How History and Sociology Can Help Today's Families

Stephanie Coontz

In this 1997 article (the introductory chapter to her book *The Way We Really Are*), Stephanie Coontz demonstrates the sociological imagination as she discusses the nature of relations between men and women and between parents and kids. Again, these issues seem personal, but Coontz demonstrates how taking the larger—sociological and historical—view is very important if we want to find practical answers to such crucial questions as "What's wrong with male-female relationships in modern society?" and "What's happening to today's youth?"

When lecture audiences first urged me to talk about how family history and sociology were relevant to contemporary life, I wasn't sure I wanted to abandon the safety of my historical observation post. But my experiences in recent years have convinced me that people are eager to learn whether historians and social scientists can help them improve their grasp of family issues. And I've come to believe that it's our responsibility to try.

I don't want to make false promises about what history and sociology offer. I can't give you five tips to make your relationship last. I don't have a list of ten things you can say to get your kids to do what you want and make them think it's what they want. Nor can I give you many useful pointers on how to raise their parents.

But a historical perspective can help us place our personal relationships into a larger social context, so we can distinguish individual idiosyncrasies or problems from broader dilemmas posed by the times in which we live. Understanding the historical background and the current socioeconomic setting of family changes helps turn down the heat on discussion of many family issues. It can alleviate some of the anxieties of modern parents and temper the recriminations that go back and forth between men and women. Seeing the larger picture won't make family dilemmas go away, but it can reduce the insecurity, personal bitterness, or sense of betrayal that all of us, at one time or another, bring to these issues. Sometimes it helps to know that the tension originates in the situation, not the psyche.

Putting Teen-Parent Conflicts in Perspective

Consider the question of what's happening to American youth. It's extremely difficult for parents today to look at a specific problem they may have with their teenager, whether that is sneaking out at night or experimenting
with alcohol and drugs, without seeing it as a sign of the crisis we are told grips modern youth. Parents tell me they are terrified by headlines about the "epidemic" of teen suicide and by chilling television stories about kids too young to drive a car but old enough to carry an AK-47.

Concerns over adolescent behavior are not entirely new. "Let’s Face It," a Newsweek cover story of September 6, 1964, declared: "Our Teenagers Are Out of Control." The 1965 film, Blackboard Jungle, claimed that teens were "savage" animals because "gang leaders have taken the place of parents." Still, there are new structural and historical changes in American life that have recently complicated the transition from early adolescence to young adulthood, making youth-adult relations seem more adversarial.

It doesn’t help us understand these changes, however, when people exaggerate the problems of today’s teens or turn their normal ups and downs into pathologies. Most teens do not get involved in violence, either as criminals or victims. While teen suicide rates have indeed been increasing, any growth from a low starting point can sound dramatic if presented as a percentage. For example, a 1995 report from the Centers for Disease Control stated that suicides among 10- to 14-year-old youths had "soared" between 1980 and 1992. What this meant in real figures, points out researcher Mike Males, was that 1 in 60,000 youths in this age group killed themselves in 1992, compared to 1 in 125,000 in 1980. The actual death rate among teens from firearms and poisoning has scarcely changed since the 1950s but the proportion attributed to suicide has risen dramatically, while the proportion attributed to accident has declined (Holinger 1994; Males 1996).

Furthermore, many "teen" suicide figures are overstated because they come from a database that includes people aged 15 to 24. Suicide rates for actual teenagers, aged 13 to 19, are among the lowest of any age group. In fact, notes Kirk Astoth, "teens as a whole are less likely to commit suicide than any other age group except prescents. ... Occupational surveys consistently show that parents and teachers are twice as likely, counselors and psychologists are four times as likely, and school administrators are six times as likely to commit suicide as are high school students" (Astoth, 1993, 413). (When I read this statistic to a teenage acquaintance of mine, he told me dourly, "Yeah, but they'll just say we drove them to it.")

It's not that we have more bad parents or more bad kids today than we used to. It's not that families have lost interest in their kids. And there is no evidence that the majority of today’s teenagers are more destructive or irresponsible than in the past. However, relations between adults and teens are especially strained today, not because youths have lost their childhood, as is usually suggested, but because they are not being adequately prepared for the new requirements of adulthood. In some ways, childhood has actually been prolonged, if it is measured by dependence on parents and segregation from adult activities. What many young people have lost are clear paths for gaining experience doing responsible, socially necessary work, either in or out of the home, and for moving away from parental supervision without losing contact with adults.

