

“MAN UP!” On Masculinity and Childhood

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Abstract

This piece sails in time and space, collecting memories in an effort to *show instead of tell* how masculinity is inculcated in children by parents. I use autoethnography to present scenes collected from three different moments of my life. I reflect on gender norms reproduced as complementary/opposite meanings, in which hierarchy remains, placing men above women.

Keywords

autoethnography, masculinity studies, performance ethnography

First scene: MAN UP! A (painful) rewind to childhood (Córdoba, Argentina, 1982)¹

Characters:

The author as a 9-year-old girl

The author's father

Father

MAN UP!²

Stop crying right now!

My flip-flops are soaked as the plastic bottle keeps losing its precious content all over my feet.

I'm 9. As every day, I have just rode my bike to the nearby neighborhood to get some drinking water. A carpenter, who always works with his door open, has given me permission to take some from the faucet outside his house. He says "hello" when he sees me coming, and keeps painting something that looks like a crooked bench. I place the 1.5 gallons bottle against the faucet and I wait until it's full. I do that every day, so my father, my mother, and I have good water to drink. In our neighborhood, we just get salty water. We can use it to take a shower or do the dishes, but we cannot drink it.

When the bottle is full, I place it in my bike's basket. I'm skinny and the bottle is heavy, but I'm used to do the job. My bike creaks a little when I place the plastic container on it. It is an old bike that belonged to my uncle when he was a kid. I know my parents cannot afford a new one, but I can't avoid hating that rusty-antique-looking bike. I wish I had a shiny one, maybe pink, with colorful pokes and a bell.

I get on the bike, ride a few blocks, and suddenly hear a cracking sound under me. The wheels don't roll anymore and I can't avoid falling on the pavement. I get up, rubbing

my knees, and then I notice: The bike's frame is dangling! I have a couple of blocks ahead to get home, a bike that doesn't work, and a container full of water.

Just for a moment I consider emptying the bottle, but I refrain: we need it. It's almost lunch time!

I don't know how I do it, but I manage to drag the broken bike and the bottle full of water to my house. When I get there I'm covered with perspiration and short of breath.

I see my father waiting for me in the front door. I am late and he looks angry. My heart shrinks a little: I know what's coming.

Father

Where the heck were you?

What did you do to that bike???

I startle and let go the broken bike just for a moment. It falls and the broken parts scratch my legs a little bit. The worst of the whole thing is that the basket follows the bike's move and the plastic bottle ends tumbling on the pavement. The cap opens and the water starts dripping on my feet. Oh, no . . . not the water!

Father

Hey! Pay attention to what you are doing! Can't you see that you are losing the water?

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I cannot hold it anymore and start crying from frustration. I didn't do anything wrong. The stupid-prehistoric-rusty bike broke, all the sudden, leaving me on my bare foot and with a bottle of water that weights more than 10 pounds.

My father sort of regrets his harsh words. It's quite obvious that a 9-year-old couldn't have broken a bike herself. Now he mumbles:

Father

Well, man up! Stop crying now

Man up.

(The little girl stares at the tip of her soaked flip-flops, her tears joining the running drinking water).

Man up

(My father still does not accept I am a little girl)

Man up?!!

(Shouts the woman I have become: "What do you mean, *man up?* I was a little girl!")

I was *just* a little girl.

1. To begin with

Remembering that day, back in my childhood, re-experiencing those feelings of frustration, indignation, and the cruel bite of injustice in my stomach, I decided to write this essay. This is a messy piece; it sails in time and space collecting memories, in an effort to *show instead of tell* (Denzin, 2014) how masculinity is inculcated in children by parents. I use autoethnography and present scenes collected from three different moments of my life. Such images are presented in two sections: in Scenes 1 and 2, I show gender inadequacy, being a girl/woman who struggles in the futile effort to be considered a "real" man. Scenes 2 and 3 introduce the observation of gender socialization practices on male children, from my point of view as a karate referee. Both topics interact in Scene 2. Scene 4 is closure.

