

Are boys driven by vagina envy?

It's not penis envy that makes the world go round

It's probably the biggest cover-up in history.... "Why would anyone want to be a *girl*?" sneers the ten-year-old boy with the lopsided haircut, pausing for a moment on his scooter. "Girls can't *do* anything! All they do is play with dolls and sit around and giggle. It's much better being a boy. You can have fun if you're a boy!"

"And anyway, girls are whores," says the cynical fifteen-year-old boy with the angry look in his eye. "You can't trust them. They mess you around. They're always going behind your back. And then they complain and say you're being harsh."

It's a cover-up invented by boys and men and it starts with feelings about mothers. Each of these two boys might be the Oedipal child realizing that he can never have his mother to himself because she loves another, and that – at best - he must share his beloved. The realization, the sense of unfairness is terrible. Every boy senses that his mother has something he wants, something he can't quite describe, and yet he can't have it. So he finds a way of dealing with the situation by withdrawing, by having nothing to do with her, by attacking everything that she stands for, even as he secretly still loves her and would do anything to win her favour.

Boys carry these mixed feelings about their mothers from infancy into puberty and adulthood, leaving them with all sorts of envious feelings about girls. Boys must bear the humiliating fact that girls tend to develop earlier at puberty, leaving the boys behind for a while. Boys are then scorned for their attempts to compensate by acting big: making lots of noise, exaggerating, fighting, boasting, talking dirty. Girls sneer at them, "Why don't you lot just grow up and stop being so pathetic?" Boys see how much more domestically competent, how much more emotionally literate girls tend to be, and how much this wins approval from parents and teachers. As teenagers, boys become aware of the mystery going on inside girls, of the reproductive capacity of girls and of the intimacy of a mother's eventual relationship with her baby: a physical and psychological intimacy from which boys and men are necessarily excluded. Having a penis is all very well, but the baby grows inside the mother, not the father, and it's the mother that the newborn baby craves, not the father.

Of course we're all subject to biological predispositions. It's not that boys want to stop being boys: after all, they love the power; they love the patriarchy. It's just that they want it both ways: they want to be boys *and they want to be girls*. But however much they preen and strut their stuff, they know it can never be. In a binary universe where people are brought up to be to be one thing or the other, boys are obliged to be boys and to deny ever wanting to be girls. So they set about the denial by putting as much energy as possible into disparaging girls, "Why would anyone want to be a *girl*?" They belittle the achievements of girls; they objectify girls and are especially keen to shame the very femininity they secretly admire and covet.

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Keeping up this male façade is exhausting, debilitating. Boys end up either refusing to speak about their own feelings altogether for fear of being shamed themselves, or speaking only of feeling powerful, in command, inviolable, in need of no one, entirely self-reliant, envying no one, absolutely no one.... They celebrate physical strength, the one area where they can reasonably expect to have some advantage over girls, and they form boys-only gangs to shore up their male identities, their would-be omnipotence.

Never mind theories about penis envy. It's vagina envy that makes the world go round: boys and men needing to disempower other people and triumph over envy in order not to feel so inadequate themselves.