The Man Box: The Making of Masculinity[1]

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Abstract: This article looks at the concept of the "man box": the behaviors and expectations associated with a conventional, rigid form of manliness, an exaggerated, archetypal machismo that academics describe as "hegemonic masculinity." I explore how manliness and masculinity are tied to male identity and how throughout the centuries anxiety over boys has manifested itself with the changing perceptions of masculinity.

Keywords: the man box, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, boy crisis, gender.

Introduction

The concept of the Man Box is used by sociologists and equality advocates to describe the behaviors and expectations associated with a conventional, rigid form of manliness, an exaggerated, archetypal machismo that academics describe as "hegemonic masculinity." Admittedly, the metaphor of the Man Box is a little cutesy, but its utility lies in how it clearly separates sex and the biological identity of maleness from gender and the cultural creation of masculinity.

This is a significant, even radical, distinction to make, since these markers of masculinity continue to be seen not only as normal but also as the rightful traits of those who do and should hold power. It's why we associate a deep voice with authority, while a higher voice sounds weak or shrill; why a suit and tie seem more fitting in a corporate office than a dress does; and why the socially awkward solo inventor, rather than the emotionally attuned collaborator, has become our go-to image of a tech genius.

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For all the power these gender biases exert, the idea of "manliness" or "masculinity" as a fixed or natural thing has until recently rarely been questioned. Like whiteness, masculinity has been considered the default—think about how we address a mixed-gender group as "you guys" but never "you gals," much as we use adjectives like ethnic and exotic to describe every group but WASPs. In the 1990s, whiteness studies and masculinity studies (or men's studies, as it's sometimes called) began to crop up on college campuses. These fields of research seek to debunk the belief that "white" and "masculine" are the norms from which other identities diverge and deviate. Rather, "whiteness" and "maleness" are constructions and deviations of their own, deployed to concentrate power among some people and deny it to others. The myth that people of European descent are distinct from and superior to those with African ancestry, for instance, was the undergirding of slavery and segregation. Yet as the sequencing of the human genome has revealed, there is no meaningful biological difference or distinct dividing line between racial groups. Neither are racial categories stable or "pure." Human history is the story of migration and mixing. As social anthropologist Audrey Smedley once phrased it, "Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real" (Smedley & Smedley 2005: 16).

Masculinity and male identity

When it comes to gender and sex, the study of masculinity seeks to confront male identity in a similar way. As with race, the definitions of masculinity and manliness are not static either. The attributes inside the twenty-first-century Man Box, such as being heterosexual and stoic, are not the same ones that would have described a so-called real man in other centuries. In ancient Greece, for example, a sexual relationship with an older man was a common coming-of-age experience for a future free male citizen. And the poetry and art of the romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were rife with effusive male emotion and tenderness among men.

Even now, what's seen as acceptable male behavior isn't monolithic but shaped by factors such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality—blue-collar men, for example, express a different sort of masculinity than men in corporate boardrooms. And merely being male is not enough: boys and men have to be the correct kind of male. Homophobia and hostility toward those who are transgender or androgynous, for instance, are the most pervasive ways to police boys and men who fail to present themselves as sufficiently masculine. Gay men and transgender people are

frequently targeted, often violently, for transgressing the rules of male identity. LGBTQ people are more likely than any other group in the United States to be victims of a hate crime. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, nearly a fifth of the 5,462 hate crimes reported to the agency in 2014 were a result of the target's perceived or actual sexual orientation (Park & Mykhyalyshyn 2016).

These messages about what it means to be a "real man" come early. Sociologist C. J. Pascoe spent a year and a half embedded in a working-class, racially mixed California high school in the early 2000s, studying how boys utilized homophobic slurs to define and regulate male behavior in themselves and each other. She investigated how boys used the term gay as both a neutral description of homosexuality as well as a generic put-down equivalent to calling something dumb or uncool. Fag, on the other hand, was employed both to mock gay kids and more broadly to call out behavior that didn't fit masculine norms. Pascoe observed that making jokes about "faggots" was central to boy culture. One student told her, "To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that's like saying that you're nothing" (Pascoe 2007: 55). Interestingly, girls were not routinely called dykes or lesbians. Instead, the most common slur directed at them was slut. And this usage of fag and slut as insults reflects the opposing gender-based expectations regarding sex: boys must be aggressively (hetero)sexual, and girls must be chaste.

As a result of this culture, an openly gay boy endured near-constant harassment and eventually dropped out of school. But being straight didn't inoculate other boys from homophobia. "Becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with sexual identity," Pascoe writes, noting the ever-present threat of being perceived as a fag. "This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism... [teaching boys to] recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it" (*ibidem*: 54).

Though anxiety about appearing unmanly was universal, Pascoe reported that the definitions and rankings of manliness were also shaped by factors such as race. Black boys at the high school, for example, were among the most popular kids, and they were seen as more athletic and more masculine than other boys. This perception is consistent with prevailing racial stereotypes that associate black men with traditional masculine traits such as strength and athletic

skills. That said, many of the black boys at the school also adhered to culturally specific standards of masculinity that diverged from the rules followed by other boys. White boys at the high school tended to think it was "faggy" or unmanly to care about personal grooming and fashion. Black boys, on the other hand, tended to take pride in their appearance. Looking attractive and stylish was, in part, a way to express their personal taste, cultural identity, and connection to other young black men.

