Boys' Friendships During Adolescence: Intimacy, Desire, and Loss

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Longitudinal, mixed method research on friendships, conducted over the past two decades with Black, Latino, Asian, and European American boys, reveals three themes: (1) the importance for boys of being able to share their secrets with their close friends; (2) the importance of close friendships for boys' mental health; and (3) the loss of but continued desire for close male friendships as boys transitioned from middle to late adolescence. While boys often had intimate male friendships during early and middle adolescence, they typically lost such friendships by late adolescence, even though they continued to want them. Other researchers have reported similar patterns over the past century, suggesting a need to revise our conceptions of boys' friendships as well as of boys themselves.

It is the middle of June and the New York City heat is on full blast making it even hotter in the empty high school classroom where 15-year-old Justin and his interviewer Jose sit in the late afternoon. Justin is being interviewed for the second time for our school-based research project on boys' social and emotional development. There is neither an air conditioner nor a fan in the classroom so Justin, in his baggy jeans and tee-shirt, pulls out a notebook from his backpack and begins to fan himself as he listens to Jose begin the interview protocol. The first set of questions is about Justin's friends and he responds by discussing his network of peers in school. Turning to the topic of close friendships, he says:

> [My best friend and I] love each other … that's it … you have this thing that is deep, so deep, it's within you, you can't explain it. It's just a thing that you know that that person is that person … and that is all that should be important in our friendship … I guess in life, sometimes two people can really, really understand each other and really

have a trust, respect, and love for each other. It just happens, it's human nature.

Listening to boys, particularly during early and middle adolescence, speak about their male friendships is like reading an old-fashioned romance novel where the female protagonist is describing her passionate feelings for her man. At the edge of manhood when pressures to conform to gender expectations intensify (Hill & Lynch, 1983), boys speak about their male friends with abandon, referring to them as people whom they love, and as Justin says, "this thing that is deep, so deep, it's within you, you can't explain it." They tell their interviewers in great detail and with tremendous affect about their best friends with whom they share their deepest secrets and without whom they would "feel lost." Set against a culture that perceives boys and men to be "activity-oriented," "emotionally illiterate," and interested only in independence, these stories seem surprising. The lone cowboy, the cultural icon of masculinity in the United States, suggests that what boys want and need most are opportunities for competition and autonomy. Yet over 85% of the American boys we have interviewed throughout adolescence for the past 20 years suggest that their closest friendships —especially those during early and middle adolescence—share the plot of *Love Story* more than the plot of *Lord of the Flies*. Boys from different walks of life greatly valued their close male friendships and saw them as critical components to their emotional well-being, not because their friends were worthy opponents in the competition for manhood but because they were able to share their thoughts

and feelings—their deepest secrets—with these friends.

Yet when one looks at the research on adolescent boys, discussions of close friendships are almost entirely absent. When male friendships are discussed, they are often relegated to the superficial category of "buddies" and described as a "loose collections of peers that offer very little sharing or emotional support" (Biddulph, 2008, p. 40). Male friends are framed as back-slapping pals more interested in playing, competing, and boasting about various types of conquests than in talking together or sharing their inner lives (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). These relationships are, in essence, defined by their simplicity rather than by their complexity, emotional nuance, and depth.

While these representations of boys' friendships are considered true for all boys, ethnic minority and poor and working class boys, particularly those who are Black and Latino, are assumed to be even less likely than their White peers to have emotionally expressive male friendships (Wilson, 1987). Such boys are often stereotyped as "hyper" masculine and thus considered unlikely to have friendships that entail much vulnerability (Stevenson, 2004). While Asian males are exempt from stereotypes of "hyper" masculinity, they too are burdened with stereotypes about being unemotional and inexpressive. These qualities, however, are perceived to stem from Asian culture rather than from "hyper" masculinity (Lee, 2005; Lei, 2003).

Yet my longitudinal studies of the social and emotional development of boys from early to late adolescence suggest a very different story of boys and boys' friendships, including the friendships of those who are Black, Latino, and Asian American (for details of my studies, including the methods of analysis, see Way, 2011). Content analyses of the semistructured interviews of 135 boys, who were freshman in high school during the first year of my 3–5 year longitudinal studies of friendships, suggested three themes: (1) the importance of and desire for sharing secrets in their close friendships; (2) the importance of close friendships for their mental health; and (3) the loss of such friendships and/or trust as they transitioned from middle to late adolescence, although they continued to desire such friendships. These themes were evident in the interviews of over half of the boys in my studies, with themes such as the desire for intimacy and the importance of close friendships for mental health being evident in the interviews of over 85% of the boys. The boys in my studies are predominantly African American, Latino, or Asian American and come from poor, working class, or lower-middle-class families living in urban areas. While not the "norm" in developmental studies of adolescents, these boys represent demographically the majority or close to the majority of teenage boys in the United States. According to the 2006 and 2010 U.S. census, approximately 80% of Americans live in urban areas, 80% are poor, working class or lower middle class, and 44% of youth under 20 years old are ethnic or racial minorities (see also Gilbert, 2002). Furthermore, my colleagues and I are currently detecting similar themes in boys' friendships in a new sample of working-class and middle-class White, Black, Latino, and Asian American boys whom we have followed from 6th grade to 11th grade (see Way, Cressen, Bodian, Preston, Nelson, & Hughes, submitted). Over the next few pages, I will describe each of the three themes and provide evidence from the interview data of the 135 boys followed throughout high school.