In this piece, I reflect on the value given by society to what is masculine, by observing parents' efforts to ensure that their kids do not grow up as feminized subjects (weak, fearful, doubtful, etc.). Scenes refer to a stalled revolution that affects women, who still struggle to achieve full rights and social recognition, and also men, who cannot detach themselves from traditional gender regulations, despite their timid advances into the space of reproduction.³ This is about parents raising boys from whom it is demanded that they perform hegemonic masculinity and children who fear being considered a "sissy." In short, this is about gender norms that are reproduced as complementary/opposite meanings, in which hierarchy remains, placing men above women (Carlson, 2011; Miller & Sassler, 2010; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).

I draw on my own story because for a long time I have thought of myself as a son. I was raised as an only child in a house in which the masculine was considered outstanding and the female, inferior. As a "good son," I learned to hide my tears, my fears, and every trace of weakness that could be associated with female gender regulations. Doing so implied a huge effort (and loss) to me while growing up.

Historically, sons have been indispensable to reproduce the family's last name, preserve its economic assets, and increase them while guarding the family honor. Parents have always been privileged watchers of the virility of their male children, encouraging them, from an early age, to develop activities socially understood as masculine and avoiding at all costs those considered feminizing. Although some beliefs have progressed in favor of girls, symbolic attributions to what is masculine still remain.

Having failed to be born a boy, all my life (please remove comma) I have made tremendous efforts to fit the image of the son my father sought. I worked hard to be a champion marksman, a boxer, a Thaiboxer, and a karate fighter (Martinez, 2014). I have always been the only woman competing among men, struggling hard to show that I was able to engage in activities considered masculine, and that I was as valuable as my male partners. In all those places, I hid my feminine features, considering them a disvalue. Despite my struggle, I never achieved being treated like a man, for the simplest reason in the world: I am not a man, and my "disguises" never made me look like one. I have always failed trying to fit in, and when I assumed a "manly" role to develop, I was every time suspected of inadequacy for being a woman. Scene 2 refers to that kind of situation.

Drawing on Denzin (2012), this essay intends to "contribute to an ethical self-consciousness that is critical and reflexive, empowering people . . . (to) turn oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, and doubt into trust" (p. 298). My childhood memories were the starting point, and now I invite the reader to come with me to a little stadium, where a full contact karate competition is about to take place. The four scenes are set in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, where I live.

Scene 2: Fight like a girl (2014)

Characters:

The author as a 39-year-old karate referee

Six male referees

Sensei (the karate master)

Two 5-year-old kids (competitors)

Two 9-year-old kids (competitors)

Scenery: Small stadium in which a karate competition is taking place. The seats are not full but there are at least 400 people. I enter the fighting space wearing straight

black pants, a blue shirt (belonging to my husband), and a white tie.

There are eight referees, and only one of them is a woman (me). Four of us sit in each corner of the mat (*tatami*) where the fights are going to take place. *Sensei* stands in the middle: He is the main referee and the one that will eventually determine who wins and losses when the corner referees dictate a draw.

My hands are sweaty while I hold a red flag in one hand and a white flag in the other. Both my arms are in a 90-degree angle. If I raise the white flag, it means that the competitor of the right wins. If I raise the red one, the competitor from the left will have the victory. I don't need to say that after 15 fights my arms ache (a lot).

I hold a whistle between my lips. I've been like that for hours. I know that the whistle has saliva in it and I find that idea disgusting. I wouldn't dare to complain; men don't. There's nothing I can do but watch the fight and respond to what happens.

Sensei

Hajime!

(the Japanese word *Hajime* means that the fight must begin)

Two 9 year-old boys are fighting. I follow every move trying to remain focused after so much time sitting there and holding a salivated whistle between my lips.

I shake the red flag; the competitor is holding the other boy's suit and that is forbidden. Unfortunately the rest of the judges don't see the boy cheating, and I'm the only one catching the *Sensei*'s (and the 400 spectators) attention. He stops the fight, looks at me (silently asking me what it was) and I grab my own clothes to show what happened.

Sensei

"Ichi! You lose one point

I sigh of relief: *Sensei* is backing me up.

I don't see anything but the competitors and the rubber mat, but I *feel* angry looks around. Someone says something about the referee being a f*** woman.

