

GUEST ESSAY

'It's Become Increasingly Hard for Them to Feel Good About Themselves'

Sept. 22, 2021

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Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C., on politics, demographics and inequality.

Is there a whole class of men who no longer fit into the social order?

A decade ago, Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan, economists at the University of Chicago and the National University of Singapore, concluded in their paper "The Trouble With Boys: Social Influences and the Gender Gap in Disruptive Behavior":

Family structure is an important correlate of boys' behavioral deficit. Boys that are raised outside of a traditional family (with two biological parents present) fare especially poorly. For example, the gender gap in externalizing problems when the children are in fifth grade is nearly twice as large for children raised by single mothers compared to children raised in traditional families. By eighth grade, the gender gap in school suspension is close to 25 percentage points among children raised by single mothers, while only 10 percentage points among children in intact families. Boys raised by teenage mothers also appear to be much more likely to act out.

Bertrand and Pan focus on the crucial role of noncognitive skills, on how "factors such as study habits, industriousness and perseverance matter as much as cognitive skills in explaining occupational achievement." Noncognitive skills, they write, "are not fixed but are in fact quite malleable, and can be shaped by early intervention programs."

The effects on boys of being raised in a single-parent household are particularly acute in the development of noncognitive skills, according to Bertrand and Pan:

Most striking are our findings regarding gender differences in the noncognitive returns to parental inputs. Across all family structures, we observe that boys' likelihood to act out is sharply reduced when faced with larger and better parental inputs. For girls, the relationship between parental inputs and behavioral outcomes appear to be much weaker. As these parental inputs are typically higher and of better quality in intact families, this largely contributes to why boys with single mothers are so much more disruptive and eventually face school suspension.

There are a number of research projects that illuminate the ongoing controversy on the subject of men and their role in contemporary America.

First, an excerpt from a 2016 paper by David Autor, an economist at M.I.T., and four colleagues:

In the United States in 2016, the female high school graduation rate exceeded the male rate by five percentage points, and the female college graduation rate exceeded the male rate by seven percentage points. What explains these gender gaps in educational attainment? Recent evidence indicates that boys and girls are differently affected by the quantity and quality of inputs received in childhood.

Second, part of a 2015 paper by Francesca Gino, Caroline Ashley Wilmuth and Alison Wood Brooks, who were all at the Harvard Business School at the time of writing:

We find that, compared to men, women have a higher number of life goals, place less importance on power-related goals, associate more negative outcomes (e.g., time constraints and trade-offs) with high-power positions, perceive power as less desirable, and are less likely to take advantage of opportunities for professional advancement.

Third, a passage from an article by Colleen Flaherty, a reporter at Inside Higher Ed:

The study suggests that men are overrepresented in elite Ph.D. programs, especially in those fields heavy on math skills, making for segregation by discipline and prestige.

And fourth, a quote from a 2013 paper, “Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education,” by Autor and Melanie Wasserman, an economist at U.C.L.A.:

Although a significant minority of males continues to reach the highest echelons of achievement in education and labor markets, the median male is moving in the opposite direction. Over the last three decades, the labor market trajectory of males in the U.S. has turned downward along four dimensions: skills acquisition; employment rates; occupational stature; and real wage levels.

I sent the four references above to Arlie Hochschild, a professor of sociology at Berkeley and the author of “Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right,” for her views. She emailed back:

Since the 1970s offshoring and automation have hit blue collar men especially hard. Oil, coal — automating, manufacturing, offshoring, and truck-driving about to go down. Non-B.A. males are in an especially vulnerable place. I saw it in Louisiana, and again where I’m interviewing in Appalachia. It’s become increasingly hard for them to feel good about themselves.

In a 2018 essay in *The New York Review of Books*, “Male Trouble,” Hochschild described the predicament of less well educated men:

Compared to women, a shrinking proportion of men are earning B.A.s, even though more jobs than ever require a college degree, including many entry-level positions that used to require only a high school diploma. Among men between twenty-five and thirty-four, 30 percent now have a B.A. or more, while 38 percent of women in that age range do. The cost of this disadvantage has only grown with time: of the new jobs created between the end of the recession and 2016, 73 percent went to candidates with a B.A. or more. A shrinking proportion of men are even counted as part of the labor force; between 1970 and 2010, the percentage of adult men in a job or looking for work dropped from 80 to 70 while that of adult women rose from 43 to 58. Most of the men slipping out lack B.A.s.

