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ABSTRACT

The literature on the male gender role portrays real men as lacking weakness, need, doubt, or any of the "female" values such as sympathy, concern, or empathy. It is contended that Western society develops, reinforces, and maintains gender roles by the emotion shame; many males are motivated in part by an effort to avoid or escape shameful feelings. Shame is basically the felt variation between one's real self and one's idealized self--the feeling of not measuring up. Shame arises in early childhood, before the development of certain language skills, so shame may not be readily accessible to verbally organized adult cognitions. Ironically, certain avoidance behaviors maintain many masculine stereotypes: (1) strong and brave; (2) competitive; (3) emotionally unexpressive; (4) problem solver; (5) isolated; (6) sexual, not sensual; (7) dynamic, decisive, and aggressive; (8) controlling; (9) tough and autonomous. These attributes of "real men" are desirable to some degree but when they are positioned as absolutes and are maintained by shaming and avoidance of shame then these behaviors become dysfunctional and destructive. The author argues for a removal of the limits on behavior and feeling and the re-incorporation of the so called non-male parts back into men's psyches. (RJM)

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For the past 15 years, I've lived with three growing boys. The oldest one is now 19. Over the years I've listened to them kid and defame each other---sometimes good-naturedly and sometimes not. A compendium of their favorite put down words includes: wimp, nerd, coward, wussy, sped, spaz, chicken, loser, and other words even less complementary. Apparently they have learned that if one wants to humiliate, and arouse the defenses of another male, one uses words that imply he is weak, unathletic, feminized, or that he doesn't have what it takes to win, or get the job done.

The research literature on the male gender role is clear; in order to be a "real man" one cannot display weakness, need, doubt, emotionality, fear, or any of the "female" values such as sympathy, concern, empathy, sensuality, softness, gracefulness, or intuitiveness. One must instead project an image of self-confidence, independence, power, control, dominance, rationality, toughness, dynamism, aggressiveness, and a strong desire to perform, compete, win, achieve, and produce concrete results (Farrell, 1975; Goldberg, 1976; Pleck and Sawyer, 1974; Miedzian, 1991) Television, movies, books and even children's school

readers reflect, support and reinforce this stereotype. (Miedzian, 1991).

A recent version of what's expected and acceptable for men is elaborated in the June 1987 issue of Esquire magazine, subtitled "The Passions of Men: The State of the Heart." A perusal suggests that their idea of male passions involves mostly things that money can buy: Porches, Movado watches, clothes, and drink. Other headlined passions include "The Passion to Prevail," "The Passion for Excitement," "The Passion to Dominate". Arousal, sports, women, and sex complete the list. The majority of the magazine is devoted to articles and pictures about these things. Only three of the articles deal even in part with relationship: one the story of a man and his relationship with Porsche automobiles; another about a man and his relationship with his computer, ("The 'Z' is not a personal computer, it is an intimate one"); and a subplot of an article on songwriter Paul Simon deals with his relationship with Art Garfunkel. I am personally tired of this stereotype.

In an article entitled "What Guys Hate" we read that they hate things like "patience," "beaux arts," "driving at 55 mph," "women's tears," "losing," "going unloved," "equivocation," "going home alone," and being told they missed, 'some kind of relationship...consideration." Additionally we read that "Guys would rather suck dry ice, than stick to saying something nice. Guys grow up exchanging whacks and slurs."

The article's "Museum of Modern Male Art" has 15 items

including a spark plug, a Zippo lighter, billiard balls, a crescent wrench, and a long-necked brown beer bottle. All items are rock hard except for a set of fishing flies and a deck of playing cards. The expectation for the male could hardly be more clearly stated.

Fortunately human beings are enormously flexible. Male and female gender identity roles are mostly learned sets of behaviors, ideas, and emotions. It appears the American male is taught to reject things labeled "female" including all aspects of himself that fall into that category. One wonders why and how this rejection of the "feminine" part of the male person comes about and how it has become such an entrenched part of the male psyche.

