

Ask Dr. Robertson 5—Self-Actualization, Boys, and Young Males: Solution:Problem::Hammer:Nail



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Image Credit: Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson.

By [Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#)

[Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson](#) is a [Registered Doctoral Psychologist](#) with expertise in Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Human Resource Development. He earned qualifications in Social Work too.

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Famously, so famous, in fact, as to become a common phrase indicative of common sense wisdom—which, as one may joke about ‘common sense,’ may be uncommon sometimes and other times not-so-wise, the late Abraham Maslow, American Psychologist, remarked on the existence of problems and tools to solve them:

I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.

Dr. Philip Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus at Stanford University, and others—including Dr. Warren Farrell, who speaks in a pace and tone so as not to offend even the fly on the wall, for content reasons, obviously—continue to focus on some overlooked issues for males, young males and boys in particular; where as a collective, interrelated culture, these become issues for us, too. Maslow constructed the hierarchy of needs in the 1943 paper entitled *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

Zimbardo, who specializes in the psychology of evil (Stanford Prison Experiment in experiment and Abu Ghraib in reality, though this experiment came under more critical scrutiny, recently) and time perspective (e.g., living, mentally speaking, in the past, the present, or future), spoke on young men and boys since the early 2010s right into the present.

In particular, Zimbardo spoke on the failure of some boys and young men in multiple domains of life, where mainstream cultures—multinationally speaking—demand certain levels of performance and expect achievement of specific milestones by culturally affirmed ages for social approval. If not, then cue the epithets and societal reproval.

It is not an all-or-nothing evaluation, but it is a change in the ratio of the boys and young men succeeding compared to previous generations on average—and, especially, in contrast to the wonderful rise of girls and women. It becomes a dual-facet phenomenon of decline for boys and young men and incline for girls and young women with higher-order analysis implications, in time and in persistence of culture in bounded geography. Zimbardo reflected on the failures, by his estimation, as indicative of a hijacking or hacking of the hierarchy of needs by pornography, video games, and fatherlessness/(male-)mentorlessness—in part.

That is to say, with the self-fulfillment and psychological needs removed from the hierarchy of needs or ignored by the boys and young men, this left, at least, pornography, video games, and mentorlessness as central pillars in the decline of self-actualization and psychological needs, in boys and young men.

In the end, Zimbardo argues the result becomes a context in which young men and boys find themselves fulfilled as purely safety-and-physiological-needs-based beings, while also creating, in his research and assertions, i.e., not formally accepted by the academic psychological community in the DSM-5, “arousal addictions”: a psychological mode of a move towards pleasure and drift, or shift, away from pain in every life dynamic with a consistent need for novelty, which is an addiction for similar hyperstimuli with perpetual novelty, e.g., pornography and video games, as opposed to the same hyperstimuli, e.g., cocaine and gambling.

Of course, as a side remark, Dr. Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., American Psychologist and Physician, describes endocrine disruptors and educational system changes as additional factors in this.

No planning, no contingencies, no notions of the future, no orientation towards larger life goals, and little or no incentive to move out of this hedonistic, presentist mental state. Did Maslow predict this psychological orientation of young men and boys? If so, how? Did anyone (else)?

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson: Your pre-amble certainly covers a lot of ground, Scott! The short answer as to whether Maslow predicted the current psychological orientation of young men and boys is “no.” He was interested in individual as opposed to collective psychological development. On the other hand, his hierarchy of needs may be applied to such developments.

There is a lot of evidence that males in modern Euro-American cultures are not doing well. Males, on average, die younger. Male unemployment is increasing with large numbers of younger males considered virtually unemployable, yet 97% of workplace deaths are men. Seventy percent of graduates in Canadian universities are women. Male suicide rates are four times that of women. Men are more likely to suffer from addictions, be incarcerated and be victims of violent crime. Eighty percent of homeless are men. Things have gotten worse for men since ex-feminist Warren Farrell wrote his book two and a half decades ago. From a Maslow hierarchy of needs perspective, things have not been going well, and part of that can be attributed to the influence of feminism.

