The Development of Healthy Masculinities: Perspectives from Cis and Trans Men

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The Boy Crisis
At Every Level of Education, They're Falling Behind. What to Do?
REAL BOYS

William Pollack, Ph.D.

The New York Times Bestseller

Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood

“Anyone who lives or works with boys and men should read Real Boys.”
—Gail Sheehy

With a new foreword by Mary Pipher, Ph.D., author of Reviving Ophelia
“Just as Reviving Ophelia introduced readers to the culture of teenage girls, Guyland takes us to the land of young men.”
—Mary Pipher, Ph.D., author of Reviving Ophelia

GUYLEND
THE PERILOUS WORLD WHERE BOYS BECOME MEN
UNDERSTANDING THE CRITICAL YEARS BETWEEN 16 AND 26

MICHAEL KIMMEL
AUTHOR OF MANHOOD IN AMERICA
ANGRY WHITE MEN

MICHAEL KIMMEL

AMERICAN MASCULINITY AT THE END OF AN ERA
The Increasing Significance of the Decline of Men

And when you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything.
Boys’ Development

- Boys encounter voices, messages, scripts, stories about being a boy/man
- Starts very early
- From parents, teachers, friends, media
- E.g., “traditional,” “conventional,” “hegemonic,” “patriarchal,” “toxic” masculinities
- E.g., “boy code,” “guy code”
Boys appropriate (internalize) these voices, messages, scripts, stories.
They are “cultural tools” that mediate and shape action and identity—particularly gender identity (“mediated action”).
Boys enact/perform masculinities, aided by these tools.
Masculinities as Mediated Action

- Relationships with boys
- Relationships with girls
- Relationships with parents
- School
- Sports
- Sexual relationships
- Bystanding/upstanding
- "Guyland"
These voices, messages, scripts, stories can remain “externally authoritative” (Bakhtin)
They can also become “internally persuasive” (Bakhtin)
Multiple forms of conventional/hegemonic masculinity in dialogue (“dialogical masculinities”)
Some boys encounter and appropriate different/alternative voices, messages, scripts, stories about being a boy/man.

“Healthy,” “resistant,” “ethical” voices

Voices critical of conventional masculinity – e.g., challenging “boy code”/“guy code”

These voices mediate “healthy” actions and interactions.
Niobe Way, Carlos Santos, and colleagues’ research on middle school boys:

- Boys who resist conventional norms of masculinity (e.g., emotional stoicism, physical toughness, autonomy)
  - remained in closer, more emotionally supportive relationships with their mothers and friends
  - scored lower on the Childhood Depression Inventory
  - were more engaged in school
- “hypermasculinity” associated with negative outcomes on all measures
Questions

- What do these healthy/resistant voices sound like during college years?
- How do they enter into dialogue with conventional/hegemonic/patriarchal voices?
- Where do they come from? What kinds of experiences give rise to them?
- How can encounter with and appropriation of these voices be encouraged and supported?
Colby Healthy Masculinities Project

- 70+ participants
- cis, straight men
- transgender men, gender queer folx
- some racial and ethnic diversity
- ages 18-24
- semi-clinical interviews
Healthy Masculinities: Perspectives from Cis Men

- Exploring the conditions that enable privileged young men to navigate the challenges of being raised male,
- to resist norms of conventional, hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity,
- and to embrace and enact forms of “healthy,” “resistant,” masculinity.
Voices of Critique and Resistance

- **Being Different**
  
  “My brother and I did a lot of non-traditional masculine things”
  “It was where I branched out masculinity-wise. Music was the first time that I could show emotion. I could write really bare songs”

- **Athletics and Sports**
  
  “My athleticism gave me a way to avoid conformity”
  “I could conform to it [toxic masculinity], and it turned into anger. I did football and wrestling, but I got too aggressive. I realized that wasn’t who I was and that those people were brainwashing me”

- **Outsider Status**
  
  "I moved to US in 5th grade. It was a real culture shock. Growing up, it was okay for boys to hold hands. You could take pictures and be really close. There was no, 'oh you’re gay'”"
Voices of Ownership and Control

- Ownership of Actions
  “Treating girls appropriately is huge”

- Ownership of Identity
  “You have to recognize who you are and be comfortable with who you are”

  “Healthy masculinity is someone who is comfortable enough with themselves that they don’t need to worry about “am I gay here?” “am I in a weak position?” “am I vulnerable?””

  “You don’t have to follow these social norms and stuff. Being able to be who you want to be”
Moral Voices

- **Justice/Respect**
  “Respect was part of my family’s culture”

- **Care/Compassion**
  “I want to be someone who is going to be compassionate”
  “Traditionally it’s your mom who teaches you about sensitivity and emotions. I think I’m very good with these things. I think I got them from my dad”
Experience in Relationships

- **Families/Fathers**
  
  "My father is one of the people who I will always look up to"
  
  "Based off what my dad is, I know what a man isn’t--it’s like a negative"

- **Girls and Women**
  
  "Even from a young age I hung out with girls. I learned that you can be around girls and they can be your friend. They don’t have to be these sexual objects, so foreign and mysterious"

- **Mentors**
  
  "The things [my role models] were doing weren’t always about themselves. They were doing things for other people. I always strived to be like them"
Experience of Challenge and Struggle

- **Trauma and Loss**
  "I had to get myself over the hump of 'it’s okay to ask for help.' I don’t know if that was stemming from my personality or what I believed to be a man at the time, but it was definitely something interesting. I think I’ve grown from the experience and can deal with personal strife"

- **Tough Love**
  We were expected to go to school and work the hardest we could"

- **Responsibility and Obligation**
  “You need to do everything in your power to take care of your family“
Experience of Activism & Empowerment

- **Implicit**
  
  "It’s subliminal resistance; you don’t even recognize you’re doing it"

  "The ones who resist don’t resist at all. They just don’t play into it"

- **Explicit**
  
  "I had these thoughts for a while, like guys shouldn’t be doing these stereotypical things... so the group [MAV] helped me articulate these thoughts. From there on out that’s how I thought."

  "If adjusting the way we think about things is necessary to see that equality, I’m willing to put in the work with a hundred black students to help change the perception of black men being thugs and lazy, etc."
Voices in Dialogue

“So many of my femme friends and I have exhaustingly long conversations about our male friends who seem to be so good and ethical and feminist, but then they turn around and commit misogyny or emotionally manipulate us and our peers.”
How do transgender men and genderqueer folx navigate and inhabit various masculinities?

What do we learn when we distinguish ”men” from “masculinity/ies”?

What insights on a positive dialogue between the masculine and feminine do transgender men and genderqueer folx bring?

How does this inform our understanding of the development of healthy, resistant, masculinities?
Physical Embodiment

- We live in a cis-normative society that is violent to nonconformists
- Puberty
- Transition
- Continuing Struggle
“At some point I realized, I can’t be good friends with people if I don’t open up more...What would it mean to have a friendship where they don’t know anything about me?”

“I found it difficult to talk about emotions and ask for help for things, which isn’t helpful for anyone! It’s better to ask for help instead of silently suffering.”
More Questions

- More work to do
- Is the term “healthy masculinities” a problematic oxymoron?
- Does “feminist masculinities” solve any of the problems associated with “healthy masculinities”?
Acknowledgements

- Spencer Foundation Small Grants Program
- Colby College Presidential Scholars Program
- Colby College Phi Beta Kappa Summer Research Internship
- Colby College Interdisciplinary Studies Division