SHARING SECRETS IN FRIENDSHIPS

Two boys describe their friendships at the ages of 14 and 15, respectively:

I've got two best friends—Willy and Brian. Like sometimes when me and Willy argue, me and Brian are real close. Then when me and Brian are not doing so good, me and Willy are real close. It's like circles of love. Sometimes, we're all close.

My ideal best friend is a close, close friend who I could say anything to … 'cause sometimes you need to spill your heart out to somebody and if there's nobody there, then you gonna keep it inside, then you will have anger. So you need somebody to talk to always.

Secret sharing or talking intimately with best friends was how the boys in my studies defined a best friend, and betrayal of this confidence was the primary cause for terminating a close friendship.

Mark says in his freshman year: "(My best friend) could just tell me anything and I could tell him anything. Like I always know everything about him …. We always chill, like we don't hide secrets from each other. We tell each other our problems." When asked to explain why he feels close to his best friend, Marcus says: "If I'm having problems at home, they'll like counsel me, I just

trust them with anything, like deep secrets, anything." Eddie a sophomore says: "It's like a bond, we keep secrets, like if there is something that's important to me like I could tell him and he won't go and make fun of it. Like if my family is having problems or something." While boys spoke about loving to play basketball or videogames with their friends, the emphasis with their *best friends* was on talking together and sharing secrets.

Sharing secrets was not only a dyadic exchange but also took place in a group. Michael says in his freshman year interview:

> You know on that Christmas day my friends and I all slept in this little bed. It was little, we were like squeezing and then we were listening to this cheap radio, my friend got a cheap radio, we were turning it to like a low volume and listening to songs at like 12:30 at night till like three in the morning, we were not all listening, we were talking about secrets and then that's how I know my best friends.

The boys in my studies indicated, in addition, that the intimacy or sharing of secrets in their friendships is what they *liked most* about their friendships. Junot, a sophomore, says: "We always tell each other everything. And um like, about something happens and I save it for [my best friend]." In his junior year, he says: "[What I like most about my best friendship] is the connection. It's like, you know how you know somebody for so long you could talk about anything and you won't even think 'oh what are they thinking?' You just talk." Paul says what he likes most about his best friend is:

> Yeah 'cause [my best friend] is like a second person you could speak to … It's like see how the kids carry a little teddy bear or whatever and when they cry, they'll hold it and stuff. So when like you get upset or something you just walk over to your best friend and he'll loosen, he'll loosen you up whatever. He'll be like yeah it's alright, even though it's not.

Paul recognizes both the safety that a friend provides but also the ways which boys tell stories that they know are not true ("he'll be like yeah it's alright, even though it's not").

The content of boys' secrets varied considerably, and the term "secrets" was often used interchangeably with "problems." "Problems" were always "secrets," but "secrets" weren't necessarily

problems. Amir says in his sophomore year that he shares secrets with lots of his friends but keeps the "really, really, big" secrets for his best friend. Andy in his sophomore year makes distinctions between secrets when talking about the friends whom he doesn't trust and the friends he does:

> I mean I can like joke around with my friends who are NOT close and like if I'm like having trouble in my classes, like if somebody knows the subject better than me, like I'll ask them. Like yeah, it's pretty much like that, not too deep though … I wouldn't tell them like my two secretest things, not too secretive. Yeah. Like about a girl or something. I mean that's the deepest, nothing deeper than that though. With my best friends, I will tell my deepest secrets.

The content of "regular" or "not too deep" secrets was often about crushes on girls or girl-related topics. "Really, really big secrets" or "secretest things" were almost always related to conflicts in the home or, on rare occasions, coping with disabilities or drug abuse of a family member. Paul admits that it is good to have a best friend because "sometimes, like you don't want to tell your family members 'cause it's probably about them and you just tell your friend and they'll keep a secret and help you."

FRIENDSHIPS AND MENTAL HEALTH

The boys in my studies not only had intimate friendships, but they believed that this intimacy was essential for their mental health. Steve says in his sophomore year:

> You need friends to talk to sometimes, you know like you have nobody to talk to, you don't have a friend, it's hard. You got to keep things bottled up inside, you might just start … crying or whatever. Like if a family member is beating on you or something and you can't tell a friend, you might just go out, just you know do drugs, sell drugs whatever.

Chen says in his junior year that he needs "someone to talk to, like you have problems with something, you go talk to him. You know, if you keep it all to yourself, you go crazy. Try to take it out on someone else." Another boy concurs saying that "without friends you will go crazy or mad or

you'll be lonely all of the time, be depressed … You would go wacko." Kai says bluntly at the age of 14: "My friendships are important 'cause you need a friend or else, you would be depressed, you won't be happy, you would try to kill yourself, 'cause then you'll be all alone and no one to talk to."

