

A New Masculinity

by Mark Manson

Introduction

Beginning about a year ago, I became obsessed with the question of whether a universal masculinity exists or not. Are the traits which we consider "manly" hardwired into us as a species? Or are they socially constructed for some specific purpose? Or both? And how does this relate to being attractive to women as well as psychologically sound as men?

You may think this is a funny thing to obsess about. But in hindsight, it wasn't odd at all. For one, much of my social experience the five years prior, and this very website, were rooted in my experiences within the pick-up artist (PUA) movement, a community dedicated to help men get laid - the most masculine of endeavors.

One could easily argue that a large component of the PUA experience, if not the defining component, is helping men discover and get in touch with their masculinity in order to attract and sleep with more women. The movement focuses on cultivating conventional masculine behaviors: being socially dominant, leading, establishing strong boundaries, pushing one's will onto others, objectifying and achieving progress. Non-coincidentally, adopting these new behaviors often leads these men to greater success with women.

Therefore within the PUA movement, it is tacitly accepted that men are supposed to behave one way and women another. When men deviate from this defined behavior, they're referred to as pussies or "AFCKs". When women deviate they're derided as bitches or feminists. (I kid, I kid - OK, not really.) PUAs justify these gender roles by butchering one evolutionary psychology theory after another. Now, I'm not disagreeing with the idea that there may be some sort of biological basis for gender behavior. I'm just saying the PUAs butcher the hell out of it.

But, I too, took these gender roles for granted as predestined fact. After all, back when I was meager, passive-aggressive and whiny, women were repelled from me. When I began to behave in a dominant, assertive and pushy manner, women began sleeping with me, people began listening to me and internally, my behavior felt right on a deep level.

Then in late 2009, I began to travel all over the world. And within a few months it became impossible to ignore: masculinity and dominance are culturally relative. In America, most women consider me to be cocky and aggressive. In some Asian cultures, women even found me to be brutish and intimidating. Yet in many countries such as Argentina or Ukraine, I came across to women as sensitive and respectful. Hell, many of the women in Brazil are more sexually assertive than I am. And in Russia, when I told a girl I was seeing that most women in America find me to be too aggressive, she began to laugh in my face.

You? Are you serious? The reason I like you is because you're so sensitive and attentive compared to Russian men.

Well shit. Not only was my conception of masculinity not even that masculine in many parts of the world, but I was attracting women because they perceived me to NOT be masculine. In Latin America, a girl I dated said she loved my lack of machismo and how well I listened. Great! Yet, back home women wanted to date me because they perceived me to be so crass and aggressive. What's going on here?

One of the beautiful yet horrifying aspects of traveling all over the world is that every time you step off the plane you set yourself up to have your assumptions shattered. It happens regularly. This was one of them.

The first lesson of this experience was what is known in social psychology as assortment theory, or what I refer to in my book as *Demographics*. The concept is a scientifically observed phenomenon where behavior by one person will naturally screen out and only attract people of that similar behavior.

For instance, a recent study found that men with misogynistic beliefs (women belong in the kitchen, women shouldn't talk back, etc.) naturally attracted women with similar misogynistic beliefs (I belong in the kitchen, I shouldn't talk back, etc.) and turned off most other women (for obvious reasons).

Assortment theory can be subtle and hard to notice. But when you travel it's impossible to ignore. If you walk into a room and only 10% of the women there speak English, then you're immediately going to be at a major disadvantage with the 90% who don't, and a major advantage with the 10% who do (they'll find you exotic, interesting, etc.) Back home this plays out in less obvious ways: behave like a crazy party guy and you'll attract crazy party girls; behave like an intellectual snob and you'll attract hipster intellectually snobby girls; dress like crap and stop showering and the only women willing to overlook it will be women who dress like crap and don't shower.

In my case, back when I was a meager, passive-aggressive, whiner, I only attracted women who corresponded to those traits: i.e., not very attractive women. When I began behaving in a dominant and assertive manner, I began attracting women in the US who sought out those dominant and assertive traits - which tended to be the hot, feminine women who were sick of dealing with wusses all the time. But then, when I went to Russia and was suddenly considered passive and sensitive, I attracted women who sought out those more passive and sensitive traits - who coincidentally also were hot, yet well-educated women who were sick of the Russian men acting like drunken pigs.

