



## FROM BOYS TO MEN: THE PLACE OF THE PROVIDER ROLE IN MALE DEVELOPMENT

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*This paper outlines a theory explaining why the provider role is important to boys in the development of their masculine identity. The family is a primary site for identity formation, and boys appear to be more badly affected by growing up in non-intact families than girls. Female identity is more marked by biological transitions (e.g. pregnancy), and gives mothers a more central role within the family than fathers. Thus the male role within the family – the provider role - needs to be socially and culturally constructed. Where the father is absent and the role is devalued, transition from boyhood to manhood is made difficult, and masculinity may be problematized as 'hegemonic', 'toxic', and 'hyper'. Solutions from traditional cultures are discussed.*

**Keywords:** role model; masculinity; embodiment; provider role; anthropology

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### INTRODUCTION

It is assumed in current academic thinking that the male provider role is a redundant concept, cast by 'the long shadow of hegemonic masculinity' (Doucet 2004, p.277), a relic used to shore up male domination which should no longer be relevant to us today. I would like to suggest that in fact the provider role has a key role to play for young men in the journey to adulthood by demonstrating to them that they are needed and have an essential place in the family. Families are the heart of a child's



world and having a key place in the family is particularly important to a young person because they have an acute (if unacknowledged) awareness of the centrality of the family, as they have been particularly dependent on it. A boy's assumption that he will enact the provider role acts as a spur to educational attainment and employment. Thus the provider role also gives boys a reason for engaging constructively with the world beyond the family. Further, by demonstrating to boys that their status as males is valuable and useful, the provider role concept and practice inhibits the adoption and development of more negative forms of masculinity.

The first part of the paper will identify the problem. Growing up in a single parent family appears to have a worse impact on boys than girls across a number of indicators. The lack of a male role model has been identified as accounting for male disadvantage in single parent families, without explaining how this mechanism works. It is not clear, for example, why the mother can't act as a role model, or why a role model can't be provided by the wider society.

The next part discusses the importance of the family as a context for modelling behaviour. Then, using 'Theories of embodiment', I show how the mother's biological role gives her a more central and secure position within the family than the father. This acts as a springboard to moral authority within family life. By contrast the position of the male is tenuous and marginal. Unlike the mother's position the father's role within the family is less immanent within the body and therefore his role needs to be socially and culturally constructed in order to be secure. To illustrate this, I turn to ethnographic examples from pre-industrial societies. I explore the way in which the male is culturally constructed to see if it is possible to identify key characteristics in the journey to manhood which we can apply to our own society.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE ABSENT FATHER**

Research shows that the gap between boys and girls, along a range of dimensions, increases when the father is absent. Buchman and DiPrete (2006) show that the differences in college completion between boys and girls tends to be higher, to the disadvantage of boys, when the father is absent and less educated. Hallam et al. found that the effects of divorce differ significantly for girls and boys, with boys having lower educational attainment, worse labour market outcomes and being more likely to die early (Hallam, Frimmel & Winter-



Ebmer, 2016). The disparity in educational outcome is also confirmed by Jacob who found after controlling for a host of characteristics, growing up in a single parent family decreases the likelihood of college attendance by three percentage points for boys but does not have an effect on enrolment for girls (Jacob, 2002).

Bertrand and Pan (2013) try to explain the significant gap in externalizing behaviour which appears between boys and girls from single parent homes. Externalizing behaviours include a range of disruptive and acting out behaviours for example aggression and delinquent behaviour. They found that single mothers appear to be more emotionally distant from their sons and that this could account for a small but non-trivial share of boys' higher rate of behavioural problems. More significantly they found a gender difference in the level of attention a parent gave to the child and the way the child responded to that level of attention. For example where children received a lower level of attention this would have a worse effect on a boy than it would on a girl. However, this still leaves the difference between boys and girls only partially explained.

Mencarini et al. (2014) found that living in a single parent family has a more detrimental impact on boys than girls. Their research, conducted in Italy, found that boys living in a single parent family invest 19 minutes less per day in human capital accumulating activities (for example reading) and have a 9 percent higher probability of lower cognitive skills than girls. However, they find no differences between boys and girls in terms of inputs received from their mothers. They conclude that "It is still possible that maternal inputs are not the perfect substitute for lack of paternal input in the case of boys" (Mencarini et al. 2014, p.14).

