Learning Masculinity

Michael Messner’s “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinites.”

Organized sports is both a gendered institution that reflects dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity and a gendering institution that helps construct the gender order.

“First experiences in sports might often come through relationships with brothers or older male relatives, and the early emotional salience of sports was often directly related to a boy’s relationship with his father.” (p. 117)

“For the boy who both seeks and fears attachment to others, the rule-bound structure of organized sports can promise to be a safe place in which to seek nonintimate attachment with others within a context that maintains clear boundaries, distance, and separation.” (p. 118)

Sports encourage the development of “conditional self-worth” since acceptance from others depends on being a winner. This makes developing intimate relationships with others more difficult.

Men from lower-status backgrounds tend to view sports in the context of the community (not just their families). Middle-class environments offer more options so middle-class boys are more likely to focus on nonathletic goals. For many lower-status boys, sports becomes the place within which to construct a masculine identity.

Pollack’s “Inside the World of Boys”

Many boys live “behind a mask of masculine bravado that hides the genuine self to conform to our society’s expectations; they feel it is necessary to cut themselves off from any feelings that society teaches them are unacceptable for men and boys—fear, uncertainty, feelings of loneliness and need.” (p. 220)

“The Boy Code puts boys and men into a gender straitjacket that constrains not only them but everyone else, reducing us all as human beings, and eventually making us strangers to ourselves and to one another—or, at least, not as strongly connected to one another as we long to be.”