

FROM BOYS TO MEN

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The 20th century is arguably the most violent period of human existence. While during the 19th century 60 people per one million of population lost their lives as casualties of war, in this century 460 people per million were sacrificed to one or another political cause. As of last count, this century has been a witness to 250 wars (Tehrani, 1997). Although frequently war's victims, women are rarely war's perpetrators, and never have women had the power to initiate this scale of collective violence.

Despite the fact that men are overwhelmingly responsible for the perpetration of both personal and collective violence, the study of men – as a specific subset of humanity - has received short shrift in the previous decades of this era. So perhaps it is a positive harbinger of a turn in our intellectual climate that the last decade of this last century of the millennium has seen the publication of a number of notable volumes studying the male gender. Ranging from psychological treatises on the nature of American boyhood, to psychological explorations of male depression and sociological studies of American male disenfranchisement, these volumes together present us with a clearer, more differentiated, empathic, and complex understanding of what it means to be a man – and to define masculinity – in the late 20th century.

Pediatrician Eli Newberger and psychologist William Pollack have both written volumes looking at the development of boys. Newberger focuses on male character as distinctive from female character and looks at how temperament interacts with environment to shape, for good or for ill, the *“constantly evolving balance between a boy's inner desires and ideals and the forces of is environment”* (Newberger, 1999). Pollack has written a book describing his recent study, *“Listening to Boys' Voices”* in which he and colleagues at Harvard Medical School observed, interviewed and tested hundreds of young and adolescent boys and conducted interviews with their parents. What these researchers have heard from boys is a poignant story of the *“gender straitjacket”* in which boys are expected to uphold outmoded ideas about masculinity that date from the nineteenth century, while being expected to act as *“new men”*, easily slipping between roles as New Age guys and cool dudes. In example after example, Pollack lets us hear the voices of boys as they absorb what he calls the *“Boy Code”*, a set of behaviors and rules of conduct that mask the child's true self as he continually falls short of this set of impossible and contradictory ideals.

James Garbarino, a psychologist at Cornell University moves away from the more normative aspects of boyhood development in his exploration of “lost boys” – the boys and young men who have been increasingly vulnerable to violence and crime. Garbarino has personally interviewed boys in juvenile institutions, prison and boys on death row, some of who have been involved in the school killings that have made headline news in America during the last few years. He has carefully reviewed the research literature on child development and child abuse, temperament and environment, attachment and disrupted attachment, moral development and childhood aggression and has integrated this information with a thorough look at the role that broader social factors like media violence, poverty, easy access to weapons, and racism play in determining outcome for troubled boys. What emerges is a complex, comprehensive and understanding picture of why “bad boys” turn out bad and what a society needs to do to keep boys from turning bad. While pointing out that “*saving violent boys isn’t easy*”, Garbarino offers a community-based plan, with examples of successful strategies and programs, to reclaim these “lost boys”.

I Don’t Want To Talk About It by Terrence Real, is a book worth reading for anyone who is, knows, works with, or loves a man. Real, a psychotherapist and co-director of the Harvard University Gender Research Project, describes how gender socialization and the small instances of betrayal and abandonment that characterize the life of many boys, combines with whatever biological vulnerabilities exist, to produce depressive syndromes in men. As he puts it, “*Masculine identity development turns out to be not a process of development at all but rather a process of elimination, a successive unfolding of loss . . . the loss of the relational*”(p. 130, 137). Women, Real contends, tend to show their depressive symptoms openly – a state he calls “*overt depression*”. In contrast, many men demonstrate “*covert depression*. . . *Because of the stigma attached to depression, men often allow their pain to burrow deeper and further from view*”. In covert depression, the man does everything he can to ward off the shame, guilt, and loss of self-esteem associated with admitting to being “*weak*” and “*a sissy*”. Addictions to drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, work, money – you name it – are all ways of avoiding the underlying feelings associated with this covert depression. So too are the grandiose pursuit of narcissistic achievement, the abuse of power, the use of violence. When self-esteem is built not on who you are but on what you can or cannot do – performance-based esteem - life becomes a perpetual competition for external approval of one’s accomplishments. “*Once we realize that the elusive ‘masculine identity’ does not exist inside the boy’s psyche, but rather that it is a social construct to which the boy must bend and comply, we can understand why it is impossible for most boys to feel secure about it*” (p. 172). According to Real, for the covertly depressed man to recover, the covert depression must be transformed into overt depression, by “*peeling back the layers of an onion. Underneath the*

covertly depressed man's addictive defenses lies the pain of a faulty relationship to himself" (p. 279). This means that the man must give up his addictive defenses, develop more relational maturity, and then release whatever traumas are unresolved in his past, redressing the empathic reversal that lies at the core of his depression. Within the context of safe and supportive environments, the depressed man must allow himself to feel again, to break through all of the socially condoned walls that little boys must build around their most tender selves.

While all of these books are impressive for how they connect the personal and the political, the individual and his social context, feminist author and journalist, Susan Faludi, has stepped back even further to look at the entire sociohistorical framework for American men and where they are today, in her new book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. After in-depth interviewing of American men from all walks of life, Faludi attempts to answer the question, "What happened to the men of postwar America?". Her answers to that question are fascinating and insightful, reaching far beyond any simple explanations. She points out that at the end of World War II, two visions of the future America vied for attention on the national scene. One voice called for seeing America as a masculine nation whose manifest destiny was to "*loom like a giant on the global scale. . . a nation that would dominate the world through unapologetic force*". The other vision called for a manly ideal that reflected the ethic of the common man – a new generation of men who would become the caring good fathers of the next generation, centering on the experiences of comfort and support that men had given each other in the war. Faludi contends that the vision of dominance through the use of force was the American vision that won out. Men were promised a clear and defined mission to manhood and that mission was to be based on the national male paradigm which had four aspects: the promise of a frontier to be claimed, the promise of a clear and evil enemy, the promise of a institution of brotherhood in which anonymous members could share a greater institutional glory, and the promise of a family to provide for and protect. According to Faludi, the postwar generation of men have been betrayed by the elder generation of men on all four promises. The promised frontier, formerly the American Wild West and the wartime fronts would become space, only space turned out to be a void, and not much worth conquering. The evil enemy, formerly the Indian and the Nazi, was now the Communist, only in Vietnam, the enemy turned out to be villagers, women, children and families in their huts. The promise of an institutionalized brotherhood, formerly the military, became the promise of job security in corporate America, only that promise has turned into downsizing, union-breaking, restructuring and outsourcing. And the promised family failed to materialize as well. While men in America were pursuing the "American dream", women were liberating themselves and began doing just fine on their own, often viewing the men in their lives as oppressors, not liberators. Faludi

asserts that “All the pillars of the male paradigm have fallen except the search for the enemy” and the enemy that men are still targeting as the source of all their problems are women and minorities. She asks the vital question of her readers, “Why haven’t men responded to the series of betrayals in their own lives – the failures of their fathers to make good on their promises – with something coequal to feminism?” and in doing so, lays down the gauntlet to a new generation of men and women.

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