

## Overcoming male privilege

This article is about male privilege—how it affects our emotional well-being, how it ought to be a serious concern for us all (especially for men), and how we can overcome it. Examine the following situations. What do they all have in common?

\* After the family meal, all of the boys and men file into the living room to watch a football game, leaving the dirty dishes for the girls and women to clean up.

\* A husband who makes three times what his spouse makes doesn't understand his wife's constant anger at his spending. He tells her that he gives her as much money as she needs and that she is luckier than other wives.

\* A father offers to babysit their three children in response to his wife's demands for a night away from the kids. He feels good about helping her out. When alone with dad, the children know to play quietly, so as to not disturb their dad.

\* When a woman is told by her best friend that the woman's boyfriend is having an affair behind her back, she discounts what she is told and accuses her best friend of being jealous of her.

\* In a town meeting, a single mother with two very active children states her objections to a pending motion. A local businessman stands up and makes essentially the same statement. Immediately several people jump to their feet and applaud his proposal.

\* A wife tells her minister that she's been shoved around by her husband a couple of times. She is told to pray and to understand her husband's difficult job situation.

\* A popular minister is accused of having an affair with one of his parishioners. She is pregnant and claims he is the father of the child. Most of the congregation support their minister and claim that the woman is crazy and manipulative. During the investigation, two other women from the parish come forward to say that the minister had sex with them.

These experiences are commonplace and generally are considered socially acceptable. All of these scenarios exemplify male privilege.

### THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Male privilege is the social system of views and behaviors that encourages men and women to believe that men are entitled to special treatment simply because they are men. In this system, men are not obliged to be as responsible for their behaviors (but women are) and act as if they are deserving of respect without having to earn it. The judgment, work and authority of women are seen by both men and women as lesser than that of men. Men obtain male privilege simply by virtue of their being born male. Lacking accomplishments or status doesn't lessen their entitlement to male privilege.

When male privilege is pointed out to men, they act confused, deny that it exists or claim that they are being misunderstood. Women thoroughly understand male privilege, often defend it, and silently feel devalued by it. Male privilege gives men and women entirely different views of life and very discrepant experiences of loving. Putting men on pedestals is often seen as quaint or harmless and it is rarely discussed.

The social system of male privilege is upheld by both men and women and undermines the emotional well-being of both sexes. No one person or group is entirely responsible for its existence. However, men are more able to make changes in this system than women are.

### NEGATIVE EFFECTS

What are the negative effects of male privilege? They are subtle and very pervasive. In this system, men become more out of touch with their impact on others, especially how they affect those close to them. They become accustomed to being seen as important and less compelled to worry about other people's feelings. Since their prominence is handed to them, they see no need to earn respect. Often men rationalize this unrealistic adulation by pointing out the pressures on them for being the main breadwinner. They fail to understand that their mates are equally pressured by child care and don't receive the same credit. Male privilege predisposes men to be image-conscious, less responsible for interpersonal relating than women, and more unaware of their own vulnerability. These factors put men out of touch with their bodies and souls, rob men of an honest relationship with a mate, imprison men in an unemotional ivory tower, and probably contribute to the significant health problems of men.

Women are also harmed by male privilege. They feel very responsible for taking up the slack of emotional caretaking in the home and get exhausted by the pressures of being all things to all people. The draining of their energy unbalances their lives and diminishes their potential for self-hood. The claim that "I am happy if you're happy" only goes so far, despite the adulation of motherhood. Outside the home, male privilege gives women the message, "No matter how much you accomplish, you're not credible." Women internalize this message and become symptomatic—they sometimes lack confidence in their successes, may neglect to voice their own views, and feel disinclined to succeed. Male privilege pressures women to believe, "You are nothing without a man." Yet when they have the man on the pedestal they often feel unsupported and dissatisfied. The presumptuousness and secretiveness of this system prompt women to look for fault within themselves and find ways to fit into an unhealthy system.

Why do people cling to male privilege?

First, men and women learn at an early age to adopt the social standards assigned to their gender. It's humiliating to a boy to be told that he throws like a girl or for a girl to be identified as a tomboy. Early sex-role training indoctrinates us deeply and stays with us for years. If you question male privilege, you're challenging a core part of your personality and upbringing. Few of us are ready to do that.