The point of assortment theory is that there are no (or very few) absolutes: no matter how you alter your behavior, that behavior is always going to naturally attract one subset of people and repel or simply not interest the majority.

(Note: I would say that perhaps the only absolute for men in dating is that they're expected to initiate. Whether you're passive or aggressive, intellectual or ridiculous, casual or fun party guy, the responsibility is still going to almost always fall on you to initiate.)

I toyed with assortment theory a bit when I returned to the US. I decided to be more sensitive and vulnerable around women. And sure enough, I began attracting sweet, sensitive girls who appreciated those qualities in me. Crazy. And even though my PUA instincts thought that I'd be attracting far fewer women by acting this way, it turns out that wasn't the case. In fact, it seemed like I was attracting the same women, just instead of them behaving in a crazy party girl way around me, they were behaving in a sweet and vulnerable way around me.

(Note: this was not merely a social experiment on my part but a conscious desire as well. I had been getting tired of the typical aggressive, overly-sexual one-night-stand-type interactions I had been having regularly and was looking for something more intimate and substantial.)

Throughout all of these experiences was the implication that not only may there not be a universal masculinity, but that conventional masculinity is not universally attractive, something feminists have been saying for decades.

In fact, when I posed this question to a feminist writer earlier this year, she responded with exactly that: it feels like typical masculine traits are universally attractive because every woman I'd been with had been attracted by my masculine traits. It doesn't mean that women couldn't be attracted to me for other reasons. In short: assortment theory.

But if masculinity is culturally relative, then why are so many people (both men and women) lamenting the seeming loss of masculinity in our culture? Why are sociologists putting out books about how we're losing generations of men to "guy culture"?+- men who don't want to commit themselves to anything but playing video games and drinking beer? How does that explain the disaster that's become the dating and marriage market in the US?

And cultural relativism can't completely explain it. If it did, men would simply adapt with new norms and move on. To a degree we are. But developmentally, we're not. We can't ignore that we ARE biologically different. Men have ten times the amount of testosterone pumping through us, which makes us bigger, stronger, urges us to take more risks, be more violent, less empathetic, want more sex, and achieve greater feats. This all on average of course, and there are exceptions. But the point remains. Everyone seems to agree with the sentiment that western men have lost something in the past few generations.

I saw, and still do see, a lot of the nascent men's trends (everything from PUA to Maxim-type magazines to shows like Mad Men) in the west as a struggle to reclaim some sort of lost masculinity of the past 50 years. But what is the nature of that struggle? Is retaking a masculine identity a matter of shifting cultural norms? Or is it biological destiny?

The answer it turns out, is a little of both (as usual). And I'm not the first person to ask these questions. Anthropologists and psychologists have been digging into this one for decades.

Rites of Passage

Camille Paglia once wrote, "A woman simply is, but a man must become. Masculinity is risky and elusive. It is achieved by a revolt from woman, and it is confirmed only by other men." Say

what you want, but both Freudian psychologists and many anthropologists back this up. Whereas a woman's femininity is implicit by simply being and birthing, a man's must be proven through action.

(Note: I realize that women struggle with their own feminine identity issues. I don't mean to downplay them. But they're different. And we're talking about masculinity here, so deal.)

Modern Freudians believe the defining emotional struggle for men is of emotionally disassociating from the safety and care of the emotional (sexual?) attachment with their mother. This disassociation plays out sub-consciously through various life experiences that establish emotional and sexual independence. Men who succeed in establishing their independence are free to fully function as men, whereas the men who never completely escape their mother's grasp flounder endlessly and ineffectually throughout their lives, struggling to act independently, eluding success, and many times failing to move on to establish a family of their own.

Examples of this disassociation process include masculine propensities for competitive achievement, sexual conquests, professional success and wealth, political power, etc. Anything from one man talking shit to the other guys in his bowling league, to two friends bragging about their car engines, to the middle manager who ignores his family to work 90 hours a week, to the nightclub promoter who sleeps with five new girls a month. These are all common, culturally-normal ways that men have expressed their emotional independence and masculinity in the past.

