M. Gilman

SOCI 6900

Dr. Pearce

OP-ED #2

**Questioning the “Absent Father” Theory in Relation to the Social Construction of Hyper-masculinity in Boys OP-ED**

The film “The Mask You Live In” (Newsom and Congdon 2015) explores the overarching theme of the social construction hyper-masculinity in boys and men in US society. Within the main theme, several “subthemes” emerge as overlapping or intersecting parts that contribute to the socialization of hyper-masculine behaviors of boys and men. Some of the subthemes introduce include teaching boys bulling behaviors, over-sensationalism of athletics, devaluing stereotypical feminine behaviors (such as open expressions of empathy and sadness), unintended access to extreme violence and pornography through the internet, and the language used as a tool to construct boys’ masculinity (i.e. “don’t be a pussy,” “boys don’t cry,” or “faggot”). One subtheme that is highlighted in the film is absent fathers and absent male role models.

Certainly fathers play an important role in raising sons (ahem, and daughters) and few would argue that point, but why do we tend to point fingers at single mothers when boys develop hyper-aggressive behaviors? If, by today’s social standards, women are viewed as “more capable” in raising children because it “is their job,” (yes, this view still exists in spite of the progress in equal rights) why is it their fault when boys develop behavioral problems? Did they suddenly, somehow, become incapable parents? In that same line of reasoning, when boys do not develop hypersexual, violent behaviors, credit is usually given to fathers. What about boys raised in “traditional” nuclear families where boys exhibit hyper-masculine behaviors? Some of the men in “The Mask…” (Newsom and Congdon 2015) attribute their hyper-masculinity to learning from their fathers how to be “real men.”

Some define father absenteeism as a “pathology,” that is, they infer situations where there is no father present are a social disease (Balcom 1998:283). This denies the fact that many kinds of families exist outside of the accepted nuclear family where boys develop healthy attitudes and behaviors towards others. What about same-sex parent families? Ah, this is likely a touchy subject for some, but it probably sparks fears of boys becoming “too feminine.” But aren’t we talking about boys becoming overly aggressive? “The Mask…” includes men who say they were socialized as boys by other men to not publicly display “feminine” behaviors such as crying and empathy. What we have here is a situation where we are teaching boys if they cry, show empathy towards others, or develop openly intimate relationships with other boys (they can “conquer” all the women they want, however) , they might “turn gay” (it seems being gay makes males “lesser men”).

Others suggest hyper-masculinity develops because of some kind of interruption during the pre-oedipal (1 – 3 years) and oedipal (3 – 5 years) stages of development (Botèro 2012; Wineburgh 2000). This is a psychoanalytic perspective derived from Freud’s (you know who this guy was, right?) theories of psychoanalysis, which is not supported by scientific data. Freud was a 19th century philosopher whose background was in the natural sciences and is considered the father of psychoanalysis. While his work was an important step towards psychological explanations for human behaviors, his ideas also pathologized (there’s that word again!) women’s sexuality. He also had some interesting ideas about how boys and girls develop in relation to their same-sex parents (that would be the pre-oedipal and oedipal stages proposed by Freud). The implication here is that father absenteeism during the early years of a boy’s development does not allow him to develop a healthy relationship with his mother. A boy is always trying to break away from his mother, but desires her as his mate. Only the presence of a father can help a boy to resolve this inherent conflict (yeah, Freud came up with this) (Wineburgh 2000).

I am not, nor would I ever deny the importance of fathers in raising children. Children need to be raised in positive environments no matter who their parent figure is. Boys and girls tend to identify with same-sex role models and this is not an issue. We also know women are more likely to be poor especially if they are raising children alone. Some point to this as a reason boys are more likely to become criminals (Wineburgh 2000). While there is certainly some kind of relationship, the scope of the problem goes beyond whether a family is poor and/or headed by a woman. The heart of the issue concerning socializing boys to be hyper-masculine is not caused by father absenteeism, but lies within what socio-cultural norms are tolerated, accepted, and practiced. We are all players and have a responsibility to analyze and be critical our own beliefs, and be willing to change (ugh, change is so hard) those that are harmful to others and ourselves.

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