Xudong says in his freshman year in response to why friendships are important:

If you don't have friends, no, you got no one to tell secrets to.

Interviewer: And so what happens then?

Xudong: Then it's like you need to keep all the secrets to yourself.

Interviewer: What do you think it'd be like if you didn't have someone?

Xudong: Then it's like, I always like think bad stuff in my brain 'cause like no one's helping me and I just need to keep all the secrets to myself.

As Xudong underscores, it is precisely the shared secrets with their closest friends that boys find critical for their well-being.

My students and I have detected similar patterns in our survey studies. In an analysis of 400 boys during 3 years of middle school, Carlos Santos found that the rates of adherence to masculine norms in friendships (e.g., being emotionally stoic and autonomous with friends) were positively associated with depressive symptoms both concurrently and prospectively (Santos, Way, & Scott, submitted). In other words, the more boys reported not sharing their feelings with their friends and figuring things out on their own rather than with a friend, the higher their scores were on depressive symptoms. A similar pattern was found among boys in our study of 700 adolescents in Nanjing, China (Gupta et al., 2013). The expression of feelings with friends and relying on friends for support in times of need were significantly associated with better mental health for the boys in the study.

EXPERIENCES OF LOSS AND DESIRE

Yet something happens to boys as they enter late adolescence. As boys enter manhood, they do, in fact, begin to talk less. They start using the phrase "no homo" following any intimate statement about their friends and they begin to say that they don't have time for their male friendships even though they continue to express strong desires for having such friendships. In response to a simple question regarding how their friendships have changed since they were freshman in high school, three boys respond and reveal everything about friendships for boys during adolescence. Justin describes in his senior year how his friendships have changed since he was a freshman:

I don't know, maybe, not a lot, but I guess that best friends become close friends. So that's basically the only thing that changed. It's like best friends become close friends, close friends become general friends and then general friends become acquaintances. So they just … If there's distance whether it's, I don't know, natural or whatever. You can say that but it just happens that way.

Carl says:

Like my friendship with my best friend is fading, but I'm saying it's still there but … So I mean, it's still there 'cause we still do stuff together, but only once in a while. It's sad 'cause he lives only one block away from me and I get to do stuff with him less than I get to do stuff with people who are way further. … Yo it's like a DJ used his cross fader and started fading it slowly and slowly and now I'm like halfway through the cross fade.

Matthew says:

We used to be like close, as far as always being around each other, now it's just like we're apart, like as far as — like if I need them, they'll still be there. If they need me, I'll be there but as far as like always being together, we're not as close as we were before.

Late adolescence for the boys in my studies is a time of disconnection from the relationships that they hold so close to their hearts. Rather than simply being a period of progress, adolescence, for these boys, is also a period of profound loss. As their bodies are almost fully grown and their minds are increasingly attuned to cultural messages about manhood and maturity, boys begin to distance themselves from the very relationships that they hold so dear and that they relied on previously so that they wouldn't go "wacko." Boys know

by late adolescence that their close male friendships, and even their emotional acuity, put them at risk of being labeled "girly," "immature," or "gay." Thus, rather than focusing on who they are, they become obsessed with who they are not—they are not girls, little boys nor, in the case of heterosexual boys, are they gay. In response to a cultural context that links intimacy in friendships with an age (childhood), a sex (female), and a sexuality (gay), these boys "mature" into men who are autonomous, emotionally stoic, and isolated. The ages of 15–19, however, are not only a period of disconnection for the boys in my studies, but also a period in which the suicide rate for boys in the United States rises dramatically and becomes four to five times the rate of girls, whereas in early adolescence it is only three times the rate of girls (Youth Suicide Fact Sheet, 2006). Just as boys during early and middle adolescence predicted, not having friends to share their deepest secrets during late adolescence appears to make them go "wacko."

When Augustus, a ninth grader who has a close male friend with whom he "shares all his secrets," is asked if and why male friendships are important, he explains that "(then) you are not lonely … you need someone to turn to when things are bad." Three years later, he says in response to the same question about his friendships that while he has nothing against gay people, he himself is not gay. He also tells his interviewer that he no longer has any close male friends although he "wouldn't mind" having such friendships like the ones he had when he was younger as he thinks they may make him feel less lonely and perhaps less disconnected from school. Other boys during late adolescence responded similarly. When boys didn't directly discuss this link between sexuality and friendships, they did indirectly with the phrase "no homo," a verbal tic that was repeated after every intimate phrase. Boys said: "we're close, no homo. We talk, no homo." Questions about close male friendships only became, however, questions about sexuality during late adolescence.

Yet the striking part of boys' narratives during late adolescence is that while boys repeated the late 20th century equation of close male friendships with sexuality, many of them remained explicit about the sadness they felt as a result of the loss of these friendships. Guillermo says in his junior year:

[I: *Do you have a close or best friend this year?*] Not really. I think myself. The friend I had, I lost it … That was the only person that I could trust and we talked about everything.