While many of the men Hochschild writes about see a future of diminished, if not disappearing, prospects, men in elite professions continue to dominate the ranks of chief executives, top politicians and the highest-paying professorships.

Frances E. Jensen, chair of the department of neurology at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine, taking a different tack, argues that boys’ brains mature more slowly than girls’ brains do, a difference that is particularly striking in the adolescent years. In a 2017 interview with the School Superintendents Association, Jensen stressed the crucial role the still maturing brain plays in the lives of teenagers:

Teens go through a period of increased emotional fluctuation and are like a Ferrari with weak brakes. The emotional center of the brain, the limbic system, which controls emotions, is fully connected, but the frontal lobe that sharpens critical thinking isn’t well-connected. That means the part of the brain that makes them pause and say to themselves, “Bad idea. Don’t post that on Facebook because it might hurt my chances of getting a job in the future” or “Don’t jump in the lake, there may be a rock,” isn’t mature.

The brain also becomes more efficient, Jensen said,

during a process called myelination. This is when a fatty substance called myelin grows slowly and wraps itself around miles of brain cells to better insulate them. Insulation makes the brain more efficient at sending and receiving signals. Myelination is a slow process that finishes in the mid-20s. Our brains have thousands of miles of networks and to insulate all of them with myelin takes over two and a half decades to finish.

Using M.R.I. images, Jensen continued,

you can actually see the brain is laying down a layer of myelin over time when looked at year over year. You can measure those layers and see a dynamic process where the insulation is sharpening the rapidity of our signaling from one part of our brain to another.

And then she added a crucial point:

In adolescence, on average girls are more developed by about two to three years in terms of the peak of their synapses and in their connectivity processes.

A major 2015 study, “The Emergence of Sex Differences in Personality Traits in Early Adolescence: A Cross-Sectional, Cross-Cultural Study,” on which Marleen De Bolle, then of Ghent University, was the lead author — with contributions from 48 additional scholars — described some of the consequences of differing rates of maturity and development:

Our findings demonstrate that adolescent girls consistently score higher than boys on personality traits that are found to facilitate academic achievement, at least within the current school climate. Stated differently, the current school environment or climate might be in general more attuned to feminine-typed personalities, which make it — in general — easier for girls to achieve better grades at school.

What are some of the other factors contributing to the differing academic performance of boys and girls?

In a 2019 paper, “Family Disadvantage and the Gender Gap in Behavioral and Educational Outcomes,” Autor and Wasserman, along with David Figlio, Krzysztof Karbownik and Jeffrey Roth, conclude that:

Family disadvantage disproportionately negatively affects the behavioral and academic outcomes of school-age boys relative to girls. The differential effect of family disadvantage on the outcomes of boys relative to girls is already evident by the time of kindergarten entry, is further manifested in behavioral and educational gaps in elementary and middle school performance, and crystallizes into sharp differences in high school graduations by age 18.

“Parental investments in boys versus girls,” they write,

differ systematically according to family disadvantage. For example, parents in low-SES households, which are disproportionately female-headed, may spend relatively more time mentoring and interacting with daughters than sons.

In an email, Autor wrote that the downward trajectory of boys and men from single-parent homes should not mask the continuation of a very different trend at elite levels:

Even as one laments boys falling behind, one should not for a moment think that all is well with women’s status in higher education or the professions. In terms of major fields, fast-track careers, leadership positions, and prestigious branches of high-paid specialties, women are still not close to parity.

The consequences are depressing:

The stagnation of male educational attainment bodes ill for the well-being of recent cohorts of U.S. males, particularly minorities and those from low-income households. Recent cohorts of males are likely to face diminished employment and earnings opportunities and other attendant maladies, including poorer health, higher probability of incarceration, and generally lower life satisfaction.

I am quoting at greater length than usual from Autor and Wasserman because they have done the most thorough job of bringing meticulously compiled and compelling evidence to bear on male disadvantage. They warn that “a vicious cycle” may be emerging, “with the poor economic prospects of less-educated males creating differentially large disadvantages for their sons, thus potentially reinforcing the development of the gender gap in the next generation.”

