Traditional Masculinity Can Hurt Boys, Say New A.P.A. Guidelines

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By Jacey Fortin

The American Psychological Association has released several guides for psychologists who work with people belonging to certain groups — members of ethnic and linguistic minorities, for example, or women and girls.

It did not have a guide for working with males, in part because they were historically considered the norm. But in August, the A.P.A. approved its first set of official guidelines for working with boys and men.

The guidelines, 10 in all, posit that males who are socialized to conform to "traditional masculinity ideology" are often negatively affected in terms of mental and physical health.

They acknowledge that ideas about masculinity vary across cultures, age groups and ethnicities. But they point to common themes like "anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence."

The document was written in academic language — not built to go viral. But last week, an A.P.A. article about the guidelines, and then a tweet about that article, captured widespread attention. Negative comments flooded in on Twitter, as well as from conservative news outlets.

"If men are struggling more the farther we move from those traditional norms, is the answer to continue denying and suppressing a boy's essential nature?" David French, a senior writer for National Review, wrote in an article about the guidelines on Monday.

"Traditional masculinity seems to be, in this report at least, conflated with being a pig, or a creep, or a Harvey Weinstein kind of person," said Laura Ingraham on her Fox News show on Tuesday.

Released in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the new set of guidelines seemed to reflect contemporary conversations about gender, bullying and harassment.

But the guidance has been in the works since 2005. The A.P.A., the biggest organization of psychologists in the United States, approved guidelines for girls and women back in 2007, and for various other groups as defined by age, gender identification, ethnicity and sexuality.

The primary purpose of the new guidelines, said Fredric Rabinowitz, one of the lead writers and a professor of psychology at the University of Redlands, was to help men and boys lead happy, healthy lives.

"We see that men have higher suicide rates, men have more cardiovascular disease and men are lonelier as they get older," he said. "We're trying to help men by expanding their emotional repertoire, not trying to take away the strengths that men have."

And the document's critics? "They're taking a very binary perspective," he said.

Judy Y. Chu, who teaches about boys' psychosocial development at Stanford University and is the author of "When Boys Become Boys," was not involved in drafting the document but said it contained good insights into the needs of boys, who are often taught to avoid showing emotion.

"All of us are born needing, and being able to develop, close personal relationships," she said. "And those are essential to our health. So what does it mean that we socialize boys away from that inherent need?"

The guidelines note that men sometimes avoid seeking help from others, including from psychologists, because it could make them look weak. And they note that even when men do seek help, psychologists sometimes err by diagnosing them in outward-looking ways — with substance abuse problems, for example — rather than with more internalized disorders like depression.

The guidelines also cite research on health risks that are particular to men. They die sooner than women, in part because of poorer diets and more risky behaviors like smoking. They commit the vast majority of violent crimes in the United States and make up most of the reported victims, even though men have "greater socioeconomic advantages than women in every ethnic group."

The document acknowledges that the issues faced by men and boys can be compounded by other things, like race and income. For example, men in the United States go to jail more often than women, but men from minority ethnic groups are more likely to be incarcerated than white men, even when crime rates are the same.

The guidelines add that men and boys have historically been considered a "normative referent" for psychology. In other words, men — especially white, heterosexual men — were overrepresented in Western studies, and their psychological needs and habits were considered more universal than they actually were.

That flattened the field of psychology for everyone, said Matt Englar-Carlson, a professor of counseling at California State University at Fullerton who is also a lead writer of the new guidelines. "The feminist movement in the '60s and '70s began to encourage us to look at women as gendered beings, and the men's movement in psychology really benefited from that," he said.

So it is no surprise that the A.P.A. guidelines for girls and women came out so much earlier, according to Dr. Chu.

"When boys and men challenge patriarchal constructions of gender, they're at risk of being perceived as failures, or as weak," she said. But she added that when women, girls and nonbinary people criticized patriarchal systems that oppressed them, another idea began to take shape: Maybe those systems hurt men, too, even as they conferred certain privileges.

"It brought to light issues that were being overlooked because there was a taboo against talking about it," Dr. Chu said.

The new guidelines will expire in about 10 years to make room for evolving ideas. Until then, the writers said, they are meant to serve as a resource for psychologists, whose practice should still be defined by the needs of the individual people they work with.

“Psychologists are encouraged to see men as being impacted by culture, by race and by relationships, rather than just assuming that there is one sort of standardized set of behaviors,” Dr. Rabinowitz said. “We want people to be aware that men are complex beings.”