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Sociology 4615: Childhood and Youth

15 December 2021

Boys will be boys… or will they?

Being strong, tough, and sexual are characteristics attributed to men that follow strict gender norms imposed by society. Masculinity has long been depicted in the same way for years, and often it is assumed men are naturally predisposed to act this way. From a sociological standpoint, I challenge this notion and further explore boys' socialization towards cultural constructions of masculinity. Early childhood and teenage years are significant points for socialization due to interactions kids engage with parents, institutions, and particularly, media. From a young age, children are exposed to toy commercials, clothing ads, and product advertisements that sustain these ideas and teaches boys they must conceal their feelings and behave on certain ways permissible to men. In essence, I argue boys become socialized through media messages of gender roles, violence, and sex that help construct a toxic definition of masculinity.

Contrary to popular misconception that boys will be boys as they follow the natural path of manhood, gender and masculinity are social constructs that boys learn very early in life. Edward Morris uses the theory of hegemonic masculinity in defining masculinity, which "envisions masculinity as a system of power relations between men and women and between different men" (Morris, 22). Steve Craig (1992) furthers this notion and adds how American culture not only expects, but demands men to support patriarchy and to dominate and exploit women and other men (Craig, 3). However, C.J. Pascoe (2011) warns sociologist on making assumptions of masculinity relating only to men and advises looking "at masculinizing processes outside the male body… to identify practices, rituals, and discourses that constitute masculinity” (Pascoe, 23). Pascoe found “that masculinity is not a homogenous category that any boy possesses by virtue of being male. Rather, masculinity is a configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways and to different degrees” (Pascoe, 18). Consequently, boys are not born with pathological characteristics of masculinity. Rather, boys learn to “act like men” as a result of interactions with family, institutions, and media at different degrees and stages of life.

The media representation of men plays a significant role in shaping the perception of boys and young men in regards to masculinity. Steven Craig (1992) criticizes the way men and masculinity have frequently been treated as the "norm" and men's portrayals in the media have often been seen as unproblematic or even exemplary” (Craig, 1). This representation can promote violence, dominance, and sexualized subordination of women to men, limiting men’s interpretation of reality (Craig, 165), and those “who find it difficult or objectionable to fit into the patterns of traditional masculinity often find themselves castigated and alienated” (Craig, 3). Therefore, men are socially constrained “by the narrowly defined images of sanctioned male roles presented by the news media, which portray a particular type of both male perspective and male behavior that may not be resonant for a vast number of men” (Craig, 167). Men who do not subscribe to this narrow view of masculinity are marginalized and othered by peers and institutions.

Little Men

Socialization of masculinity begins at an early stage when boys are start to get exposed to heteronormative gender norms. Lawrence Kohlberg’s cognitive development approach suggest that children’s idea of gender stars as early as age two or three, when “children acquire gender identity, in which they recognize that they are male or female and are able to label others as such" (H.A. Priess, 2011). By age five to seven children gain gender constancy, or the realization of unchangeable gender. At this point they have internalized they have to actively learn more about their own gender in order to behave in a manner that aligns with their gender identity (H.A. Priess, 2011). At this early stage, boys learn to self-regulate, self-punish and even police their peers when their behavior does not conform to masculine expectations. This stage of childhood is significantly important because it is when learning is the most flexible and boys begin to internalize stereotypical notions of masculinity.