The most common dilemma facing adolescents, and the one that probably causes the most conflicts with adults, is their "belieflessness" in modern society. A rare piece of hard data in all the speculation about what makes adolescents tick is that young people do better on almost every level when they have meaningful involvement in useful and necessary tasks. This effect exists independently of their relationships with parents and friends. Teens also benefit from taking responsibility for younger or less-fortunate children. As one author observes, teens "need some experience of
being older, bigger, stronger, or wiser” (Hamburg 1992, 201; Maton 1990, 297).

But today’s adolescents have very few opportunities to do socially necessary work. The issue of roteness has been building for eighty years, ever since the abolition of child labor, the extension of schooling, and the decline in farm work that used to occupy many youths in the summer. The problem has accelerated recently, as many of the paths that once led teenagers toward servitude of productive and social roles have turned into dead ends. Instead of having a variety of routes to adulthood, as was true for most of American history, most youngsters are now expected to stay in high school until age 17 or 18.

High schools were originally designed for the most privileged sector of the population. Even now they tend to serve well only that half of the high school population that goes on to college. Non-college-bound students often tell me they feel like second-class citizens, not really of interest to the school. And in recent decades a high school degree has lost considerable value as a ticket to a stable job. Even partial college work confers fewer advantages than in the past. Because of these and other trends, researcher Laurence Steinberg claims, adolescence “has become a social and economic holding period” (1992, 30).

Parents are expected to do the holding. In 1968, two researchers commented that most teen-parent conflicts stemmed from the fact that “readiness for adulthood comes about two years later than the adolescent claims and about two years before the parent will admit” (Stone and Church 1968: 447; emphasis added). There is some evidence that the level of miscalculation has widened for both parents and kids.

From the point of view of parents, it is more necessary than ever for kids to stay in school longer than seek full-time work, and to delay marriage or pregnancy. After all, the age at which youths can support themselves, let alone a family, has reached a new high in the past two decades. From the kids’ point of view, though, this waiting period seems almost unbearable. They not only know a lot more than their folks about modern technology but they feel that they also know more about the facts of life than yesterday’s teens. Understandably, they strain at the leash.

The strain is accentuated by the fact that while the age of economic maturation has been rising, the age of physical maturation has been falling. The average age of puberty for girls, for instance, was 16 in 1520, 14 in 1900, and 13 in 1940. Today it is 12, and may still be dropping. For boys, the pace and timing of pubertal development is the most important factor in determining the age at which they first have sex; the influence of parents, friends, income, and race is secondary. Although parents and friends continue to exert considerable influence on the age at which girls begin to have sex, there are obvious limits to how long parents can hold their teenagers back (Nightingale and Welter 1988, 1994).

And even as the job market offers fewer and fewer ways for teens to assert their independence and show that they are more grown up than younger kids, consumer markets and the media offer more and more. Steinberg points out that while teens “have less autonomy to pursue socially-valued adult activities” than in the past, they “have more autonomy than did their counterparts previously in matters of leisure, discretionary consumption, and grooming.” As a result, adolescents “find it easier to purchase illicit drugs than to obtain legitimate employment” (Steinberg 1992, 30).

Another problem for parent-child relations is society’s expectation that teens abide by rules and habits that grown-ups have abandoned, and that parents ought to be able to make them do so. In preindustrial societies most kids were integrated into almost all adult activities, and right up until the twentieth century there were few separate standards or different laws for teens and adults. For centuries,
youth and adults played the same games by the same rules, both literally and figuratively. From "blind man's buff" to "follow the leader," games we now leave to children were once played by adults as well. There were few special rules or restrictions that applied solely to teens. All premarital sex was supposedly out of line in the nineteenth century; teen sex was not singled out as a special problem. In fact, as late as 1886, the "age of consent" for girls was only 10 in more than half the states in the union (Luker 1996). However, girls or women who did consent to premarital sex were ostracized, regardless of their age.

Today's adults have moved on to new amusements and freedoms, but we want teens to play the old games by the old rules. There may be some good reasons for this, but any segregated group soon develops its own institutions, rules, and value systems, and young people are no exception.

Sports is virtually the only adult-approved and peer-sanctioned realm where teens can demonstrate successive gains in competency, test their limits, and show themselves bigger, stronger, and better than younger children. But for teens who aren't good at sports, or those who reject it as busywork designed to keep them out of trouble, what's left? Music, clothes, drugs, alcohol—the choices differ. Many kids experiment and move on. Others get caught in the quagmire of seeking their identity through consumption. What we often call the youth culture is actually adult marketers seeking to commercially exploit youthful energy and rebellion. But sometimes consumerism seems the only way teens can show that they are growing up and experimenting with new social identities while adults try to keep them suspended in the children's world of school or summer camp.