Race and racism shape expectations of masculinity for other boys, too. Sociologist Alexander Lu has noted that male status is tied to ethnicity, observing that the common stereotypes of Asian men and boys are emasculating ones: they are seen as studious, obedient, nerdy, and weak—all traits that fall outside the Man Box (Lu 2013). In a study of Asian American men's personal experiences of masculinity and being male, many of the respondents reported feelings of stress, "from trying to fulfill an idealized form of masculinity—a man who is tough, physically attractive, unemotional, and a ladies man. However, stereotypes about Asian American men make it very difficult for them to conform to this ideal" (Lu & Wong 2013).

Oliver S. Wang, another sociologist, has also addressed the impact of these stereotypes on Asian American men. In his writing on music, entertainment, and sports, he's pointed out the paucity of images of cool, powerful Asian men in contemporary Western popular culture. The result, he says, is that some Asian boys have gravitated toward black culture and black heroes. Writing about National Basketball Association (NBA) player Jeremy Lin, Wang observed, "For many of us, growing up Asian American meant having few of 'our own' male role models in the public sphere. As a result, hip hop—besides its sonic and textual pleasures—held a strong appeal because it was also a space in which we could witness brazen displays of masculinity, especially in defiance of whiteness." Given the "pathetically narrow" representation of Asian boys and me in popular culture, the emergence of Lin as a basketball powerhouse "offered up something we rarely get to see: an Asian American man, excelling in the most athletically masculine of all American sports, and doing it with passion, emotion and a cocksure swagger" (Wang 2012).

The performance and expression of masculinity are complex. The same tactics that give boys power in one situation make them vulnerable in another—the ability to silently endure pain and emotional wounds might please a coach or a parent, but that repression in turn thwarts young

men's capacity for intimate connection. Because no boy can live up to all the male norms all the time, manliness is a fragile quality.

Boy crises

Though the current configuration and contents of the Man Box are new, anxiety about boys and young men not living up to the standards of manliness is not. "From the very moment masculinity was invented," historian Stephanie Coontz tells me, "it was a source of worry." Coontz is the director of research and public education at the University of Texas at Austin–based Council on Contemporary Families and the author of several books about marriage, family, and gender. She traces the origin of the current definition of masculinity to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when gender identities began to be seen as a dichotomy and women and men were delegated to separate spheres, with women as homemakers and men as economic providers. Certain qualities and dispositions began to be associated with femininity, such as delicacy, sexual purity, nurturance, and sensitivity, and others with masculinity, such as rationality, stoicism, physical courage, and intellect.

Over the next hundred years, anxiety over boys—whether it was that they were too brutish or not brutish enough—has persisted, flaring up during moments of social change and upheaval. The 1950s was a similar period of flux and fear: defined by postwar prosperity and growth, the civil rights movement, the space race, the Cold War, and the Red Scare. Teenagers had more money, more leisure time, and new ways to enjoy both: dancing to rock and roll and hanging out at drive-in movies watching bad boys like Marlon Brando in The Wild One and James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause. Male deviations from clean-cut mid- century conformity—whether it was juvenile delinquents or effeminate "sissies"—alarmed parents and teachers.

The latest concern over a boy crisis began in the 1980s. Fears about crime and disorder in the United States led to the ruinous War on Drugs and the rise of mass incarceration. Big-city newspapers ran inflammatory reports about "wilding" by gangs of boys, a term that came into use in 1989, when five black and Latino teenagers were arrested and falsely convicted for the rape of a white woman jogger in New York City's Central Park. A few years later, on April 20, 1999, two Colorado teenagers named Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School, where they were seniors, just before lunch period, armed with bombs and guns. They killed twelve students and a teacher before killing themselves. The massacre was variously ascribed to bullying,

mental illness, the proliferation of guns, violent video games, goth subculture, and the music of Marilyn Manson; panic grew about alienated and antisocial white boys like Harris and Klebold, resulting in a growing preoccupation with zero-tolerance bullying policies in schools.

All these worries about boys have since been magnified. And there are genuine reasons for concern. In the United States, two-thirds of students diagnosed with learning disabilities are boys (Cortiella & Horowitz 2014: 12). And as with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), diagnoses of mental illness such as depression and suicidal ideation have exploded among boys. Young men, especially young black, Latino, and indigenous men, are among the primary victims of violent deaths.

Conclusion: Crisis of masculinity?

What do we make of all these struggles and challenges facing boys? How do we account for the ways in which they are acting up, shutting down, or being harshly punished for crimes both real and perceived? The most common response to the boy crisis has been to point to something intrinsic to boys themselves. A hundred years ago it was their wild nature. Today it's too much testosterone or their "boy brain" wiring. But the model of the Man Box points to another possibility: What if the crisis isn't about boys but, rather, masculinity?

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