

BOOK REVIEW

Boys Will Be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence.

By Myriam Miedzian. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 337 pp. \$20.00.

Boys Will Be Boys is an authoritative but highly readable study of the causes and cures of male violence, which is to say, most violence. The book is written for the general reader but goes far beyond popularizing social scientific research. Author Myriam Miedzian presents a rigorous and original theoretical framework that both makes sense of existing research and provides a basis for effective social policy. This is a book for social scientists and policy-makers, no less than parents struggling to raise children in the midst of our culture of violence. It is ideal for use as a college text in peace studies, criminal justice, or any social science course on violence.

The book encompasses the topic of direct violence, or the use or threat of physical force to hurt or gain power over others, thus including everything from physical spouse abuse to militarism. This definition excludes structural violence, that is, the system of property relations that creates exploited and marginalized classes. Miedzian explains direct violence in terms of structural factors, however—among them the maintenance of a culture of violence by media and entertainment industries willing to exploit the pathological potentials of the public psyche in order to maximize profits. What emerges from the book is an understanding of violence as neither biologically preordained nor entirely under the control of the individuals who act violently. Rather, violence is viewed as developing out of an interaction between a biological potential and the social environment, the latter being created by human beings and therefore under human control.

Boys Will Be Boys deals equally with the poor man's violence, which is generally defined as criminal or terrorist, as well as with the rich man's violence, which is generally shrouded in the legitimacy of national or internal security policy. Both kinds of violence are overwhelmingly committed by males and primarily against males. While this gender specificity may be obvious, its significance is not systematically explored by most studies on violence, which tend to abstract the issue from its gender context. Here *Boys Will Be Boys* breaks new

ground, and does so in the best of the feminist tradition—with courage, intellect, and empathy.

Miedzian generously concedes all that can reasonably be conceded to sociobiology and hormonal research regarding the biological origins of violence. But those who view violent behavior as genetically preprogrammed will not find support in this book for their ideological agenda. Biological factors are presented as potentialities for violence, such as the apparently lower thresholds for frustration and greater proclivities for “rough and tumble play” observed in many boys compared with girls. In addition, the author reviews evidence that a larger proportion of males than females are put at risk for violent behavior by conditions with some genetic basis, such as ADDH (attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity).

Breaking out of the sterile nature/nurture dichotomy, however, Miedzian shows how these biological potentialities are shaped and amplified by child-raising practices, mass communications, and other cultural institutions, which provide the models for fully developed violent behaviors. She argues persuasively that even individuals suffering from genetic disabilities need not succumb to a life of violent conduct were they to receive adequate professional care and live in a culture that discouraged violence, rather than encouraged it.

Related to genetic theories of violence is the kind of model that attempts to explain violent behavior as a discharge of aggressive energy that builds up like the pressure exerted by a liquid or gas on the walls of a container. Dating back to Freud and implicit in recent theories of Bruno Bettelheim, Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Diane Levin, and others, this “hydraulic” model predicts a decrease in violence following wars, violent sporting events, and other presumed “discharges” of aggressive energy. Miedzian cited empirical studies showing that such events tend to be followed by an *increase* in societal violence.

Having analyzed the limited role of genetic factors in explaining fully developed violent behavior and having challenged the “hydraulic” model of how such factors operate, Miedzian shows how social factors program violent behavior and how this situation could be reversed through a range of specific social policies. A review of research in sociology and anthropology leads the author to conclude that the absence of a nurturing, involved father puts boys at higher risk for committing acts of violence. She also cites psychoanalytically oriented literature in support of this position, including Dorothy Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. The exclusion of males from child-raising, which is maintained by taboos such as the one against boys playing with dolls, is shown to deprive the male child of a positive gender model. Boys so deprived can come to a masculine identity only by negating early identification with their mothers.

Males raised in infancy and early childhood almost exclusively by females are thus found to be chronically insecure about their gender identity as adults. Miedzian uses the term “masculine mystique” for the competitiveness, emotional detachment, and violence that result from the need of such men to prove

their masculinity. Most of the book is devoted to an in-depth analysis of how specific models for the playing out of these needs are provided by television, toys, sports, entertainment, and warfare, and how these various domains of culture reinforce one another and the values of the masculine mystique.

While *Boys Will Be Boys* does deal with the role of violent child abuse as a factor in perpetuating the cycle of violence, those who view child abuse as *the* factor will feel the book misses its centrality. The author argues that the child abuse theory fails to explain why large segments of the female population who have suffered violent child abuse do not become as violent as abused males become. Here Miedzian and the child abuse theorists would appear to be answering two different questions, both of which are necessary to a complete explanation.

Miedzian's focus on the insecurity of gender identity of males reared by females explains the deep motivation of such males to "prove their masculinity." The child abuse theory, on the other hand, may shed light on the question of why proving masculinity ultimately takes the form of violent behavior. While *Boys Will Be Boys* gives a thorough account of how the culture of violence programs the specific forms violent behavior takes, the child abuse theory adds another dimension of explanation regarding the ultimate origin of the fascination with violence generally.

Miedzian's analysis of the child-raising correlates and culture of violence leads naturally to social policy correctives. These include the expansion of successful school programs in parenting for both boys and girls, and other policies for breaking down barriers to paternal involvement in child-raising. They include "taking children out of the commercial market" by establishing a noncommercial public broadcasting system for children and mandatory lock-boxes on television sets and by regulating the toy industry and other purveyors of children's entertainment to protect children from the teaching of violence, much as children are currently protected against sexually explicit material. (Lock-boxes are devices that would permit parents to exert some control over what their children watch on TV.)

Even many who may disagree with parts of Myriam Miedzian's analysis and policy agenda will agree, I believe, that she is asking the right questions. Further, she has provided a sorely needed unified frame of reference for understanding our diverse epidemics of violence at the domestic, municipal, and international levels and for designing effective social responses. *Boys Will Be Boys* deserves to be read widely and acted upon.

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