Some of these papers suggest that boys' poorer outcomes are the result of the absence of a same sex role model as the vast majority of the single households are headed by women. However, beyond noting the absence of an analogous male role in these households there is a notable paucity of evidence or ideas about how this role modelling occurs. This question is thrown into relief in a paper by Cobb-Clark and Tekin (2011) which explores the relationship between delinquency and having a father figure available. They find that there is no relationship between the delinquent behaviour of adult girls and the presence or absence of a father figure. However, they find a strong relationship between delinquent behaviour and the presence or absence of a father figure among boys. This cannot be accounted for either by the



level of father involvement or by income levels. It is again suggested by Cobb-Clark and Tekin that the presence of a father has a protective effect for adolescents without spelling out how this protective effect occurs.

A meta-analysis has been carried out addressing whether fathers make a unique contribution in raising their children, and if so, identifying the areas in which their impact was felt (Jeynes, 2016). The meta-analysis included only studies which specifically examined the unique role of fathers compared to mothers and therefore did not include the studies, mentioned above, in which the fathers' role is implicit by its absence. The study found that mothers and fathers have a unique role, and that the fathers' impact was more likely to be on behavioural outcomes than academic outcomes directly. The role of fathers was slightly different for boys and girls but the evidence suggested that fathers were equally important to boys and girls. Therefore, this meta-analysis does not explain why the absence of fathers should be so significant for boys. This is a puzzle remaining to be solved.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF A ROLE WITHIN THE FAMILY**

The data presented above suggests that fathers have a significant positive impact on their sons. However, there is a dearth of suggestions as to why this occurs. A possible hypothesis is presented here.

The hypothesis assumes that the family is, in a sense, the centre of a child's universe and source of meaning. The school provides a secondary and alternative source of meaning. People and events will become important depending on the degree and way in which they impact on the family<sup>1</sup>.

If we accept that the family provides the source of meaning for a child it follows that parents become significant according to their role and importance in the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The other activities which parents engage in, for example work outside the family, or construction of a family home or farming, or the building of social networks; all these things will become important to the extent that they impact upon the parent's family role. In this sense when a parent provides a role model, what they are actually modelling is a role within the family. What the parent does outside the house becomes important because of the impact it has on the family role.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the role of the family in socialisation see Myers, 1996. See also Handel, 2011



For example, if a parent works long hours outside the home but their contribution towards the household and family is valued and recognised by the other parent (or by society at large), and they are clearly a participating member of the family, then the role that parent plays (in this case a provider) will be highly regarded and provide a model for the child. If on the other hand the parent is making a significant financial contribution but they are hardly ever available, and their financial contribution is not valued or recognised, then the parent is unlikely to be providing a role which the child will want to emulate<sup>2</sup>.

A female child will have a template to follow which is not available to the boy. For example, the process of pregnancy and lactation and the gendered division of labour which follows from this means that children usually form their primary attachment with their mothers. This gives the mother a central and vital role within the family and by extension the daughter who shares an identity with her. The primacy of the female role is something which we easily lose sight of in contemporary society where more value is attached to the world of work. However, if we look at other societies or in other historical periods the centrality of the maternal role is thrown into relief. Margaret Mead puts it nicely:

*“So the little girl learns that although the signs of her membership in her own sex are slight ...some day she will be pregnant, some day she will have a baby. And having a baby is, on the whole, one of the most exciting and conspicuous achievements, that can be presented to the eyes of small children in these simple worlds...” (Mead 1954, p.73).*

The place of the father in the family is more tenuous. Where the father takes over maternal caring he is likely to be regarded as a poorer substitute for the mother rather than an equal alternative; a permanent secondary role. The father's role therefore needs to be socially and culturally constructed as an equally valuable alternative to the maternal role. To the extent that this is done successfully both by the society and by the family, the boy will have a role model to follow and his position will be secure. To the extent that there is no role model to follow a boy will have no template or road map. In order to illustrate this I will use work from the sociology of 'embodiment'. I will then go on to show how the position of the male is created in preindustrial societies. Finally, I will consider what lessons can be learnt from these pre-industrial societies which we can apply to our own.

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<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion on the way in which having to spend too much time on providing activities can impact negatively on the provider role see: Bryan, D. M. (2013). To parent or provide? The effect of the provider role on low-income men's decisions about fatherhood and paternal engagement. *Fathering*, 11(1), 71.