Freud's developmental theory posits that the little boy, as he is growing up, becomes afraid that the all powerful competitor for mother's love--Dad--will castrate him (literally or metaphorically) if he competes too hard. Out of this fear of annihilation, and realizing that he is literally outmanned, he chooses to switch rather than fight; he can't beat Dad, so he joins him and disconnects from the mother and switches his identification to the father to thereafter take on a male gender identity. The 180 degree shift involves wrenching disconnection and the repression of the feminine part of himself (Freud, 1905; Jung, 1933; Chodorow, 1978; Wong, 1982). The repression is a start, the rejection of things labeled "feminine" follows.

Freud's outline is a wonderful metaphor reflecting to a

great degree the reality of male development in American society. The boy is born and raised primarily by a woman on whom he is totally dependent for many years. According to Chodorow (1978) his mother sees him as different and opposite to herself. One must suppose that she behaves differently toward him than to her female children. Research studies in fact point out that male babies are touched less, are breast-fed less, and talked to less by their mothers than their female counterparts. They are also handled more roughly almost from birth.

For the first few years of his life, the boy is pretty much allowed to act and interact with others as he likes. Soon however, he learns that if he is going to get the love, attention, support, and approval he needs to survive; if he is to avoid subtle shunning, criticism, derision, and outright rejection, there are some ways he must not behave. If he continues to behave in ways that are considered too "feminine", upon reaching age 5 or 6, the boy risks disapproval, ridicule or even rejection and outright abandonment by peers and perhaps by parents.

Obviously, it is not so much the attraction of the male code of behavior that boys move toward in their gender socialization process; rather it may be the fear of association with behaviors labeled female that they run from. Freud's castration fear may be seen as a metaphor for being ridiculed, shamed, ostracized, or perhaps even abandoned socially. Abandonment fear is a shame-based fear; the fear of being abandoned if exposed as being

defective, or in some way found wanting.

The rejection and devaluation of female attributes both in himself and as a way of being in general results in a fear of femininity that lies at the core of male gender role socialization and its maintenance. According to O'Neil (1981, 1982) it results in six major male conflictual problems: homophobia; restricted emotionality; control power and competition needs; restricted sexual and affectionate behavior; obsession with achievement and success; and health care problems.

In the seminal book "the Liberated Man" (1975), Warren Farrel refers to the development of male socialization as "escape from femininity" (p32) into the "confines" of masculinity. In other words, for the developing boy, the male role is the alternative to possible ridicule and rejection and is thus chosen to escape or avoid these and life threatening abandonment. In psychological terms it is learned primarily through an avoidance of punishment paradigm. This explains why it is reportedly difficult for men to change negative behaviors associated with their learned male gender role even when it is in their best interests to do so.

The fear of femininity is genuine and easily aroused in the male. Once I went to a basketball game with my sons; the half-time entertainment featured a demonstration of Jazzercise, ballet-like movements by 20 females and one male, all dressed in leotards. The demonstration was accompanied by modern music. On the way home in the car, the major subject of conversation was

the "non-man" who was out there in the leotard dancing with all of those women. 'The boys' rush to dissociate themselves from such threatening behavior was a stampede. The fear of being identified with this fellow male was obvious. They were embarrassed for him and of him. What he had done somehow reflected on them and perhaps the whole male gender.

It is my contention in the rest of this paper that the gender role in western society is developed, reinforced, and maintained by the emotion shame, and much of male behavior is motivated in part by an effort to avoid or escape shame feelings.

What is shame? At its basis is the felt variation between one's real self and ones idealized self. It is the feeling of not measuring up; that there is something wrong with you and if it is exposed to others you will probably be ridiculed, rejected and perhaps abandoned altogether. It ranges from chagrin to mortification. (c.f. Lewis, 1971; Nichols, 1991; Kaufman, 1980, 1990)

Shame is rooted in early childhood. Eric Ericson (1968) a seminal theorizer on development, place the development of the propensity toward shame at two years of age. Thus it occurs before the development of identity itself and before the development of guilt. It occurs at a time before the ability to think and to store memories using language. This implies that the feelings are primordial and may not be stored in a verbally identifiable manner and not readily accessible to verbally organized adult cognitions; thus one can often feel shame and not

understand it and not know where it is coming from.

