



Towards an Integrated Perspective on Gender, Masculinity, and Manhood

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For decades our understanding of gender, masculinity, and manhood has arguably been bedevilled by uninformative pseudo-academic gender ideology. Detached from biological reality, and crediting culture with almost autonomous causation, this ideology of gender feminist social constructionism has exhibited a dogged self-preserving reflex of disconfirmation, whenever faced with knowledge challenging its dogmatic assertions. Its unashamed devaluation of thought, through resort to propagandist mantras of global male aspersion and political correctness, underscores not only its fundamentalist nature – disqualifying it from any serious consideration as a basis for understanding gender and social relations, but also the urgent need for a perspective, unfettered by ideology, that reflects current interdisciplinary knowledge, and is actually useful.

In major Western cultures, partisan gender ideology has been permitted to monopolise and censor nearly all public discussion of gender and social relations. Despite

the availability of a broad basis of interdisciplinary knowledge to inform an understanding of gender and its relationship to biology and culture, such knowledge remains largely neglected and underutilized - arguable evidence of just how successfully gender ideology has managed to colonise not only popular culture but even (and perhaps most consequentially) our institutions of higher learning. The mistaken acquiescence of academe, which assumed that gender ideologues might, if permitted, just muddle about relatively harmlessly at the *soft* end of the academic spectrum, was a serious lapse of judgement and responsibility, one which underestimated the metastatic opportunism it afforded an ideology determined to inculcate and proliferate its own partisan and spurious epistemology.



With such scope for ideological renditions of gender and social reality to flourish in some of our most respected institutions, should we be surprised by the position we now find ourselves in, one of wondering how we can commence a gender discourse of integrity and that serves the best interests of men and women?

How can we begin to put things right? Past efforts at remediation have proven to be a perilous reef on which many academic careers and personal reputations have been wrecked. It is a brave thing to resist a bullying gender commentariat, whose stock in trade is not facts or reason, but facile political correctness, the manipulation of cultural taboos, moral sanctimony, sullyng of others' character and reputation, the cultivation of moral panic, and the use of propagandist, literary, and institutional violence.

Past experience suggests there is little point in confronting this fundamentalism head on, since that usually only serves to energise it. It is most self-assured and convinced of its rightness when it feels besieged, and it has an aggressive defensive reflex of disconfirmation in relation to any idea that challenges its overweening sense of rightness. By its very nature this fundamentalism contains the constituents of its own demise; nevertheless, for now, it remains entrenched and pervasive.

Perhaps our most effective recourse is to resolutely refuse to engage with it polemically, and to "step around" it, ignore it, and forge ahead independently of it, focusing on evidence, reinstating our prerogative and responsibility to express a reasonable opinion, and striving for a fresh, sensible, equitable, and practicable perspective. The latter imperative is the endeavour of this article, which contends that, simply by integrating some available basic knowledge of a range of germane disciplines, it is possible to realise a sensible provisional perspective of gender, one not only grounded in the reality of men's and women's lived experience, but one that is also actually explanatory and useful. What we have in the present dominant paradigm of gender is arguably neither of these things.

GENDER: BIOLOGY OR CULTURE?

For decades we have been told that gender (the aptitudes, abilities and behaviours that are characteristically associated with men as distinct from women) is the product of social conditioning or learning, that men and women are the same by nature, and that *biological sex* and *gender* are different things or separate domains. Gender, we are told, is socially constructed, the product of self-serving patriarchal cultural narratives



(Nadeau, R., 1996).

The evidence still widely cited in support of this dichotomy of biological sex and gender is that famous single study published in 1935 by anthropologist Margaret Mead, titled *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. In order to counter some of the rigid thinking about gender roles at that time, she exaggerated the degree to which one of the societies she studied (the Tchambuli) associated what we would call the masculine with women and the feminine with men (Goldberg, S., 1991; Wood, P., 2003; Freeman, D., 1983; Roscoe, P., 2003).

Gender ideologues seized upon this as the “smoking gun,” incontrovertible evidence of a society that had succeeded in reversing gender roles, proving that gender is not only interchangeable, but is wholly socially or culturally constructed (Goldberg, S., 1991; Roscoe, P., 2003).

Despite Mead subsequently and publicly stating over and over that her research had never found or proven any such thing, the “windfall” of “proof” her research report provided was just too useful to let the small matter of the author’s subsequent repeated public repudiations become an impediment. As Goldberg (1991) observed, numerous university introductory sociology textbooks have quoted and continue to quote Mead’s study as evidence of the sex/gender dichotomy and of gender social constructionism.