## THE MARGINALITY OF THE EMBODIED MALE

Embodiment theory considers how many aspects of our cognition are a result of the way we are physically 'embodied' (Doucet,2009). For example, being an elderly or frail person could influence how safe we feel going out and therefore our experience of the world as a stressful or hospitable place. How we look, could influence how we are treated, which could in turn influence how we view the world in all kinds of formative ways. Similarly, being born in a male or female body will impact on the way which we experience the world with consequences which reverberate for our identity, motivation, our sense of ourselves and our relationships with other people. The impact of being born in a male or female body is thrown into relief if we look closely at the differences which men and women experience when they become parents. To illustrate this, I will turn to work which has been done on men's experiences of becoming fathers and early fatherhood.

Jan Draper's study analyses men's experiences of pregnancy, birth and early fatherhood. She shows how during pregnancy men often felt isolated and redundant and had difficulties engaging with the reality of pregnancy because their bodies and status were not transformed in the same way that the pregnant woman's was (Draper, 2003). Men's biological encounters are second hand. This peripheral position is maintained through the labour and early fatherhood because his transition to fatherhood is not marked out by biological processes in the same way. Draper explains how at the same time the contemporary man's pregnancy locates men in the unfamiliar private space of bodies and birth which he is encouraged to be part of but in which he feels alien and marginalised. This outsider status was experienced to varying degrees and Draper's study does not make clear when or indeed, if, it ends.

Doucet's research is based on interviews with over 200 fathers of whom over 100 were primary caregivers. She explores the role which the body plays in the early stages of motherhood and fatherhood in order to try to account for: "The outstanding stability in mothers' responsibility for children" (Doucet 2009, p.77). She describes one of her 'most surprising' findings as:

*"...the overwhelming belief by fathers as well as mothers in a gender differentiated bond between mother and child, especially in the first months of parenting" (Doucet 2009, p.90).*



One of the fathers in her study explained how women are connected to their children in a very physical, primordial sense. As another explained:

*“As a man I have to understand, and I think most men do. They really have to understand the child really has to bond with the mother first...because they carry it for nine months. And if they’re breastfeeding, that’s just biological. You can’t really disrupt it. You don’t want to disrupt it. You can’t even though you feel a sense of abandonment or whatever. And you just have to accept it, really. And you just have to know that” (Doucet 2009, p.86).*

Doucet goes on to explain how the biological and social differences between women and men are hugely magnified during pregnancy, birth and postnatally and it is this phase of parenting that can entrench women and men into longstanding gender differences.

### **WOMEN IN CHARGE IN THE MORAL ECONOMY**

The marked asymmetry in favour of women which surrounds processes of pregnancy, birth and lactation mean that mothers have the primary role determining the structure and function of the household realm and the family. The position of men is secondary, with men tending to respond to choices women make.

This can be seen from birth onwards. Draper, in describing men’s individual transition towards fatherhood, suggests that “...men’s individual journeys to fatherhood shape the structure of men’s collective experience. So, in this way the individual shapes the collective and the collective shapes the individual” (Draper 2003, p.74). However, this collective is in the first instance female. It is females who determine whether fatherhood commitment should be expressed by attendance at birth or not, and it is females who set the prescriptions about what the father should and shouldn’t do.

The primary bond which an infant has with his or her mother not only sets up the pattern of path dependency which is reflected in the gendered division of labour. Becoming a mother hugely elevates a woman’s status. This was more readily recognised 50 or 60 years ago when it was assumed that mothers belonged ‘on a pedestal’, as this respondent from the East End of London explained:

*“[using the Christian name] sounds like a distant relation, but “mum” puts a woman on a pedestal where she should be” (Young & Willmott 1990, p.50).*



A mother's influential position and moral authority is obscured by contemporary ideology which associates status with the public realm of prestigious and well paid jobs rather than with the family and home. Despite this, the moral authority which mothers have by virtue of their position within the family remains intact. It is reflected in the almost complete control which those who claim to be representing women's interests have to shape the agenda on policies around employment, childcare, parental leave, domestic violence, family law and so on.