Of course, many teens get a lot out of school and summer camp. But the dilemmas of rolelessness often put adolescents and their parents on a collision course. Young people feel that adults are plying them with make-work or asking them to put their lives on hold as they mature. They're pretty sure we didn't put our lives on hold at comparable levels of maturity, so they suspect us of hypocrisy. Often, they have a point.

On the other hand, what many parents recognize that risk taking among teenagers hasn't changed much since their own youth, they feel that there are more serious consequences for those behaviors than there used to be, given the presence of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), high-tech weapons, and new potent drugs. So adults are not necessarily being hypocritical when they hold kids to higher standards than they met themselves. Many of us fear that the second chances and lucky breaks we got may not be available to the next generation.

Balancing the legitimate fears of adults against the legitimate aspirations of teens is not easy. But it helps for both teens and adults to realize that many of their conflicts are triggered by changes in social and economic arrangements, not just family ones. The best way I've found to personally overthrow the sociological studies of rolelessness is to ask older men to talk about their life histories. Some of the most interesting discussions I've had over the past few years have been with men over age 60, whose memories extend beyond the transitional period of the 1960s and 1970s to what teen life was like in the 1950s, 1940s, or even 1930s.

The conversations usually start with comments on irresponsible behavior by today's teenage males, "I'd have had my hide tanned if I'd been caught doing that," someone always says, which generally leads to examples of how they got "whipped" or "taught a lesson." Soon, though, the subject switches to the things these upstanding men didn't get caught doing in their youth. And most of the time, it turns out the first lesson they learned by getting whumped was how not to get caught.

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When they talk about what really set them on the right path, almost every older man I’ve talked with recalls his first job. “I was supporting myself when I was 17” (16, 18, 19, even 15), or “I was in the army with a job to do,” the stories go: “What’s the matter with today’s kids?” And soon they provide their own answers. The typical job a teenager can get today provides neither the self-pride of economic independence nor the socializing benefits of working alongside adult mentors. Teens work in segregated jobs where the only adult who ever comes around is the boss, almost always in an adversarial role. Few jobs for youth allow them to start at the bottom and move up the middle rungs of the job ladder have been saved off. Marking time in dead-end jobs that teach no useful skills for the future, teens remain dependent on their parents for the basic necessities of life, simultaneously resenting that dependence and trying to manipulate it.

The stories older men tell about their first jobs are quite different from those told by today’s teens. Even men who later became businessmen or highly educated professionals say that their first jobs were in construction, factory work, or some menial setting where they worked beside older men who were more skilled or highly paid. The senior men teased the youngsters, sending them out for a grab-bag job or making them the butt of sometimes painful practical jokes, but they also showed kids the ropes and helped protect them from the foreman or boss. And they explained why “putting up with the crap” was worth it. After older men talk for a while about what these work experiences meant to them, they are almost always surprised to find themselves agreeing that the loss of unsupervised male mentoring may be a bigger problem for boys today than the rise of single-mother homes.

Even allowing for nostalgia, such work relations seem to have been critical experiences for the socialization of many young men in the past. Such jobs integrated youths into adult society, teaching skills they would continue to use as they aged, instead of segregating them in a separate peer culture. As late as 1940, about 60 percent of employed adolescents aged 16–17 worked in traditional workplaces, such as farms, factories, or construction sites. The jobs they did there, or at least the skills they used, might last well into their adult lives. By 1990, only 14 percent worked in such settings (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986).

Girls, who were excluded from many such jobs, have lost less in this arena of life. Up through the 1960s an adolescent girl typically had more responsibilities at home, from washing dishes to taking care of siblings, than she does today. While such tasks may have prepared girls for adult roles as w-ies and mothers, they also held girls back from further education or preparation for future work outside the home. The change in work patterns for girls has thus made it easier for them to see that they have paths toward adult independence.

On the other hand, it raises a different set of tensions between girls and their parents. The decline of the sexual double standard, without an equal decline in economic and social discrimination against women, leads parents to worry that their daughters may have too much opportunity too early, and to engage in sexual risk-taking for which girls still pay a far higher price than boys.