Second, male privilege benefits men more than women. Men are reluctant to give up these benefits if it means their taking equal responsibility for child care, sharing money and power equitably, and actively worrying about the concerns of others. After all, it's a man's world.

Lastly, confronting male privilege means that we would all have to look at our family and community life more honestly and with more courage. Our family's well-being is very much affected by the overall health of our society. For a breadwinner to appreciate how he is robbed of an honest relationship with his wife simply because of wage inequity would require a great deal of social awareness. Many of us have grown too disenchanted to fathom the impact of society on our family life.

Despite resistance to examining male privilege, there are many good reasons to confront it. When inequities in relationships are discussed openly, people are freer to love more honestly and fervently. When we take responsibility for our own unjust behavior, we feel more secure in loving ourselves. Things don't change overnight, but even making an effort is an improvement.

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1) Face male privilege honestly in your daily life. It's tempting to brush it aside as quaint, unavoidable, and of little consequence. Not so. When males are put on pedestals and women are devalued, we all suffer. Men don't learn about their own humanness, women fail to accept their personal power, and men and women together are phony with each other. None of us is above male privilege. We all have it.

2) Focus on yourself and your immediate relationships. You can't change the world, you can't change others—you can only help yourself. When you identify male privilege, name it, don't preach about it, and ask for change. Be patiently persistent (and persistently patient) in confronting the ill effects of male privilege. You're reading this article and thinking about it is a good start.

3) For men—resist being worshipped and let off the hook, don't let others mother you, take charge of your own feeling life, listen and heed the feelings of others without catastrophizing, admit your mistakes, and be open to the joys of responsible fathering and husbanding. Someone once said that the closest we come to heaven on earth is a happy family life. Being an emperor in an ivory tower is not heaven.

4) For women—trust yourself to know more and to voice what you know, look for heroism within yourself, speak the truth and respect the capacity of others to face adversity, be less understanding and more understood, and take pride in your ability to live in both a man and woman's world.

John H. Driggs, LICSW, is a Family and Sexuality Therapist in private practice in Minneapolis.

► "Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes."  
— John Donne, poet

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E Sechin VARIETY

# Double standard?



Juan Miguel Gonzalez sat outside a house where he stayed in Bethesda, Md., last week as he awaited custody of his son, Elian.

By Adam Pertman  
*Boston Globe*

For more than four months, the crowds of Cuban-Americans have demonstrated in Miami, arguing that Elian Gonzalez should never go back to Cuba. President Fidel Castro's regime is so oppressive, they insist, that even the custody demands of the boy's father can't be taken seriously.

His case raises the question: How have generated a transoceanic custody battle, a presidential campaign issue, a renewed focus on Communist rule, and a global debate about the treatment of children if the sur-

living parent had been his mother? Some specialists in international law, family dynamics, custodial rights, and social psychology think not.

"He would have been on the first boat back to Havana, I don't think there's any doubt about that," said Jack Shonkoff, dean of the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University and chairman of the Board on Children, Youth and Families at the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine. "This cultural icon of a mother's bond to her child is so high up there, it would override just about anything."

Ninoska Perez, a director of the Cuban American National

Foundation in Miami and an outspoken advocate of keeping Elian in the United States, hesitated a moment before replying to the question of whether events would have unfolded differently had the boy's mother been the one asking for his repatriation.

"I don't know, probably yes," Perez said. Then she quickly changed course, asserting that nothing would have changed because the Cubans' overriding motivation would have stayed the same regardless of the remaining parent's gender.

**CUSTODY continues on E3:**

— *Mother-child relationship is special in all cultures.*

Had it been  
Elian  
Gonzalez's  
mother  
begging to let  
her son return  
to Cuba, would  
the fervor to  
keep him in  
Miami have  
been as strong?



## CUSTODY from E1

# Mother-child relationship holds special place in every culture

"To us," she said, "it represents sending a child back to hell."

The majority of Cuban-Americans feel so strongly about their homeland that they might well feel that keeping Elian in this country trumps all other considerations, including maternal love. Perez's initial response seems telling, however.

### Mythic impact

The mother-child relationship, in fact and perception, holds a special place in every culture and religion.