This moral authority is reflected in the domestic realm. For while men, may praise the virtues of being stay at home dads it is ultimately women who determine how much they stay at home or go to work (Machel, 2016). Further, while women spend more time on housework, this is not because they are downtrodden. Rather, they are the equivalent of the responsible boss who is often the last to leave. Those in charge often spend longer at their work. This assumed dominance is reflected in women's treatment of men:

*"Women are hypocrites...we would go crazy if men treated us in the workforce the way we typically treat them at home---if a guy in the workforce assumed he was more competent than you are, and told you what to do--- but that's the way most women treat men in the household" (Slaughter 2013).*

These sentiments are echoed by Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda:

*"Mothers are gatekeepers when it comes to non-residential fathers' access to children, and they frequently constrain and define the roles and responsibilities of both residential and non-residential fathers. Mothers communicate their expectations of their partners by handing over their babies for diapering, instead of diapering the baby themselves. In other cases, mothers may use children as bait to get what they want (money, sexual interest) from their partners" (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda 2004, p.13).*

## **THE FRAGILITY OF FATHERHOOD**

Draper, in her study of men's experiences of pregnancy, wrote powerfully of men's feelings of vulnerability in relation to their role as fathers. This is an issue which is not acknowledged in Western society and therefore never properly resolved. This fragility lies at the heart of fatherhood precisely because of the absence of embodiment, of a strong biological anchor. As Rob Palkovitz points out: *"Fathers are only fathers because of relationships. There is*





*no such thing as a father independent of relationships*” (Palkovitz 2014, p.3). This is not the case for mothers, who become so through the act of giving birth.

This is perhaps explained most clearly by Geoff Dench, who acknowledges that fatherhood is a ‘political fact’ like motherhood but recognises that it is not of the same order.

*“This is true logically, in that you cannot easily determine who a father is until you have identified the mother...it is also true at moral and legal levels, in that unless a mother renounces all ties with a child which is not feasible in many cultures, then fatherhood is mediated by motherhood, and hence by the nature of the relationship between a woman and her partner” (Dench 1996, p.81).*

The fragility of fatherhood is obscured by the anxiety surrounding ‘patriarchy’ witnessed in contemporary society. Patriarchy or ‘rule of the father’ is a system widely believed to have been created by men to dominate women (Purdy 2016). While it is true that men are more likely to hold public office in one form or another in every known society, there is no actual evidence that when it comes to how we live our lives that men are in charge. Despite this the myth of patriarchy persists and it is only in the closed family courts that the fragility of fatherhood is properly exposed.

It is this fragility of fatherhood which means that having a paternal template, a way in which boys can identify their role in the family and therefore in society, is so much more of an issue for boys.

## **THE LOST BOYS**

The place of the father in the family is crucial for understanding the psychological development of boys. For both male and female children, the family is at the centre of their universe. It shapes their values, models their relationships, and what happens beyond the family only becomes relevant when its impact is felt here.

Girls, taking their cue from their mother, have a more secure position, although current social changes are likely to be felt even here. Boys, taking their cue from their fathers whose position as we have seen is more tenuous, will be more dependent on the social and cultural constructions of fatherhood. This is beyond the realm of easy measures like paternal engagement or emotional involvement. The role which the father plays within the family, its



level of importance and the degree which he is rewarded and valued for it, these will provide the boy with a map of his place within the world which he can choose to accept or reject.

Where the father is absent and does not play an obvious role within the family, the boy will have no compass with which he can orientate himself and his place in the world will be particularly problematic. However, there are other reasons why the path to manhood might seem very confusing or refuse to lead anywhere.

Firstly, the traditional provider role is very much up for grabs. Christiansen and Palkovitz describe it thus:

*“Providing has always been more than a paycheck, it is a complex, multidimensional role that manifests a father’s emotional and psychological connection to his children through meeting their needs...Economic providing requires an element of sacrifice because resources invested in others are not available to the self” (Christiansen & Palkovitz 2001, p.91).*

However, providing has increasingly come to be seen in a negative light as something which facilitates male privilege and female dependency and which takes the father’s attention and time away from the family, rendering the family subordinate. These negative associations have been worsened by a fall in the real wages of less educated men (Autor & Wasserman, 2013). This has made it incredibly difficult for those men who are expected to provide for their families to do so (Bryan, 2013).

As policy makers have viewed it as increasingly desirable for women to enter the workplace, the role of the father has become focussed on the extent to which he is helping to reduce the child-rearing burden of the mother (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). As a result, the father’s role has become increasingly modelled on the mothers’ nurturing role. As this is a fairly recent development the social consequences are not yet known.

