

## Masculinity and Man's Problems in Presentations of Contemporary Young People

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**Abstract:** *This study is conducted from the standpoint of the modern interdisciplinary direction in social sciences - boyhood studies – that initiates the necessity of studying the ideas of modern youth about masculinity and specific male and youth problems in modern society which substantially contributes to the social-psycho phenomena. The interviews were conducted within the parameters defined by the Tomsk State University and on the basis of guideline stated by the university. The importance of this study reflects towards representations of views from the respondents as a consequence of a fundamental transformation of understanding the nature of gender differences in modern philosophy and social theory. While the experience in conducting this study reveals the socio-psycho phenomena of the respondents in the deeper meaning, about their feeling towards gender transformation, which offered rightfulness in their social lives to maintain the psychological state of mind to live within a human society. The results suggest that systematic study of boyish problems in the long term is necessary.*

**Keywords:** Boyhood studies; masculinity; boys; men's problems; teenage aggression; paternity

### Introduction

Masculinity and femininity are objects of uninterrupted interest on the part of social and human sciences throughout their history, including a significant period of development of philosophical reflection from ancient philosophy to the philosophy of postmodernity, as well as social roles and identities closely associated with these categories. Specificity of traditional conceptualization of these categories can be indicated with the help of two fundamental provisions: (1) *Masculinity and femininity* are considered as extremely significant phenomena, which represents certain ontologically defined constants in the cultural and social space (classical philosophical tradition, Freudianism, biological evolutionism, structural functionalism, sociobiology and others); (2) *Divine plan*, metaphysical order or nature prescribes the subordinate (dependent) position of a woman in society on the basis of her secondary ontological status (this thesis contributes to increased attention to the

specificity of the female situation in society and to the boundaries by which her *natural* purpose is determined).

However, in the XX and XXI centuries these installations had undergone significant transformations. First of all, it is subject to the essential definiteness of the male and female principles, those are not conceptualized as *natural* data and are revealed in the context of complex social, historical, cultural and discursive configurations (Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler et cetera).

Overcoming the tendency to view masculinity and femininity in the scientific discourse in the context of a certain biological or metaphysical predetermination for the first time made it possible to reveal the fundamental role of the category *masculinity* in the formation of the traditional conception of the naturalness of a woman's subordinate position. At the same time, *detection of the male* becomes one of the most significant consequences of overcoming the essential conditionality of gender differences (Khitruk (2017, 18). Thus, from the second half of the 20th century, issues related with the study of the specifics of the masculine situation in society, destructive tendencies in masculine behavior, norms and stereotypes of masculinity are gradually entering into the category of gender problems. Modern men's studies include active learning of the difficult situation associated with the mobility of male roles, the changes in the institution of the family, the influence of gender stereotypes on the emotional development and social well-being of men.

#### *Boyhood studies as an important direction in the modern social sciences*

A special place in men's studies is gradually being devoted to the study of specific boyish problems in modern society. Within the framework of special *boyhood studies*, there are problems of violence and emotional isolation in a boyish environment, destructive behavioral practices, as well as the repressive influence of the *Boy Code* that is a set of myths and rules of boyish culture, having the archaic origins.

The Boyhood studies fellowships recognize that main reason of boyish problems is the orientation toward outdated ideas that masculinity is seen as the essential opposite of femininity. It is associated with a painful distancing from so-called female characteristics, most of which have a universal character (emotional openness, caring for children etc.).

In the context of the discovery of rigid regulatory mechanisms of traditional culture aimed to the formation of specific practices of boyish behavior, boyhood studies reveal another significant circumstance. Traditional gender scheme, promoting the androcentric social structure, deprives a number of social groups, including women, sexual, gender minorities, etc. of the right to vote (the right to pronounce their specific experience). Throughout the history of Western European civilization one of such group deprived of the opportunity to independently represent their own characteristics and needs, is boys. Within the framework of multilevel mechanism that regulate the upbringing of boys and men's initiations in most societies scientifically known (Badinter, 1997; Gilmore, 1997; Kon, 2009), we still are not

known much about how the boys themselves understand and perceive their masculinity. How they cope with the consequences of the various rituals of "initiation into men" taken from their demonstrative options in the archaic culture to the more veiled, but not less dramatic, modern practices.

