



Is masculinity to blame for men who murder their children?

I have written this post in response to an article in *The Observer* today, titled '[Masculinity Crisis leads to family murder, according to new study](#).' It is a short piece, which states that Birmingham City University criminologists have studied 59 men who between 1980 and 2012 killed their children and, sometimes, their wives as well. It states that the study concludes that:

the increasing instances of the [crime](#) were a reflection of "masculinity in crisis". He [Professor David Wilson] said: "Some men are unable to come to terms with different and developing notions of the institution of the family, where women increasingly play a much more dynamic role than they had in the past."

The same study's findings were reported in [The Daily Mail](#) in May this year. In this report, the causal factors of marriage breakdown were highlighted. Elizabeth Yardley, one of the criminologists working doing the research comments that the murders '*find it impossible to cope when their families break up*'. All '*seem to have one thing in common. They feel that their masculinity is being threatened*'.

I have to say that I am delighted that this crime is being investigated. Like everyone else, I have found the incidents reported extremely troubling and, as a historian, have been struck that this phenomenon seems to be relatively 'modern,' in that I am not aware of similar cases in the past. Moreover, the press reports which call these crimes 'tragedies' seem to me to be obscenely recategorising terrible pre-meditated murder as family breakdown tragedy. Thus, I want criminologists and social scientists to help explain why this happens and how it can be prevented.

But today's article really worries me and seems to represent a trend in discussing gender more generally. I want to point out that I have not been able to track down the study itself, which is published, so my comments are reserved for these articles themselves. Yet, this is significant since this is where most people will meet the information and – rightly so – will assume that it is unproblematic because experts have carried out empirical reserach and drawn conclusions from it.

In the first place, to assign 59 men's killings of their children over 32 years as the result of a crisis in masculinity is strikingly problematic. Surely a crisis cannot last that long? What about the concept itself? Historians of masculinity (like John Tosh) show that the notion of a 'crisis' in masculinity is flawed; for each supposed example, such as in the seventeenth century or the late nineteenth century, when societies shifted due to changes in labour or because women's status improved, there is little evidence that ALL men experienced anxiety about their identity, their position relative to women, or their autonomy.

Nor is this weight of historical evidence unknown to [the social](#) sciences. Harry Beynon's *Masculinities and Culture*, published in 2002, devotes a chapter to 'Masculinities and the notion of crisis'. He points out that the concept is at best '*ill defined and elusive*' (p. 75) and



after describing the problems concludes that the crisis has:

become a contemporary cliché, a catch-all container into which anything negative about men is simply poured. (p. 95)

I hate this tendency to talk about men as a collective who are all 'naturally' violent, sexually predatory, and liable to exploit women and children given the 'right' circumstances – which seem to include both not being in control and being in control. Thanks to unreflective articles of the kind we see in *The Observer* today, to use Beynon's words:

Boys are constantly confronted with the notion that men are by nature brutal and emotionally damaged. (p. 97)

Indeed *The Daily Mail's* report ends with the shocking claim that as marriages continue to breakdown:

there is no way of predicting which men are going to carry on being loving fathers — and which are going to act on these feelings and turn into Family Annihilator

But the men who who spitefully murder their children as a way to damage further their estranged wives are not representative of men in general, nor of men who find it difficult to cope with changing gender constructions. They are psychologically damaged, no doubt, since they seem unable to comprehend of their children as individual humans with rights of their own. Indeed, I wonder if they see their offspring simply as extensions of their mothers and therefore abuse them as such. Arguably this may have links to some models of masculinity since the study found that many of these killers were policemen or soldiers. These institutions do promote forms of masculine identity that use controlled violence to achieve specific ends. However, of course, it is the word 'controlled' that is important. Neither of these institutions should automatically produce men who can kill their children.

All in all, I would like to see more precise language and concepts being used to think about domestic violence in all its forms. This kind of reporting is crass and insults men as well women by following the usual '[victim blaming](#)' route.

This post was first published [here](#) - thanks to author for permission to cross post.