Anthropologists have found that this process of disassociation plays out in men in every culture. What changes is how the process plays itself out, and to what degree. For instance, indigenous tribes in Eastern Africa require adolescent boys to be tortured and maimed publicly to certify their masculinity, whereas Spanish men are forced out of the house at an early age and expected to become breadwinners early on. Japanese men are put through excessive schooling and expected to achieve a certain academic standing.

Manliness isn't as hardcore as it used to be.

What's interesting though is that any one conventional expression of masculinity is not universal. Tahitian men lack any sense of machismo and are considered quite lazy by comparison to other cultures, but the men there still express their emotional disassociation in other ways, primarily through social groups and organization. In Trukese culture, it's accepted that men will become drunks and excessively violent with each other in their early 20s. Many hunter-gatherer societies tie masculinity to the ability to hunt and catch food. Our society, up until recently, usually attributed manhood to a man's ability to accumulate and provide wealth and resources.

So the conclusion is that the psychological development of masculinity is universal, but the way it manifests itself is different from culture to culture.

After surveying dozens of cultures on their beliefs and practices of masculinity, anthropologist David Gilmore came to many of the conclusions mentioned above: that there seems to be a universal drive of autonomy among men worldwide, but the way they express that autonomy

differs from one culture to the next. Also, this autonomy seems to always be up for debate and has a need to be confirmed by other men in each culture.

But Gilmore went further. He wanted to know why masculinity is so hardcore in some places, and considerably tame in others. Why do some African tribes literally whip and cut young boys publicly to test their manhood, whereas other communities in Malaysia judge manhood by who can carve the coolest looking stick?

Gilmore's theory, set out in his book *Manhood in the Making* is that the severity of masculinity in a culture - and the chasm between gender roles - is proportional to how treacherous the environment in which that particular society exists is. Cultures that are constantly warring over territory, who have limited resources and have to battle the elements or nature have some seriously hardcore conceptions of masculinity. And rightly so. When you're constantly defending your only sources of food from invaders and wild animals, you need men to step up and be warriors and protectors. Men are more biologically suited for that, so deeper gender roles become established.

Meanwhile other cultures which are isolated, have plenty of resources, and not threatened, the men are usually comparatively passive and relaxed. Again, there's a lack of economic need for diverse gender roles, so society adapts.

The idea that social norms and culture are influenced and created by environmental conditions and economic realities is not a new or controversial one. It's an idea that the scientist Jared Diamond recently popularized in his acclaimed books *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. We don't make up our ways of life in a vacuum. They develop and evolve out of economic necessity.

The Crisis of the Western Man

If you're reading this site or even remotely taking me seriously right now, you may be one of the many who has the sense that something's amiss with Western men. Sociologists have been fretting about it for an entire decade now. Entire self-help industries for men have sprouted up. Demand for men's dating advice has surpassed women's dating advice. Communities such as the PUA movement have formed and thrived. In a celebrity-scape of Justin Bieber, Kanye West and *The Situation*, there's not a legitimate masculine role model to be found anywhere. Hell, even feminists began fretting about 10 years ago, with writers such as Christina Hoff Sommers and even Naomi Wolf lamenting that boys have begun falling behind in school at every level. US universities are currently 55% female. Girls are outperforming boys in almost every subject and have moved to being even with them in the math and sciences. In 2010, for the first time in American history, women out-numbered men in the workforce.

Feminism has often been blamed for these changes. And indeed, in a society where men used to derive their self-worth from making money and establishing good careers, suddenly having women as their competition (or bosses) can sabotage that search for meaning. After all, the point of men pursuing achievement and success so much was to assert their independence from women - now, with women as their peers, it kind of undermines the developmental effect.

But I don't think feminism is the root cause for modern masculinity's turmoil. In fact, I think it's just another effect of a deeper underlying cause. Remember, Gilmore asserted that gender roles break down in societies which experience greater security and resources. They're no longer as useful.