Another trap in the path to manhood is the current tendency to conflate maleness or masculinity with ‘hegemonic’, ‘toxic’ or ‘hyper’ masculinity with all the negative associations which these words connote. The expression ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is used to describe everyday processes and practices through which men are believed to maintain dominant social roles over women (Connell, 2005). That it is a commonly accepted trope in contemporary



narrative about males is reflected in the following usage in a mainstream British online newspaper:

*“Toxic masculinity enforces the idea that being a “man” means not just being strong, but showing that strength through violence and fear. It means always being the one in control, having power and dominance over others at all times, by any means. ... We need to acknowledge that hateful, toxic masculinity is bred among us in the everyday. We need to start pulling apart and dismantling its roots in male entitlement and structures that promote masculine supremacy” (Stephenson, 2016).*

The same article tells us *“it’s not Muslims or people with mental health problems who are most likely to kill you in a terrorist attack – it’s men”*.

However, the boys who are less likely to engage in troublesome behaviour are those who grow up with their fathers present in their households. The evidence suggests that after controlling for adolescents’ self-esteem, family income and three dimensions of family functioning, ‘father present’ boys had higher levels of ‘current masculinity’ than father-absent boys. The father-absent boys perceived themselves to be lower in masculinity, but wanted to be as masculine as the father-present boys wanted to be (Mandara et al., 2005).

As father absent boys are the ones most likely to engage in the negative behaviour associated with ‘toxic masculinity’, this suggests that it is not masculinity which causes the bad behaviour but its absence. Where boys are more feminine and perceive themselves to be so they are more likely to behave badly. This suggests that the surest route away from toxic masculinity would be to encourage boys to develop their masculinity and enable them to find ways of being men. However, this is exactly what the current obsession with toxic masculinity prevents. Those who ‘call out’ toxic masculinity are inadvertently the creators of it.

The result is that those boys who grow up without a father in the family not only have no one to model manhood to them within the home; they have a lack of legitimate role model within the public sphere.

The final section of this paper will explore the creation of manhood in pre-industrial societies and identify what we can learn from these cultures to apply to our own.



### THREE STAGES IN THE CREATION OF MEN

Three defining characteristics have been identified from an examination of male initiation processes in pre-industrial societies which, I suggest, are essential - in some form - to a secure sense of being a man. These characteristics are i) separation from the feminine, ii) all aspects of initiation are carried out by men, iii) the appropriation or imitation of female reproductive processes through the provider role.

#### *Separation from the feminine*

The first stage involves separation from and denial of all that is feminine. Such an approach is frequently interpreted in our own culture as a hostility to all that is feminine but to do so is to not understand its source. Young men need to prove that they are not feminine not primarily because they view femininity as bad but rather because they have been utterly dependent on it. This is explained by Robert Stoller:

*“...the whole process of becoming masculine is at risk in the little boy from the date of his birth on; his still-to-be-created masculinity is endangered by the primary profound, primeval oneness with the mother, a blissful experience that survives, buried but active in the core of one’s identify, as a focus that, throughout life, can attract one to regress back to that primitive oneness, that is the threat lying latent in masculinity. I suggest the need to fight it off energizes some of what we are familiar with when we call a piece of behaviour masculine” (Stoller 1975, p.294).*

Secondly I would suggest that they avoid the feminine arena because they are brutally disadvantaged by their own lack of overt reproductive power; men simply cannot compete.

There are various way in which separation from the feminine is achieved in simple societies. Ian Hogbin, in his aptly named ethnography “The Island of Menstruating Men”, describes how the underlying theme of the male cult amongst the Melanesian Wogeo is the physical and social gulf between men and women. An essential part of the ritual involves the scarification of the tongue – this serves the dual purpose of not only bleeding the boys thus prefiguring their subsequent ‘menstruation’ through the penis, but by doing it through the tongue it cleanses them of the feminine pollution which they would have imbibed in their mother’s milk (Hogbin, 1996).



One way of ensuring that one is protected from the feminine is through secrecy. For example, central to the Wogeo initiation is learning to play the flute and it is essential that the flutes are kept a secret from the women, who when they hear them are supposed to believe that they are some strange monster which will eat their sons. Variations on this theme are repeated in a number of unrelated cultures.

