

# Gender Difference and Boarding School

Nick Duffell

*Nick Duffell has been running workshops for Boarding School Survivors for a decade, and five years ago he co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology with Helena Løvendal Sørensen. In this article he offers some notes on the difference in effects of boarding on men and women.*

Over the years *Self and Society* has been kind enough to publish pieces about our work with the psychological effects of boarding school and about our work with couples and gender. In this essay, which is adapted from my recent book on the psychology of boarding education, *The Making of Them*, I want to share some of our thinking on gender difference which partly arose from running workshops for Boarding School Survivors. We started putting on these workshops only for men, as an offshoot of the fledgling Men's Movement in the late eighties. However, we had so many letters from women telling us that they had felt damaged by boarding that we felt the need to offer groups for women, with very little idea of what we would find.

Can we ever say that any one person has suffered more than another? How do we establish whether boys or girls have more to lose by boarding. An understanding of the inner differences between women and men has become the most pressing area of exploration for me recently. However, despite the politicisation of this issue over the last thirty years, a viable psychology of gender is only in its infancy. I therefore present a small selection of ideas, more to give the reader something to chew over, than to suggest that I have the last word on the subject. My wife and I hope shortly to publish something more substantial on the subject.

## Gender Difference

In terms of separation we could argue that boys who board get abandoned twice: first when they are very young and realise their essential difference from mother, and secondly when they are sent away from her to school. For a boy, the experience of difference from mother is a major formative step. Researchers from the Institute of Human Relations at the Tavistock Clinic, Liam Hudson and Bernadine Jacot, argue that it constitutes an essential and existential wound. They call this 'The Male Wound.' In order to get their identity needs met they have,

as it were, to leave mother and find their fathers. Females do not have the same kind of wound as males, nor the same kind of existential journey to make. They have their own wounds and their own individuation to deal

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with. The daughter's wound appears to be more about getting some psychic space from mother, and sense of autonomous valued existence, for which she often has to look to the father, since her own gender seems not to be thus associated.

At boarding school, however, both girls and boys get cut off not just from their mothers, but also from The Feminine, and everything which that includes. Comfort, softness, home, 'Beingness,' relationships, process rather than achievement - all such are discouraged. For the girls this means in effect that they are separated from that which is closest to their own nature. The psychic effect of this is hard to imagine, but the cut-offness of some of the women boarding school survivors is often terribly painful to see, perhaps because one tends not to expect the extent of such a character style in a woman.

Boys and girls sent away have three times a year to undergo a regime of separating and rebonding with mother, siblings, father, pets, and all that makes a home. This encourages the cutting off of feelings and discourages faith in relationships. It is as if by being at boarding school both girls and boys have to suffer the Male Wound. The result is that it makes men over-male and women can lose touch with their instinctual femininity. Historically, it seems that some of this was planned into the system, since the public schools were partly an attempt to get the precious male child out of the mother's control. Boarding school is in effect a male world, built on the corrupt belief that the world is a male world. Feminist-friendly psychoanalyst, Adam Jukes, suggests that for men born into this system there is little choice.

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Although the (male) child needs and wants his mother's love, he can see all around him that approval by men is what matters if he is to be a 'man.'

This helps to engender a deep seated inner resentment for being dependent on women for love, Jukes argues. In

compensation, men tend to seek to dominate the world of outer things, which for them includes women. Even without feminism, women seem to feel the injustice of the belief that the world belongs to men in their bones. As one woman workshop participant told us, "My dad owned the world."

But inner worlds may be much more difficult for men. In men there seems to be a propensity away from the relational, the psychological, and towards the rational. Of course this

is bogus. But in gender terms, the idea of 'making a man' may have more to it, than does a similar precept women. At this stage of our research into gender psychology it appears that women's task is more about being, inhabiting themselves, valuing and standing by their feminine power; whereas men seem to need to cross over towards something, to develop into something, which they are not yet.

## From Survival to Living

Although the survival mechanisms which I explore in the Making of Them apply to both genders, there are differences in how men and women talk about their experience at boarding school. In the workshops, most women speak of having had a complex web of relationships, friendship, alliances, crushes. It is as if friendship is the practice of relationship, which is purely an intimate aspect of womanhood. This is all very different from men's accounts. It follows that girls get badly hurt by the betrayals and relational strategies which abound in a boarding school. The workshops can become an arena where such things are resolved.

