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Masculinity as a Psychologically Permeable Barrier to Gender Equality

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My research explores the role that masculinity plays in maintaining gender inequality. Given the traditional division of labor by gender, people may see gender and social roles as intrinsically linked and thereby conclude that the gendered way in which resources are divided between men and women is fair. Because men enjoy a privileged position in the social hierarchy, they may be more likely to see gender roles as fixed and be more motivated to defend the social system as fair and just. On the other hand, adopting a growth mindset about gender roles was expected to promote openness to change, as the overriding goal associated with growth mindsets is development and learning. In a series of laboratory studies, I measured mindsets about gender roles and found that men's tendency to see gender roles as fixed has a number of downstream consequences for maintaining the status quo. Overall, we found that, by increasing the degree of psychological investment in their masculine identity, adopting a fixed gender role theory increased men's rationalization of the gender status quo compared to when gender roles were perceived to be changeable. This suggests that promoting the belief that gender roles can be altered through effort and persistence reduces men's felt pressure to maintain the status quo with regard to the division of labor between men and women in society. We also found that threatening men's masculinity by providing gender incongruent feedback exacerbated their defensiveness about the fairness of the current gender system but that by providing men with an opportunity affirm the self and their most important values before receiving gender incongruent feedback increased rather than decreased their support of structural changes meant to promote greater gender equality.