



Review of Gary T. Barker, *Dying to be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2005), viii + 186 pp.

Andrew Singleton

The idea that there is a “crisis” among western male youth has been widely championed by policy makers, politicians, parenting experts, self-help authors, and psychologists for more than a decade. Male youth, it is typically claimed, are failing to manage the challenges and complexities of contemporary life with the same assurance, skill and confidence as young women. Claims about the youthful male “crisis” are usually substantiated by evidence showing that males, compared to females, have higher levels of suicide, are more likely to die in an accident, more likely to be victims of assault, and record poorer academic outcomes. Despite the almost ceaseless public pronouncements about the magnitude of this crisis, many scholars remain skeptical about whether it is appropriate, or even accurate, to describe young men’s lives in this way. Some argue that the evidence put forward to justify the “crisis” idea usually involves a comparison of male and female life outcomes without factoring in things like class and race. Other critics observe that the question of enduring male power is rarely broached in pronouncements of male “disadvantage.” Nonetheless, this idea that male youth are in crisis has proved remarkably enduring.

Gary Barker’s new book, *Dying to be Men*, could be taken as evidence that the alleged malaise gripping male youth in the west is typical of boys worldwide, particularly in countries characterized by acute disadvantage. In its pages, Barker documents the violence, hopelessness and marginalization experienced by male youth in the Caribbean, Nigeria and Brazil, painting a picture of lives that are relentlessly bleak. And yet, Barker himself never resorts to facile descriptions of “crisis” when presenting his material. Instead, *Dying to be Men* stands as a balanced, sensitive, and insightful account of male youth on the margins in an increasingly globalized world. If it finds the readership it deserves, it has the potential to redefine debates about the trajectory of young men’s lives worldwide.

Barker is uniquely placed to write a book of this kind: already an internationally recognized scholar, he is also a practitioner. He currently works for a non-government organization in Brazil, having previously worked in other developing nations and in the United States. He draws on his own personal observations, along with extensive focus group and interview data from all of these settings, in order to describe what life is like for young men in places such as these. The author’s intimate and authentic knowledge of his subject matter is one of the many highlights of this compelling and important book.

*Dying to be Men* provides insights into the lives of those male youth living in some of the toughest areas of Rio de Janeiro, Chicago, the Caribbean and Nigeria. The focus in each of the chapters is thematic rather than geographic: chapters

variously deal with social exclusion, violence, gang membership, employment, fatherhood, education or sex, be that in Brazil or Lagos. With each of these topics, Barker's approach is similar: outline the problem, explain why young men are acting and behaving in certain ways, then present data from various locations. This approach works extremely well, and the reader is able to form a cross-national perspective about the issues which confront young men. Particularly successful are the chapters on sex, employment, and gang involvement.

While the book is very readable, several aspects of Barker's work are worthy of specific mention. First is his lucid theoretical explanation of various issues. Notable examples of this include the sections "Framing a way of understanding young men" in chapter 2, and "Young men and violence" in chapter 5. Barker is readily able to sum up complex social and psychological theories and offer the reader a clear way of understanding the various issues which beset certain young men, especially those who are socially disenfranchised. Second is Barker's extremely balanced view of both gender relations and the trajectory of men's lives. *Dying to be Men* is no incendiary polemic about the ails of contemporary masculine youth. Instead, Barker constantly reminds the reader about the difficulties which beset young women in the various settings described in this book, while also noting that not all young men have a propensity for violence, delinquency or misogyny. This balanced approach means that Barker's conclusions can always be understood in broader context. Thirdly, mention must be made of the interview data Barker draws on throughout the book. These first-person accounts from a diverse group of young men offer a rich understanding of the issues, difficulties, and triumphs of their lives, all of which makes Barker's arguments persuasive.

*Dying to be Men* is a worthy addition to the empirically grounded literature about male youth. Written with great insight and humanity, it is essential reading for policy makers, scholars and practitioners alike.

Andrew Singleton  
School of Political and Social Inquiry  
Monash University/AUSTRALIA  
e: Andrew.Singleton@arts.monash.edu.au