The fight ends and now two 5-year-olds stand on the *tatami*. One is a boy, and the other one is a girl. Children under 8 are not divided by gender or weight. She is taller and heavier than him, and throws punches and kicks non-stop. People sitting on the grades laugh; they find her attitude amusing. The boy tries to defend himself but she is stronger than him. A punch to the chest throws him on the rubber mat. The little girl jumps and celebrates her achievement (I know what she feels) while *Sensei* approaches to the boy.

Sensei

Are you ok? Would you like to continue?

The boy pouts and timidly nods. The fight resumes. The boy now runs to the girl and I can tell he is furious. His face is contorted and his cheeks look like red apples. He tries to kick his opponent but soon the girl nails a punch and he falls on the mat again. Now he cannot help crying. He runs to me and hugs my leg. I guess he sees me as the closest thing to a mom. The crowd exclaims: "Awww!"

I don't know anything about dealing with children and the boy is crying on my knee.

Alejandra as referee

Hey, cheer up dude, you did great! (his boogers on my pants) This is not about winning or losing; it is about giving your best, and you did (the boy keeps crying, what do I do?). Are you hurt or something? What is it? (Where is your mom, kiddo?)

Boy

She is a girl! I lost to a girl! I SUCK!

(He runs away from the *tatami*, absolutely embarrassed)

2. Autoethnography as a way to reflect on masculinities

Autoethnography seeks to make a contribution to knowledge about a social problem, based on the conjunction of the personal and the cultural (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). The aim is to understand social phenomena from a perspective that demands permanent reflexivity and self-analysis on the part of the researcher. In the words of Tilley-Lubbs (2014), "Autoethnography allows me to examine an event, practice, or a circumstance in my own life" (p. 271), and doing so, I navigate and draw from my own pain (Adams, 2012).

When writing autoethnographically, it is assumed that it is not possible to guarantee absolute methodological certainty in the social sciences, that all research reflects the point of view of the researcher, and that there is no possibility of constructing a free knowledge exchange (Denzin, 2014). Autoethnography demands awareness that all research involves political, moral, and ethical issues (Denzin, 2014; Ellis & Adams, 2014; Martinez & Andreatta, 2014; Merlino, 2014).

The relationship between individual and context is not intended as a position of equilibrium or immobility. Autoethnography describes a world in constant movement and change, linking history with context, and the reader with the author. It is a dialogue that is achieved from the intersection of research, writing, and method (Ellis & Bochner,

2003), which seeks to generate in the reader the feeling that the experience described is realistic, believable, and possible (Ellis et al., 2010). That is why an autoethnographic narrative should include emotion, action, introspection, self-awareness, and the body. At the same time, it demands the use of a narrative and literary style of communication. The researchers' emotions, fears, and personal experiences are exposed, and they become subjects like those they observe.

Autoethnography criticizes and challenges naturalized meanings, inviting an ethical dialogue, while reflexively clarifying a moral position, engendering resistance while offering utopian thoughts about how things can be different (Denzin, 2014). It shows instead of telling, underlining the rule that "less is more," showing interpretive sufficiency and representational adequacy. It is politically, functionally, and collectively committed (Denzin, 2014). Autoethnography advocates the idea of understanding, in a sensitive way, the meaning of what people feel, think, and do (Ellis & Bochner, 2003).

Man up

Big boys don't cry

Only sissies cry

Are you a girl?

Don't behave as a girl

Be a man

If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry
about

MAN up, man up, man up, man up, man UP

3. Growing hegemonic masculinities

Masculinity is constructed relationally, defined and redefined in relation to a context, and internalized from childhood as a non-conscious process. This process develops in the framework of a social order in which social practices have a defined gender. Manhood, thus, is a cultural product; it is not the consequence of having been born with male genitals, but rather a set of historical definitions, socially constructed and therefore changing (Hensley, 2011; Oliffe et al., 2013; Pelias, 2007). It does not emerge from the biology of a male and rise to his consciousness, but rather means different things in different ages (Kimmel, 1987). There is no one pattern of masculinity, but instead there are multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005).