Assertion of this “evidence” and the averred dichotomy is still predominant in academic gender discourse and gender literature, a sobering reminder of the generativity of the fundamentalist meme — one with an ability to bypass people’s critical capacities and evoke subjective reflexes, one with an inbuilt capacity to repudiate and repel even the most erudite disconfirmations of its dogma.

Fortunately for the future of better gender relations, this fundamentalism is being increasingly eclipsed by compelling evidence from a whole range of academic disciplines, including biology, anthropology, neuroscience, endocrinology, psychiatry, psychology, and others.

Available multidisciplinary knowledge now obliges us to postulate that differences in brain structure and hormone physiology in males and females “result in behavioural tendencies that on average correlate with statistically significant differences in behaviour on the group level” (Nadeau, R., 1996, p. 60). Such knowledge, since the brave release many years ago of *Brain Sex* (1992), remains unremitting in its growing robustness.

Never has this implied that by nature all men act one way and all women act another way, or that all men are alike, or that all women are alike, in their preferences, abilities and aptitudes. Rather, it means that men are *more likely* to act one way and women are *more likely* to act another, and that men are *more likely* to exhibit characteristically male preferences, aptitudes and abilities, and women, those that are characteristically female. The tendencies are fundamentally due to biological differentiation.

Available knowledge suggests that biology is the *primary* (though not exclusive) determinant that drives and orientates human individual and social behaviour in general. Sex-specific abilities and behaviours are grounded in male and female biology, and social systems exhibit conformity with the limits imposed by this reality (Goldberg, S., 1991; Pinker, S., 2002; Baron-Cohen, S., 2003; Sax, L., 2006; Nadeau, R., 1996; Gold-

berg, S., 1973).

The reason why men and women tend to be drawn to and occupy largely different institutional and role domains in society, and why they experience “sexually differentiated socialization” is not to cause or produce male or female qualities or gender. Biology sees to that. Instead, “societies conform their institutions and socialisation to the sexual directions set by physiological (biological) differentiation” (Ashfield, J., 2003, p. 118; see also Goldberg, S., 1973).

This should not be taken to mean that biology can ever be an excuse for inequitable discrimination. Nor can it be justifiably used to generally or artificially limit men’s and women’s options and choices, but “it does explain universally observable sexual differences in behaviour and institutions, where social constructionist explanations cannot” (Goldberg, S., 1973, p. 146. See also: Goldberg, S., 1994).

Arguably, then, biology is the fundamental originator of *gender*, with social conditioning reinforcing, accentuating, limiting, or refining gender characteristics to fit in with and meet the demands of particular cultural and environmental contexts (Ashfield, J., 2003).

The antithesis of the current gender paradigm, this perspective promises to see an end to the needless “industry” of gender partisanship and antagonism, paving the way for endeavours of human service and social enhancement that are equitable and grounded in reality.

MASCULINITY AND MASCULINITIES

Much that is written about masculinity posits or reinforces a deficit view of the male gender. Most of what is written represents a social constructionist endeavour to make sense of gender and behaviour, in the absence of the necessary knowledge to do so (Murphy, P., 2004; Kimmel, M., Hearn, J. & Connell, R., 2005; Smith, J., 2007).

A prime example is the discussion of masculinity or male gender detached from biological reality, as social constructionists are obliged by their ideology to do. Ironically, to avoid many inherent contradictions such a dichotomy necessitates a correspondingly selective and reductionist reading of social reality. Not doing up the “top button” correctly results in an inevitable succession of required intellectual compromises. Even constructionist discussion about *masculinities*, whilst seeking to avoid the obvious problem of viewing all men as a homogenous group, simply adds further confusion to a phenomenon that can be much more satisfactorily explained if reconnected to biological reality and referenced to relevant anthropology (Gilmore, D., 1990).

As already proposed, biology is the fundamental originator of male gender. Far from being interchangeable with femininity or capable of being abolished (as gender ideologues have believed possible), *masculinity* best describes male-specific aptitudes, abilities, responses and behaviours that arise from biologically innate cognitive and emotional processes and capacities (Ashfield, J., 2003).

It would appear that each male is born with a different “blend” of biologically based *masculine potentials* which when actualised characterise male behaviour as discernibly masculine. Masculinity is biologically innate and is expressed through *masculine gen-*



der. It is this differentiation *along with* but in no way exclusive of the potentiating or suppressive influence of cultural demands of *manhood* that gives rise to diverse expressions of manhood, contrary and in contrast to the constructionist idea of *masculinities*.