Sax, whom you also referenced, in a brilliant analysis of kindergarten curricula in the United States, said that the curricula had been changed in preceding decades to conform to girl’s normative development. Specifically, he said that kindergartens had come to emphasize verbal skills which developmentally favour girls at that age. Had kindergartens emphasized spatial skills then boys would have been favoured. The result of this gynocentric curricula is that boys are more likely to experience frustration in their early schools, like school less, and more frequently experience failure. If female normative development and behaviour is set as normative across society, then boys and men will be disadvantaged. But that is only part of the story.

Using qualitative methods, I was able to demonstrate that a diverse sample of Canadian men have experienced harsh stigma as a result of their sex. Stigma is the imputation of characteristics to a class of people that renders them unfit for certain social roles. The men were viewed as a threat to others or irresponsible with respect to family responsibilities simply because they were men. As a result, they were judged as unfit, or less fit, in their roles as parents or as employees in specific occupations despite a lack of evidence of any wrongdoing. We see this stigma in society with notions of “toxic masculinity” where guilt does not have to be proven, it is assumed. Thus, even when men overcome disadvantages built into education, they remain at a disadvantage. The alienation of fathers from their families, in large part because of stigma, compounds the problem because boys, raised by single parent mothers, are less likely to have effective role models matching their gender and they are more likely to experience addictions, incarceration and suicide.

So, as Zimbardo has argued, many young men are dropping out. They are not competing for careers. They are not establishing families. They are not contributing meaningfully to society. They are occupying themselves with short term gratification. Maslow argued that until self-esteem needs are met, people are more preoccupied with meeting those needs than pursuing self-actualization. If a group of people are disadvantaged in education and suffer stigma for being a member of their group, it could be expected that in accepting the dominant society’s normative view, they suffer low genderized self-esteem. Zimbardo’s famous prison experiment showed definitively that people tend to become the roles societies set for them. The scary implication of this is that many of these young men could become the “toxic masculine” stereotype feminists have set for them. But I think there is another way of looking at this.

About three decades before Maslow built his famous pyramid, Alfred Adler said that all humans are born with a “striving for perfection” which is similar to Maslow’s idea of self-actualization. Those who give up this striving are people who are discouraged and this describes those young men who are dropping out. We need to combat society’s message to boys that they are both bad and failures and we need to reintroduce the striving for goodness.

Robertson's article on Male Stigma can be found at:

https://www.hawkeyeassociates.ca/images/pdf/academic/Male_Stigma.pdf

Jacobsen: Following from the previous question, what therapeutic methods, in a professional setting—group and one-on-one, work with the young men and boys, who, by standard cultural expectations, continue to fail at, probably, increasing rates?

Robertson: In 2012 I attended a workshop on how to counsel men at a Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association annual convention. The presenters were both women one of whom asked, with wide eyed innocence, how many of the attendees, who were overwhelmingly women, had actually counselled a man. Fewer than half the workshop participants raised their hands. The workshop then proceeded with a review of statistics on how few men seek psychotherapy, how men experience depression and suicide ideation less but nonetheless commit suicide at higher rates, and how men sublimate their mental health needs through alcohol, anger, and violence. The prescription of the presenters was that men need to learn how to admit their failings and seek help; they need to be in touch with their feelings more and make themselves “vulnerable” by discussing those feelings; and they need to find allies and build support systems. In short, they need to become more like women.

The suggestions of these female facilitators are not totally wrong. Many men benefit from honing these skills; but I would argue that many women would benefit from learning skills in which men tend to more easily excel. The problem with the paradigm that was presented at this workshop is exactly the problem Sax found with gynocentric kindergarten curricula—it sets up female developmental experience as normative to which both sexes should aspire.

The dominant themes in psychotherapy have always been gyno-normative, even when most of the practitioners were male. For example, Freud's patients were all female (and rich females at that), and it was on his experience with them that he based his theories. It is probably no coincidence that the psychoanalysis he developed consists of symbolism, dream interpretation,

random thoughts, free associations and fantasies in a process that can take years. In contrast, the male approach is to define a problem and solve it. Sometimes this involves setting aside one's emotions so that rational processes are better able to take charge. My experience with men is that they do not want to be in therapy for a long time. Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy makes sense for many men although women may equally benefit from this approach.

