

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The American Culture and Boys

Not too long ago, many in the educational community ignored the evidence—but no longer: Boys are falling behind—catastrophically in many categories. That boys (and eventually men) are not keeping up with girls (and women) is not a positive culturally development. A number of years ago, the historian, Ann Douglas, wrote the important book, *The Feminization of American Culture*, which documented the developments that have “feminized” our culture. Although that was not her intent, Douglas provided the historical foundation for what we are now witnessing—the long term effects of this trend. Male leadership and male involvement in culture are both diminishing. Consider two important developments, both reflections of the cultural turmoil resulting from the confusion over sexual roles:

- First is a summary of recent research by columnist David Brooks on the American educational system and its impact on boys. Because of the nature of boys, who love to be rough and to tumble around, many are now diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and put on medication. Boys must fit the culture—scrapping, jumping off jungle gyms, smacking one another—does not fit the culture. Brooks writes: “The education system has become culturally cohesive, rewarding and encouraging a certain sort of person: one who is nurturing, collaborative, disciplined, neat, studious, industrious, and ambitious. People who don’t fit this cultural ideal respond by disengaging and rebelling.” In many cases, it is the boys who do not fit! The evidence is mounting and is actually quite compelling. Because boys do not fit this feminized culture, they first withdraw and then they rebel. Boys are falling behind and it is not their fault but the fault of the system. For example, male reading scores are far below female test scores. Psychologist Michael Thompson has shown that 11th grade boys are now reading at an 8th grade level. Boys used to have an advantage in math and science, but that gap is nearly gone. Two million fewer men graduated from college over the past decade than women. The performance gap in graduate school is even higher. Brooks compellingly writes that “Schools have to engage people as they are. That requires leaders who insist on more cultural diversity in school: not just teachers who celebrate cooperation; not just teachers who honor environmental virtues, but teachers who honor military virtues; not just curriculums that teach how to share, but curriculums that teach how to win or lose; not just programs that work like friendship circles, but programs that work like boot camps. The basic problem is that schools praise diversity but have become culturally homogeneous. The educational world has become a distinct subculture, with a distinct ethos and attracting a distinct sort of employee. Students who don’t fit the ethos are left out.” For the most part, that is the boys, and they are paying a dear price that affects their entire life. We are now seeing the results of this phenomenal cultural shift in American education. God created boys and girls differently. As in so many things, as we try to homogenize the American classroom (i.e., feminize it), we are ignoring the

innate differences that God has created. We do so to our cultural peril—and the boys are paying the price.

- Second, one of my favorite authors is Kay M. Hymowitz. Her written works have helped me in developing one of the major themes of *Issues in Perspective*—an analysis of cultural trends, especially the growing confusion of young men in American culture. She uses the term “pre-adult” to define a new cultural development or even a new stage in human development between the teen years and adulthood. [Other sociologists, such as Christian Smith, have called this stage, emerging adulthood.] Here are some of Hymowitz’s observations about pre-adulthood, based on her new book, *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys*.
 1. Among pre-adults, women are the first sex. They graduate from college in greater numbers (among Americans ages 25-34) and 34% of women now have a bachelor’s degree compared with 27% of men. They also have higher GPAs.
 2. Pre-adults do not know what is to come next. For them, marriage and parenthood come in many forms, or can be skipped altogether. In 1970, just 16% of Americans age 25 to 29 had never been married; today an astonishing 55% have never been married in this age group. In America, the mean age for the first marriage is now 30.
 3. “Pre-adulthood has also confounded the primordial search for a mate. It has delayed a stable sense of identity, dramatically expanded the pool of possible spouses, mystified courtship routines and helped to throw into doubt the very meaning of marriage.”
 4. Meanwhile, men go on struggling with an acceptable adult identity. Women are moving ahead in an advanced economy where husbands and fathers are now optional. The qualities of men that are needed for them to fulfill their role—fortitude, stoicism, courage and fidelity—are obsolete, even a little embarrassing. This healthy role has now been substituted with the likes of Hollywood characters such as Jim Carrey, Will Farrell, Adam Sandler and Owen Wilson: Frat boys who have never grown up and are enthralled with sex, NASCAR and beer.
 5. The number of single men is therefore growing in our culture. They are “more troubled and less successful than men who deliberately choose to become husbands and fathers. So we can be disgusted if some of them continue to live in rooms decorated with ‘Star Wars’ posters and crushed beer cans and to treat women like disposable estrogen toys, but we should not be surprised.”

God has given humanity clear teaching on the respective roles of a man and a woman. When that teaching is ignored, dysfunction and catastrophe follow—a perfect description of much of America culture in 2012.

See David Brooks in the New York Times (6 July 2012) and Hymowitz’s essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (19-20 February 2011).