With the onset of

lower marriage rates of less-educated males, their children face comparatively low odds of living in economically secure households with two parents present. Unsurprisingly, children born into such households also face poorer educational and earnings prospects over the long term. Even more concerning is that male children born into low-income, single-parent-headed households — which in the vast majority of cases are female-headed households — appear to fare particularly poorly on numerous social and educational outcomes.

There are other forces driving the vicious cycle, Autor and Wasserman write:

A growing body of evidence supports the hypothesis that the erosion of labor market opportunities for low-skill workers in general — and non-college males in particular — has catalyzed a fall in employment and earnings among less-educated males and a decline in the marriage rates of less-educated males and females. These developments in turn diminish family stability, reduce household financial resources, and subtract from the stock of parental time and attention that should play a critical role in fomenting the educational achievement and economic advancement of the next generation.

Why are boys falling farther behind than their sisters? Autor and Wasserman reply:

The absence of stable fathers from children’s lives has particularly significant adverse consequences for boys’ psychosocial development and educational achievement.

More specifically:

On a wide variety of self-control, acting-out, and disciplinary measures (including eighth-grade suspension), the gap between boys and girls is substantially greater for children reared in single-mother-headed households than in households with two biological parents.

Another reflection of this pattern, according to Autor and Wasserman, “is the growing divergence in high school girls’ and boys’ expectations of obtaining a four-year college degree.” Among cohorts of high school seniors interviewed between 1976 and 2006, “a gap opens between boys’ and girls’ expectations for B.A. attainment starting in the early 1980s and cumulates thereafter.” They add that “growing up in a single-parent home appears to significantly decrease the probability of college attendance for boys, yet has no similar effect for girls.”

It is not just fatherlessness, the two economists write. A key factor is that single parents — disproportionately female — are “more limited in the amount of time they can devote to child care activities.” If, then, “boys are more responsive to parental inputs (or the absence thereof) than are girls, it is possible that the gender gradient in behavioral and academic development could be magnified in single-parent households.” They cite a study demonstrating that single mothers “report feeling more emotionally distant from their sons and engage in disciplinary action such as spanking more frequently with their sons. These disparities in parenting are largely absent from dual-parent homes.”

Adam Enders, a professor of political science at the University of Louisville, sees the troubles of young white men in particular as an outcome of their partisan resentments.

“My take is that lower-class white males likely have lower trust in institutions of higher education over time. This bears out in the aggregate,” he wrote, citing a Pew Research Survey.

Part of the reason for this — at least among some conservative males — is the perception that colleges are tools for leftist indoctrination — a perception increasingly fueled by the right, including top Republican and conservative leaders. Indeed, there is a hefty split between Democrats and Republicans in their orientations toward the education system. Republicans became more negative than positive about education since around 2016.

Shelly Lundberg, a professor of economics at the University of California-Santa Barbara, does not dispute the data showing large gender differences in educational outcomes, but she has a different take on the underlying causes, focusing on “the concept of fragile or precarious masculinity, in which manhood (unlike womanhood) is seen as a social state that requires continual proof and validation.”

In a 2020 article, “Educational Gender Gaps,” Lundberg argues:

Social and cultural forces linked to gender identity are important drivers of educational goals and performance. A peer-driven search for masculine identity drives some boys toward risk-taking and noncompliance with school demands that hampers school achievement, relative to girls. Aspirations are linked to social identities — what you want and expect depends on who you think you are — and profound differences in the norms defining masculinity and femininity create a gender gap in educational trajectories.

Lundberg’s position that different norms define masculinity and femininity, Enders’s political take and the argument of Autor and other scholars that boys suffer more than girls in dysfunctional homes are most likely more complementary than conflicting.

The bigger question is how the country should deal with the legions of left-behind men, often angry at the cataclysmic social changes, including family breakdown, that have obliterated much that was familiar. In 2020, white men voted for Donald Trump 61 percent to 38 percent. Many of these men have now become the frontline troops in a reactionary political movement that has launched an assault on democracy. What’s next?

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