I don't mean to recapitulate John Grey's Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus thesis. A non-sexist psychotherapy will treat each person as a culture of one with the therapist setting out to learn that culture; however, we need to recognize that there are certain tendencies that may be culturally or genetically driven. Sexist psychotherapy occurs when the normative experience of one sex is set as the norm for both. For example, the presenters at the "How to Counsel Men" workshop I just cited were mystified as to how it was that men were far more likely to commit suicide than women but were far less likely to suffer from depression. It did not occur to them that the American Psychological Association defines depression using the female normative experience. Male symptoms that differ from the female expression are not recognized, and I submit this is one reason why men are under diagnosed with this condition.

It is not at all clear that men's mental health needs will receive serious attention any time soon. The APA Guidelines for the Psychological Practice with Men and Boys released last year, attempts to link traditional masculinity to racism, ageism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, and this, we are told, results in "personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self." The unsubstantiated suggestion is made that men commit higher levels of intimate partner violence and are estranged from their children because they lack the will or ability to have positive involvement in healthy family relationships. Psychologists are cautioned about believing their male clients who protest their innocence because, in the words of the APA, "Male privilege tends to be invisible to men."

I think we should consider the possibility that men do not seek counselling or therapy because they do not see counsellors and therapists as sympathetic to

their experiences and the APA guidelines fail to dispel this perception. This should not be seen as an indictment against all therapists. Jordan Peterson's "Twelve Steps" are based on practices that are common to Rational Emotive and Cognitive Behavioural therapies, and he expressed surprise that his approach has been overwhelmingly endorsed by young men because those approaches are gender neutral. I think his experience demonstrates that men are willing to seek help for their mental health issues if the helpers are seen to be sympathetic to their lived experience.

My advice to men who are interested in psychotherapy is to interview a number of psychotherapists before settling on one. Ensure that the therapist you choose is sympathetic to your needs and has an approach with which you feel comfortable. I think most therapists would feel comfortable answering such questions, and if they do not, you do not want to use the services of that therapist.

Jacobsen: Recalling a remark by Sax, he noted, after the age of 30, no reliable intervention—inasmuch as his research and professional practice work are concerned—for the aforementioned failure, in terms of steering back onto the high seas of normal cultural life. He states, according to recent research on the architecture of the brain, an adult female is aged 22 and an adult male is aged 30.

Robertson: Neuropsychology is not my field; however this sounds like an old idea that girls mature faster than boys. I will rely on Susan Harter on this who did a meta-analysis and concluded that the frontal lobes normally complete their development around age 25 for both sexes. She published this in her 2012 book, and there may be subsequent research of which I am not aware. On the other hand, Sax is on solid ground in contending that there are inherited sex-linked differences with respect to personalities, drives and certain aptitudes although it should be remembered that when discussing such differences we are talking about averages and that knowing a person's sex will not reliably tell us anything about any individual person's personality or aptitudes. In any case, we are not born with a blank slate as Steven Pinker classically articulated in his book of that name, and on that point I think Sax is on very solid ground scientifically.

The 1950s and 60s popular notion that girls mature faster than boys was grounded in a number of observations that included girls verbal and social development, and the fact that young women were often ready to settle down and raise a family by their late teens. Young men, on the other hand, were often more interested in things than people and would rather explore and experiment than settle down and raise a family. The related conclusions regarding maturity was again grounded in a gynonormative perspective. We now know that different lifestyles and experiences can affect the brain's structure such that male curiosity, if allowed expression, will result in a strengthening of relevant parts of the brain. Neo-natal scarcity can also lead to phenotypical gene expression that may be adaptive in a world of grinding poverty but are maladaptive in the modern context. Sax may have been thinking of this research in putting limits on when profitable interventions may be undertaken. Recent research has debunked the idea that the brain loses all plasticity by age 30, and in any case, I have helped many adults past middle age to lead satisfying lives after having had a career of dysfunctionality.