To prove themselves, men are forced to develop practices that supposedly respond to "nature." Male practices involve action versus inaction, strength versus weakness, and courage against cowardice (Lindemann, 2012). The ideal of masculinity becomes an unattainable social model, to the extent that men must constantly test their strength to prove and reaffirm that they possess the skills required for those born with male genitals (Lindemann, 2012; Oliffe

et al., 2013). This position must be maintained daily, because there is always "the risk of contamination of the 'feminine'". The process of achieving masculinity lasts one's whole life, beginning in childhood, in which boys are segregated from the feminine universe (Guasch Andreu, 2002).

A "real man" is asked to constantly keep a defensive image to preserve an honor understood as masculinity (Collins, 2012; Patti, 2012). It has to be reaffirmed in front of women but mainly toward other men. In this effort, men intend to preserve their image as "real men" jeopardizing their physical integrity by performing activities which are dangerous (fighting, driving recklessly, or, for example, participating in hazing; Bourdieu, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

The myth of the hero is defined as the explanation of the reasons that lead men to intentionally expose themselves to situations that threaten their lives, seeking to legitimize themselves as men (Collins, 2012; Figueroa Perea, 2005; Patti, 2012). Montoya, referring specifically to the Latin American situation, sets attributes that he understands as part of masculinity as it is understood: "compulsory heterosexuality, exercising gainful occupation, being an adult, being aggressive and able to exercise violence" and (successful) practice of sports, which is a site for men to express and affirm masculinity (Adams, 2006; Hensley, 2011; Lindemann, 2010; McNaughton, 2012; Sparkes, 2012).

Girls and boys are taught to express certain emotions (and hide others) in specific ways, "The boy will learn to suppress his grief and express it not by crying, but by hitting. He will learn to feel ashamed of his weaknesses rather than his aggressiveness" (Fernández de Quero, 2000, p. 111; Hensley, 2011). From their early adolescence, boys learn that their parents are a sort of gender police, constantly threatening to expose them as effeminate and unmanly (Hensley, 2011; Kimmel, 1987). Thus, they must frequently overcome the fear and embarrassment of not-taking-it-like-a-man (Hensley, 2011).

Connell (1996) states that "some (masculinities) are exemplary, taken as symbolizing admired traits, for example, the masculinities of sporting heroes" (p. 209). Karate is indeed a gendered space and a masculinized sport (Chawansky, 2015; Drummond, 2010). Combat sports are male preserves in which woman are seen as outsiders (McNaughton, 2012).

To honor Norman Denzin's call to show instead of tell, I now invite the reader to come with me once more to a little stadium in the city of Córdoba, a freezing day of July 2014.

Scene 3: Fight like a man (despite being 9 years old) (2014)

Characters:

Sensei

The author as the karate referee
Two 9-year-old kids (competitors): Pablo and Carlos
Pablo's father

Scenery: Interior. The same small stadium.

It is 7:00 p.m. and the karate competition is finishing. Two 9-year-old boys are about to participate in the last fight of the evening. The winner will be declared the junior champion of year 2014.

Sensei

Hajime!

The fight begins. The boys are tired after fighting four times that day. They are not hurt (*Sensei* does not allow the fights to go too far), but they are stressed and exhausted. They approach carefully to each other, trying to predict the opponent's first punch or kick. Spectators yell their lungs out, encouraging one or the other kid. Suddenly my attention gets caught by one man who is not respecting the *tatami* limits: I have seen him before. He is one of the kids' fathers.

Pablo's father

"KILL HIM PABLO!!! KILL HIM!! USE YOUR LEGS!!!

USE YOUR LEGS!!! KICK HIM HARD!!! BREAK HIM!!! MOVE, MOVE!!!

WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOING STANDING THERE!!!

BREAK HIS LEGS PABLOOOO!!!"

The man has considerable excess weight and he has trouble to move quickly. While shouting (his face horribly contorted), his breath shortens and his face turns bright red. He walks around the *tatami* trying to get closer to the fighters, regardless the referees, who distract our attention asking him to leave the area of the mat and sit with the rest of the attendees.

I'm horrified. The man is yelling to a 9-year-old kid who is competing against another boy who is also 9 (*kill him, he said?*).

The kids are visibly exhausted but they still throw punches and kicks trying to hit the opponent.

