

Alex Juarez  
OAKES 80-C1  
[alajuare@ucsc.edu](mailto:alajuare@ucsc.edu)

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## The True Purpose of Masculinity

Michael S. Kimmel is an American sociologist who specializes in gender studies, especially masculinity and its effects on society. One of his works, *Masculinity as Homophobia*, explains how the concept of masculinity is as toxic to men as it is to women. It also redefines men's true fear; not women gaining power, but other men finding out they themselves have no power. Society perpetuates aggressive male gender roles that harm men rather than help them by reinforcing morally devaluing qualities through media and fellow peers. Men are either pitted violently against each other or subtly against anyone different, all to maintain a “macho” bravado. As a male, I can not only relate but add onto Kimmel's analysis, as I myself have been criticized for not following societal masculinity (since I am not as “manly” as I should be, according to gender norms).

Kimmel writes that men throughout history judge other men based on their masculinity - are they perceived enough as a man, or are they not man enough? The most common way society believes a man is “manly enough” is through violence between men. He clarifies that, in order to prove themselves to others, men will resort to displaying physical power over one another. He remarks that he and a friend have a

standing bet: “I can walk onto any playground in America ... and by asking one question, I can provoke a fight. That question is simple: ‘Who’s a sissy around here?’” (104). By this simple challenge, Kimmel goes on, he can have any male listeners enter a battle royale. This is because, from childhood on, men are constantly evaluated on their masculinity and are made sure not to be seen as a “sissy” - or “unmanly”. I can recall a memory in my earlier childhood that reflected something like this. In elementary school, a group of (male) friends and I used to gather at the highest slide of the playground. We would play an unusual game - after getting into the slide, before we started to come down, we jumped off over the side and landed on the not-so-spongy ground. Technically speaking, the goal of the game was to show the least amount of pain, because those who whined were outed - not labeled as sissies, per se, but recognized as not very pain-tolerant. I was the first to admit pain, and thus admit I was “weaker” than they were. Of course this game was wildly ridiculous, but it reflected our desire to prove to one another how manly we were, even at the cost of our bodies. As long as men are able to cover their hurt, they are seen as invulnerable. This is not how human behavior normally works - we are able to recognize pain and can be empathetic if not sympathetic to one another - yet American society prefers that every man fits the very specific, unrealistic archetype of the “warrior man”: cool, tough, and merciless.

According to Kimmel, while violence is a physical and direct form of establishing masculinity, men find other ways to impose their manliness. The more subtle the stipulation of the male gender role, the easier to enforce. Another consequence of societal masculinity is men feeling the need to dominate those considered below them

in a hierarchy, whether they be inferior men or women. "Inferior men" here can mean anyone from homosexual men, to men of color, to poorer men. The dominant men, thus, are rich, white, heterosexual, elitist men. Kimmel asserts that heterosexual men understand ways to ensure no one else - especially other men - get the "wrong idea" about them (this "wrong idea", again, being a sissy). One of them, he notes, is "Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet, so it is impossible for any woman to get the wrong idea about you." (105). Heterosexual men feel they must be able to impress women, or rather impress other men gender policing them, to prove how masculine they are. Paired with the other characteristic of violent tendencies, this often leads to men being sexually aggressive to women, sometimes as far as sexual assault. In fact, once during high school a female friend of mine recounted how she felt followed in Downtown LA by a dodgy older man. I warned her how dangerous her situation was, but in the end we both blew it off, assuming it to be a one-time occurrence. In truth, however, this situation is played out time and time again, because many men believe they are entitled to something, such as a woman, or power over one. If men are too timid to advance on women, they are again seen as sissies and thus fall under the "inferior men" umbrella term. The qualities of patience and understanding are irrelevant when it comes to masculinity, since they are simply "unmanly", and are instead traded for vanity and aggression. Society betrays qualities seen as humanly, preferring qualities seen instead just as manly.

Kimmel makes clear many points about masculinity that I assumed was only felt by men with an inferiority complex (meaning they feel less valued than other men). I

now understand it is this twisted definition of what makes a man that creates such inferiority complexes in men. Those physically weaker or more emotionally open are perceived as less than men, reducing their self-esteem among their peers. In my family, I was often identified as the weakest male; many family members noticed I had shown no interest in sports or entertaining bets and joining in any “man talk” (which can either include degrading women by the bachelors or comparing physical abilities by the husbands). The males in my family always pressured me to adhere to certain roles, such as having a drink with them, looking for a nice girlfriend, or enlisting in sports teams or even the Army. At one point, one of my uncles asked if I was gay, to my shock (which I am not). I chalked it up mostly to them caring for my well-being (and who's to say they aren't), but understanding how masculinity works now I see that they worried more about how society saw me than how I saw myself.

I also occasionally perpetuated gender roles myself. I didn't specifically want girls to join me in physical games when I was a kid, because I was led to assume by male standards that women were inferior than men; therefore, they wouldn't be able to give me a competitive edge in any sports. I also always tried to be more knowledgeable than my other male friends. Since I clearly couldn't outrank anyone in a physical sense, I concentrated on knowing as many useless facts as I could to make them feel less confident about their own thoughts. In either case, I never intended to hurt anyone's feelings for my own benefit, but in reality that's exactly what was happening. I see these actions linked to how society defines manliness, and they prove Kimmel's point that

modern society contorts what values the general population quietly cherish to push an agenda of aggressive manliness. That is not the kind of person I want to be.

Because men feel they must uphold masculine standards to be taken seriously, they believe they have no choice but to follow what society provides as guidelines for men. If they do not do so, society abandons them as lost causes for the male motive of domination. Many people can counter that aggressive masculinity is simply how nature designed the males of almost every species on earth. This is very true in some cases - for most animals, the males are meant to protect the family as they're physically larger and stronger, while the females care for the family as they birth the babies and often provide milk. Yet, we've evolved past the need for a defined "protector" and defined "caretaker". As long as society refuses to break away from the gender binary system, equality can never be truly achieved. Masculinity will continue to be over-exaggerated, and other movements like the feminist movement will continue to be deemed irrelevant. Kimmel offers that breaking away from gender roles and opting for a more equal society comes with a society that accepts qualities rather than rejects them, and I agree wholeheartedly.

### Bibliography

from *Reconstructing Gender* ed. Estelle Disch. Boston, MA : McGraw-Hill, 2004.