The shame process is inherent in the initial "escape from femininity during early development. It should be noted however, that this feminine part of the self that is repressed during the switch to male identification, remains part of the self, and as with all repressed material, it becomes hostile and adversarial (Jung, 1933; Johnson, 1974). Energy is used to keep it repressed and yet it has a tendency to "leak" out when the guard is down or when the environmental stress level becomes high enough. These leaks can cause further feelings of exposure of weakness/defectiveness and thus shameful.

The male gender role expectation emphasizes independence, striving, toughness, competition, and winning. It is my contention that if this male role expectation is held as an ideal self, the only outcome can be feelings of inadequacy and resultant fear of exposure and shame; no one can live up to the expectation all of the time. Paradoxically the stereotype is maintained by avoidance behavior---maintenance of a facade that is designed to avoid shame. Let's look at some aspects:

(1) "Real men" are strong and brave. They face danger impassively, and defend their ladies fair and their country's honor to the death if necessary. Yet, every Vietnam veteran I've interviewed has told me in the confidence of the office, that he was terrified during much of his experience in Vietnam. The shame associated with such secret fear (lest it be labeled cowardliness) is immense in some of the men I've worked with;

(2) "Real men" are competitive; they compete and of course win. If this is taken seriously it assigns half of us to the category of "loser". "The agony of defeat" brings out shameful feelings of incompetence, inadequacy, defectiveness, and weakness;

(3) "Real men" are not emotionally expressive--they are "strong and silent". The expression of too much emotion overtly is female and is seen as a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Yet emotions are inherent to the species and constitute a large part of what makes us human. To deny emotions, to repress them and become divorced from them is to become divorced from and unaware of part of one's self.

Often men seen in therapy are "emotional illiterates"--they cannot describe what they are feeling beyond saying that they are feeling "down" or "bad", or "depressed." As Goldberg (1976) points out, emotions represent a bind for most Western males. If a man controls his emotions he becomes guarded, hidden, and emotionally unknown to others and even to himself. If he lets them "hangout" he may be branded as immature, unstable, or even "effeminate". Goldberg, 1976, p83).

Hodson (1984) comments further on the difficulty that men have in expressing personal emotions. He asserts that:

"By the age of nine, a lot of little boys are already unable to relate to their fellows except through an activity. Personal speech has become alien to them. Beginning a sentence with the words: 'I can see that

you feel X about Y' which is the standard test of a good interpersonal communicator, would stick in their throats like a fishbone." (Hodson, 1984, p47)

Almost everyone has strong fears and feelings of need. Most of us, deep inside, would at times love to let down our guards, and sometimes it would feel wonderful to be taken care of. But for a man to acknowledge these feelings to himself is to risk self admonishment. To acknowledge them to another is to risk being seen as weak and emotionally unreliable.

(4) "Real men" are trained to evaluate, give advice, and solve problems. They are not trained to listen, reflect, and express caring and consoling. They talk with friends mostly about things or other actions outside of themselves. "Real male" talk is about achievement, sports, politics, or business. As a result it often is only superficially satisfying as it lacks a personal ingredient and the depth that only referent to personal feelings can give it. Hodson, (1984) calls this "masculine un-talk" and gives an all too familiar example:

" 'How's it going Frank?'

'Fine, fine'

'Business?'

'Never better...'

'And the operation?'

'Piece of cake...'

A few weeks later one is astonished to hear that when Frank died from post-operative complications he was technically

insolvent" (Hodson, 1984, p50). The comment "He was such a nice quiet fellow...kept to himself a lot, never bothered anyone" has been reported so frequently after sudden suicides or murders, it has become a cliché;

(5) "Real men" are loners and don't need others. To be a friend, often requires listening and learning about another's personal concerns, and helping without judging or offering advice or solutions; this talent is rare among "real men". To be a friend also requires allowing the other person to know your true self, with all its feelings of fear and inadequacy. I often hear clients describe themselves as loners. Paradoxically they also report in confidentiality that they are lonely but see loneliness as a given. Often when asked if they like being a loner, they become conflicted. The male gender role expectation teaches them that it is good to be autonomous and not connected to others. Their experience tells them that it doesn't feel good to be alone and cut off from others all the time. The only conclusion must be that something is wrong with them.