At the same time, many observers say the contretemps involving Elian starkly illustrates the extent to which men do not receive the same legal deference or social respect as women in matters relating to children — particularly on custody issues.

"What would have been different is the reactions . . . of American politicians and of the American people, no matter what the Cubans would have said or done," said Mark Charalambous, a mathematics professor at Mount Wachusett Community College and a founding member of the Fatherhood Coalition, which promotes fathers' custodial and legal rights in Massachusetts.

He and some others interviewed argued that few of the politicians in either party who are promoting U.S. residency status for Elian would have opposed the reunification of a child with his mother, at least partly because they might have risked being portrayed by election opponents as antifamily.

The specter of a mother being forcibly separated from her child also would have heated up the case's emotional impact for many Americans, who already favor Elian's return to his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, by an almost two-thirds margin in

most opinion surveys. In contrast, about 95 percent of the Cuban exiles in and around Miami, according to a poll this week, want the boy to remain in Florida.

Still, if this were a story of a child separated from his mother, the dynamic on the ground might have been changed.

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### Political sensitivity

Even if the Cuban-Americans had been just as ardent, Perlmutter and others suggested, the campaign to keep Elian in this country would have been tough to sustain for so long without the support it has received in Washington and without the walking-on-eggshells approach the Clinton administration adopted as the political sensitivity and complexity grew.

Jeffrey Leving, a Chicago lawyer who specializes in child-custody cases and who wrote the book "Fathers' Rights," says the Immigration and Naturalization Service would have acted "almost immediately" to repatriate Elian if his mother had been the surviving parent, irrespective of the Cuban-American community's clout in Florida.

Leving, who has represented

many fathers from abroad in cases where their children are brought against their wishes to the United States, says his task is frequently difficult for two major reasons: Both male and female judges often assume children would be better off with their mothers even before hearing any evidence, and sometimes "because the social and psychological presumption is that the children are being kept from the father because the father did something abusive."

Not everyone interviewed agreed that Elian's treatment would have been different if it had been his mother seeking his return to Cuba. New Hampshire Senator Bob Smith, the chief Republican sponsor of legislation to give the boy U.S. residency sta-

tus, said he believes the surviving parent's ability to speak out freely, rather than anyone's gender, was the key issue.

And Ellen Zack, a prominent divorce lawyer in Boston, said she believes the feelings among Cuban-Americans run so high that they

might have turned Elian into "a conduit for their own rage" even if it had been Elian's mother who had lived. Zack added that the boy's father is suffering to some extent from his gender, but added, "I would like to believe that it's a shadow or shading . . . and not the compelling issue here."

Shonkoff, who is a pediatrician, expressed a more typical view. Asserting that "this whole story is one of the most outrageous examples of public abuse of a child that I have seen in my life," he said he hoped the Elian saga would serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of placing political or even judicial considerations ahead of a child's well-being.

If Elian's mother had been the one seeking custody, Shonkoff said, people would have reflexively dealt with the case on a more emotional and human level from the start. "No question," he said, "that this is a situation where the double standard has been played to the hilt."

# Pop culture embraces image or softer, gentler males

By Catherine Fitzpatrick  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The world in which the archetypal male was a man's man reeking of smoke, leather and day-old socks — well, that world is vanishing.

In today's popular culture, the once-unchallenged machismo of cowboy and Marine is competing with post-millennial embodiments of the male ideal that are far softer, gentler and prettier than the Marlboro Man ever was.

"The new era of male attractiveness has really arrived," says Syracuse University professor Robert Thompson, president of the International Popular Culture Association.

Think of it this way: John Wayne, George Patton and Jackie Robinson are making room on the pedestal for Leonardo DiCaprio.

In a less complex world, gender roles were sharply defined. Still, they gave us our pick of prototype males: Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando and Clark Gable. Rudolph Valentino and John F. Kennedy and Superman.

Today, though, the hard lines that once helped define masculine identity are blurring. Women serve in the military, play pro basketball, run corporations, govern. Men diet, undergo cosmetic surgery, bare their souls in support groups, cook.

The genetic essence of male and female remains as solid and unbudgeable as ever. "What has changed," according to Anthony Shugaar, an author specializing in popular-culture issues, "is the willingness of men and women to experiment with the outward signs of sexual identity."