When I was down, he used to help me feel better. The same I did to him. So I feel pretty lonely and sometimes depressed … because I don't have no one to go out with, no one to speak on the phone, no one to tell my secrets, or to help me solve my problems. [I: *Why don't you think you have someone?*] Because I think that it will never be the same, you know, I think that when you have a real friend and you lost it, I don't think you find another one like him. That's the point of view I have … I tried to look for a person, you know but it's not that easy.

Guillermo discusses the loss of his close male friends and remains explicit about his sadness over the loss.

Victor says in his junior year that he doesn't have a best friend this year but he would like one:

No I don't say I would. 'Cause I feel that a friend is going to be there for you and he'll support you and stuff like that. Whether they're good or bad times, you can share with him, you would share your feelings with him, your true feelings … that's why I don't think I have any real close friends. I mean, things can travel around in a school and things would go around, and the story would change from person to person. Yeah, basically I hate it, I hate, it, 'cause you know I wouldn't mind talking to somebody my age that I can relate to 'em on a different basis.

Like Guillermo, Victor longs to find the type of intimate male friend that he had earlier but fears of betrayal prevent him from continuing to pursue this possibility.

In their groundbreaking work on adolescent girls, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) find a similar pattern of loss among girls but at an earlier age. In their longitudinal studies of over one hundred girls, they find that girls during late childhood (8–11) are able to speak freely and honestly in their relationships. Yet on the brink of adolescence (ages 12 or 13), girls lose this ability to speak their minds and hearts and become increasingly disconnected from their real thoughts and feelings. Brown and Gilligan find that girls who once were outspoken warriors become lost in a world of "I don't know" and "forget" what they used to know about themselves and their relational worlds. Girls enter the world of womanhood—a world that encourages the sacrificing of one's own needs to

the needs of others—and lose their ability to speak freely (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

My studies suggest that boys too experience a loss, but their loss happens in late adolescence. Boys enter their teenage years with a tremendous willingness and ability to engage in intimate male friendships despite the cultural dictates that discourage such behavior. Yet as they enter manhood, they begin to lose their way. Their emotionally sensitive and astute voices become fearful and wary. Words such as "love," so pervasive in their interviews during early and middle adolescence, give way to expressions of sadness, anger, and frustration or simply of not caring any longer. In our analysis of emotion words in the boys' interviews throughout adolescence, we see a dramatic decline in the use of vulnerable words such as *love* and *sadness* and an increase in words related to anger and frustration as boys grow older or we see simply a decrease in emotion words altogether.

The intimacy in boys' friendships as well as the loss of such intimacy is evident not only in my studies of working-class and lower-middle-class boys but also in studies of boys from a wide range in socioeconomic status over the past century. In the early part of the 20th century, a survey study was conducted of approximately 2,500 youth in the state of Illinois. The researchers concluded that intimate or "secret sharing" friendships were common among both boys and girls and were critical to their mental health (Bonser, 1902). Harry Stack Sullivan found the same pattern of intimacy in his clinical work with preadolescent boys in the middle part of the 20th century and, more recently, researchers such as Margarita Azmitia and Stephen Frosh have also noted the intimacy in boys' friendships in the United States and the United Kingdom (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2001; Sullivan, 1953). In William Pollack's best-selling book on boys, the mostly middle-class and upper-class White American boys in his studies discuss "needing" someone to talk to, relying on their friends to share their secrets, "expressing" their feelings with their closest friends, and telling each other "everything" (Pollack & Shuster, 2000). Studies of adult male friendships suggest, furthermore, that the loss that I heard in my studies is common among adult males as well. In a study of hundreds of men across the United States, Stuart Miller concludes that "most men secretly cherish the memories of the close male friendships they had when they were younger" (Miller, 1983, p. 13). This loss in friendships is also referenced in Hollywood movies such as *Stand By Me*, one of the most popular coming-of-age movies in American culture, where the narrator in the movie describes the sadness of the seemingly inevitable loss of close friendships for boys as they grow up.

Yet despite over a century of findings underscoring the intimate nature of boys' friendships and the loss that boys experience, boys continue to be framed as "activity-oriented" and "emotionally illiterate." Boys and men continue, in other words, to be seen as gender stereotypes rather than as humans with the same social and emotional needs and capacities as girls and women. The relevant questions are not how to teach social and emotional skills to boys; the questions are: What fosters boys' abilities to have intimate male friendships in the first place?; Why do boys, at least those living in the United States, lose their friendships or trust in other boys as they grow older?; And finally, why is no one paying attention to what boys are saying directly? But before I offer answers to these questions, let me describe why friendships are important in the first place.

