in rates of rape from one society to another. For example, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern (2009) conducted interviews with soldiers and officers in the Congo, where rapes were widespread in a conflict in the 1990s and 2000s that killed over five million people. The authors show that rape in this context must be understood in relation to a broader cycle of violence driven by social factors that include learned gender behaviours, hostile civil-military [relations](#), marginalisation, and attempts at reasserting power and authority. Rape is here not simply a strategic weapon of war but a frequently chaotic outcome of dysfunctional institutions. Alexandra Stiglmayer studied mass rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, writing, 'rape seems to be part and parcel of a [male] soldier's life, a "normal" accompaniment to war' (1994: 84). Yet she also shows that rape was in this instance conducted to facilitate mass expulsion and [ethnic](#) cleansing, reflecting the overall goals of military intervention.

Such examples stand in contrast to the notion that there are any 'underlying' biological and evolutionary factors making human rapes obligatory. The comparative study of other species does not help much in this instance. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, hundreds of millions of people around the world had access to the program *Animal Planet* on television. Based on their viewing of this program, they might reasonably have concluded that when it comes to sexuality, there are more similarities than differences

between the males of various primate species. They might have also learned that forty percent of male mallard ducks participate in what some researchers call 'gang rape' (see Prum 2017). Yet the producers of this program and the researchers cited should have been horrified by the use of this term in this context, because it implies that there is something predetermined about rape throughout the [animal](#) kingdom and that, for humans as well as ducks, it is a matter of acting out one's male nature. This ignores that for humans rape is a matter of *choosing* to impose one's (male) power through force. Adaptability among humans means that there is not only a far wider range of attitudes and manners, but that unlike ducks and even our closest primate cousins, humans have an almost bottomless well of capacities to alter and transform their attitudes and manners. Anthropologists and sociologists have thus been keen to point out that there is no biological basis to sexual coercion, and that the fact that rape can be found in nature does not make it natural for human beings. They show that in a human context, rape is not primarily about sex, and sex is not primarily about procreation (see Kimmel 2003).

Similar arguments hold in the anthropological study of suicide. Three to four times more men commit suicide than women in the world, though more women try to commit suicide (see WHO 2014). Male suicide is thus assessed from many perspectives in anthropology, and violence and masculinity are certainly among the most important filters through which to chronicle this pressing health concern. Although most academic writings on suicide in the last forty years have come from psychiatry, psychology, and social work, and have emphasised individuals with crippling [depression](#), anthropologists have looked to social factors, including the effect on young men of participating in wars of invasion and conquest, as well as suicide among migrant men who are no longer able to support their families back home. Silvia Sara Canetto (2017) has found that 'rigidity in coping' with less obvious purpose in life, and an inability to develop a new 'sense of self' are social factors that may contribute to a higher incidence of suicide among white, middle class, retired men in the United States (see also Wu 2009, Imberton 2012, and Chua 2014). Again, the variability of suicidal tendencies among men outweighs the role of hormones, and socio-cultural factors seem to account for the largest share of male violent behaviour.

Anthropologists do not argue that hormones or any other physiological factor are irrelevant in human or other animal aggression. Yet, what they do emphasise is that social factors outweigh biological tendencies, and that aggression (and sexuality, and much more about human activity) is ultimately a chicken and egg situation: not only do biological processes in bodies change human behaviour, but changes in behaviour and environmental conditions, for instance, can significantly change our bodies.

### **Renegotiating the gender binary**

Anthropological theorist Gayle Rubin writes that there are moments in [history](#) in which the tussle and tumult around erotic life seem more fraught with possibility and danger (1984: 4). She was referring in particular to sexual mores in times of religious upheaval, but the point is relevant here, too. In these times

there is a widespread *renegotiation* of norms that may have been taken for granted in earlier times. In 1900, few national political leaders in the world were women. It would have been easier at that point to claim that men made naturally better leaders. Today, women ministers and heads of government have become commonplace around the world and are often extremely successful. On an entirely different scale, but along the same lines, in 1950 if you analysed alcohol use and abuse in many parts of the world, you might have concluded that there were stark differences based on gender in terms of what people drank, how much, and how often. Today, far fewer distinctions exist based on purely gender lines (see de Garine & de Garine 2001).

Finally, by way of example, until the creation of the Internet, pornography was rather exclusively associated with men and not women. There were even [scientific](#) papers explaining that this was the case because men were hard-wired differently, especially with respect to visual stimulation. Yet, when porn could be viewed anonymously in the privacy of one's own [home](#), it turned out that many women also availed themselves of the opportunity (see Gutmann 2019). In all three cases, you could say, there has occurred a *degendering* of both actions and our association of particular actions and abilities with a uniform and ubiquitous gender binary (see Gutmann 2019).

The study of transgender politics illuminates this tendency, as it challenges a broad array of issues regarding biological sex and assumptions about people's lives. In the field of forensic anthropology, for instance, Jenna L. Schall, Tracy L. Rogers, and Jordan C. Deschamps-Braly make a clear case that when exhuming human remains, researchers should 'consider the possibility that an unidentified individual could be transgender, and not limit their analyses and conclusions to binary sex categories' (2020: 8). This outlook represents a radical departure from standard practice for disinterments throughout history until the early twenty-first century. It is an excellent example that an anthropological sensibility is tremendously valuable in reframing taken-for-granted conventions.