Changes in behavior as a result of socialization manifest in subtle ways and may go unnoticed since society has normalized masculine behavior. Judy Chu's findings show this as she navigates boy's relational capabilities during the ages of four and five. Chu explored how these capabilities change as boys grow up and learn to align their behaviors with group and cultural norms. At the beginning of their first semester of schooling, the boys exhibited four main capabilities. They were attentive and able to engage with other; they articulated their perceptions and experiences in a clear and coherent manner; they were authentic in reflecting their thoughts, feelings, and desires; and they were direct in expressing their meanings and intentions (Chu, 33). Regardless of their characterization as introverted or extroverted, the boys appreciated meaningful connections with one another as they embraced each other and felt comfortable showing signs of affection to their peers. They also received their parent's affection and reciprocated their hugs and kisses. These boys were surprisingly open and emotional. Their "relational repertoire extended beyond typical depictions of boys", challenging the idea that boys naturally act a certain way (Chu, 35). However, by the end of the semester these capabilities changed. The boys became inattentive as they focused on impressing people rather than connecting with them; they were inarticulate, as they withheld their personal opinions for the sake of their group membership; they became inauthentic by aligning their attitudes and behaviors with other's expectations; and they became indirect, as they learned to obfuscate their meanings and intentions to avoid trouble (Chu, 36). Chu findings showed how "boys' relational capabilities became less apparent as they became more focused on gaining other people's approval and acceptance and, to that end, learned to align their behaviors with group and cultural norms" (Chu, 36). As soon as boy start schooling at the early ages of four and five, they understand they must conceal their emotions and posture in order to maintain their membership as one of the boys and reassure their masculinity to others.

In learning these gender stereotypes, media is a key instrument to socialize boys on the do's and don'ts of masculine behavior. From media, boys learn to express masculinity through toy preferences, clothing styles, and group activities. As a result, they engage in aggressive play and posturing during group activities that aligns with stereotypical masculine behavior seen in media. Douglas Gentile et al (2007) found "children readily imitate aggressive behaviors they see others perform, either live or from televised images" (Gentile, 11). Craig Anderson et al (2015) research on media violence supports these findings and adds how "brief exposure to media can cause desensitization to real-world violence, increases in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and decreases in empathy and helping behavior" (Anderson). Additionally, the boys in Chu's study found comfort in playing with guns as opposed to dolls since this reinforced their masculinity and proved their membership as "one of the boys" with interest in boys' toys and boys' activities (Chu, 64). She also found of evidence of posturing, which happens when boys mimic things they have seen or heard, usually in the media (Chu, 37). In her study, some boys mirrored mannerism and expressions from media that could make them look tough and confident (Chu, 37). Media then becomes a point of reference of masculinity and what boyhood means for kids.

Different pieces of toy commercial present evidence of masculine stereotypes that play a role in socializing these boys. Nerf toys, for instance, sell a variety of foam-based weaponry. A 1993 commercial features a group of boys holding Nerf guns against a single boy with no guns that screams and runs a way (Nerf, 1993). “Face it, you are either in one end of a Nerf weapon, or the other. Time to choose!” At this point the boys with guns start to play and shoot one another looking cool. “You better think about getting yourself a [Nerf weapon], or a very good hiding place!” As they say this, the group spot the same weaponless kid hiding in a trashcan, they approach him and scream to him “Don’t you get it?! It’s Nerf or nothing”, and then they close the trashcan with the boy inside. This toy commercial displays cultural expectations of gender. Boys are shown as active, aggressive, and brave. In order to secure membership as one of the boys, they must to engage in gun play. This is one of the way boys reaffirm their masculinity. The commercial also shows how boys who do not engage in gun play get punished. This is evident at the end of the commercial, when the group of boys shut the trashcan lid and did not engage with the scared boy. Boys who scream, run, and hide are shamed, alienated and marginalized by the group for not following masculine expectations.

