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# Book Review: The Boy Crisis

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Farrell, Warren, and John Gray. 2018. *The Boy Crisis*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.



Warren Farrell and John Gray sound an alarm for boys in their latest popular psychology text, *The Boy Crisis*. In it, they address contributors to a global crisis affecting boys and men characterized by higher rates of suicide, violence, incarceration, attention disorders, and school dropout than those for girls. Farrell and Gray argue boys are struggling with a “purpose void” that is symptomatic of changing norms: the lauded masculine ideal of the stoic, physically tough, sole provider is becoming less rigid across Western cultures. Combined with lower rates of father involvement in boys’ lives, the authors argue today’s boys are unprepared to thrive personally and professionally. They raise important questions about narrow definitions of masculinity, asking readers to think critically about how feminist movements must also be concerned with boys’ liberation from stringent gender norms. However, the authors rely on sensationalist tactics and the misrepresentation of scientific evidence in order to render a narrative that remains unsupported by the multidisciplinary community of scholars on boys’ development (Dumas and Nelson 2016; Husain and Millimet 2009; Luttrell 2012; Noguera 2008; Way 2011).

As the title announces, Farrell and Gray are committed to convincing readers that all boys everywhere, no matter their race or socioeconomic status, are in peril. A more nuanced sociological lens may refine the authors’ claims. By ignoring power, status, or other social identities beyond gender, Farrell and Gray fail to reach what sociologists often refer to as a “thick” analysis of culture (Geertz 1994). Thick interpretations require recognizing the social hierarchies and power structures in which boys’ lives are embedded, and without these considerations, the authors reach “thin” conclusions that are often sensationalist (e.g., “The new enemy is not Hitler. It is dad deprivation,” 388). Scholars do not deny many of the issues raised by Farrell and Gray, such as the importance of fathers and the prevalence of ADHD, as pressing concerns in the lives of children (e.g., Cabrera et al. 2018; Sayal et al. 2018). Yet, the primary factors associated with boys’ positive social and emotional development highlighted across the past three decades—such as the importance of maintaining close same-gender friendships and rejecting harmful norms of masculinity—are not mentioned (Chu 2014; Rogers and Way 2018, Rogers et al. 2017; Way 2011; Wong et al. 2017). Their most central argument, that father absence is the overriding contributor to boys’ negative outcomes, is at odds with evidence from an established literature (APA 2018).

The authors intend to provide the reader with sophisticated evidence on the status of boys' development, but they present poor statistical interpretations with misleading claims. For example, Farrell and Gray cite research from *Pediatrics* on the effects of father loss on boys' telomere length, a biomarker associated with disease and longevity (Mitchell et al. 2017). They say telomere length was shorter among boys with deceased or absent fathers but fail to mention that the association between father loss and telomere length was mediated (in some cases fully mediated—95 percent) by family income. Simplifications are common throughout the text's 32 chapters. When summarizing research on fluctuations in boys' IQs over time, Farrell and Gray say father involvement increases boys' intelligence before age 11 (35). The research cited by the authors reported instead that father's social class, not father involvement, was the most powerful correlate associated with IQ (Nettle 2008). Although the issues highlighted by the authors are pressing, readers should be aware of potential oversights regarding accuracy.

Not all the information put forward in *The Boy Crisis* is misleading, but it is often presented in ways that promote the stereotype that boys are emotionally illiterate. Farrell and Gray stress that boys are suffering from a "compassion void" (260), and, as a result, their "latent" emotional intelligence should be nurtured to prepare them for the future job market. They say "emotional intelligence will be paramount for your son's future: the more sophisticated artificial intelligence becomes, the more we will yearn for humans to fill the emotional intelligence void" (31). Yet, these skills are critical for social and emotional well-being more broadly. Judy Chu (2014) points out that even in the preschool years, boys are emotionally astute and deeply sensitive to the intricacies of relationships. Just as child development scholars have pointed out that girls do not inherently lack agency or outspokenness, boys' resistance to losing their *already present* emotional acuity can and should be nurtured by friends, teachers, and parents (APA 2018; Way et al. 2014; Wong et al. 2017).

It is important to note the many ways in which boys thrive and report a sense of purpose, despite the authors' claims that boys lack a "reason for being" as "fewer warriors were needed" and women "began to share the breadwinner role" (46). Evidence suggests many boys find meaning and purpose in their friendships, particularly in their relationships with other boys. In Niobe Way's (2013: 201) qualitative interview research with early to late adolescents, boys from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds make it clear their relationships are vital pieces of their identity, stating that without friends, they would "feel lost." A review of the literature highlighted boys'

many aspirations and future plans rather than a sense of gender-role-related hopelessness. It may be the case that definitions of masculinity are broadening in many cultures, but researchers do not report this has caused a sense of purposeless (e.g., Singleton 2008; Yowell 2002).

*The Boy Crisis* has been praised by celebrities and mainstream US news programs. It is, in many ways, a “dominant” perspective on boys’ development. However, the academic community holds these authors to a different standard than nonacademic publishing sources. Through varying cross-discipline methodologies, scholars attempt to characterize boys’ struggles and strengths by drawing on their participants’ voices—a practice firmly grounded in the idea that there are no substitutes for boys’ diverse understandings of their own lives, and one that *The Boy Crisis* neglects (Dumas and Nelson 2016; Way 2011). Scholars of boys’ development seek to complicate an otherwise static narrative by situating evidence within boys’ diverse cultures and contexts. These empirical traditions highlight the larger sociological realities of children’s lives, particularly the ways in which gender issues are also issues of race and class. *The Boy Crisis* is an important read for anyone who works or conducts research with boys, as texts that provide “thin” interpretations help us to become more attuned to “thickening” these arguments with empirical data.

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