A War Against Boys?

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Here's a new twist on the question of preferential treatment or affirmative action for people who have experienced discrimination. In 2004, Doug Anglin, a 17-year-old senior at Milton High School outside Boston, sued the school district to retroactively raise his B-grade point average. Anglin's lawsuit, brought with the aid of his father, a Boston lawyer, argued that schools routinely discriminate against males. "From the elementary level, they establish a philosophy that if you sit down, follow orders, and listen to what they say, you'll do well and get good grades," Anglin told a journalist. "Men naturally rebel against this."

Laughable though it may be, this ploy is simply the logical extension of a cultural campaign to convince us that feminism has gone too far and that males are now the disadvantaged sex. Feminist-inspired programs enabled a whole generation of girls to enter the sciences, medicine, law, and the professions, to continue their education, to imagine careers outside the home. But now, we're told, those same feminists have pathologized boyhood. Elementary schools, we read, "feminize" boys, forcing active, healthy and naturally rambunctious boys to conform to a regime of obedience—"pathologizing what is simply normal," as one psychologist put it. By the time they get to college, they've been steeped in anti-male propaganda. "Why would any self-respecting boy want to attend one of America's increasingly feminized universities?" asks George Gilder in The National Review. The American university is now a "fluffy pink playpen of feminist studies and agitprop 'herstory,' taught amid a green goo of eco-motherism . . ."?

ARE BOYS IN TROUBLE?

There is no doubt that boys are not faring particularly well in school. From elementary school to high school they have lower grades, lower class rank and fewer honors than girls. They are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade in elementary school, one third more likely to drop out of high school, and six times more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. 2

By the time they get to college—if they get there at all—they get lower grades and honors as well. Women now constitute the majority of students on college campuses. They outnumber men in the social and behavioral sciences by about 3 to 1, and have invaded such traditionally male bastions as engineering (where they now make up 20 percent) and biology and business (virtually par). One expert, Tom Mortensen, warns that if present trends continue, "the graduation line in 2068 will be all females." 3 (For the less statistically-minded, that's like predicting, forty years ago, that if the enrollment of black students at Ol' Miss was 1 in 1964, and, say, 200 in 1968 and 1000 in 1976, that "if present trends continue" there would be no white students on campus by 1982.)
These three issues—lower achievement, problematic behavior, and declining percentages in higher education—form the empirical basis of the current debate. But the idea that males are now the disadvantaged sex, and that the solution is to re-value “traditional” male values such as competition and aggression, rests on a misunderstanding of the challenges facing boys.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE “WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS” DEBATE?

For one thing, it creates a false opposition between girls and boys, implying that educational reforms undertaken to enable girls to perform better have actually hindered boys’ educational development. But these reforms—new initiatives, classroom arrangements, teacher training, increased attentiveness to students’ individual learning styles—actually enable larger numbers of boys to get a better education. Though the current boy advocates claim that schools used to be more “boy friendly” before all these feminist reforms, they obviously didn’t go to school in those halcyon older days, when the classroom was far more regimented and teachers far more authoritarian; they even gave grades for “deportment.” Rambunctious boys were simply not tolerated in the 1950s; they dropped out—or were expelled.

Some educational changes over the past ten years have hurt boys, but these changes were initiated by Congress, not by feminists. The net effect of the No Child Left Behind Act has been a zero-sum competition, as school districts scramble to stretch inadequate funding, leaving them little choice but to cut all non-curricular programs to ensure that their curricular mandates are followed. This disadvantages boys, since many of these programs were after-school athletics, gym and recess. Cutting “unnecessary” school counselors and other remedial programs also disadvantages boys, who compose the majority of children in behavioral and remedial educational programs.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Another problem is that the numbers themselves don’t add up. More people—that is males and females—are going to college than ever before. In 1960, 54 percent of boys and 38 percent of girls went directly to college; today the numbers are 64 percent of boys and 70 percent of girls. It is true that the rate of increase among girls is higher than the rate of increase among boys, but the numbers are increasing for both.

Most critically, the imbalance between girls and boys is not uniform across class and race. The numerical imbalance between “problem” boys and “problem” girls turns out to be more of a problem of race and class than of gender per se. It is what Cynthia Fuchs Epstein calls a “deceptive distinction”—a difference that appears to be about gender, but is actually about something else—in this case race and class.4

Middle-class boys continue to complete high school and go on to college in similar proportions to girls. Among middle-class white high school graduates going to college this year, half are male and half are female. But working-class men—of all races—are less likely to go to college than working-class women. The racial disparities are even more stark. Only 37 percent of black college students are male, compared to 63 percent female, and only 45 percent of Hispanic students are male, compared with 55 percent female.