Toy commercials can also influence the mannerism boys develop as they learn how to posture in front of others in order to hide real emotions and engage in role-play. An example of this is presented in a compilation of Tonka Trucks commercials from the 80’s (Tonka Truck, 1981). “Here is a real tough machine in action!” says the commercial while showing a real truck and “here is Tonka’s Mighty Roughneck Pickup with Big Duke (driver man) on the wheel!”, while showing the truck toy and a boy playing with it. Another Tonka commercial shows a kid playing in with a Tonka Truck as he is approached by an adult man. “Are you driving the Mighty Tonka?” asks the man. “Yep!” responds the boy with confidence. Then they engage in a conversation about the Tonka Trunk, while the little boys responds very confident, almost like an adult. Then the adult man gets into a real life version of the Mighty Tonka while saying “Kid, my first truck was a Tonka”. Tonka Truck commercials send the message that boys play with big, tough and rough trucks because this is what men do in real life once they are adults. I noticed this since their commercials would start with real trucks along with adult men, and then switch to the toy version of the trucks. The commercials also show the coolness of boys engaging in conversations with adults and trying to impress them with their knowledge on trucks. From these representations of masculinity, boys might engage in role-play to act confident and tough. Just like Judy Chu boys adopted mannerisms and expressions that could make them appear tough and confident, other boys can engage in similar role play from watching similar commercials. In addition, only boys engage in this activity. Girls do not play with tucks, nor engage in adventurous and tough play. Therefore, boys internalize playing with trucks as a manly activity, one that they must engage with in order to show their confidence and toughness as one of the boys.

Boys reinforce masculinity in having a negative attitude toward girls and separating themselves from anything feminine that could undermine their masculinity. Patricia Adler’s research on the socialization to gender roles found that “although cross-gender friendships were common in the preschool years, play and games became mostly sex segregated in elementary school, and there was a general lack of cross-sex interaction in the classroom” (Adler, 175). Sigmund Freud work further “described early childhood as a pivotal moment in boys’ initiation into manhood—a moment when boys establish their masculine identities by separating from women and girls and aligning with men and boys” (Chu, 8). The Mean Team in Judy Chu’s research is the best characterization of the boys versus girl sentiment. The boys in her study created a club called the Mean Team with the sole purpose of bothering their enemies, the girls. Creating this club and acting against the girls establishes “a notion of masculinity that is defined both in opposition to and as the opposite of femininity” (Chu, 111). Membership to this club was important as it reaffirmed their identity as boys.

Media reinforces this boy versus girls dynamic, along with masculine stereotypes that are heavily embedded in society. Kids clothing commercials from GAP are a good example of this (GAP, 1999). In the 90’s GAP released several denim jean commercials. One of them features only boys doing martial arts and karate. The word “POW!” remains in the background, while the group of boys show off their skill with confidence and serious-looking faces. Another denim jeans commercial called *Boys* presents boys running and jumping as if doing martial arts. Boys look strong, agile, and active as they dance in a cool way and hang in the air. The rock music sets a cool tone and it can be heard in the background “Boys! How about the boys?”. The girl version of the denim jeans commercial was also made. It is called *Girls* and it advertises denim skirts. The commercial opens with girls laying on the floor and posing with their hands in the head or hip. The music in the background is more calm and bubbly and it can be heard in the background “Girls! How about the girls?”. The girls smile and act playful as they dance. GAP commercials send the message that boys and girls do things separate, starting by the fact they had to make two different ads to advertise similar clothe for each gender. Boys at this age are supposed to segregate and distinguish themselves from girls, and therefore no girls appear in the boys’ commercial or any of the commercials previously examined. The commercial also reinforces the gender differences between boys and girls in terms of interest and behavior. Boys are sporty, confident and tough, whereas girl care about their personal appearance, they like to dance and to smile, all things that do not align with masculine stereotypes. Boys looking serious are most likely engaging in posturing as it involves being confident and cool (Chu, 113). In addition, boys engage in karate and martial arts, more aggressive activities that characterizes masculine behavior and is opposite to notions of femininity.

In essence, references of masculinity observed in boys' toy commercials and clothing ads contribute to the socialization of masculinity from early stages of life.