Amongst the Baruya of Papua New Guinea the boys are taken away from their mothers at around the age of 10 when a man comes to fetch the boy and lock him up with other boys of his age. They are gradually separated from all that is feminine by donning male garb and insignia in stages and they remain in the Men's House until the age of 20 or 21 when they get married. Again a crucial part of this separation from the feminine involves secrecy, as the author Maurice Godelier explains:

*"The Baruya did not tell me everything and I promised not to divulge all that they told me. What I have withheld, the reader will have guessed, relates to the men's efforts, strenuously hidden from the women, to produce great men without women's intervention"*  
(Godelier 1986, p.xiii)

### ***Only men make men***

There is an absolutely key feature running through the full gamut of rituals across a whole range of societies. Only men are involved. Women occasionally play bit parts – the provision of food in early stages of Wogeo ceremonial, throwing hay bales to help the men making then Men's House 'womb', or providing an admiring audience for the newly initiated men in their finery, but that is about it. This exclusion of women is vital, absolutely essential, because if boys see that it is only men who can actually help to bring about their manhood the boys see that men have their own, powerful, reproductive potential. This acts as a counter to, and maybe even trumps women's original generative power. As Margaret Mead explains;

*"Women it is true, make human beings. But only men can make men"* (Mead 1954, p.84).

Keeping women out resolves some of the deepest tensions in an already fragile male identity<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For a good discussion of this see: Metcalf, A., & Humphries, M. (Eds.). (1985). *The sexuality of men*. Pluto Pr.



It also appears to be the case that very often the men involved are not immediate family relatives. In this way a new kinship is established which transcends family kinship along biological lines. For example, amongst the Baruya, once they are living in the men's house the initiate's father will no longer strike him unless it is something extremely serious; his punishments will be inflicted by third and fourth stage initiates who live in the men's house and act as representatives of the entire male body when dealing with the younger boys (Godelier, 1986).

### ***The imitation of female reproductive process***

A consistent feature emerging across a number of these societies is the way in which male initiation is so clearly imitating female reproduction. Amongst the Wogeo the entire construction of ritual and symbolism, the cultural context, is structured so that the processes of reproduction can be shared by men. For the Wogeo sleeping in the clubhouse is at the heart of the ritual; boys go in uninitiated, and come out as men after lots of feeding and rituals. Amongst the Baruya the men's house is even called a womb (Hogbin, 1996; Godelier, 1986).

Many rituals are involved in magically growing the boy. They are given lots of unpleasant things to eat and drink which will ensure lofty stature and freedom for skin disease. It is said that by the end of all the initiations they will have consumed some portion of every useful tree creeper or plant found on the Island – in this way the milk provided by women is somehow outdone by the nature harnessed by men. The symbolism of this is strengthened by the mythology where the tribal hero Nat Egare survived underground in his dead mother's body by eating the roots of the plants and trees (Hogbin, 1996).

While all the initiation processes are accompanied by severe restrictions and discomforts for the boys, those doing the initiating endure privations which are even worse. The result is that the men refer constantly to enduring such pain, hunger and thirst that they expect in the years to come the boys will make a fitting repayment with offers of daily assistance. In this way we can see how the rituals mimic the child's obligation to his or her mother (Hogbin, 1996).

Another interesting feature is a ritual process which involves drinking a cleansing water with one of the other boys. The unrelated boy then becomes a blood brother and their relationship is now closer than that of real siblings. They can refuse each other nothing. In this



way the male initiation acts to create a new form of kinship which maybe outdoes the one of which women appear to be in charge (Hogbin, 1996).

Among the Baruya various founding myths show how male initiation is all about the appropriation of female reproductive power. For example, according to one myth, in the beginning women were superior to men, but one man violated the fundamental taboo of penetrating the menstrual hut and touching objects polluted with menstrual blood. In this way he captured female power and brought it back to the men, who now use it to turn little boys into men (Godelier, 1986).

A key aspect of imitating women's reproductive process is provisioning. After years in the men's house, having gone through various levels of ritual and reached the final and most important stage, the master of the ceremony explains that their elder will be finding wives for them, and once married they will have to clear the forest and lay out gardens and feed their family. They are told that they will be expected to fulfil all their responsibilities toward their wives, children and all their extended family (Godelier, 1986). Amongst the Wogeo the link between male providing and male reproduction is also made. The scarification of the tongue, mentioned earlier, take place once the boys are becoming economically useful (Hogbin, 1996).