## No boundaries

It's called "gender tourism." Until a few years ago, it was restricted to the edgy fringes of avant-garde fashion.

But lately, in a vast array of signals rippling through the currents of global culture, the concept of "pretty boy" as heroic or romantic male has glided into the mainstream.

"It's out there," says Ron May, a psychologist who teaches a course on masculinity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison



The macho men portrayed in film by John Wayne (left) are being replaced by Leonardo DiCaprio's more androgynous heroes.

File photos

"If the world seems sprinkled with the stardust of softer-gentler guy icons, here's why:

➤ **Genre:** A certain amount of what women find attractive in men is probably hard-wired in us, Valerie Steele believes. Steele specializes in the history and sociology of style at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology.

Across the millennia, she says, women have been betazzed by men with broad shoulders, a strong jaw, good skin, healthy hair, symmetric features.

"But what some describe as polarized concepts — macho vs. sensitive — are really two standards that have been in place throughout recorded history," Steele says. In Greco-Roman times, both the strength of Hercules and the beautiful sensitivity of boyish men were held in admiration.

➤ **Gay culture:** The softer, gentler iconic male is primarily a homoerotic ideal, some experts believe.

"With the greater acceptance of homosexuality, there's less phobia about showing men who are more androgynous in their beauty," says Steele. Advertising in the mainstream media takes its cue from gay media, Edisol Wayne Dotson points out. Dotson is author of "Behold the Man — the Hype and Selling of Male Beauty in Media and Culture." That is why images of male

young men with less-than-determined gazes make the easy leap to the mainstream, he says.

➤ **Economics:** Well into the 20th century, the essential image of a man was that of a person who worked hard, provided for and protected his family, defended his country.

But the '90s brought deep changes, among them a rising tide of prosperity. Today, masculine identity is more closely tied to consumption than work. As the chasm widened between the haves and have-nots, sharp gender indicators have floated away on a wave of prosperity.

"It's a very much a class issue. The haves are into fashion, the have-nots into food, housing, medical care, education," says California psychologist Aaron Kipnis, author of "What Women and Men Really Want."

The upper classes have always "softened the male image so that he appears different from the working man — the man who wears jeans, gets his hands dirty, is muscular," Kipnis says.

It is the professional men, perched at the top of the new economic world order, who accept fairly easily today's broader range of male identities, says Craig Thompson, an associate professor of marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who specializes in consumerism and gender issues.

Working-class men — the guys who buy tickets to monster truck shows, who chow down on Wendy's triple-decker cheeseburgers — have a far tougher time embracing androgyny as heroic ideal.

➤ **Dreamy girls:** Teenage boys idolize celebrity bionic men: Sylvester Stallone, Mel Gibson and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Young girls, however, find over-the-top superheroes too full of testosterone.

Tween girls (ages 9 to 13) fantasize about male celebrities who are nonthreatening sexually, says Irma Zandi, president of a New York firm that tracks the under-30 consumer.

"For them, the idea of kissing and cuddling is the extent of where they want it to go, so celebrity males who have a softer

side are their heroes."

In a recent layout titled "To Know Them Is to Love Them," Cosmo Girl magazine featured baby-faced former soap star Ryan Phillippe and softly sensual Joshua Jackson of "Dawson's Creek." Seventeen magazine, meanwhile, predicted that Josh Hartnett — who not long ago portrayed a teen yearning to be a hairdresser — was bound for glory.

Why do the fantasies of 13-year-old girls propel a new image of masculinity from the fringes of pop culture into the mainstream? Because millions of dollars' worth of products are marketed to young girls, Dotson says.

➤ **Feminism:** For the past 30 years, the women's movement has addressed itself to the inequities between men and women, railing against controlling, insensitive men.

"A whole generation of men, particularly those who have gone through universities, have gotten the message," says author/psychologist Kipnis. The result is

that SNAGs (sensitive New Age guys) believe that being flexible, receptive, gentle, interested in relationships and nonthreatening is a good thing.

In the real world (as opposed to the Gucci world), May says, SNAGs struggle with the dilemma of trying to be a thoroughly modern man without being perceived as a wimp.

The shift toward a gentler ideal male is well underway. Yet the heroic man — bulked up, determined, self-controlled and courageous — has hardly disappeared.