Young Men

As boys grow to become teen and adolescents, they develop more actionable practices to reaffirm masculinity. For instance, young boys might engage in fights and acts of violence as ways to reinforce masculinity. Although my argument focuses on gender, intersectionality is always happening and it is important to note that the frequency of fights and violence varies according to social status and race (Morris, 150). When studying boys from two schools with different social status, Edward Morris (2012) found that "boys in particular perceived an exigent need to prove and defend their toughness by not backing down from a fight" (Morris, 153). Patricia Adler et al (1992) furthers this argument with her findings, noting how "physical displays, both within and outside the game structure, can also culminate in physical aggression and fights between boys, through which masculinity is tested and dominance is established" (Adler, 183). As punishment, boys who refuse to fight are considered "pussy" and are mocked by their peers. They are viewed as weak, scared and vulnerable, all adjectives that align with feminine ideals and contradict the ideas surrounding masculinity. Therefore, "willingness to fight composed not only a general survival strategy in these disadvantaged contexts but also a strategy of masculinity" (Morris, 153). In doing so, boys get to demonstrate toughness, strength, and bravery regardless of the outcome. Hence, young boys regain a sense of masculinity in engaging in fights and acts of violence.

Young boy victims of the criminal system find ways to regain their masculinity after constantly being tested. For instance, James Messerschmidt (2000) found that "boys who are violent criminal offenders may use violence as a means to reassert masculinity in response to circumstances they perceive as emasculating" (Morris, 12). Furthermore, Victor Rios (2011) found that young males who are discriminated and criminalized by the criminal justice system engage in criminal offenses to regain a sense on manhood (Rios, 128). They could engage in fights, confront the police by posing, threaten others who make them feel emasculated, and in few instances, try to get a weapon. These young males would be targeted and criminalized by officer who abused them by pulling their pants down, padding them, and emptying their pockets under the pretense they were looking for drugs and weapons (Rios, 126). Therefore, "crime is one of the avenues that men turn to in developing, demonstrating, and communicating their manhood. Indeed, criminal activity constitutes a gendered practice that can be used to communicate the parameters of manhood" (Rios, 126). Given that society offers limited, narrow, and often strict expectations of manhood, these young boys engage with the most attainable interpretation of masculinity they know.

Teens and adolescents are heavily exposed to socialization from media at this stage. On average, kids from ages 8-18 engage with media for about 7 hours a day (Anderson, 2015). Steven Kirsh (2012) affirms "media can influence youth on a wide range of phenomena, including buying habits, sexuality, gender and racial stereotyping, body image, and drug use" (Kirsh, 10). Moreover, Aimee Montiel explains how for many young males, ads and video-games sell a "vision of masculinity – adventurous, aggressive and violent—that provides men of all class a standard of "real manhood" against which to judge themselves" (Montiel, 32). As a result, these young boys further internalize expressions of violence and toughness as cool reflections of manhood.

Video games targeted to young boys often engage in the type of violence and male stereotypes previously discussed. Grand Theft Auto (GTA), a popular IGN video game, is an example that encompasses all of this (IGN, 2011). GTA is a series of series of action-adventure games that involves characters trying to rise from the criminal underworld. For instance, their GTA series 5 trailer features Michael, a white "family man" that suffers a mid-life crisis and is seeking the trills of the criminal life. He is seen robbing, drinking, killing, and physically abusing his wife, while justifying this with the fact he is rich and miserable with his regular life. Franklin, the second character, is an amateur gang member that is seen killing, robbing, and running from the police. "But I thought we were trying to get out of this bullshit!" says Franklin to a family member. "You are sounding more and more like a CIA everyday" replies the family member. Franklin, while trying to get out of this gangster life, is told "you ain't got respect" and he replies by saying "I got respect for reality". The few women that appear in the trailer are prostitutes. Both trailers present representation of masculine stereotypes. The GTA trailer sends the messages that violence and crime are exciting, cool, and an effective way to regain manhood when going through a mid-life crisis. Furthermore, the way violence is portrayed is as if men could not get away from it, as it represents an essential component of manhood. As Franklin tries to get out of this life, he is punished by being mocked. He is told "you got no respect", which is a strong statement as it signifies a sign of weakness among men; "physical risk and bravery" are the things that secure "local hegemonic masculinity" (Morris, 165). Hence, Franklin might feel emasculated and peer pressured into violence to reaffirm his manhood. In addition, female representation on GTA are both abuse and sexualized, putting men in power and in control of the opposite sex.