A lot of feminism's triumphs can be attributed to just that. Beginning in the mid-20th century, technology had largely taken over the role of homemaking. Cleaning the house, washing the clothes and cooking dinner took 1-2 hours whereas in the past it had taken an entire day of hard labor. Women had access to pre-heated ovens, electric stoves, dishwashers, toaster ovens, vacuum cleaners, etc. There was no more need for them to stay in the home all day. In fact, one could argue that modern women went through this same identity-level crisis generations before the men did. What had defined them as a gender for centuries was suddenly rendered unnecessary. Between technological advances in the home and birth control, women were able for the first time in history to exercise complete control over their bodies and their time.

These same economic realities are now applying to men. Historically, men attached their entire identities to their careers and professions. That's who they were. That's where they derived their sense of self-worth. And that's how they asserted their emotional autonomy.

But in recent decades, the career-man is almost a myth. People often spend only a few years at each job. Many jobs have been outsourced or automated. The economy has tanked a couple times. And now women (or the wife) are working just as hard (or even harder) than you. That's no longer a very stable sense of identity. And not a reliable way to express emotional autonomy.

Take a man who works a standard corporate job and makes a decent living. Let's say this man is totally reactive to his environment and the people in his life. He did well in school because others told him to. He got a nice job because his parents wanted him to. He did what his bosses said to get promoted so he could make more money to provide for his wife and family.

In 1950, this man would be considered a raging success. He'd actually be celebrated as a proper example of what a man should be. The fact that he doesn't like his job is irrelevant. The fact that he's his boss's whipping boy wouldn't matter. He brought home the bacon and had a proper, respectable identity.

But today, there's a strong and powerful cultural under-current that this man is considered a jailed failure. He's stuck working a job he hates for people he doesn't like for money he doesn't need, just to give it to a woman who doesn't need it and is likely to divorce him anyway. Whereas it used to be enough to simply get a paycheck and bring it home, that doesn't cut it anymore. That's not good enough. Anyone can do that now, so it's not a viable way for a man to disassociate, to declare himself independent and powerful. In fact, it's the opposite. He's taking the safe route. The route that no longer validates his masculinity or helps him assert his autonomy.

So what's the result? Generations of financially successful men who are pushovers, who don't assert themselves, can't get a date, and end up obsessed with sex and/or embroiled with

mommy issues. Sound familiar? Our society has evolved to a place of more luxury and security, and therefore the previous rites of passage men utilized to establish themselves have washed away and left a muddled, incoherent masculinity behind.

A New Masculinity

One thing that surprised me when I sifted through a lot of feminist writing this year was how often feminists would wish that men would step up, shake off the shackles of their failed gender roles and shape new identities for themselves. I have to admit, it bridged a lot of apparent gaps for me. I think feminists miss the fact that we're trying; we're just not trying to do it in a way that they expect or necessarily like. But they are right. Men need to step up and define a new masculinity for themselves. We need to stop floating aimlessly through our lives, and become reactive to the world and what's happening in it.

I spent most of the last five years operating within a men's movement full of men obsessed with asserting their emotional independence. Sure, the motivation and inspiration behind it was sex and women, but it had long been clear to me, that at the core of it, the PUA movement was a method for men to vicariously find that emotional independence and validation from other men that they had missed growing up - whether it be because they grew up without a father around, because their career path turned out to be stifling and unsatisfying, because their relationships consistently fell apart due to their neediness, or whatever.

Feminists were often (and still are) perceived to be the enemy, +scapegoated for the tattered state of modern masculinity. But if you take the time and side-step past the rape culture paranoia, some of the patriarchy lunacy, and a lot of unnecessary soap-box speeches, then you get to the heart of that movement: economic and social realities forced women to confront and transcend what defined them as women, and now it is time for men to do the same thing. And right now we're sucking at it.