WHY FRIENDSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT

Decades of research with children and adolescents, including my own survey-based research, have revealed that positive peer relationships, friendships, and (more specifically) close friendships, are linked with all kinds of positive outcomes such as emotional and physical well-being as well as academic achievement (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Oldenburg & Kerns, 1997; Thompson, O'Neill-Grace, & Cohen, 2002; Townsend, McCracken, & Wilton, 1988; Vernberg, 1990). In their study of 193 third- through sixth-grade students, Cynthia Erdley and her colleagues found, in fact, that the association between the quality of friendships and psychological adjustment was stronger for boys than for girls (Erdley, Nangle, Newman, & Carpenter, 2001). In my survey studies of middle school students in the United States and in China, we found that support from close friends was more predictive of psychological well-being and academic performance than support from parents (Jia, Way, Chen, Yoshikawa, & Hughes, 2009). Furthermore, adolescents without friendships are at risk of depression, suicide, low school engagement, dropping out of school, early pregnancy, drug use, and gang membership (Erdley et al., 2001).

Among adult men and women, researchers have consistently found that those who have close

friendships or strong social support networks are less prone to depression, less likely to get physical illnesses, and more likely to live longer lives (Parker-Pope, 2009). Sociologists find that friendships among adults are more important than family relationships in predicting psychological health over the lifespan (Adams & Allan, 1998). Friendships have even been found to be more predictive of physical health than spouse relationships. In a 6-year study of 736 middle-aged men, attachment to a single person (almost always a spouse) did not lower the risk of heart attack and fatal coronary heart disease, whereas having a strong social support network did (Orth-Gomér, Rosengren, & Wilhelmsen, 1993). Smoking was the only risk factor comparable to a lack of social support. Researchers also find that people with strong social support networks are less likely than others to get colds and other common illnesses and are at less risk of death (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

In a study of 30 industrialized countries, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett conclude that the two most important factors determining the health and well-being of people living in these countries are social status and friendships (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Those who lack friendships and those who have low social status are at greatest risk for health problems and death. In a meta-analysis of over 148 studies that examined the link between social relationships and the risk of death, researchers recently concluded that individuals with strong social relationships have a 92% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with weak social relationships (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). According to the researchers, the risk of death for those with poor social relationships is comparable with well-established risk factors for death such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption and exceeds the influence of other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity. These studies underscore the fact that friendships and social support, more broadly, are not simply "feel good" issues, they are life and death issues as well.

Underscoring the importance of best friendships in particular, William Bukowski and colleagues find, in their daily diary study with 5th and 6th graders, that having a best friend present during a negative experience significantly buffered the effect of the negativity on cortisol levels and global self-worth. When a best friend was not present, there was a significant increase in cortisol and a significant decrease in global self-worth as the negativity of the experience increased. When a best friend was present, there was less change in cortisol and

global self-worth due to the negativity of the experience. This effect was, strikingly, not evident for those in the presence of friends who were not close —it was only evident in the presence of best friends (Adams, Santo, & Bukowski, 2011).

In another experiment showing the importance of having close friendships more specifically, Kent Harber and his colleagues find that perceptions of geographical slant are significantly shaped by the proximity of a friend (Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008). In their experimental design, the researchers asked college students to stand at the base of a hill while carrying a weighted backpack and to estimate the steepness of a hill. Some participants stood next to close friends whom they had known a long time, some stood next to friends they had not known for long, and the rest stood alone during the exercise. The students who stood next to their friends gave significantly lower estimates of the steepness of the hill than those who stood alone. Furthermore, the longer the friends had known each other, the less steep the hill appeared to the participants involved in the study. In another similar study, college students were asked to recall a positive social relationship, a neutral one, and a negative one immediately before estimating the steepness of a hill. The researchers found that those who simply recalled a positive social relationship estimated the hill to be less steep than those who recalled a neutral or negative one. In addition, the closer the participant felt to the person they were recalling in the positive relationship instance, the less steep the hill appeared to be (Schnall et al., 2008). In other words, the world looks less difficult when standing next to or even recalling a close friend. In sum, decades of research have underscored the importance of friendships and social support for our health and well-being and thus why the loss of such relationships should be of great concern to us all.

WHAT FOSTERS INTIMACY IN BOYS' FRIENDSHIPS?

How are boys able to have such intimate male friendships when they live in such a rigidly gendered culture where the "boy code" (see Pollack & Shuster, 2001) and the "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1993) dominate? My research indicates that the answers lie, as Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) pointed out decades ago, in the micro and macro contexts of boys' lives, including parent and child relationships, the social dynamics in schools, and the ethnic communities of the boys themselves. These factors are,

of course, not the only ones that foster boys' social and emotional capacities, but they are the ones that appear to distinguish those boys in my studies who had intimate male friendships during early and middle adolescence and continued to have them throughout adolescence from those who did not.