MANHOOD

“Running the gauntlet” of childhood and adolescent development, masculinity or a male’s masculine potentials are configured, reinforced, exaggerated, limited or downplayed as far as they can be through social learning and cultural conditioning, according to environmental conditions, the demands of survival and society, and the expectations of culture. The effect of this dynamic process of adaptation and conditioning is best described as *manhood* (Gilmore, D., 1990; Ashfield, J., 2003).

For example, in contemporary Western culture the *on-average* male’s brain and hormone physiology, which provide him with a capacity for the forceful and single-minded pursuit of goals, stoicism, risk-taking, and persevering competitiveness, are exploited and reinforced, because they are indispensable to the kind of roles men must perform to keep us all in the standard of living, safety, and security we have come to expect (Pinker, S., 2002; Baron-Cohen, S., 2003; Sax, L., 2006; Nadeau, R., 1996; Goldberg, S., 1973; Ashfield, J., 2010).

Each male occupies a place in the *general manhood culture*, by being matched with and situated in one of its constituent manhood *subcultures*. The general manhood culture consists of the commingled representations of *manliness* of the variety of individual manhood subcultures (Gilmore, D., 1990; Ashfield, J., 2010).

What determines the characteristics of the general manhood culture and its subcultural constituents? As Gilmore (1990) has observed, cross-cultural studies exhibit that the harder, more demanding, threatening, competitive, or dangerous life is, the more stress appears to be placed on a manhood ideal that is tough, aggressive, competitive, and stoical. Conversely, in circumstances that are comfortable, less competitive, and pose little threat to health or wellbeing, the manhood ideal is relaxed and much more liberal.

THE GENERAL MANHOOD CULTURE AND ITS SUBCULTURES

Each society exhibits its own characteristic general manhood culture, and its own variety and emphases of manhood subcultures. Manhood *sub-cultures*, are mostly defined and projected by different occupational groups. They may also be determined by a strongly orientating philosophy, ideology, or lifestyle community. Examples of the former might include hospitality, mining, building and construction, agricultural, corporate finance, and health industries, the armed forces, academia, politics, and the police force. Examples of the latter might include motor cycle groups, sporting organisations, service organisations, alternative lifestyle communities, social justice or social issues focussed groups. Liberal affluent societies appear to exhibit the broadest spectrum and variety of permissible manhood sub-cultures (Ashfield, J., 2010).

Though this may be an oversimplification of the complex way in which culture and society capture (though never fully control) and utilise masculine potentials, it does propose a defensibly useful broad conceptualisation for making sense of the role of and relationship between *biological and cultural determinants* (Ashfield, J., 2010).

MANHOOD AND MALE DEVELOPMENT

Making sense of *male development* in relation to manhood derives much illumination from examination of Post-Freudian male developmental psychology because of its resonance with recent cultural anthropology, in particular that of the seminal work of Gilmore (1990).

It appears self-evident that boys do not achieve a sense of male gender identity or manhood merely through biological maturation. Unlike girls, they must break away from their sense of unity with mother, to be able to achieve a self and public identity recognised by society as manly.

Boyhood bonds with mother must be broken to achieve an independent social status as distinct and opposite from hers. This may be a difficult and lonely process if not cushioned by appropriate male support, mentoring, and role modelling. How else can a boy attain a viable male identity, and achieve the best place possible for himself in the male dominance hierarchy, and in the world of men, men of whom much will be demanded by society (Moxon, S., 2008, Ch. 2)?

He must resist the tempting comfort of puerile regression, running back to “mother” or the world of women for solace or protection, because male gender identity forms in contradistinction to mother and women (Fogel, G., 1986; Stoller, R., 1984; Hallman, R., 1969; Gilmore, D., 1990). Perhaps this is why boys often appear more attentive to the small encouragements of men than the many affirmations of women. This is a matter in need of more observation and research, especially when it comes to the gender of school teachers and appointed female confidants with whom boys must engage. Expecting boys to do things they experience as contrary to their male quest for an independent masculine identity and male status (albeit uncongenial), may be perceived as a most unwelcome invitation to puerile regression and a return to mother dependence.

Perhaps the need for a “man about the house,” in the school, and in the therapy room, deserves better than merely to be dismissed as a sexist archaism?