Pablo's father

"KILL HIM PABLO!!! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? MOVE!!!

(whistle sound)

WHAT THE . . . ??? IT IS OVER??? ARE YOU SERIOUS??? COME ON!!!

Sensei gently asks the boys to face each other in the middle of the *tatami* and asks the referees to deliver their

decision. Four whistles sound at once . . . three red flags and one white flag go up.

Sensei

The winner is red, Carlos Morales

The crowd claps and screams. The fighters shake each other hands and then hug. *Sensei* congratulates both for their extraordinary performance. Carlos, the winner, is ecstatic and runs to the corner where his parents are waiting for him. Pablo bites his lips trying to hide his frustration. He does not rush to the place where his father is waiting. I look at him, being sorry about the boy. When they walk close to where I am I can hear the boy's broken voice:

Pablo

I said I'm sorry . . .

Pablo's father

I don't know what's wrong with you. You are no son of mine.

Stop crying, I don't want people to *know for sure* you are a girl, c'mon, MAN UP!!!!

4. Last words

Why use autoethnography to reflect on masculinity? Why using performance to write about gender regulations? I have written above about the method, but these questions go far beyond technique. Autoethnography allows me to observe issues of masculinity much more clearly than any other method I have used before. I have carried out research about contemporary masculinities for the past 10 years. I have applied focus groups to children aged 8 to 9 (Martinez, 2009; Martinez & Merlino, 2009) and interviewed dozens of men and women from different social classes, asking them how they experience gender norms (Martinez, 2008, 2010, 2012). I have applied discourse analysis, grounded theory, and developed typologies of subjects, but the papers I wrote were dry and distant.

What good do those pieces do, if they are not passionate and committed? If they do not speak from the soul and inspire real feelings and sensations? What are they good for, if they do not change people's lives? Why would I be a social researcher and a professor, if it is not to have a real impact on the lives of people subject to social injustices?

I use autoethnography in an attempt to change things as they are determined by dominant agents and institutions, and thus make *real* people's lives better. Drawing on Giardina (2005), I look for "non-violent critical methodologies that

protest, resist, and help us represent, imagine, and perform radically free utopian spaces” (p. 182).

Autoethnographical papers do not whisper (in a questionable attempt of being neutral and objective) but *scream* from the heart, demanding social change. And that is why I write autoethnography, to scream out of my lungs:

“Dad: *There’s nothing wrong with raising a female child! Being a girl is as valuable as being a boy. There’s nothing embarrassing about raising female kids!*”

Using “personal experience to illustrate facets of the cultural experience”, I have the chance to claim:

“Parents: *stop harassing your male kids! Teach them love, understanding, respect for every kind of person, and encourage them to embrace an inexhaustible search for equality and social justice.*”

Following Denzin (2012), I “start with the personal and the biographical and (my) own location within the world around (me) . . . connecting the personal, the political, and the cultural” (p. 298). Doing so I also use autoethnography to move forward and heal myself.

Scene 4 (and last): New Year’s eve 2014

Characters:

The author in the present (40 years old)

Her father

I’m sitting on the bed and my telephone rings twice. The caller ID shows me my dad’s number. Reluctantly, I pick up.

Father

Hi there, I’m calling to wish you a happy New Year.

Daughter

Happy New Year to you, too, dad

Father

You know I’m proud of you, don’t you?

Daughter

(Actually, I don’t. You never told me so before)

You are?

Father

Yes, very proud of you

Daughter

Well, thank you

I hang up.

I have a horrible feeling: I do not care anymore.

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Notes

1. **Note to the reader:** English is not my mother tongue. A native speaker usually checks the use of English in my papers so they do not sound “unidiomatic.” This piece was checked, but there are some parts in which it is very important for me to use my own English-speaking voice, imperfect as it is. Thank you for reading.
2. I have chosen the English idiom “Man up” to help the reader understand what I wish to express, but in Spanish, my mother tongue, the literal translation for the expression I want to use is “Become a man” (hazte hombre).
3. Reproduction is a term widely used in gender studies and it is understood as a feminine space that involves the care of the home and the family, children, the elderly, and the ill, among others.

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