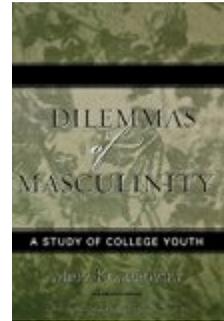


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Dilemmas of Masculinity: 1970-2006

Dilemmas 1969-1970

Mirra Komarovsky's *Dilemmas of Masculinity*—first published in 1976 and reprinted in 2004—is a study of male college seniors at Columbia College in 1969-1970. It focuses on the way in which social changes, including, but not limited to, the unfolding of the second-wave women's movement, affected young men's relation to ideals of masculinity based on heterosexuality, male dominance, male bread-winning, and head of household status. Of the sixty-two seniors in Komarovsky's study—carefully selected for race (75 percent white, 25 percent black), religion, and father's education—some 80 percent experienced what she refers to as “role strain” (p. 9). Social roles, according to Komarovsky, are sets of social norms or socially sanctioned rules of behavior that are themselves attached to clusters of statuses—such as child, worker, friend—in which most of us participate. Komarovsky defines “role strain” as “felt and latent (not fully recognized by the person) difficulty in role performance and perceived paucity of rewards for role conformity,” (p. 9).

Of the 80 percent who experienced role strain, Komarovsky reports, 72 percent felt this strain in relation to the sexual sphere, and particularly in relation to an ideal of male sexual dominance. 53 percent of the seniors felt strain in relation to the idea of being a family breadwinner, a function which the majority regarded as “one of the touchstones of masculinity” (p. 207). 43 percent felt uneasy with respect to father-son relations, and in male-female relations outside the sexual arena 45 percent had

difficulties in living out an ideal requiring male leadership and dominance.

These various forms of role strain were fraught with contradictions, the most politically significant of which, for Komarovsky, was that 48 percent of the young men expressed support for women's intellectual and occupational equality in the public sphere and at the same time “expected their wives to play the role of homemaker and child rearer of young children” in the “private.” The young men themselves planned on being the “principal achievers in the outside world” (p. 23). Although these same young men proclaimed their willingness to help with child care and household duties, only two or three approved an egalitarian allocation of domestic and occupational roles (p. 33, 38). For most of these seniors, whom Komarovsky labels “modified liberal” (p. 33), the only alternative to traditional role divisions at home was “simple reversal” (p. 249). They could not “conceive of a third option” (p. 249).

One side of the contradiction expressed by these modified liberals, according to Komarovsky, was deeply rooted in the more widely shared social assumptions “that women must naturally bear the major responsibility for child rearing as well as the [in] recognition of the radical changes required in many institutional sectors if this assumption were to be challenged” (p. 252). As an advocate of more egalitarian relationships between the sexes, Komarovsky saw this contradiction—between a declared support for women's equality in the public sphere and an investment in traditional divisions of labor in the

home—as a “major ideological roadblock” to the “serious institutional reorganization” that would be necessary for wider and more equal options for men and women (pp. 250).

A Feminist Frontier

One of the most striking aspects of Komarovsky’s book is that it was written so early in the women’s movement and that its approach to the subject of men and masculinities is both compassionate and complex. (When Komarovsky conducted her field work in 1969-1970. NOW had been in existence for only three years and radical women—white women and women of color—were only beginning to form caucuses inside and then outside new left and cultural nationalist movements and to enter into consciousness-raising groups). The tenor of much female feminist work on men in this period, moreover, was critical, if not negative—this being the age of such half-joking feminist quips as “men in men’s groups are men in bad company” or “women need men like a fish needs a bicycle.” Komarovsky’s decision to focus on men and masculinity and to do so in a compassionate and complex manner was a pioneering move in female feminist scholarship.

Komarovsky’s age and the age of her subjects—she was sixty-five and most of her subjects were twenty-one—may help explain her compassion. She was almost old enough to have been a grandmother to these college seniors. The complexity of her approach, however—a complexity that was undoubtedly facilitated by her initial empathy—must also have contributed to it. The very process of conducting detailed ethnographic studies often produces a more compassionate understanding of one’s subjects than one contemplates at the beginning. (My own co-authored study of men who were in graduate school in 1969—men who are now only five to eight years older than Komarovsky’s subjects—began with an ego-centric assumption about feminist “impact” on men of my generation. A close study of these men, however, uncovered such a complex tangle of forces at work in their responses to feminisms that the term “feminist impact” began to seem inadequate if not ironic.)[1]

Komarovsky, although she too expresses an interest in tracing the effects of feminism on men and on ideals of masculinity, also situates her study in complex changes that preceded and helped inspire the second-wave women’s movement. These changes include the increasingly early cross-sex interactions of boys and girls, interactions that made young women more of a reference point for young men. Other developments include young

women’s growing ease with premarital sex and women’s rapidly mounting participation in the work force. The latter doubled between 1940 and 1960 from 15 to 30 percent. The changes also incorporated the development of a counter culture which condemned competitive striving for success, militarism, and machismo and the early stirrings of the men’s liberation movement and an “emerging concern with the masculine role” (p. 2). Thus, Komarovsky is careful to avoid “the unwarranted assumption that women constitute the major source of men’s woes” or, one might add, the assumption that women are the most central concerns of even heterosexual men’s lives. (p. 2).