Why boys and men are responsible for 95% of cases of violence in the US (Kimmel, 2004)? Why are 88% of juvenile delinquents in Russia are boys (Obrazhiev, 2015)? Why, despite the widespread belief that boys rarely fall into depressed states, they commit suicide 4-6 times more often than girls (Pollack, 1999, p. xxiv)? These and many other similar questions become an occasion not only for the formulation of theoretical hypotheses within the framework of boyhood studies concerning the influence of traditional ideas of masculinity on the methods of education and training of boys, but also for a serious scientific study of the boys' views on masculinity.

One of the earliest and most significant project directed to inclusion in the scientific discourse the boys' ideas about their unique experience of boyhood is the project of the professor at Harvard University William Pollack, entitled *Listening to Boys' Voices*. In his famous work, dedicated to this project, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, Pollack (1999, xxi) writes:

"Over the last several years, I and other professionals who work with boys have become increasingly aware that even boys who seem OK on the surface are suffering silently inside - from confusion, a sense of isolation and despair. They feel detached from their own selves, and often feel alienated from parents, siblings, and peers. Many boys feel a loneliness that may last throughout boyhood and continue into adult life".

The alarming situation described by Dr. Pollack in his research certainly deserves close attention from the scientific community. Although the project "Listening to Boys' Voices" was implemented in the US, there is every reason to believe that the rest of humanity and, not least, the population of the Russian Federation, also needs active and serious attention of the scientific community to the specific problems of boys. The situation with juvenile delinquency, suicidal, risky and dependent (alcohol, drug, and gambling) behavior of boys in Russia is so alarming that the researchers' inattention to the gender aspect of the "boyish question" is distressing.

### **Description of methodological study**

This paper devoted to views of the young men of the Tomsk town and the Tomsk region on masculinity, inspired by the experience of Dr. Pollack. The research includes two round tables which were held in the context of two different conferences, however, on the basis of a unified methodology. The former round table *Boyhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon* was held within the framework of the international conference of the same name, which took

place on November 17-18, 2016 on the basis of the Philosophical Faculty of the National Research Tomsk State University.

The second round table entitled *Becoming Masculinity: Taking Care of Yourself* in the Context of Modern Youth Practices was held in the framework of the international scientific conference *Self-Care as an Educational Practice for a Modern Classical University*, which was also held on November 24-25, 2017 on The Faculty of Philosophy of the National Research Tomsk State University. Schoolchildren of Tomsk and neighboring Seversk town, as well as students from the Seversk Cadet Corps and Tomsk Agrarian College, aged 14 to 18, took part in the round tables. The function of the moderator was performed by Candidate of Philosophy, Associate Professor of the Sociology Department of the National Research Tomsk State University Roman Bykov.

The youths were invited to discuss on the following themes;

*Making up a boy (young man) by a boy (young man) apart from physiology,  
The advantages of boys compared to girls,  
The difficulties in the family, school, communication with their peers the boys are dealing with?  
Problem that touched you only because you are male,  
The famous people considered as the standard of masculinity,  
A man in your environment who can be considered as the standard of masculinity? If so, describe it, and  
The three qualities of a real man you think?*

*Box 1: Themes towards discussion*

*A successful man is .....successful man look like?;  
Succeeded in life without a family, realization of - family or career?;  
Importance for becoming a father in the future and representing yourself in this role?*

*The three qualities of a good father you think.  
Father actively participating in the upbringing of children, be friends with their children (or its main task - to adequately provide the family financially)*

*Possibilities for a man to openly express his emotions (crying, hugging loved ones, talking about his feelings)*

*Box 2: Phrases to discuss*

The themes were formulated in accordance with certain headings: understanding gender differences, understanding the male role in society, the male role in the family, the level of emotional openness of the man, the connection between the notion of masculinity and manifestations of aggression. Participants were invited to discuss these issues in free form, preferably not limited to one-word answers.

