Comment on 'A real man or really a man?'

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The article that I find myself commenting on has been an important trigger for reflections around questions that increasingly enter into my therapies: what makes a male a man? What characteristics should a man possess? How to create a male gender identity today? What values should we base ourselves on?

Sofia Bignamini (Riva *et al.*, 2020) proposes the relationship with one's body as essential elements in the construction of a male identity (both as a biological matrix and as a place of expression of requests originating from the body); being put to the test and, ultimately, belonging to the group and being compared to the dimension as a couple.

In asking myself these initial questions, my mind spontaneously goes to the code that Pellai proposed at the end of his article: the paternal.

Historically, what has happened in our country since the 1970s has been the overthrow of the authoritarian figure of the father-master. The family and society have gone from normative to affective and this shift in values has profoundly transformed the role of the father who today must attempt to define a new ethical function. While traditionally the father passed on the rules, in the new society of affections it seems to me that his function could be to make limits and defeat tolerable.

Within a conception of democracy of affections (Fornari, 2011) this competence can only be transmitted if it has been personally acquired by the father through a successful integration of the paternal code and the male code and, secondly, if this father is willing to bear witness to the experience by distancing himself from the idealized and persecutory models of success proposed by capitalist culture.

What I often find myself observing in the course of my study, is that fathers who have difficulty in embodying their own role risk giving little support to their sons in taking on the male role, leaving them in a stalemate isolated from their peers, or involved in transgressive and violent group behavior which attest to the birth of a virile identity.

In my work with my male-identifying patients who are looking for pos-

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sible interpretations of their masculinity, the thorniest issue to be resolved seems to be that of aggression, which brings with it the conflict that has been clearly pointed out by the author: real man or truly a man? Depentes (2019) argues that gender stereotypes stem from the power system's attempt to limit the freedom of individuals by forcing them into predetermined roles through mutilating operations. The dominant stereotype pushes femininity towards a condition of fragility and dependency, and masculinity towards strength, dominance and emotional silence.

It follows, as a consequence, that males are culturally inducted into the expression of strength, and that those who for some reason do not identify with these characteristics do not feel sufficiently masculine.

Zoja (2000) clearly describes what happens when we are confronted with a masculine code uncontaminated by other codes: the pack. A system of construction of the masculine which annuls the subject within an 'us'; makes the pain of growing up bearable; knows how to annihilate the only factor that could challenge it, namely love and its derivatives.

What identity alternative does a young man have, then, when he wishes to realise the values of his gender in a non-destructive manner?

Pellai's film proposal brought to mind some moments in my training as a therapist when the construction of gender identity was analysed in Disney feature films. In particular, I believe two recent productions provide commentary on the themes raised by the author.

The first film mirrors what Pellai wrote about the affective (non)education of male adolescents: lonely, confused and exploring the internet. In the construction of the masculine identity of Hiro, the protagonist of 'Big Hero 6', we find the elements that have always been part of the male gender: body, heart and brain. What is, however, completely different from the past is the way in which these elements develop. The construction of knowledge is no longer vertical, but horizontal thanks to access to the internet.

In terms of the heart, too, we have transformations: it is no longer either the parents or the loving couple that constitute a reference. Quite the opposite: the antagonist is a father who owes to his love for his daughter, and his inability to overcome her grief, a vengeful ferocity. Yet affections still constitute the pillars of male identity, as Pellai points out, albeit placed within another relational framework: that of the peer group.

As far as the body is concerned, in the sequence in which Hiro builds customised armour for each one of his companions, we witness a profound redefinition of what contemporary adolescence is: a sort of mutation that is no longer only biological but also technological. Hiro builds armour which is capable of amplifying the characteristics of the wearer: a new definition of mentalisation, a transfer onto the body of an identity elaborated in another place. This signals to us that today's affectivity and sexual education programmes need to take into account a different availability of the body in adolescence, that technology is proposed as a tool through which gender and the body can be interpreted, which is no longer a destiny, but a possibility.

Finally, the total absence of adults in the landscape of this individuation process is striking.

Being part of the horizontal group is essential in order to limit the risk of omnipotence getting the better of one's self and making one lose sight of the limit of reality. Being part of the group reminds us that we are interdependent human beings, and helps to process emotions in a healthy way by finding creative, non-violent solutions to the pain of growing up.

One question remains in the background: how to get adults, specifically fathers, back on the scene, and where to find competent, credible ones to signal that the adolescent moratorium is over, and to show creative and constructive ways to channel aggressive impulses and tolerate the frustration of limits.

Precocious socialisation in childhood entrusts an important function to the peer group from the earliest stages of development. For years, starting from the protest movement 'Sardines' which gathered in the main squares, to those of Fridays for Future to the very recent Just Stop Oil, there have been not only protests, but above all calls for adults to assume their responsibilities.

The second feature film was prompted by Pellai's contribution on gender violence and the patriarchal culture in which an emotionally dumb male identity is constructed. In 'Ralph smashes the Internet', the stereotype of a dependent and passive femininity, of which the princesses of the Disney tradition are emblematic, is explicitly pilloried.

The female figure of Vanellope is given skills, confidence and self-esteem that make her free from the need for confirmation and appreciation which characterise Ralph.

From the relationship between Ralph and Vanellope, erotic tension and desire disappear, as is happening with today's adolescents who increasingly withdraw from sexuality and pleasure, placing these bonds in a pre-adolescent psychic universe that struggles to deal with complementarity. The clan of princesses proposes a liberation from dependence on the male, and this recalls the need to elaborate a new narrative of the couple's bond and to re-found the relations between genders.

What happens in the feature film is that faced with this prospect Ralph, left alone to indulge in a physical appearance devoid of any erotic appeal, and animated by narcissistic mirroring, reacts to Vanellope's abandonment with an explosion of rage that transforms his strength into destructive violence.

A narrative is proposed in which the masculine, wounded by the abandonment of a feminine who no longer accepts to sacrifice its own personal fulfilment to the bond, finds no other solution than that of violence. The couple thus seems to be founded on the support of projects of personal fulfilment and no longer on passion and devotion to the romantic bond. A new quality of the bond is emerging which no longer demands personal sacrifice in the name of the couple, but on the contrary places the bond at the service of the Self.

This different aim involves a redefinition of the ideal of the couple as it

has been deposited in our culture and minds as well as a redefinition of gender roles.

The final scene sees Ralph and Vanellope physically apart, each committed to growing and realising themselves, according to their own inclinations: just like many contemporary young adults, travelling away from home in the world, but emotionally connected thanks to the possibilities offered by the internet to cultivate ties at a distance.

As Pellai pointed out, quoting Hooks (2022), within the bond of love we find a key to the foundation of a new virility. These changes in the fluid, capitalist post-modern society have altered gender relations and introduced greater flexibility and less polarisation of differences which evolve into a fluidity of identities and genders. A fluidity which, when put at the service of growth, takes the form of a language that helps to find a way of separating and identifying oneself from the reference models typical of patriarchal society.

In the new gender ideals, however, we encounter the risk of an imposition of excellence, of having no limits, of having no differences: an omnipotence which erases all differences and erases all subjectivity. How, then, can the complexity of all subjectivity be sustained evolutionarily?

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