As someone trained as a literary critic and not as a sociologist, I was also struck by the thoroughness of Komarovsky’s methods. Each participant sat through two hours of interview, filled out five schedules, and took two personality tests, one read by a computer and the other by a clinical psychologist. Komarovsky is also meticulous about defining terms, about articulating categories—there are, for example, six modes of “role strain”—and about and proposing, testing, confirming, or discarding of hypotheses (p. 226). Also striking, because they are emphases I associate with much later, postmodern work on male masculinities, are Komarovsky’s careful meditations on the kind of complexities that Matthew Guttman was to refer to as “contradictory consciousness” some thirty years later.[2]

These complexities include emotional conflicts—many of the seniors yearned for intellectual companionship with women but felt threatened by intellectual women at the same time (p. 50). They include contradictions between conscious and socially acceptable attitudes toward women and the less stereotypical images of women that the men arrived at through ongoing experience, and they incorporate conflicts between attitudes and behaviors. As Komarovsky observes, it is possible to be “more radical in practice than in professed beliefs” and vice versa (pp. 13, 44).

Also worthy of note is Komarovsky’s acknowledgment of the different levels on which personal change takes place, her understanding that male self-transformation does not operate on the level of willful political choice alone, that, in the words of Erickson, “it takes a much longer time to emancipate what goes on deep down inside us—that is, whatever ... [has] become part of our impulse life and our identity formation—than the time it takes to re-define professed values” (p. 42). In an age when nuance and complexity were often reserved

for female feminist work on women, Komarovsky generously acknowledges that discrepancies between one's beliefs, norms, and values are so widespread as to constitute the rule rather than the exception in men and women both (p. 24).

Another strength of Komarovsky's work is its attention to class. Even within the largely middle-class population she studied Komarovsky is conscious of subtle, class-linked variations. White sons of better educated fathers, for example, were more self-disclosing than the sons of lesser-educated fathers. Sons of lower-class fathers complained more often of their father's deficiency in "warmth and understanding" (p. 192) and of their "harshness" than the sons of upper-class dads (p.193). Komarovsky articulates some racial variations as well. Only one of the nine black seniors, for example, "agreed with the proposition that the men's reasoning ability was superior to that of women—perhaps rejecting all such group comparisons in intelligence" (p. 58). Racial distinctions, however, are not as clearly articulated as those of class in this study, although, as Komarovsky notes, many of the sons with lower-class and less educated fathers were black. Differences with respect to sexual identity are muted at best. Since the field work was carried on in 1969-1970, during the beginning of a national gay liberation movement, gay young men, even at a liberal college, may well have been reluctant to share information about their sexual identity.

Most striking to me, however, is the degree to which Komarovsky emphasizes the intimate relation of the public and the private, one of feminism's most central contributions to the study of society and culture. Komarovsky's central point, of course, is that women's equality in the public sphere is dependent on the way in which the "private" world of the family is structured. Even more notable, however, is the fact that the family is not just represented by divisions of labor or roles. For Komarovsky, men and women's intimate, emotional, and physical relationships are also central to our understanding of the "public sphere," a concept often conflated with what "history" is about.

Thus in Komarovsky's study we learn that some men's struggles to separate from dependent mother-son relationships leads to mistrust of women, affects their capacity to confide in women, and contributes to their investment in traditional gender relations. We learn that men who had been sexually intimate with women were more likely to choose women as confidantes because "sexual intimacy contributed to psychological closeness"

(p. 166). Whether these men were also more likely to espouse liberal attitudes toward women's equality is another matter, although Komarovsky observes that men who lack psychological intimacy become deficient in "self-awareness and empathy" and may fail to become "sensitive to the inner world" of their female associates (p. 158). We do learn that 40 percent of the men who Komarovsky defined as "traditional," in their desire to have nonworking wives, were still virgins as opposed to only 18 percent of the group that did not object to working spouses (p. 30). Komarovsky was surely one of the first second-wave feminists to observe, as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall do in a much later study of nineteenth-century British middle-class women and men, that men's positive and intimate investments in relations with women may play a productive role in progressive gender change.[3]

What the Future Held

The men Komarovsky studied would be fifty-six today—solidly within the baby boomer generation—"and the present age of many of the men I myself studied between 1995 and 1999 in my book on the "men's movement." [4] (In 1995, that is, many of the men I studied were in their mid-forties.) Although relatively few of the men in Komarovsky's study would have participated in organized efforts to redefine masculine ideals, they certainly lived during the years in which other men did and in which a public "crisis" over the meaning of "masculinity" unfolded both in many men's lives and in the media. What forces were involved in this crisis and how might these forces have affected men such as those Komarovsky studied?