## Results

Since this study was conducted only in two small groups (16 and 10 young men), it is not necessary to speak about the representativeness of results in the sociological terms. However, this study was interpreted by the organizers as extremely meaningful in terms of preparing for a systematic study of boys' views about masculinity and specific *male problems* in the territory of the Russian Federation and allowed some important conclusions to be drawn.

At first, the study confirms the hypothesis of William Pollack about the so-called *mask of masculinity*, which is a set of established myths and stereotyped images that convey ideas about the *natural* opposite of the sexes and the *natural* superiority of men (boys) over women (girls) that is initially shown by boys in their answers. It can be said that at the first approximation, boys confirm by means of stereotypical answers their belonging to *normal* masculinity and only in the context of this ritual demonstration the conversation on the topic of masculinity in general becomes possible. According to Pollack, (1999, xxii), the mask becomes so much an integral attribute of masculinity that it gradually *grows* into the face of real boys and men. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the researcher is *to get behind the mask of masculinity, the mask that most boys and men wear to hide their true inner feelings*. The following answers of the young men can be referred to this demonstration of *coolness*, strength and confidence, to questions about the gender difference and the advantages of the male sex: *guys are better than girls, a boy is strong, and a girl is weak, men are smarter, better drive a car, better orient themselves in space*.

Secondly, it is possible to fix the uncertainty in the notions of the gender difference, which is hidden behind the initial *bravado*. Demonstrating their belonging to the *best* and *strong* sex, the young men turn to the analysis of examples from their own lives, from the experience of the family and images broadcast in the media, which do not confirm the diametrical opposite of the sexes and the undisputed advantage of men: *Girls can also stand up for themselves, Some men are good at cooking, and some women are excellent at shooting, some women have a male character*. Trying to cope with the uncertainty that has arisen, different groups of young men offer different versions of interpretations. The first of these versions reduced to the assertion that there are no fundamental differences between the sexes and, accordingly, the principal advantages of the male sex doesn't exist: *all can do everything, psychologically, there is no difference between girls and boys*. The second version however assumes that the fixed uncertainty is a consequence of a malfunction in the correct distribution of social roles and, in the end, must be overcome.

*A pumped up woman is bad, a man should be a man, and a woman should be a woman, a man must be strong, the woman should show caress and tenderness.* Thus, on the one hand, young people realize the significant difference between the real situation in the ratio of male and female social roles in society from the stereotyped model, but on the other hand, the young men express a desire for clarity and certainty in this matter. In the end, one of the participants in the discussion makes the following conclusion: "It is difficult to determine the roles of men and women in modern society.

Roles are blurred! I do not understand the roles of men and women!" The same ambivalence is observed with respect to the description of the advantages of the male sex. On the one hand, the young men assert that they possess indisputable advantages in the mind and in physical strength. On the other hand, the analysis of the real state of affairs forces them to recognize the social positions of the male as vulnerable: *socially men lose, women take children after divorce, women think they are weaker, so they can't drive, who concedes places in the bus? - men, although everyone talks about equality, men have no advantages. I see that we have less rights, we are losing!*

Thirdly, the conducted research confirms the hypothesis that in society ideas about masculinity and violence (physical force, aggression) are closely intertwined. As American sociologist Michael Kimmel notes, violence has been part of the meaning of manhood, part of the way men have traditionally tested, demonstrated and proved their manhood. Without another cultural mechanism by which young boys can come to think of themselves as men, they've eagerly embraced violence as a way to become men. It would be a major undertaking to enumerate all the health consequences that result from the equation of violence and masculinity (Kimmel, 2004).

The form itself, in which this tendency had emerged in the context of the investigation under discussion, is interesting. One of the young men during the discussion shared the results of his own small survey of young men aged 16-17 years from the Tomsk Agrarian College, conducted to find out the causes and manifestations of aggressive behavior among young men. On the question of how often young men face aggression among adolescents, the majority of responses (86%) were *infrequent*. However, the respondent interprets the results as follows:

"In my opinion, the majority answered "rarely", because the guys practically do not notice aggressive behavior among their peers and consider everything that is happening as a norm of conduct".

The next question about how often the young men themselves display aggression towards others, 86% of respondents answered "rarely", 14% "never". "It is the same situation," the study suggests that, teens do not notice how they display aggressive behavior towards others. It is also considered as the norm. Thus, in fact, contrary to the collected data, the young man assesses the level of aggression in the teenage environment as very high.