Parent and Child Relationships

My studies indicate that those boys who reported having at least one parent who was emotionally engaged with them and offered a safe space for them to talk freely about their thoughts and feelings were often the boys who had and maintained intimate male friendships over time. This finding is consistent with attachment theory, including research that reveals a significant link between security of attachment with parents and friendship quality during adolescence (Allen et al., 2003). And since parents are socialized into a culture in which mothers are considered the carriers of emotions and emotional talk and fathers are not, we have also found in our studies, unsurprisingly, that it is typically the mothers who offer the space for boys to stay connected to and express their thoughts and feelings (Gupta, Way, McFadden, & Hughes, In progress). In Santos's analysis of middle school boys, he finds that boys' reports of mother support in sixth grade and an increase in mother support from 6th to 8th grade predicted an increase in boys' reports of emotional expression in their friendships from 6th to 8th grade (Santos, Way, & Scott, submitted).

Social Dynamics at School

In addition to parent and child relationships, the social dynamics at school fostered boys' intimate friendships. The boys in my studies who were most likely to have intimate or "secret sharing" male friendships were those who had the most social power with their peers in school. Social power among peers was acquired through numerous routes, including the familiar ones such as being athletic, tall, conventionally good looking, and having a good sense of humor. Having these attributes resulted in greater social power that, in turn, appeared to lead to greater freedom to bend the rules of the "boy code" (see Pollack & Shuster, 2000). Brown, Lamb, and Tappan (2009) have noted a similar pattern in their studies of boys, concluding that "being successful at sports not only protects a boy from being called gay [a slur in a homophobic culture] but also gives him permission to do well academically, show sensitivity, and stick up for kids who are bullied" (p. 222). The boys in our studies who succeeded in sports or who simply appeared "manly" did not seem to feel as much pressure as the other boys to prove their masculinity or their heterosexuality.

In addition to these more traditional routes to social power, there were other routes contingent on race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and sexual orientation of the boys themselves and the stereotypes associated with each of these social categories. In U.S. culture, where masculinity is "raced," "classed," and sexualized" as well as given a nationality (Pascoe, 2010), Black and Latino boys are considered more "masculine" than White or Chinese boys and working-class boys are perceived as more "masculine" than middle-class or upper-class boys. Furthermore, looking American (e.g., baseball cap, untucked shirt, untied athletic shoes) is perceived as more masculine than looking like an immigrant (e.g., buttoned-up and/or tucked-in shirts and tied shoes). Similarly, looking straight (e.g., baseball cap, untucked shirt, untied athletic shoes) is perceived as more masculine than looking gay (e.g., skinny jeans and tight shirts). The look of masculinity, which is based on a set of stereotypes about race, ethnicity, social class, nationality, and sexual orientation, is part of the same embedded set of masculine conventions that equates emotional stoicism and autonomy with being a real man.

Within the context of my studies, the boys who had the "look" of masculinity and were considered the most "cool," according to their boys, were the Puerto Rican boys. These were the boys who the non–Puerto Rican teens—particularly the Dominican American, Chinese American, and European American teenagers in my studies—wanted to be. The Puerto Rican boys in my studies were also the most likely to have intimate male friendships and speak in emotionally attuned ways. Survey data indicate that the Puerto Rican boys are, in fact, the most likely to have intimate male friendships when compared with their African American, Chinese American, European American, and Dominican American peers (Santos, Way, & Scott, submitted). Reasons for the social clout of the Puerto Rican boys were not only due to their American look and status, they were also given such clout because they have "between" skin tone and hair which is neither stereotypically Black nor White and their "cool" language (Spanish), music, and style (hip and urban) (see Way, 2011). This clout made it easier for the Puerto Rican boys to have the types of friendships that they wanted without the risk of being considered feminine, gay, or immature.

Ethnic Communities

A third set of factors that appeared to foster the intimacy in the friendships of the boys was the ethnic communities of which the boys are a part. Latino boys, for example, share a pan-ethnic culture that has a long tradition of valuing emotional expression and friendship. From the writing of Junot Diaz to the poetry of Pablo Neruda, it is obvious that many Spanish-speaking cultures value the types of relationships that the Latino boys had in my studies. Like their Latino peers, African American boys also share a culture where "brotherhood" and friendships are strongly valued. Scholars have argued that it is, in fact, European American culture that is dispassionate, aloof, stoic, and independent and not reflective of the traditional values of Black people (Stevenson, 2004). The "cool pose" of "hyper" masculinity of Black boys, in this view, signifies a distrust of White culture and not an inherent quality of Black culture. Chinese American youth also share a culture with a long history of valuing intimate friendships. One sees evidence of this value in the teachings of Confucius as well in traditional Chinese poetry (Li, 1975). Finally, European American boys are, as well, embedded in a culture that has a tradition of valuing friendships from philosophers, poets, and writers such as Homer, Aristotle, William Shakespeare, and Mark Twain. In sum, the Black, Latino, Asian, and White boys in my studies were part of ethnic communities that have long traditions of valuing male friendships, and thus, in some respect, the prevalence of intimate male friendships should not be surprising.

Yet by late adolescence, it became increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for boys from each of these ethnic groups to maintain their male friendships and to trust their male friends even though they continued to want intimate friendships. Thus, the next questions focus on why the boys in my studies lose their friends and their trust with their male friends as they grow older.