For many men, even those who were white and middle class, the years after 1970 produced further erosions of ideological and material support for the norms of male-dominant, bread-winning, head-of-household masculinity. From the early 1970s on, for example, deindustrialization and a profit-driven restructuring of global and local economies led to a decrease in men's real wages and initiated a decline in secure, well-paying jobs for U.S. men and women both. These developments, in turn, promoted an increase in the number of married women and mothers entering the labor force, especially as low-paid workers. Inflation, escalating consumption standards, the expansion of coeducation on the college level, and the persistence of high divorce rates also fueled the continued entry of women and mothers with small children into labor outside the home. Feminism, by encouraging female economic and personal autonomy, acted as un-

witting “midwife” to these changes. Some of the men Komarovsky studied, therefore, may well have experienced what she refers to as a “socially structured scarcity” of the resources that had once supported them in trying to perform bread-winning, head-of-household status (p. 226).

As Komarovsky observes, the dominant ideal of masculinity in 1969-1970 had also implicitly assumed men’s right to greater power and privilege than women. Feminists’ hard-won gains for women, however—the growth of gender consciousness, an increase in the percentage of women in higher education, greater access for some women to traditional male-dominated forms of employment, laws against gender discrimination, and many other social and political inroads into traditional gender arrangements—further challenged the unquestioned acceptance of such inequality. The gay liberation movement, which had only just begun when Komarovsky commenced her work in the field, the proliferation of gay masculine ideals, and the influence of gay culture on male bodies and fashions also complicated the automatic equation of heterosexuality with being a “masculine” man.

Changing racial demographics, meanwhile, and continuing struggles for racial equality shed greater light upon the race privilege that had often functioned as another foundation of a dominant masculine ideal. By the late 1980s, when the media-hyped figure of the “angry white male” began most fully to appear, the category white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male was still a privileged category but a much less secure or celebrated one than before. Many men were experiencing a decline in what Komarovsky called the “rewards for role conformity” (p. 226).

Both inadequate resources and low rewards for conforming to a dominant ideal helped produce what Komarovsky calls the men’s liberation movement, a phenomenon which would be better described from the perspective of the present as networks of men organizing around efforts to redefine masculine ideals. Many of the concerns that Komarovsky’s seniors expressed in 1969-1970 would be taken up by these very networks. 53 percent of the men Komarovsky studied, for example, felt some role strain with respect to the norms of bread-winning masculinity and 43 percent experienced strain in relation to father-son relations. The most dominant source of the latter strain was a perceived lack of “warmth, involvement, and closeness” on the part of fathers (p. 190). Komarovsky’s seniors, moreover, occasionally felt that the ideal of toughness and dominance “not only put an intolerable burden upon them but hin-

dered more humane and rewarding relationships with women and with men” (p. 232). Although the traditional ideal of masculinity was still “the yardstick against which the seniors measured themselves,” the male ideal that they described in their schedules now included qualities such as “patience, sensitivity, and artistic appreciation, hitherto identified as ‘feminine’” (p. 154).

Similar strains and developments would appear in networks of men organizing around the redefinition of masculine ideals. Networks with participants identifying themselves as largely radical, or as largely liberal, or conservative, networks with wildly different positions on important social issues, shared two related activities—criticizing individualist, self-making values and attempting, through surprisingly similar ritual practices, to construct ideals of masculinity that were more expressive of vulnerability, tenderness, and care. Indeed, most of men’s efforts in these networks focused on “emotion work,” efforts to invent masculine ideals that encourage greater emotional closeness to other men, to children, and, sometimes, to women as well.

These efforts were often enacted through forms of community-oriented political activity (as in black nationalist emphases on serving the people), through building brotherly relationships between men (as in the profeminist movement NOMAS, the liberal Mythopoetics, or in gay networks such as the Radical Faeries and Manifest Love), and/or through forms of mourning over lost, distant, and unloving dads (as in the Mythopoetics). For many men in these networks, however, the area of greatest interest and emotional growth would lie in inventing and practicing new ideals of fatherhood. A turn (or return) to nurturing fatherhood, indeed, was embraced by large numbers of men who never participated in an organized effort to transform ideals of masculinity, a development that would have bearing on men’s capacity to imagine a “third option” with respect to traditional divisions of labor between women and men (p. 249).