What is emerging is a surprising "in between." Strong but sensitive. Suave but vulnerable.

Baby-faced but courageous. Tom Hanks. Matt Damon. Pierce Brosnan. Tiger Woods. Matt Lauer. Lance Armstrong.

We live in an era that is questioning the rough shell that covers the male gender, a shell made of flesh, fashion and frame of mind. Taken as a whole, it powerfully characterizes how we idealize male beauty.

# Seeing the joys of outrageous boyhood

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I was serving lemonade to a herd of my daughter's friends when one of them made me an honest bet. The gamble came from a lanky guy in an oversized t-shirt and baggy khakis.

"Two bucks says I can drink this upside down," he said as he held the tall glass over his head.

"Two bucks has it," I said. We shook on the deal as my daughter moaned in humiliation.

He swaggered toward the porch awning, lemonade in hand. Smiling, he dropped his head between his knees, turned his face toward the glass and poured 16 ounces of lemonade into his left ear, missing his mouth by 4 inches.

How could you help but love a guy like that? Maybe his own mother would disapprove, but I was happy to pay my two bucks for the honor of his wager.

My daughter's male friends spend so much time at our house I've started to call them the "summer sons."

I've known most of them since birth. Some were members of our "play group" when my girl was a toddler. The boys have all changed, of course. Their feet are bigger and their voices lower. But to me, they will always be the same little guys who used to brag about their newest Transformer or challenge my kid on the hottest Nintendo game.

These are the fellows who taught my daughter to spit and use the "f" word in a sentence. They are the same little guys who slathered Play-Doh in her hair in first grade and who showed her how to build a cylinder with Legos. And they are her dear friends.

## Not in my day

When I was a child, nice girls did not have male friends. Boys and girls were segregated at the first sign of puberty.

Physical education, sex and health classes were all single-sex. Girls studied home economics; boys studied industrial arts.

Scouting was single-sex. Piano lessons were divided by gender. At church, my confirmation class met in a room with a split down the middle. Boys on one side, girls on the other.

School gender rules were formidable. No pants or culottes in class. Skirts had to touch the knee. Unnatural hair color could get a girl suspended.

Boys suffered under similar rules in a parallel universe. No stubble on the chin. No fuzz on the upper lip. Filthy tennis shoes.



**Kristine Holmgren**

ceptable. Hair below the ear and a guy was sent home.

Like other good girls I believed the laws were made for my benefit. Their existence let me know I needed to pay close attention to the behavior of the unruly opposite sex. If I didn't, I might damage something called my "reputation."

Even the dimmest girl was bright enough to get the message; boys were dangerous. They wanted only one thing from a girl. No self-respecting female would have one as a friend. A girl who thought otherwise was either stupid or a slut.

But I get no respect when I

reminisce about the bad-old-days with my daughter's girlfriends. They've seen too many seductive movies about my generation. "I thought the '60s were supposed to be cool," they say. Or, "What about sexual revolution? Women's lib? Flower power and group sex?"

If I had the energy, I would explain the weird social/political context in which these movements were incubated. But I'm no fool. The effort would be lost. Might as well try describing the Sahara to an Inuit.

Besides, my stroll down gender-biased memory lane only makes me sad. I am reminded of the human evil that prevailed when half the human race feared the other half.

These summers are too short to sour with my grim history. And my "summer sons" are too charming to interrupt when they are on a roll.

Talk about entertaining. Some of them have memorized entire episodes of "South Park." One can do a great imitation of Chris Kattan's "Saturday Night Live" character Mango. Another

can recite every detail of the latest summer flick, including the director's intentions behind specific camera angles.

So when they visit, I yield the floor. It is the least I can do, considering what they have done for me.

Watching them grow has changed my life. Thanks to them, I'm not afraid of rock music, weird clothing, body piercing or potty humor.

I have escaped becoming one of those frightened little women who scurry down public thoroughfares, eyes darting, clutching her purse next to her chest.

Not me. I am no longer afraid of random gangs of adolescent males. Their elaborate postures and animal noises are like a fresh breeze blowing across my old conclusions.

I am forever changed. The summer sons have opened my eyes to the joys of outrageous boyhood.

And redeemed my sexist soul.

— Kristine Holmgren is a writer, pastor and broadcast commentator.