Amongst the Aka of the African Congo the training of young boys in the men's secret society is combined with learning to hunt. In this way the provider role is subsumed into and becomes part of the rituals which facilitate social reproduction, and here we get to the crux of what the provider role is all about (Hewlett, 1993). Far from being a way of gaining status, power and domination, by becoming a provider a man is symbolically and practically finding himself a place in the processes of reproduction so that he too can share in woman's reproductive role. So as Dench (1998, p.20) observes, providing is in fact a way in which men can become more like women. It is not about accumulating status and power among men.

## **NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES PROVIDING A MAP TO MANHOOD**

There are a number of features of the coming of manhood in pre-industrial societies which I think could provide pointers for how we could improve life in the West

Firstly, the fact that only men are involved is something we could learn from. Recognising the central role of men in making men is crucial to understanding gang behaviour. In a society which frowns strongly on male only institutions or environments, boys



coming together in gangs to engage in male only activity represents a process whereby boys can, in the absence of more constructive initiations, simultaneously both create and become men. Were more male-only institutional frameworks encouraged where older men could guide and model behaviours for younger men, some of the primary drivers of gang behaviour could be undermined. It is conceivable that schools could play a role in this.

Unfortunately, the tendency in contemporary society is to reduce the number of male-only spaces. Women are increasingly entering the military and there is a new drive to model sports such as rugby in a way which would make it more acceptable to women. Even the Scouts is no longer allowed to include boys only.

The encouragement of male-only environments, where older men model behaviours to younger men, could, by encouraging the development of masculinity, reduce the need to reject the feminine, which can in our own society sometimes take a destructive form. Hewlett, who has studied the Aka pygmy hunter gatherers in central Africa, explains that;

*“When fathers are not around very much young men usually have not been exposed to a clear sense of masculinity. Consequently, their identities develop in opposition to those things that are feminine, which in turn they tend to devalue and criticise” (Hewlett 2000, p.64).*

By depriving boys of all-male environments the development of their masculinity may be discouraged and aberrant forms of masculinity such as “toxic masculinity” may emerge. Hewlett suggests that where men are involved in childcare, as among the Aka this can encourage an intimate knowledge of masculinity which means that boys are less likely to devalue the feminine. Of course this can only happen if the father has a strong, clear sense of masculine identity in the first place, which may be more likely among the Aka where male initiations are in place.

Another notable difference between the societies examined here and our own Western society, is that it is becoming a *man*, rather than becoming a *father*, which is culturally elaborated. Central to becoming a man is learning to nurture and care for others but this sequentially precedes becoming a father. By contrast in our own society being male is regarded as something of a problem and there are almost no sources of identity which are only





available to men. In fact fatherhood remains one identity, which is only available to men, although even then it is increasingly modelled on the maternal role.

Consequently becoming a father becomes a route to manhood rather than being preceded by manhood. This reversal of timing may have many deleterious consequences. Firstly, it leaves some of the crucial issues of masculinity unresolved in that becoming a father requires a woman, and therefore the sense of independence and separation is not properly achieved. In the terms of the primitive societies investigated here I suspect it would represent a somewhat aberrant form of manhood. More significantly, it encourages men to become fathers before they have learnt how to care for and provide for others. Finally a key feature in these societies is a conceptualisation of the provider role, and therefore of masculinity, as a way of nurturing and caring for others. Crucial to this is having a sense of personal responsibility for others, whether these are your own wife and children, your sister's children, or children that your wife gives birth to. Dench explains the importance of this:

*“A useful occupation by itself can give that sense of value to the most scarce and skilled workers. But for most men this has to come in the same sort of way that it has traditionally come to mothers, that is through having others personally dependent on them. However they may actually earn their bread, the social value of their labour lies in the channelling of it to those others who are reliant on them....this sense of the personal nature of responsibility is something which women may easily leave out of the account because they take it so much for granted in their own lives” (Dench, 1996, p.20).*

Warren Farrell also identifies the feminine aspect of the provider role:

*“Just as women provide a womb to create the children, men provide a financial womb to support the children” (Farrell 1993, p.106).*

In this way the provider role enables men to have - and boys to feel that they will have - a vital, unique and valued role within that most important social institution, the family. It teaches boys that masculine identity is developed by caring for others.