THE CONFISCATION OF MANHOOD

The attainment of manhood and a sense of masculine social identity are very difficult for a number of important reasons. It serves society’s purposes for manhood never to be fully attainable, because it is a powerful device of social utility. Manhood is never a final or certain state of being. There is always the hovering threat of it being taken away (Gilmore, D., 1990; Ashfield, J., 2004). British recruitment propaganda and strategies of the First World War were a transparent example of this. They idealised manhood, holding it out as a promise to young men and as a reward for steeling themselves



against danger and fear in order to get them to enlist in the army and go off to war. Recruitment posters extolled the bravery, courage, and national pride associated with military service, and shamed those who were reluctant to join up. The White Feather campaign was used to great effect in threatening disqualification from manhood of any young man who refused to enlist. The white feather, which was most commonly handed out by women, was used as a potent symbol of cowardice. Men who received the white feather were swiftly ostracised, and sometimes even threatened with physical violence (Ellsworth-Jones, W., 2008; Wodehouse, P., 1907).

All cultures have words in their vocabulary for the purpose of challenging, undermining, and maintaining the precariousness of manhood: sissy, girly-boy, wimp, weakling, effeminate, pussy-whipped, pansy, putz, schmuck (of the Yiddish idiom), and so on. Women have traditionally figured prominently in the use of language aimed at impugning manliness (Gilmore, D., 1990).

It is interesting to observe how, in many cultures, men's neuroses about penis size and sexual performance arguably are not driven by competitive males but by women and quite obviously because it is a considerable source of covert power. It directly exploits the precariousness of manhood, without which a man's hopes of securing or keeping a female partner may be dashed. It is perhaps one of the most potent counterbalances to the male biological aggression advantage. As Gilmore noted, manhood is a culturally imposed ideal to which men must conform. Manhood is an ingenious cultural device that provides the immense leverage required to get the majority of men to occupy the majority of the most stressful, health-diminishing, dirty, and dangerous roles and occupations in service to society. And it works because human well-being depends so heavily on having a viable gender identity and on social inclusion. For many men, it seems, it is better to die than to be considered a non-man (Ashfield, J., 2010).

Manhood is a code calibrated to cultural requirements that often demands emotional detachment, stoicism, toughness and strength. It may require men to ignore even potentially life-threatening consequences in order to ensure material production and provision, and to protect community and family, all prerequisites for human community's survival and prosperity.

It should be an intolerable contradiction and injustice to demand of men the performance of roles (to benefit us all) that generally lead to greater ill-health and an earlier death than women, whilst at the same time calling for men's feminisation and demasculinisation.

MANHOOD AND THE MALE DOMINANCE HIERARCHY

No consideration of manhood is complete without understanding it in relation to the male dominance hierarchy.

Much research indicates that male status in the human male dominance hierarchy is the basis of female choice in selecting a male partner (Buss, D., 2003; Okami, P. & Shackelford, T., 2001). As with other species, the human male is challenged in various ways that test his "rigour," which may be gauged on the basis of evident physical char-

acteristics or competitive determination. Yet status in the human male dominance hierarchy is also what is being considered even when a man is being judged on personality. Humour may indicate self-confidence and intelligence, and education and intelligence are potent means of attaining status. Status may translate into dependability and a well-provisioned lifestyle (Moxon, S., 2008, Ch. 2). All are preferences that fit with female reproductive criteria.

Of course, money is a proxy for status. Though men seem to pursue it as an end in itself, it is more often that they are less concerned with what a certain level of income can buy than with how, by means of wealth, they might be valued. Interestingly, women who are wealthy high achievers still overwhelmingly choose men with higher incomes than their own, despite having no need for a male provider (Moxon, S., 2008, Ch. 2).

There is no escaping the imperatives of biology or what we share in common with other species, no matter with what sophistication we clothe ourselves. A male instinctively starts vying with his same-sex peers from when he is a toddler for the very purpose of calibrating to what extent he will be able to reproduce (Moxon, S., 2008, Ch. 8). Women will be most interested in him if he succeeds in his competition to attain a favourable ranking.

It is stating the obvious to say that men can never be like women, just as women would never want them to be. But that is not to say that men (and women) cannot benefit their relationships by exploring and negotiating a whole range of refinements and compromises in the way in which they communicate, express affection, exhibit commitment, constancy and fidelity, and seek to understand, appreciate, and value each other.

Men cannot be women. They can only endeavour to be valued and esteemed men. Women cannot be men. They can only endeavour to be valued and esteemed women.

