
Foreword

The “boy” question burst on the scene a couple of years ago. Suddenly, it seemed, America had “discovered” boys.

A flurry of best-selling titles urged us to “rescue” and “protect” boys. Psychologists like William Pollack, Dan Kindlon, and Michael Thompson described how boys are failing at school, acting out behaviorally, feeling depressed and suicidal, or shutting down emotionally. Most of the better books by these therapists point their finger at what Pollack labeled the *boy code*—the cultural myths of masculinity to which boys try so desperately and so poignantly to adhere, despite their small frames and trembling hearts. They advised anguished parents about boys’ fragility, their hidden despondence, and depression, and issued stern warnings about the dire consequences if we don’t watch our collective cultural step. Other works by political pundits such as Christina Hoff Sommers and by psychologists like Michael Gurian, sought to rescue boys from feminists, who they claimed were problematizing normal, natural, rambunctious boyhood.

Boys had been “discovered” all right—both as a psychological problem-in-waiting, and as a political football.

Lost in much of the ensuing public conversation were the boys themselves—the richness of their experiences, the texture of their lives. This was to be expected of those who were simply using boys as a foil with which to critique feminism. In fact, the pundits appeared relatively uninterested in boys’ welfare; they were simply the latest weapon against feminists.

Yet some of the richness of boys’ experiences and lives seemed lost also in the best-sellers by psychologists who had spent their careers listening to boys’ voices. The fact that all of their books portrayed white boys on their covers was more than a marketing ploy by their publishers; their books generalized from predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class white

boys—who were observed at single-sex prep schools, or were patients of the therapists/authors—to *all* boys. This was an empirical and analytic leap that obscured more than it revealed.

What was missing, then, were all the “other” boys—African American boys, Latino boys, Asian American boys, working-class boys, boys from countries other than the United States. Also missing were gay boys, bisexual boys, boys who didn’t yet know their sexual orientation. (Only Pollack included a chapter on homophobia, and it was largely oriented to elicit compassion for homosexual boys.)

But these boys also contend with the boy code—and they do so in different ways, with different social, cultural, and economic resources, as these boys also find their way toward manhood. And it is one of the great strengths of Niobe Way and Judy Chu’s remarkable collection *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*, that the authors have paid attention to the voices of those other boys. Now we read, for example, of how working-class British lads experience their masculinity; how African American boys construct different definitions of masculinity as they wrestle with racialized definitions of competent manhood; how lower-class Chinese boys experience their relational worlds; or how gay boys come to understand their sexualities. There are even studies that compare boyhoods—internationally, as in the chapter on boys’ peer relationships in China and Canada, and across ethnic groups within the United States, as in Way’s own work on same-sex friendships among Asian American, African American, and Latino boys.

Through the able (and apparently hands-on) editing by Way and Chu, this anthology minimizes the incoherence and inconsistency that mar many an edited volume: disparate voices, methodologies, empirical objects of scrutiny. The fact that the chapters in this edited volume both stand on their own and cohere into a unitary volume is a testament to judicious editing as well as a well-assembled cast of capable characters.

Having read these empirically rich and theoretically informed chapters, we can no longer pretend that the boy code is the same monolithic and monochromatic entity foisted upon these identical unsuspecting creatures called boys. Rather, we observe different boys developing friendships, negotiating romance, love, and sexuality. Nor can we pretend that boys’ lives are the same in every social and structural arena in which they find themselves. There are not only social differences among boys, but differences that are produced by the different types of institutions in which the boys find themselves.

Ignoring the voices of those “other” boys is more than a marketing decision, more than a moment of analytic myopia, more than a problem of simply generalizing from clinical populations in the first place. It is a political problem. For it will inevitably be from these boys’ voices—the voices of the others, those marginalized by class, race, sexuality—that we will begin to hear the voices of resilience, of resistance to the boy code, of an understanding of how the boy code works and doesn’t work.

After all, it is axiomatic that the marginalized always understand the dynamics of marginalization better than those who are not marginalized. Who better to explore the depths of the boy code than those who have it used against them, who are constantly measured against it and found wanting?

If we want to rescue boys—including those white middle-class boys who grace the covers of the best-sellers—we will need to listen to the voices of the marginalized. As they negotiate their way through boyhood toward different definitions of masculinity, they open doors for the rest of us: doors of resilience and resistance to those very dominant norms.

Thankfully, this superb collection begins that conversation.

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