WHY DO BOYS LOSE THEIR FRIENDSHIPS?

The reasons for boys' losses during late adolescence can be divided into thin and thick culture explanations (see Geertz, 1977). Thin culture explanations repeat narratives that are familiar to many and only skim the surface. When boys are asked directly about the loss of trust and friendships, they repeat well-worn narratives about why friendships disappear. Having girlfriends, busy work and school schedules, and changes in schools and neighborhoods were seemingly risk-free reasons for the loss of friendships and trust. The boys invoke these excuses freely, but not without expressing frustration, sadness, and anger at their losses and a persistent wish to regain what they had earlier in their development.

Thick culture explanations for the loss of trust and close friendships among boys focus on conventions of masculinity in the United States that emphasize autonomy and emotional stoicism especially for grown men, as well as the homophobia and sexism that discourage such friendships among boys and men in the first place (see Lehne, 1989; Way, 2011). Boys' determination not to sound or seem "gay or girly" (e.g., "no homo") during late adolescence strongly suggested that homophobia and sexism play powerful roles in explaining why boys experience such losses.

Thick culture explanations also draw attention to the larger pattern of decline in social connectedness, empathy, and trust in the United States over the past 30 years or so. In 1985, according to a nationwide survey, the modal number of close friendship that adults had was three, whereas in 2004 it was zero, "with almost half of the population now reporting that they discuss important matters with either no one or with only one other person" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006, p. 358). In a series of studies of college students in the United States since 1980, researchers report that there has been a 40% decline in empathy or in the amount of time that college students spend "thinking about other people's feelings" with the biggest drop occurring after the year 2000 (Alleyne, 2010; Konrath, 2010). In another study, 58% of Americans in the late 1950s indicated that "most people" can be trusted; in a series of follow-up studies, however, that number dropped significantly to only 40% endorsing such a belief (Uslaner, 2002). Similarly, Urie Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues report that the percentage of high school seniors who say that "most people can be trusted" has declined significantly since the early 1980s (Bronfenbrenner, McClelland, Wethington, Moen, & Ceci, 2007). According to the social sciences, Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected, less empathic, and less trusting. They appear to be facing the same crisis of connection that boys experience as they enter manhood.

And, finally, thick culture explanations of boys' losses during late adolescence examine an obvious culprit, and that is constructions of maturity in the United States. Despite the decades of work on the importance of connectedness (e.g., see the work of

Carol Gilligan, Joseph Allen, Catherine Cooper), the mainstream perception in the United States continues to be that autonomy, independence, and emotional stoicism are the most important aspects of maturity, especially for boys. Mohammed says in his junior year: "But I don't know. Recently, … you know I kind of changed something. Not that much, but you know, I feel like there's no need to —I could keep [my feelings] to myself. You know, I'm mature enough." Interpreting a desire to share feelings as a sign of *immaturity*, Mohammed shuts down. He understands implicitly that there are consequences to becoming "mature." Other boys knew these consequences as well as they explicitly linked maturity and isolation saying things like "Now I'm a man, I need to take care of myself and not rely on others." These thick culture explanations for boys' losses during adolescence allow us to see beneath the surface, but they don't explain why mainstream culture in the United States has ignored over a century of research that reveal the intimate nature of boys' friendships and their acute emotional and social capacities.

WHY HAVE THE DATA BEEN IGNORED?

In a world where thinking and feeling are separated and are given a distinct sex and sexuality, where we use the same word for our 750 Facebook friends and for our 1 or 2 genuine close friends, it is not surprising that we assume that what boys *have* in their friendships is the same thing as what they *want*; or that while boys may report lower levels of intimacy in their friendships than girls, they may still have emotionally intimate male friendships; or that while our gender stereotypes may capture an element of boys' experiences, it does not capture the full picture.

We have not paid much attention to the intimacy in boys' friendships because boys are supposed to be, by nature, not interested in these types of relationships (see Gurian, 2006). Yet if we look back in time in the United States or at other cultures, this assumption about boys' nature falls apart. According to social historians, emotionally intimate friendships among American men were highly valued and very public in the 19th century and earlier (Coontz, 2009). Honeymoons in 19th century America, in fact, involved bringing best friends along for the trip (Coontz, 2009). Anthropologists, furthermore, find that intimate friendships are strongly valued elsewhere. According to Nardi (1992), in southern Ghana same-sex best friends go through a marriage ceremony similar to

that performed for husbands and wives. In Cameroon, adults pressure their children to find a best friend, much in the same way that American parents pressure their adult children to find a romantic partner. In China, at least until the late 1990s, and in many other Eastern and Middle Eastern countries, heterosexual men held hands with their best friends and regularly relied on them for emotional support. The Lakotas, a Native American tribe, have a long tradition of emotionally intimate friendships where "the emphasis for Indian men was a close emotional bond" (Williams, 1992). It is only in "modern" American culture, and other cultures like ours, that boys' and men's desire for emotionally intimate male friendships is dismissed as a female, childlike, or gay proclivity.