Most current men's self-help movements are rife with woe is me + pity parades, and bizarre forced rituals (drum circles, sweat lodges, etc.) that are painfully anachronistic and ineffective. The pick-up and dating industry indirectly leads a lot of men to establishing powerful and independent identities, but it's also weighed down by misogyny and men fixated on superficial sexuality. Magazines such as Maxim, GQ, FHM, and others prey on men's most immature impulses by plastering half-naked, airbrushed women across their pages, while hocking overpriced shit down your throat in a constant attempt to re-establish the failed-state of masculinity's past: that a real man buys expensive crap and fucks hot girls. Hit it or quit it - broski.

Television shows and movies have seen a throwback period of masculinity with powerful male characters in popular shows such as Californication and Mad Men. But men such as Hank Moody and Don Draper are caricatures - idealism sketched onto a screen, with deep flaws. Draper exhibits an independence and strength that leaves male viewers in awe and female viewers in lustful shivers, but at the end of the day, he's ruthless and gutted of any deeper empathy. The sexual chaos and wit that permeates Hank Moody's life would make any man envious for a moment (myself included). It's impossible for a man to watch Hank and not immediately desire the same kind of boyish freedom he exercises around the women of

Hollywood. Yet, Hank too, is a complete emotional fuck up: substance abuse, an ex-wife he can't stop cheating on, a daughter he sucks at raising, a career scarred by underachievement.

Don't even get me started on Jack Bauer.

The point is, as a culture, there's a void where our masculinity used to be. Created by the absence of our fathers, the futility of conventional career paths, the inundation of a feminized pop culture, this generation of men is floundering and has been for a while. It's no wonder we're staying unemployed, single, having more casual sex and playing more video games than any generation of men before us. It's no wonder that feminists are writing 20-page articles in places like The Atlantic freaking out that all of the single men are either %leadbeats or players+and that many women are actually consciously choosing to stop hoping for marriage.

So what are we supposed to do?

Remember, the key universality is defining an emotional independence for ourselves followed by validation from other men. Simply making money isn't enough anymore. Buying nice things isn't enough anymore. Achievements and conquests by themselves aren't enough. Perhaps you've done many of these things, and you have felt it. Having money and nice things is nice, but it doesn't make you feel like a man anymore. Something's still lacking. We live in such a culturally relative post-modern world that all of these things are only as valuable and recognized as those around us make them.

What I offer is the idea of a post-masculinism, an idea of masculinity that includes conventional masculinism (dominance, achievement, sexual pursuit), but is not confined by social roles or expectations. One man's rite of passage may be building his own boat and sailing across Lake Michigan. Another man's rite of passage may be writing and publishing a novel. Another man's may be living in on a beach in Cuba and volunteering with starving children. The common denominator is that we set out to establish ourselves as emotionally independent through our actions. The common denominator is taking action as individuals.

Since there's no longer any socially universal norm for masculine achievement, we are the first generation of men that must create our own. And what's more independent or emotionally liberating than that? It's a true expression of your individual power and your masculinity.

But this isn't easy. And in many ways, we're ill-equipped for it. Just as women were ill-equipped to supersede their roles in society, we are as well, just in different ways. Striking out on your own path and creating your own rite takes courage, ambition, technical skill, all conventional masculine traits. But it also takes introspection, emotional awareness, vulnerability and a willingness to fail - traits most men are not accustomed to.

Entrepreneur and business writer Gary Vaynerchuk often speaks of the idea of personal brand. He claims that in the coming age of social media, our most important asset is going to be our own personal brand that we present to the world. I see the concept of post-masculinity in similar terms: it's not enough to simply be a bread-winner, to be a provider, to be a walking paycheck anymore. It's like Tyler Durden says in Fight Club (the perennial movie of post-masculinity if

there were such a thing): %You are not your job. You are not how much money you have in the bank. You are not the contents of your wallet. You are not your fucking khakis.+

Our canvas is ourselves and we are all artists. The developmental blueprint is that there is no blueprint. There is an individuality and eccentricity that we must all cultivate and contribute back to society. Throughout human history, men always had a clear and concise path laid out before them. We are one of the first generations that doesn't. You can do or be anything you want in any capacity that you want. So create your own standard and then surpass it. Psychologically that's where we derive our worth and our value. Right now simply following the path our fathers and grandfathers laid out before is not working. It's time to blaze our own trail.