Another issue facing teens of both sexes is their increasing exclusion from public space. People talk about how kids today are unsupervised, and they often are; but in one sense teens are under more surveillance than in the past. Almost anyone about the age of 40 can remember places where young people could establish real physical, as opposed to psychic, distance from adults. In the suburbs it was undeveloped or abandoned lots and overgrown woods hidden from adult view, often with old buildings that you could deface without anyone caring. In the cities it was downtown areas where kids could hang out. Many of these places are now gone,
and only some kids feel comfortable in the malls that have replaced them.

Much has been written about the gentrification of public space in America, the displacement of the poor or socially marginal from their older niches, followed by fear and indignation from respectable people suddenly forced to actually see the homeless doing what they always used to do. Over the years we have also seen what I think of as an "adultification" of public space. Kids are usually allowed there, as long as they're young enough to be in their parents' charge. But where in your town are teenagers welcome on their own?

Teens today have fewer opportunities than in the past for gradual initiation into productive activities, both at home and in public, and fewer places to demonstrate their autonomy in socially approved ways. At the same time, though, they have more access to certain so-called adult forms of consumption than ever before. This makes it hard for adults to avoid the extremes of overly controlling, lock-'em-up positions on the one hand and frequent breakdowns of supervision on the other. Some parents clearly underprotect their kids. We've all seen parents who are too stressed to monitor their kids effectively or who have had their limits overrun so many times that they have given up. Other parents, however, overprotect their kids, trying to personally compensate for the loss of wider adult contacts and of safe retreats. Both extremes drive kids away. But, in most cases, both are reactions to structural dilemmas facing parents and teens rather than abdications of parental responsibility.

What Social Science Tells Us About Male–Female Conflicts

The same kind of perspective can be useful in sorting through conflicts between modern couples. I vividly remember the first people who forced me to bring my historical and social analysis down to individual cases. Following one of my talks, a couple stood up and described a conflict they were having in their marriage. She complained about how unappreciative he was of the effort she took in making gourmet dinners and keeping the house clean. He said: "Hang on a minute. I never asked her to do any of those things. I can't help it if she has higher standards than I do. I don't care what we have for dinner. I don't care if the floor gets mopped twice a week." They wanted me to comment on their situation.

This is no fair. I thought, as I tried to wriggle out of doing so. I've just summed up the history of family diversity and changing gender roles since colonial times and they want me to settle a marital argument—over housework, of all things? I'm not a counselor; I don't know anything about mediating these issues. I tried to change the subject, but they wouldn't let up, and the audience was clearly on their side. You think family history is relevant, they seemed to be saying. Prove it.

Trapped, but unwilling to pretend I had therapeutic expertise, I just said about something in my own research or training that might by any stretch of the imagination be helpful. The only thing that came to mind was a concept I had read about in an academic journal: "So," I said, feeling a bit silly, "perhaps the problem we have here lies in what social scientists would call your 'situated social power'" (Wartenberg 1980).

It sounded very academic, even downright pompous, but the more we talked about it, the more I realized this was a useful concept for them. In plain English it means that various groups in society have unequal access to economic resources, political power, and social status, and these social differences limit how fair or equal a personal relationship between two individuals from different groups can really be. Such social imbalances affect personal
behavior regardless of sincere intentions of both parties to "not let it make a difference."

Teachers, for example, have social power over students. I tell my students that I want them to speak their minds and express their disagreements with me. And I mean it. But often I don't even notice that they continue to defer until someone finally gets angry at me for "dominating the discussion." Even after all these years, my initial reaction is usually indignation. "I told you to speak up." I want to say; "it's not my fault if you hold back." Then I remind myself that in any situation of unequal power, it's the party with the most power who always assumes that other people can act totally free of outside constraints.

When a person with power pretends not to have it, people with less power feel doubly vulnerable. Although they continue to be unequal, they are now asked to put aside the psychological defenses they have constructed against that inequality, including a certain amount of self-protective guardedness. So they clam up or get sore, which leaves the more powerful person feeling that his or her big-hearted gestures are being rebuffed. This tension arises between people of different races and classes, between employees and supervisors, and between men and women, as well as between my students and me.

With this awareness, I try to remember that my students are never going to feel as free criticizing my work as I'm going to feel criticizing theirs. I have to adjust the structure of my class to facilitate discussion. I need to institute protected spaces for criticism, such as providing anonymous evaluation forms for assessing my performance. But I also have to recognize that our power imbalance will always create tensions between us. I should neither blame my students for that nor feel that I've failed to communicate my "authentic self" to them.

None of us exists independently of the social relations in which we operate.