Aggression is so implicitly appeared among young men that it is a kind of background in building relationships with others, and in evaluating one's own behavior, a background that is not even realized by the respondents. The results suggest that "If parents inspire the child with the right way of life and help to set a goal from childhood, then the child will go with such a mood in life. And if they do not notice him and do not help him, then the child will conceal an insult and will throw out aggression on the surrounding people". In other words, a high level of aggression in the teenage environment is put in direct dependence on the parents' inattention, their alienated attitude to the needs of their sons.

Therefore, family support, active complicity of close people in the life of a young man can reduce the degree of power tension in a youthful team and can prevent a host of accompanying problems. This conclusion is all the more important in comparison with the widespread opinion that boys and young men *by nature* are more independent than girls, they need less support from close people, that *early* separation from the family is *natural* for them.

Fourthly, this study clearly demonstrates the great importance for the young men the father's role matter in the family (from analyzing the experience of their parents and their relationship with the father to projecting into the future and plans for building their own family). The tendency of *father's loss* in modern society and in terms of the physical absence of fathers in families and in the terms of a lack of close emotional contact with fathers in complete families has been the subject of close attention from scientific community for several decades.

However, it must also be cleared that the younger generation of future fathers also aware of this problem and try, as far as it is possible to understand its causes and prevent its recurrence in its adult life. For example, one of the participants in the study discussed above stressed that since the family has great importance in the life of the child, society should pay special attention to the upbringing of sons in single-parent families.

“For a son the loss or absence of his father is associated with serious difficulties, since the mother, being alone, is anxious about the growing masculinity of her son. The mother’s seeking to give her son "masculine" upbringing through rigor and discipline deprives him of the mother's warmth and support, being so necessary for him”.

Surviving loneliness and confusion, trying to cope with difficulties, the young man begins with big responsibility refers to his future role as a father.

“I think that an incomplete family, although it faces a number of objective difficulties, but nevertheless has sufficient potential for full-fledged upbringing of children. The parent, by virtue of the circumstances, turned out to be the head of an incomplete family, it is necessary to be aware of the psychological peculiarities of the situation created and not to allow that they would lead to negative consequences”.

The experience of many well-off single-parent families suggests that this is possible.

“I also believe that people who were raised in single-parent families are the same members of society as, for example, individuals who were raised in complete families”.

These people also learn, work, have fun, fall in love, etc. Once they will get their families and raise their children, but, have already known the sign of incomplete family, they will protect their family from disintegration tooth and nail. Another participant of the study, analyzing his life experience, comes to similar conclusions;

“I have a lot of friends whose parents do not live together (from 10 friends - 8). And I am brought up in an incomplete family too”.

“Guys from complete families are also my friends and they also play with me. But the problem is that we must not just accept this situation, we must somehow prevent it ... The growing child will understand that, despite the fact that his family is inferior, he himself grew up a good full-fledged person who can continue his life and become a normal parent, that can create a normal full-fledged family, where he will not allow the child to be experienced the same loneliness due to a lack of one of the parents”.

In other words, the experience of growing up in an incomplete family is not only passively experienced by young men, but in many of them it produces the emergence of an active life position and a deeply responsible attitude to the role of the father in the family. How much this position will be stable upon the collision with the real and complex world of adulthood, unfortunately, is unknown, but its very existence must be taken into account and understood in the process of analyzing the problem of missing paternity in modern society.

## Conclusions

Summing up, it should be noted that the investigation described above contributes to the awareness of the specific situation in which modern boys grow up, receive upbringing and education: the need for a clear understanding of what it means to be a man coexists in their consciousness with the uncertainty of the social role of men in society; loneliness and misunderstanding in the family is closely associated with aggressive behavior in communicating with peers; the experience of growing up in an incomplete family contributes to the formation of a conscious and responsible attitude to the role of the father.

The attempts to express that the result of this research will contribute to the emergence in the scientific community towards building an interest in studying the boys and young men representations about masculinity and specific male and youth problems in modern society, and also to spread the real *voices* of Russian boys that needs to be heard.



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