The cultured nature of our beliefs about the nature of boys is underscored in Lise Elliot's book *Pink Brain, Blue Brain*. Elliot, a neuroscientist, disputes numerous claims about sex differences in emotion and cognition. Calling on years of research and her own work in the field of neuroplasticity, Eliot says "infant brains are so malleable that small differences at birth become amplified over time, as parent, teachers, peers and the culture at large unwittingly reinforce gender stereotypes.… Girls are not naturally more empathic than boys; they are just allowed to express their feelings more" (p. 262). Although Elliot doesn't acknowledge the fact that boys do, in fact, express their feelings, she draws attention to the ways in which we make our stereotypes about girls and boys into what *is* naturally, rather than what ought *not* to be culturally.

IMPLICATIONS

What are the implications of these findings? If we take what boys tell us about their friendships seriously and if we take into account what we have learned over the past century regarding boys' and men's friendships, we should begin to reexamine our understanding of what it means to be male as well as what it means to be human. And that is, in fact, what a growing group of natural and social scientists are doing in what David Brooks from the *New York Times* refers to as the "New Humanism" emerging in the sciences that underscore our empathic, cooperative, and social nature (2011). The previous emphasis on competition and aggression as defining attributes of humans is now widely challenged by developmental psychologists such as Michael Tomasello (2009) and evolutionary anthropologists such as Sarah Hrdy (2009), with primatologist Frans de Waal (2010) stating that we

need "a complete reassessment of our assumptions about human nature" (p. 7) to take into account this new (and not so new) research. The fact that we are social beings and truly care about what others think and feel is the reason why, according to Charles Darwin, we have thrived as a species. We want to cooperate. We want to have close relationships, including friendships.

Yet the conceptions of manhood and maturity in the United States and elsewhere rest on valuing emotional stoicism and autonomy exclusively. Those of us from the United States and in many other places typically tell our children, particularly as they reach late adolescence, that they must not only separate from their parents but also from their peers and move toward independence. We tell our children to think for themselves and not worry about what others think or feel. In other words, we foster ways of being that are not natural and do not bring about psychological or physical health for boys or girls, men or women. When asked what it would be like to be a girl, Andy, at the age of 17 says: "It might be nice to be a girl because then you wouldn't have to be emotionless." American culture, in other words, appears to foster the crisis of connection that the boys in my studies face in late adolescence and the crisis of connection that Americans are facing in the early 21st century.

What can be done to address this crisis of connection? Countries such as Norway and Canada are changing the way they school children to address their own crises of connection. After a string of teenage victims of bullying committed suicide in the early 1980s, Norway began a campaign to build children's social and emotional skills and decrease bullying. Professionals, including teachers and principals, were trained to identify and respond to acts of bullying, while students at all grade levels participated in weekly classroom discussions about conflicts and friendships. A quasi-experimental study was conducted on 2,500 children from 42 elementary and middle schools to determine the effects of this large-scale intervention. The results indicated that the rates of bullying dropped by half and stealing and cheating declined during the 2-year period after the program began. Furthermore, significant improvements were detected in the social climate of the class as "reflected in students' reports of increased satisfaction with school life and school work, improved order and discipline at school, and more positive social relationships" (Olweus, 1991, pp. 411–448; Olweus, 1993, 2004). Canada has also recently implemented a program called "the roots

of empathy" in elementary schools across the country. The program, created by Mary Gordon, brings babies and parents into the classroom on a monthly basis for an entire year to foster empathy among school children. Research on this program has found that it significantly reduces bullying and aggression in school and enhances school engagement (Gordon, 2009). These program and curriculum innovations indicate that schools can make a significant difference in children's academic as well as their social and emotional lives. Psychologists Susan Engel and Marlene Sandstrom argue in a *New York Times* article (2010) that we need to revise how we think about the function of schooling so that we teach kindness, along with algebra and history. According to the boys in my studies, however, we do not need to teach students such skills—as they already have them—we need to foster their development.

In conclusion, what would it mean for us to let *boys be boys* by fostering their natural empathic abilities and their intimate friendships? What would it mean to define maturity as being independent *and* having emotionally supportive relationships? What would it mean to value the very skills that have been stereotypically associated with girls, women, and gay boys? Social and natural science research has already given us the answers. If we were to value a full range of relationships—a biodiversity of sorts—and that being emotionally literate and invested in relationships is not a "girl thing" or a "gay thing" or even a "childish thing" but an inherent part of being human—we would, according to the research, have better psychological and physical health, better academic outcomes, less bullying in and out of schools, less violence, better marriages, better friendships, stronger communities, and longer lives. The boys in my studies seem to know this but we, as adults, seem to have forgotten. If we listen closely, however, to both boys and girls during adolescence, we will begin to remember what we knew all along: What makes us human is our ability to deeply connect with others and we must figure out ways to strengthen these critical life skills in and out of school. Then, perhaps, growing up might become, in fact, good for boys' health—even for those growing up in the United States.

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