Remembering how helpful this concept is to me in depersonalizing conflicts with students, I reminded the couple that men and women have different options in our society, outside and independent of their personal relationships. Research shows that men are happiest in a relationship when they don't have to do much housework and yet meals get made, clothes get ironed, and the house looks good. This doesn't mean they are sexist pigs. Who wouldn't be happier under those conditions?

But the wives of such men tend to be depressed. A wife may feel, especially if she jeopardized her earning power by taking time off to raise children, that she can't give up the domestic services she performs, because if her husband does get dissatisfied, she has fewer options than he does in the work world, and will be far worse off after a divorce.

Consciously or not, the wife in this particular marriage seemed to be assessing the risk of not keeping a nice house or preparing delicious meals on the table, and finding it too high to just relax and let the housework go. But she was also resenting her husband's unwillingness to help out. This very common pattern of seemingly voluntary sacrifice by the woman, followed by resentment for the man's failure to reciprocate, originates outside the individual relationship. The man was probably completely sincere about not caring if the work got done, but he was missing the point. His wife had looked around, seen what happened to wives who failed to please their husbands, and tried extra hard to make her husband happy. He could not understand her compulsion, and resented being asked to participate in what he saw as unnecessary work. Counseling and better communication might help, but would probably not totally remove the little kernel of fear in the wife's heart that stems from her perfectly reasonable assessment of the unequal social and economic options for men and women.
Similarly, two people trying to raise a child while they both work full-time are going to get stressed or angry. Part of the problem may be that the man isn’t doing enough at home (on average, research shows, having a man in the house adds hours to a woman’s workday) (Brase, Lloyd, and Leonard 1995; Hartmann 1983). Part of the problem may be that the woman is sabotaging her own stated desire to have the man do more—treating him as an unskilled assistant, refusing to relinquish her control over child-raising decisions, and keeping her domestic standards too high for him to meet. But another part of the problem will remain even if they see the most enlightened individuals in the world.

There’s no nonstressful way to divide three full-time jobs between two individuals. Better communication can make the sacrifices more fair, or help clear away the side issues that get entangled with the stress, but the strains are a social problem existing outside the relationship. The solution does not lie in Maritans learning to talk Venucian or Venucians being tolerant of the cultural oddities of Maritans, as one pop psychologist describes the differences between men and women, but in changing the job structures and social support networks for family life. Until businesses and schools adjust their hours and policies to the realities of two-earner families, even the best-intentioned couples are going to have difficult times.

Improving communication or using the shortcuts offered by self-help books can alleviate some of the conflicts between men and women in this period of rapidly changing roles and expectations. But addressing communication problems alone ignores the differing social options and the patterned experiences of inequality that continually re-create such problems between men and women. So people move from one self-help book to another; they try out new encounter groups and memorize new techniques; they slip back and must start all over again. They are medicating the symptoms without solving the problem.

For example, the Venucian–Maritan reference comes from best-selling author John Gray, who has found a strikingly effective analogy for getting men and women to realize that they bring different assumptions and experiences to relationships. Men, he says, come from different planets. They need to learn each other’s culture and language. Gray tells women why men’s periodic withdrawals from communication do not mean lack of interest in a relationship. Maritans, he says, like to retreat to caves in times of stress, while Venucians tend to count around, offering each other support and empathy. He explains to men that women are often just asking for reassurance, not trying to control men’s lives, when they pursue subjects past the male comfort zone (Gray 1992).

But Gray doesn’t urge either sex to make any big changes, merely to take “tiny steps toward understanding the other.” He offers women hints on how to ask their partners for help without antagonizing them or making them feel manipulated, but he doesn’t demand that men share housework or that women accept the responsibilities that go with egalitarian relationships. For Gray, a healthy relationship exists “when both partners have permission to ask for what they want and need, and they both have permission to say no if they choose.” This is certainly better than no one feeling free to ask, but it leaves a rather large set of issues unresolved (Gray 1992, 265; Peterson 1994).

The problem is that many advice books refuse to ask hard questions about the division of household work and decision-making power. In a section called “Sorting points with the opposite sex,” for example, Gray’s advice to women revolves around issues such as not criticizing men for their driving or choice of restaurants. Men, by contrast, are advised:
"offer to make dinner," "occasionally offer to wash the dishes," "compliment her on how she looks," "give her four hugs a day," and "don’t flick the remote control to different channels when she is watching TV with you" (Gray 1992; Sen 1983).