Gilligan (1984) suggests, basing her comments on the great literature written by men about love, that men's fantasies connect closeness with death. That may overstate the case a bit but O'Neil (1981, 1982) points out that men are afraid of closeness and Osherson, (1992) emphasizes that intimacy is often shame producing for men in part because they are ashamed of failing at "manly tasks" and because they feel unmanly or defective when they get in touch with powerful but unmanly

feelings include the yearnings for connection that most men feel.

Closeness requires letting another know your innermost fears, joys, and hates. Exposure of these, on the other hand is at the least shameful because of the inadequacy it represents and perhaps even dangerous because it can lead to other more frightening things such as rejection, abandonment and death;

(6) "Real men" are sexual, not sensual. When a boy is young he is encouraged and rewarded for doing the "natural" thing, playing with other boys. If he plays with girls he is labeled a sissy. When he becomes an adolescent, he is admired and held in esteem by his peers for sexual conquests. As Goldberg says (1976) he is oriented to "chase, challenge, and conquer." Boys are taught by peers and the society in general to pursue sex and score points as though it were another game to be won.

The enjoyment of the delights of the senses, on the other hand, graceful movement, lovely sound, gentle touch, are seen as female traits. Sensual males are hair dressers, interior designers and other "limp wristed" types. The sensual part of the male may remain stunted out of fear of arousing the shame of the stigma of effeminacy;

(7) "Real men" are dynamic and decisive and aggressive leaders. The sports training ground rewards only those most aggressive and skillful at imposing their will on others and finding and exploiting weaknesses. Great presidents are seen as good if they make quick decisive decisions rather than taking

time and reflecting. (Perhaps a presidential comparison in this regard could be made between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. In the short run Carter was less popular partly because of his seeming indecisiveness and unwillingness to use power tactics. In the long run it seems that history may decide in his favor.)

Authoritarianism and demandingness are alienating and isolating. The short run power gain may be offset by long run unsatisfied intimacy and closeness needs which could not be expressed for fear of exposing inadequacies weaknesses;

(8) "Real men" control. As evidence of their superiority, they control themselves and control others---people, wives, children---as well as material things, cars, property, money. The other day I interviewed a young boy of 14 who had round scars, and burn marks on his forearms. He told me those were from "chicken tests" in which two boys would put their arms together and a lit cigarette was placed on them. The first one to pull his arm away was the "chicken". Apparently the winner was the one who could control the most pain. He was obviously proud of his "chicken test" scars.

Lack of control implies weakness, failure, and an exposure of lack of superiority. Lack of control or control by a woman is even more odious. The most shameful thing you can say about a "real man" is that he is hen-pecked or tied to apron strings. Both of these imply control and dependence on a woman.

(9) "Real men" are tough and autonomous and don't need help from other people to do what they want to do. The John Wayne

image of the strong, silent, non-dependent man is held out as an appropriate goal. Most men I know, however, and most of the men I have seen in my practice, desire and need human contact. They also have at some level a desire to be loved and cared for and to love and care for others. It is this aching for connection left over from the original wound of disconnection that often leads men to become dependent on women or a woman for the emotional expression and love and caring they cannot give themselves and can't get or fear to get from other men because of the potential for shameful stigma.

The attributes of "real men" listed above are, at some degree, desirable. It's only when they are held up as absolutes not to be deviated from, when they are presented as an ego ideal, and they are taught and maintained by shaming and avoidance of shame that they become dysfunctional and destructive.

I have attempted to point out the role of shame in the teaching and in the maintenance of this ego ideal for the Western male. As with the rigid role itself, the use of shame to teach and maintain the role is crippling, destructive of mental health, extremely limiting of the range of behavior allowed, and limits self fulfillment.

Erickson (1968) points out that shame need not be a powerful agent in human development; its encroachment into the human psyche can be minimal. To use it to maintain a social convention that constricts and limits male behavior is indefensible. As a psychologist who works primarily with men, I often see the

destruction wrought on males by emotional illiteracy, social isolation, fantasized superiority and the rigid repression and rejection of the "non-masculine" parts of their selves.

It is not now the further rejection of these "male" values that I propose, but the removal of the limits on behavior and feeling, and the re-incorporation of the so called non-male parts back into men's psyches. The desire is for the expansion of masculinity, to re-unify, and to allow for the wholeness that promotes a more mentally healthful manner of living, working and loving.

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