In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, for example, spokesmen for black nationalisms and for largely white profeminist networks alike not only embraced loving fatherhood as a major form of personal development for men, but speculated that it might be the most rewarding avenue of all for developing more open and emotionally expressive masculine ideals. Advocates of “generative fathering” in the 1990s also emphasized the role of fathering in men’s personal change. They defined the generative father as a man who took on housework and physical and emotional care of children not as “a reluctant

personal sacrifice of privilege for the sake of social justice” but as an essential part of his own personal growth. The turn to involved fathering, therefore, had much to do with men’s emotional lives and with their investment in their own self transformation.[4] Men “had their own agenda” with respect to “patriarchal culture.”[5]

There were good reasons, moreover, that love for children, rather than intimacy with women, say, or with other men, became the primary site for exploring, encouraging, and celebrating greater nurturing and feeling on the part of many heterosexually identified males. One is that for many such men producing a more humane, less emotionally constricted masculinity was more safely accomplished with children than with female adults or other men. At the same time, moreover, nurturing fatherhood, particularly of the hands-on, changing-the-dirty-diaper form, also spoke to feminist demands, providing many men with a gratifying sense of having responded to women’s calls for change. Fathering was, and remains, an arena in which men’s self-interest has undeniably intersected with feminist politics.

The return to fathering, however, was to be replete with ironies and contradictions for men and women both. On the one hand, involved fathering opened a road to personal change that was less threatening to men than that of brotherhood or greater intimacy with women and that did produce new capacities for tenderness and care. On the other hand, involved fathering might also contribute to subtle forms of gender conflict and revenge. This was reflected, for example, in the activities and language of some father’s rights organizations and in the appearance of such media-hyped figures such as the newly angry dad and the “good [enough] family men.”[6] These groups and positions were fueled by a contradictory mix of emotions and desires which included, among other things, longing for contact with one’s own children, a quest for personal change, a desire for revenge, and a compelling urge to reassert traditional forms of male authority.

While more involved fathering might draw men and women together in an absorbing common project, moreover, it had features that women found emotionally disconcerting as well, such as unexpected transfers of attention from wife to child or new forms of competition. As one divorced father confessed to me in the late 1990s, “involved fathering is a weapon men use against women too.”[7] While women in the 1980s often took pleasure in their husband’s attention to the child and welcomed shared childcare and increased autonomy with respect

to their children, they also felt that they had lost a good deal in the bargain. In a world where women were still largely invisible and lacking social and economic power, they felt they had sacrificed some of the emotional power they had felt in being the indispensable wife and mother, the primary source of emotional provision in the home.

The turn to shared parenting, of course, was also driven by the effects of global and domestic restructuring. Between 1973 and 1988, as inflation drove up the price of housing, transportation, education, and health care, and as real median incomes in the U.S. stalled, the rising cost of the American dream pushed women into the labor force in ever higher numbers. Thus, in 1970, 29 percent of women with children under five worked in the labor force but in 1988 the number had risen to 51 percent, a change with significant impact on gender relations at work and in the home. Feminism, moreover, augmented women’s sense of social justice with respect to domestic labor. Komarovskiy cites a study that suggests a striking rise in feminist attitudes between 1969 and 1973. In 1970 most of the female partners of the men Komarovskiy studied expected to withdraw from employment for the purposes of child-rearing (p. 39). In a 1973 study of college women at Douglass, however, 60 percent of the women surveyed intended to work all their adult life (p. 39).

The years following 1970, then, did see an erosion of the “ideological roadblock” which Komarovskiy observed in her college seniors, the assumption that women must naturally bear the major responsibility for child rearing, the inability to imagine a “third option” (p. 249). To what degree, however, was a shift in ideology accompanied by a change in day-to-day behavior? There is some evidence to suggest that the multiply determined turn to fathering did produce more equalitarian marriages at least for dual-earner couples with children. A 2003 study of dual-earner couples—the dominant family form in the United States—suggests that men’s handling of household chores and child care increased steadily since 1977.

In 1977, fathers in dual earner couples with children spent 1.3 hours per workday on household chores compared to 3.7 for employed mothers. By 2002 the figures were two hours per day for fathers and three for mothers. The gender gap in housework declined by 70 percent. In 1977, employed fathers in dual earner couples allocated 1.9 hours per work day to their children compared to 3.3 hours for employed mothers. By 2003 the comparable figures were 2.7 hours for fathers and 3.5 hours for mothers. The gap had narrowed by 57 percent. Other research tells