Now, most women will say that the book would be worth its weight in gold if their husbands would just follow that last tip, but the fact remains that the unequal bargaining power and social support systems for men and women are not addressed, or even acknowledged, in this kind of advice. In the long run, failure to address the roots of gender differences perpetuates the problem of communication, or merely replaces one set of misunderstandings with another. As therapist Betty Carter writes, communicating about feelings rather than addressing issues of power and daily behavior can lead to manipulation that eventually degenerates into mutual blame and psychological name-calling (Carter 1996): If we’re going to think of men and women as being from different planets, they need more than guidebooks and language translations; we must make sure that the social, economic, and political treaties they operate under are fair to both parties.

It’s not only women’s dissatisfaction that are addressed by a historical and sociological perspective. Men often complain that feminists ignore male insecurities and burdens, and they have a point. Men do feel injured and alienated, despite their economic and political advantages over women of the same social group. But history and sociology can identify the sources of men’s pain a lot more accurately than myths about the loss of some heroic age of male bonding when Australian aborigines, Chinese sun kings, and Greek warriors marched to their own drumbeat. Going "back to the woods" makes a nice weekend retreat, but it doesn’t help men restructure their long-term relationships or identify the social, economic, and political changes they need to improve their family lives (Bly 1996).

Male Paz is the other side of male power. Not all men, contrary to the rhetoric of masculinity, can be at the top of the pyramid. The contrast between rhetoric and reality is very painful for men whose race, class, health, or even height does not allow them to wield power, exercise authority, or just cut a figure imposing enough to qualify as a "real man." Even successful men pay a high price for their control and authority. The competitive, hierarchial environments men are encouraged to operate in cut them off from intimacy and penalize them for letting down their guard. The myth that male power is all individually achieved, not socially structured, means masculinity can be lost if it is not constantly proven in daily behavior (Birnes 1994; Lehne 1989).

Structural analysis helps us get beyond the question of "who hurts more" to explore the different rewards and penalties that traditional gender roles impose on today’s men and women. For girls, societal pressures descend heavily at about age 11 or 12, penalizing them for excelling and creating a sharp drop in their self-esteem. There is overwhelming evidence, for example, that girls are treated in ways that hinder their academic and intellectual development. But sometimes this discrimination takes the form of too easy praise and too little pressure to complete a task, leading boys to feel that "girls get off easy." And almost any parent can testify that boys are subject to a much earlier, more abrupt campaign to extinguish the

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1 For a critique of Bly’s point of view, seeConnell 1992.

2 As Andrew Gourley points out (1989), women's needs are declined for more significantly than men's. Unless their frustrations with the marriage bargain are addressed more directly, men and women could end up on different planets.
compassion, empathy, and expression of feelings that young boys initially display as openly as girls. The list of derogatory words for boys who don’t act masculine is miles longer than the list of disparaging words for girls who don’t act feminine. Boys who don’t get the message quickly enough are treated brutally. Those who do get the message find that the very success of their effort to “be a man” earns mistrust and fear as well as admiration. In an article that my male students invariably love, Eugene Augustine points out that people always talk about “innocent women and children” in describing victims of war or terrorism. Is there no such thing as an innocent man? (August 1992; Gilligan and Brown 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hammer 1990; Kann 1986; Ornstein 1994; Sadker and Sadker 1994).

It’s good to get past caricatures of female victims and male villains, but it is too simplistic to say that we just have to accept our differences. A man’s fear of failure and discomfort with intimacy, for example, come from his socially structured need to constantly have others affirm his competence, self-reliance, or superiority. This is the downside of what he must do to exercise power and privilege. For women, lack of power often leads to fear of success. The downside of women’s comfort with intimacy is discomfort with asserting authority.

As three researchers in the psychology of gender summarize the tradeoffs, boys “get encouraged to be independent and powerful, possibly at the cost of distancing themselves from intimacy.” The result is that boys “tend to be overrepresented in the psychopathologies involving aggression.” Girls, by contrast, “get rewarded for being compliant and for establishing intimate relations, possibly at the cost of achieving autonomy and control over their choices.” This may be why girls are “overrepresented in the psychopathologies involving depression” (Cowan, Cowan, and Krieg 1993; 1990).

The solution suggested by historical and social analysis is not for men and women to feel each other’s pain but to equalize their power and access to resources. That is the only way they can relate with fairness and integrity, so that unequal and therefore inherently dishonorable relations do not deform their identities. Men must be willing to give up their advantages over women if they hope to build healthy relationships with other sex. Women must be willing to accept tough criticism and give up superficial ”privileges” such as being able to cry their way out of a speeding ticket if they hope to develop the inner resources to be high achievers . . .

References