The provider role is a way of making the world of work and public achievement relevant to men and boys because it provides a motivation for education and earning because these provide the route to playing an essential role in the home. Evidence suggests that



married men are more likely to work and work harder than unmarried men<sup>4</sup>. By the same token I would suggest that boys who have a clear concept of the provider role are more likely to strive in school.

## DISCUSSION

The first part of this essay defined the problem. This was that boys from single mother families consistently fared worse on a range of indicators than boys from intact families. The explanation offered by researchers on the subject was that boys lacked a male role model.

Lack of a male role model provides a common-sense explanation. However there is little theoretical elaboration about how having a male role model works to improve the well-being of boys. This is the gap I have tried to fill here.

What I have suggested is that to be able to model a role to a male child, the man needs in the first instance to have a valued role within the child's family. Men from the public realm of work and celebrity are too distant and inaccessible to provide meaningful role models while growing up. I hypothesize that what is more important is how the child perceives the man's role within the family.

I then go on to demonstrate that a girl's transition to adulthood is less problematic than a male's because a female has the reproductive markers, particularly of pregnancy, birth and lactation, which mean her role is more embedded. The male role by contrast is much less obvious. This could be why in so many societies and cultures the transition to manhood has been culturally elaborated to include various forms of ritual and initiation to a greater degree than the female role. I suggest that this cultural elaboration frequently includes the development of the provider role. The provider role can take a variety of forms, including material, physical, protective or spiritual provisioning. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the forms provisioning could take but the concept provides a useful analytical tool which could be applied to future anthropological research.

Within our own culture the provider role is particularly useful, because as well as showing boys that they have a place within the family it also makes the world or work and

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/04/02/dont-be-a-bachelor-why-married-men-work-harder-and-smarter-and-make-more-money/> Dench, G. (2011). *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes*. Transaction Publishers. and also <http://www.aei.org/publication/for-richer-for-poorer-how-family-structures-economic-success-in-america/>



study relevant because these become the means which enable them to play a role within the family. Therefore, the provider role has a unique bridging function.

As the male role is culturally constructed rather than immanent within the body, a boy growing up without a father could be more disadvantaged than a girl growing up without a mother. It may be this aspect of cultural construction which makes the male role, and therefore males more vulnerable in times of social upheaval as reflected in increases in the male suicide rate. This is usually interpreted as being a result of the loss of a particular form of masculine identity, usually constructed as 'hegemonic'. However I would suggest the distress suffered is the result simply of the loss of a male constructed role (Möller-Leimkühler, 2003). If alternative sources of identity and role are available at times of social upheaval, male distress would be less likely to occur.

Key aspects of the way in which the male role can be culturally constructed have been identified through an exploration of male initiation in pre-industrial societies. These societies differ considerably from our own, but a number of characteristics can be identified which appear to be applicable to our own. These include separating from the feminine, the importance of only involving men in processes of male ritual, and finally the centrality of the provider role in the expression of manhood. While provision can take a variety of forms ultimately it becomes an extension and development of the female reproductive role.

The above theory can be tested through research. For example, the extent to which the father performs a provider role could be quantified. We could then examine whether this correlated with the son's own expectations, at some point in the future, of having a provider role himself<sup>5</sup>. An intervening variable could be perceptions of the father's role by other members of the family and society at large. We could then explore whether there was a relationship between expected provider role and academic achievement as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The male role has become significantly problematized in contemporary society. The male role is seen as disadvantaging women, both within the family and beyond it, along a number of dimensions. This presents particular problems for boys growing up without a father

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<sup>5</sup> [www.academia.edu/28911223/Outline\\_of\\_Men\\_for\\_Tomorrow\\_paper\\_on\\_boys\\_academic\\_achievement\\_work\\_in\\_progress\\_.docx](http://www.academia.edu/28911223/Outline_of_Men_for_Tomorrow_paper_on_boys_academic_achievement_work_in_progress_.docx)



as they have no positive role model to aspire to either within the family or beyond it. Some mechanisms have been suggested for dealing with this, including the development of male-only spaces and the role of older men in identifying and valorising activities for younger men. However most important is the provider role which provides a positive expression of masculinity by teaching men to care for others. It also provides a way in which males can indirectly share in the female reproductive role.

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