Similarly, in an [ethnographic](#) study of Puerto Rican transwomen, Mark Padilla and Sheilla Rodríguez-Madera 'consider the ways that the transgender body is systematically excluded and "designed to die"' through exclusion and benign neglect on the part of biomedical practitioners (2021: S26). Gender transitioning is often facilitated through commercial sex networks and very low-quality silicone and hormones, exposing transwomen to multiple health risks. In part, this is due to the state medical system that refuses to facilitate sex transitioning, whereby it essentially abandons and further marginalises these women. In this case, the systemic othering of people is directly related to transitioning women's elevated risk of disease and bodily distress.

Constructions of masculinities can vary significantly even within countries. Studying trans masculinities in the southeast of the United States, Baker A. Rogers has argued that regional identities 'shape how trans men understand and do gender' (Rogers 2020). The men Rogers studied were found to enact masculinities

much like their cis counterparts, holding stereotypical ideas about masculinity that link it to [values](#) of honour, independence, and mastery. While the people Rogers writes about do care about what kind of bodies they have, their issues of maleness and manhood are not reducible to male bodies. Anthropologists who have focused their studies on women have also contributed directly and indirectly to our appreciation of men and masculinities. As simplistic as it may sound, the idea that only men can study men and only women can study women took some debunking in anthropology. Some of that clarity came about by studying more carefully intimate interactions between men and women, for instance regarding sex [work](#). Sealing Cheng (2010) and other scholars have turned the tables on previous interpretations of women's [agency](#), giving voice and volition to sex workers, for example, and providing an alternative to the view that all women sex workers are helpless victims who have no choice in how they earn a living. Through giving women in these circumstances agency, our view of the men involved also has had to shift. Our assessment of men has thus been called into question, in particular the disconnect between men's professed control over various situations and the new reading that makes decision-making and domination along strict gender binary lines more complicated (see Viveros 2015).

Where will these renegotiations of gender lead? As anthropologists are at pains to demonstrate, nothing along these lines is preordained. The extent to which degendering will expand into more and more realms, or whether the gender binary will be reasserted as some might wish, will depend largely on the outcome of the fierce renegotiations around gender, sexuality, and the gender binary that are taking place in bedrooms and boardrooms across the globe.

### **Conclusion: a modest proposal**

In anthropology and other academic disciplines that have paid attention in recent decades to the study of men and masculinities, [ethnographers](#) have sought to capture developing trends and directions in how people in a range of walks of life are thinking about and being men. More attentive parenting by men is called a new way of being a father. Anger management has emerged as code for men's aggressive inclinations (see Kimmel 2013). Negative traits and tendencies associated with men, maleness, and masculinity—toxic, hegemonic, patriarchal—are counterpoised to emergent, new, and alternative masculinities. Anthropologists have tried to capture these transformations with an array of labels, such as 'sensitive' or 'nontoxic' masculinities (see Carabí & Armengol 2014).

At the same time, and reflecting the influence in particular of feminist and [queer](#) theories and social movements, anthropologists have recorded the anguish of coming to terms with maleness, as well as pride in defying views and practices associated with certain men and masculinities regarded as sexist, homophobic, and transphobic.

Recent work has developed around descriptions and concepts rooted in nonbinary gender identities,

bodies, and analysis. What this has meant, among other things, is that the simplistic use of terms like 'masculinity' (or even 'masculinities') has been problematised, as being biologically male is no longer universally a prerequisite for being masculine. Some, but by far not all, anthropologists are even engaged in the more radical pursuits of getting rid of the binary gender paradigm altogether. Perhaps one of the strongest examples for their applied work is the movement to upend gender pronouns; it has spread throughout the world, in creative and linguistically-specific ways, reflecting frustrations on the part of some, often young people, with the restrictions of binary gender conceptions.

At the very least, anthropologists increasingly hold that it is no longer sufficient to merely seek novel forms of masculinity. Instead, their comparative and empirical study has led them to consider that we live in a world in which gender is more fluid and nebulous than a binary gender model allows. This is directly relevant to the undercurrent in all gender studies that seeks to address inequalities that manifest along gender lines. The language used to describe men, maleness, and masculinities in anthropology has always emphasised the relational nature of gender, sex, and sexuality. If inaccurate portrayals of men and masculinities have rarely had the same social consequences as similar mischaracterisations of women for example, they nonetheless have contributed to misleading explanations, and therefore excuses, for male deeds, including those related to gender-based violence (see Merry 2006; Das 2008; Merry 2008; Wies & Haldane 2011).

By highlighting that men and masculinities exist, anthropologists have attempted to highlight the problems of male dominance and also the tremendous variation and malleability of human maleness. Their modest proposal is for the world to recognise this diversity and to sweep away overly constraining prisms of current gender analysis in the name of greater human flourishing.

At the end of a detailed treatment of changing men and masculinities in the United States, journalist Susan Faludi quotes Michael Bernhardt, a veteran of the US war in Vietnam: 'All these years I was trying to be all these stereotypes of manhood, and what was the use? I'm beginning to think now of not even defining it anymore. I'm beginning to think now just in terms of people' (1999: 607). Faludi concludes that Bernhardt was thus beginning 'to conceive of other ways of being "human", and hence, of being a man'.

Anthropologists know that there is still good reason not to ignore what men-as-men do, say, and think in the world. But they also know that there is an evident need not to reduce everything every man does to masculinity, and to look for ways that someday we might associate a range of human practices—from political leadership to sex to alcohol use and abuse to childcare—less with men and masculinities and more simply with what it means to be human.

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[1] On adolescent circumcision, more common in parts of Africa and the Middle East, see also Heald 1999.