Why don’t we “see” race and class, but are so drawn to gender? Perhaps because we are encouraged to see some parts of the picture but not to see others. Consider this front-page article in The New York Times from March 25, 2001: “Troubling Label for Hispanics: ‘Girls Most Likely to Drop Out’ ” reads the headline. The fifth paragraph of the article describes a “troubling trend”—
Table 27.1 Distribution of Undergraduate Enrollment Among Students Aged 24 or Younger, by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Income: 1995–96

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<th>Low Income (less than $30,000)</th>
<th>Middle Income ($30,000 to $69,999)</th>
<th>Upper Income ($70,000 or more)</th>
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<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>50</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

N/A: The sample size is too small to generate a reliable estimate.

"Hispanic girls are dropping out at a far greater rate than any other group of girls in the United States." According to government data, 26 percent of Hispanic girls leave high school before receiving a diploma, compared with 13 percent of black girls and 6.9 percent of white girls.

"Hmm," you might say to yourself, "what is up with these Hispanic girls?" That is, until you read the very next paragraph (here quoted in full):

The only group that has a higher dropout rate among all students is Hispanic boys. Thirty-one percent of Hispanic boys drop out, compared with 12.1 percent of black boys and 7.7 percent of white boys.

So the dropout rates among Hispanics—both boys and girls—are exceptionally high. This isn’t about gender at all: it’s entirely a problem of race and ethnicity. (And, since race and ethnicity are so indelibly linked to class, it’s a problem of class as well.) The article should have been titled "Hispanics—Boys and Girls—Most Likely to Drop Out."

Local studies also reveal the race- and class-based underpinnings of the trends usually attributed to gender. A study of high school students in the Boston area by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy found substantial gender differences in dropout rates. For 2005, the study found an attrition rate of 21 percent between 9th and 12th grade. The male dropout rate was 4 percent higher than the girls’ rate, but most of the enrollment decline overall was accounted for by Hispanic and black males. The number of Hispanic males enrolled in Massachusetts by grade 12 was just barely half of the number that had entered in 9th grade.5

Why don’t the pundits acknowledge these race and class differences? To many who would now propose to “rescue” boys from feminist “political correctness," such differences are incidental because, in their eyes, all boys are the same and they need special treatment that takes into account their naturally aggressive, competitive natures.

Men need to be tough, the theory goes, to see themselves as leaders who can take charge of others. They can then channel their natural urges into responsible social roles such as becoming the family breadwinner or serving in the military. Michael Gurian, for example, celebrates such masculine rites of passage as “military boot camp” and “fraternity hazings” as “essential parts of every boy’s life.”
But encouraging this definition of masculinity is part of the problem, not the solution, to the issues facing boys. Countless surveys suggest that young boys today still subscribe to a traditional notion of masculinity, stressing the suppression of emotion, stoic resolve, aggression, power, success, and other stereotypic features. I believe that an over-reliance on these norms of masculinity—and the suppression of a wider range of emotional expressions, behaviors and psychological traits in the name of masculinity—is the underlying cause of the current boy crisis.

ACHIEVING MANHOOD—AT THE EXPENSE OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

How does a focus on the ideology of masculinity explain why boys are more likely to have problems with school? Carol Gilligan's work on adolescent girls describes how these assertive, confident, and proud young girls "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence and gender norms come down on them more harshly. They become more diffident, less sure of themselves, more "feminine." At that same moment, William Pollack notes in his book Real Boys, the boys become more confident, even beyond their abilities. You might even say that boys find their voice, but it is the inauthentic voice of bravado, of constant posturing, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence. He calls it "the boy code." The Boy Code teaches them that they are supposed to be in power, and thus they begin to act like it.

In adolescence, both boys and girls begin to conform to the traditional norms of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it. Recent research on the gender gap in school achievement bears this out. Girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally "masculine" educational arenas such as math and science. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado (and many facing strong family pressure) are likely to over-value their abilities, to remain in programs even though they are less qualified and capable of succeeding.

This difference, and not some putative discrimination against boys, is the reason that girls' mean test scores in math and science are now, on average, approaching that of boys. Too many boys who over-value their abilities remain in difficult math and science courses longer than they should; they pull the boys' mean scores down. By contrast, the few girls whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to "trespass" into a male domain skew female data upwards.

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences, where girls' test scores actually outpace those of boys. This is not the result of "reverse discrimination," but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a "feminine" subject. Pioneering research in Australia and Britain found that boys are uninterested in English because of how it might challenge their (inauthentic) masculine pose. "Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic," commented one boy. "Most guys who like English are faggots." The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Catharine Stimpson recently put it sarcastically, "real men don't speak French."

Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love them. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules, but rather one expresses one's opinion about the topic and everyone's opinion is equally valued. "The answer can be a variety of things, you're never really wrong," observed one boy. "It's not like maths and science where there is one set answer to everything." Another boy noted:

I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts ... In English you have to write down how you feel and that's what I don't like.
Compare this to the comments of girls in the same study:

I feel motivated to study English because . . . your view isn’t necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer.

It is not the “feminized” school experience that prevents boys from succeeding in school, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. “The work you do here is girls’ work,” one boy commented to a researcher. “It’s not real work.”

The gender gap in achievement has almost everything to do with ideologies of gender—what people believe makes them masculine and feminine—and much less to do with biology. And these problems are exacerbated by race and class.

BAD BOYS?

It has been nearly three decades since Paul Willis first documented the ways that working-class British lads created their own masculinity codes in schools, and how their lack of achievement, their disinterest and disruptions were based on a class-based opposition to middle-class norms. And nearly two decades ago, John Ogbu first noticed that same oppositional culture among black students whose relentless criticism of higher achieving black students for “acting white” constrained black achievement.

Several important ethnographies of inner city schools have built on Ogbu’s and Willis’s original insights, among them Signithia Fordham’s Blacked Out and Ann Ferguson’s Bad Boys. Fordham’s study echoed Ogbu’s: when black students worked hard in school or achieve academic success, their peers accused them of “acting white.” But when black boys worked hard or achieved, they were also accused of “acting like girls.”

The origins of this oppositional subculture are hotly debated. As Sugrue and Raley point out (this volume), job loss in the central cities, declining real wages for blue-collar workers, cutbacks in affordable housing subsidies, and chronic underfunding of inner-city schools, often combined with self-fulfilling prophecies on the part of educators, have left many impoverished youth with no sense that that they have a shot at upward mobility. And when people do not expect to succeed at something, and others also expect them to fail, they may try to ward off defining themselves as failures by deciding that they wouldn’t want to succeed at it anyway.

Individual psychological remedies rarely get through to these youths. In fact, Pedro Noguera has found that adolescent black males are the only group—race or class or gender—for which there is no relationship whatever between self-esteem and academic achievement. For all other groups, raising self-esteem is a psychological way to raise achievement. But many young black males are so disaffected, so alienated from the system, that they are immune to its effects.

Self-fulfilling prophecies, chronic underfunding, and oppositional gendered racial subcultures also combine to affect behavior in schools. Young black males are expected to be behavioral problems—and given the material circumstances and cultural milieu in which they go to school, they often are. According to research at Indiana University, African-Americans are four times as likely to be suspended from school and about two-and-a-half times as likely to be expelled as white students. Hispanics are about twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students. And in the era of “zero tolerance,” a part of the No Child Left Behind approach, this releases a significant number of boys of color onto the streets—which almost serves as an incentive, since you get to skip
school. (Incidentally, the study also found absolutely no effect of “zero tolerance” on achievement or even school behavior.)

CONCLUSION

Whether one focuses on numbers, achievement or behavior, the current boy crisis is unevenly distributed among boys by race and class. Focusing our attention on the psychological anxieties of upper-middle-class white boys, who are and will continue to be college bound, will not address the structural crisis—a crisis of political and economic urgency—that simmers below the surface. That requires that we ask “which boys?” and that our remedies take into account both race and class. And those boys’ voices will be essential in our conversation.

For much of American history, poor men and men of color have endured a constant questioning of their manhood—indeed, that they are not “real men” has often been used as an “explanation” of their condition. They are either lazy, irresponsible, and dependent, on the one hand, or hypermasculine sexualized violent thugs on the other. Or both. As a result, proving manhood among poor men and minorities has often led to a sort of hyper-masculine over-compensation, as though to demonstrate masculinity one must exaggerate all the man-making qualities offered by the society.

Note that I wrote “often.” There is another side to the problematization of minority and working-class masculinities besides compensatory hypermasculinity. And that other side is constructive resistance. It invariably surprises my students, for example, when they learn that black husbands do more housework and childcare than white husbands, or that working-class men do more than middle-class men (although middle-class men are more ideologically egalitarian).

Questioning someone’s “manliness” has been, for decades, a way to start a fight. But for some courageous young men, questioning “manliness” might also offer an alternative path, a path away from racialized and class-based demonstrations of manhood, and toward a definition of masculinity that embraces connections with friends, intimacy with one’s family, academic success, and solidarity instead of competition with others.

NOTES

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