Jacobsen: Looking at the last two questions, if we look at the short, medium, and long term futures of men and, thus, in part, societies, what will be the outcomes for those who begin to succeed, and those who continue to fail, by the standard cultural expectations in Canada? What will be the outcomes for the Canadian culture if the trends lean towards further failure or further success—as defined before? For example, Sax reflects on the work by Professor David D. Gilmore, Professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, with the likely dissipation and replacement, as an assessment and not a judgment of Gilmore, of secular English-speaking culture in North America, and, in fact, elsewhere, because of the lack of strong bonds across generations and the current cultures with young men and boys on one failure, and girls and young women on another standard success, trajectory, where these sub-cultures in larger Canadian society will not reproduce themselves for a variety of reasons and, therefore, will undergo steady replacement by other sub-cultures enacting the behavioral, communal, familial, and mating patterns indicative of those who have endured in previous generations for millennia, e.g., the Navajo, the Chinese, the Jewish, and so on.

Robertson: Again, there is a lot packed into your question. I would predict that some men will continue to succeed and they will assume the position of alpha males. I predict that large numbers of men will continue to fail, in part due to societal structures that lead to this result, and in part due to their own state of personal anomy flowing from a breakdown in the intergenerational transmission of values. I would argue, however, that reproduction below replacement levels is occurring worldwide and cannot be attributed solely or even primarily to events unique to Euro-American cultures but seem to be correlated with higher levels of educational opportunity available to women that allow for alternate avenues to self-actualization besides the mother archetype. I don't think a low birth rate is necessarily a bad thing, but I am concerned about male roles in this new culture.

With the words "alpha male" my mind went immediately to the Canadian prime minister who may or may not be prototypical. Alpha males operate by different rules than are available to ordinary males. Feminists in Trudeau's cabinet like Chrystia Freeland and Jane Philpott gave Mr. Trudeau a pass on substantiated allegations of a past sexual assault while applauding the expulsion from the Liberal caucus backbench members who faced unproven allegations of sexual assault. This would be an example of how rules between classes of men differ in the new society. The problems men who are not alpha face are either invisible or ignored. Even though three times as many male aboriginal men are missing or murdered as compared to aboriginal women, a Canadian inquiry into the problem excluded consideration of the men. When the government announced that Syrian refugees would be admitted, single males were specifically excluded from refugee status. When foreign aid increases were announced, agencies receiving the aid had to agree that none of it would go to men. I do not think the majority of men can expect much consideration from such feminized alpha males.

One problem faced by the majority of men is we do not normally confide in and support other men. I have been part of that problem. In 1969 I marched with Women's Liberation to protest the "Saskatoon Club." This was a club for well-to-do men in the city of Saskatoon. Men got to relax, play pool, discuss business and politics, and enter into mentoring relationships without the perceived distraction of women. We succeeded in opening it up to

women. About three years later a succession of women rose at a meeting of Women's Liberation to state that there were women present who felt intimidated by the presence of men. They politely asked the men present, who numbered about a quarter of the group, to leave, and we did so without protest. The result is that there was no net gain in inter-sex cooperation. The difference involved a shifting of gender specific networking and mentoring capacity. Ordinary men to this day remain largely unorganized.

The lack positive male self-identity can be traced to an intergenerational fail in the transmission of values. This fail began long before the advent of feminism. With the Industrial revolution men were forced to work in factories for 12 to 16 hours per day six days per week. Men became absentee parents whose contribution to the family was largely as a "good provider." Mothers raised their children but necessarily gave them a woman's perspective. This division of labour became a cultural norm, maintained long after working hours were reduced. Most men still measured their self-worth by their ability to be that good provider for their families differing to women in matters of child-rearing. But now, if men work hard and achieve financial success they are told that they are the recipients of unearned male privilege. Some men are saying, "Why bother?" I think the appeal of people like Peterson is that he has given them a reason to bother that transcends current ideological constraints, and that reason has to do with the development of personal integrity. In a sense, he is reaching out intergenerationally, filling a need in building positive male identities, as I also hope to do in this interview. Thank you for the opportunity.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Robertson, once more.

Image Credit: Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson.

[Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#) founded **[In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal](#)** and **[In-Sight Publishing](#)**. He authored/co-authored some **[e-books](#)**, free or low-cost. If you want to contact Scott: **Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.com**.