MANHOOD AND MEN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The cultural phenomenon of manhood is a vital key to understanding why men are in fact conditioned not to pay much attention to their health and well-being. To do so would be contrary to many of the roles they must perform for society. Consequently, if some men respond poorly to the promptings of men's health promotion, their response is understandable and not at all deserving of blaming, shaming, or the patronising statements commonly exhibited in health literature. Men do in fact take responsibility for their health and well-being when given support in doing so, just as do women. They also respond positively to health promotion messages that are male gender appropriate and respectful. Health authorities are only now beginning to realise that attempting to work with men in the same way as women is ineffectual. Men must be approached differently if they are to be engaged effectively by health services and respond affirmatively to health promotion messages (Ashfield, J., 2010; RACGP, 2006).

Quite obviously, health authorities need first to understand the nature of manhood and the demands it makes on males. There is a constant hovering threat that, if a man does not live up to his manhood obligations, it may be taken away from him or severely



diminished. Men cannot afford to be seen by other men or women as weak or unmanly if they are to protect the integrity of their manhood identity upon which so much depends in any society. This is not a case of “male ego” or “machismo” as is so often sneeringly suggested. It is a matter of self-preservation through social approval and inclusion (Ashfield, J., 2010).

In Australia, considerable resources are expended on health promotion slogans that are clearly contrary to the demands made of the most at-risk male demographic. On the one hand, it is demanded that men be stoical, show no vulnerability, and get on with their job without complaining; on the other hand, they are told that to be a “real man” they should admit to vulnerability and encourage their male friends to do likewise. See, for example, <http://www.beyondblue.org.au> and <http://www.prostate.org.au>.

Men are now belittled in a multiplicity of blatant and subtle ways. Yet in almost every example, if the gender was reversed there would be a hue and cry.

Men generally need to be given social license to take active “public” steps in tending to their health and wellbeing, which is perhaps why only after much prompting from a female partner will some men seek medical assistance or have a medical check-up when it is needed. It has been observed that, if self-care and health care can be promoted and accepted as a group norm within an all-male group, individuals within such a group will often alter their individual help-seeking and health care behaviour positively because they’ve been given licence and permission to do so by a sufficiently credible social peer group (Rees, C., Jones, M. & Scott, T., 1999; Ashfield, J., 2002; Ashfield, J., 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The concepts of *gender*, *masculinity* and *manhood* are an essential key to understanding male experience and psychology, the place and role that men occupy in culture and society, and what is demanded of them by society. They provide a vital interpretive frame of reference for all social and human service endeavours.

Through the lens of these interconnected realities, we discover an affirmative perspective, not the alleged male (compared with female) deficiency, but instead real and important gender differences; not the much publicised male (compared with female) ineptitude, but rather a largely biologically determined and culturally demanded aptitude.

Survival is the primary imperative of evolutionary history. It is a wasted effort to try to de-nature gender. Gender differences have been the basis of our survival. However problematic they may appear for the relational preferences of an affluent class, their utility (principally for the affluent who benefit most from them) is deserving of a good deal more understanding and respect than they have been given.

I spoke to a student recently who had decided to pursue studies in social science at university. He is a gentle unassuming individual, interested in ideas and delighted by learning. He excitedly took himself off to his first classes at university. Not one month into his studies he rang me, angry and perplexed. He said: “I know it is early in my

time at University, but I'm feeling somehow demeaned. I'm being bullied into pretending a kind of apologetic stance, for no other reason than because I am male. How can there be higher learning here, when any discussion contrary to political correctness or a negative view of males, is censored or belittled?"

What a disgrace that a first-year university student should feel the need to recount such an experience. How dare we allow any university or college to be an environment that requires male students to chant the mantras of political correctness in order not to be penalised?

Regretfully, I felt the need to explain some things to him, as I have had cause to do with other students: Academe in the West, has, in certain of its disciplines, betrayed a sacred trust. It has acquiesced to a bullying pseudo-intellectual, self-appointed gender commentariat. It has permitted ideology to have ascendancy over intellectual integrity, creating a legacy of gender adversarialism, a jaundiced and disintegrative perspective of psychosocial reality, and a dogmatic fundamentalism unaccommodating of any potential disconfirmation.

We have need of a whole new approach to gender and our understanding of males in particular, one that is factual, sensible, equitable, practicable, and by virtue of its integrity, able to supersede the old. It is possible to make things right, but change will not come without emulating the courage and commitment of the many men and women who have in the past already paid a high price for asserting intellectual integrity in academe and in public. They did so without reward except that of knowing that they hearkened to the moral imperative of trying to move the world from an embittered and divisive place to one enriched and humanly compassionate for both genders.

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