The women seem to express a greater rage towards their mothers. Perhaps this is because they can be mothers themselves, and they imagine what it might be like to send their own child away, whereas the men, who tend to be more cut off from their feelings, consider having to separate from the mother part of their natural expectation. The enforced separation from mother can provoke the child to think: "If she loved me she wouldn't send me away." Both male and female boarders lose love, but in the male psyche this loss goes unconscious and

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sounds too simple, but our work with couples has shown over and over again that this is far from being a stereotype: even the reconstructed 'new man', with all his awareness of feelings, tends to polarise with his female partner at the cutting edge of emotional availability. This tendency in men to split the heart from the head, the private from the public, the Feminine from the Masculine, is given an enormous boost by the boarding school.

Is there any point in having schools designed to 'make men' of boys? A large part of the thesis of my book is that the concept of 'the un-made child'

joins the other male experiences of rejection from mother, the Feminine, and all that is nurturing and good. The Male Wound, we suspect, is a condition of unconscious severance from such qualities. The result in terms of behaviour can be, for example, a continuous low-level exasperation, or a pleasing compliance in relation to women.

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It could be argued that for women the loss of home which boarding school entails is a greater blow than for men. Whether this is better or worse, in terms of gender politics, is by the by. What we can say is that home has traditionally been the only permitted domain of woman, and as boarders they lose it, often forever. Being in such schools may well be harder for them than for men, if men find it easier to belong to an institution which is organised like a man's mind and body - hierarchical and unsentimental, with logic safely stored in a compartment separate from emotion and sexuality. Men seem generally to like institutions, and hierarchies. Boys also often seem to want to grow up fast. Nevertheless, they do not benefit from losing their childhood by force. Boarding school dress is a symbol of this loss; it is

invariably an adult male outfit, with its jacket, collar and tie.

According to some sociologists, masculinity is defined in relation to what it is not. For example, boys don't cry - girls do. All-male schools may therefore have a pervasively negative influence on their pupils, and it is possible that the girls may avoid some of this. Research on boarding carried out in the late sixties drew attention to differences in mixed gender schools. Commenting on how the boys tend to cut off from their feelings, which he calls, 'affectively neutral behaviour,' Royston Lambert has this to say:

State boarding schools, where pupils have lived at home until eleven or twelve, exhibit far less of it; pupils are more spontaneous, demonstrative, noisy and prepared to show what they feel. Mixed boarding at any age prevents it, for in contrast to boys, girls are expected to be emotional, tantrums are quite permissible and the boys are not forced to behave very differently: (pseudo) adult behaviour is not required.

In the workshops, both men and women have difficulty with expressing emotions. Both have repressed their rage at their abandonment, and often wish that they could lose their "affectively neutral behaviour." Men, however seem to take rough treatment more for granted. For centuries they have been sent out to die in wars, and the schools were designed on either a military or monastic model. Women tend to understand relationship issues and self-sacrifice, and thus the concept of self-betrayal. They, after all, have held the domestic world together for millennia by putting their families' welfare before their own.

If there is a typical difference, it is that men generally need help getting to their grief, and women with their anger. Access to anger and grief are both necessary when trying to heal a loss, but they have different dynamic values. Anger is a force which can harm, but it is one which gets you what you want, and leads you to your values. Grief, on the other hand, takes you to your ground, connects you to your essential self, to your Centre of Dignity and Humility. Grief has the power to reconnect you to your loss, so in the end is the great healer and re-uniter.

In this, as in all healing processes, both men and women need help in expressing and balancing their outrage and their grief to claim and regain the wholeness which is the human potential.

## Further reading

Liam Hudson and Bernadine Jacot, *The Way Men Think*, Yale University Press, London and Newhaven 1991

Royston Lambert, *The Hothouse Society*, Weidendfeld and Nicolson, London 1968

Adam Jukes, *Why Men Hate Women*, Free Association Books, London, 1993

Nick Duffell, *The Making of Them*, the British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System, Lone Arrow Press, London 2000.

The Making of Them is available from bookshops and from Robert Kirkpatrick, Lone Arrow Press, 6 Osterley Park View Road, London, W7 2HH, England, tel: (0)20 8567 4521, cost £20 + postage and packing: £2.00 UK, £3.00 Europe, £4.00 rest of world surface, £5.50 airmail.

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*His therapeutic work with Boarding School Survivors has been the subject of a BBC 40 Minutes documentary, and numerous articles in the national press. He can be contacted at Nick@genderpsychology.com and The Making of Them is available from Lone Arrow Press, attn. Robert Kirkpatrick on 020 8567 4521.*