As boys enter puberty, their relationship with girls transitions and becomes complex. In a study, Patricia Adler (1992) found that towards the end of elementary schools "both boys and girls began to renegotiate the social definition of inter-gender interactions because of pubertal changes and the emulation of older children's behavior" (Adler, 175). As kids became older, it became more socially accepted for boys to engage in intergender interactions with female peers (Adler, 175). In this stage, teens and adolescent explore their sexuality, and this process too is linked to social expectations of masculinity. C.J. Pascoe explores compulsive heterosexuality, which involves sexualized practices, discourses, and interactions (Pascoe, 69). Compulsive heterosexuality is not about desire for sexual pleasure per se, or about desire to be "one of the guys"; rather, it is "an excitement felt as sexuality in a male supremacist culture which eroticizes male dominance and female submission" (Pascoe, 69). The boys' locker room sex talks are rituals that represent public display of sexuality, and reinforces and secures masculinity. The sex talk and social gathering celebrate this communality and it is expected from every boy. Otherwise, the peers will act as the "sexual police" and punish any boy who does not subscribe to this behavior.

In order to protect masculinity, girls represent a significant aspect of heterosexual rituals. The girl's body is the means through which male students demonstrate their dominance and mastery to prove their masculinity, which C.J. Pascoe calls the "male supremacist culture" (Pascoe, 69). Dominance relates to the power male students feel entitled to because heteronormative and cultural norms have allowed privilege and a sense of superiority. Therefore, showcasing their power over girls through "female submission" helps reaffirm boys' masculinity (Pascoe, 69). In addition, dominance is not imposed only in a sexual context. Man can engage in violent acts against women to create this sense of power. Furthermore, a detailed description of what a guy can do to a girl and mastery of the sex talk within the male group represents fluent knowledge of sex, another defining aspect of masculinity. Since boys are presumably thinking about sex, it is a given that they should be performing sex as part of their "natural male urge". For this reason, boys hyperbolize and dramatize their sexual conquests or fantasies to publicly showcase and reinforce their masculinity.

When it comes to media, commercials and advertisements objectify women and portray men as hypersexual, pushing this narrative into teens and adolescent boys. Axe body spray and their well-known commercials are an example of this. Their 2005 campaign presents Ben Affleck with a clicker counting how many women approach him, insinuating they want to sexually be with him after using the Axe body spray. At the end, he show off his number, 103 women, to a random guy. The random guy, unimpressed, shows his number, 2372 women, to which Ben Affleck looks impress and disappointed with his achievement. The campaign sends the messages on how men are expected to actively pursue and hunt women as their sexual conquest. The number of women men can score is also an indicator of manhood, one that is shown and told to other boys reaffirm their membership as "one of the boys". In addition, women in the commercial are sexualized and objectify as the mean through which men can display their dominance and power over them.

Overall, the depiction of masculinity portrayed in video games and product advertisements furthers socializes teens by teaching them violent and sexualized expectations of manhood.

Conclusion

Media plays a significant role in socializing children and youth. This research provided evidence sustaining how toy commercials, clothing ads, product advertisements, and video game can shape boys' definition of manhood. Toxic masculinity represents modern threat to our kids, which is why it is important to intervene early boys' life when learning is more flexible. Just recently, adult men started to question toxic ideas surrounding masculinity and are aiming to unlearn years of internalized gender notion through collective efforts. The responsibility to push back on toxic masculinity lies on adult men, but also on families, institutions, and media in order to dismantles years biological myths and make a change.

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