

## COMMENTARY

## From Promoting Healthy Masculinities to Nurturing Healthy Humans and Societies: Commentary on Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022)

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To extend the insightful points articulated by Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022), I bring into focus the landmark contributions of Carol Gilligan whose large body of scholarship (1982, 1993, 1995, 2011; Gilligan et al., 1990) on human development in a patriarchal society is largely overlooked in the present article. Gilligan's critique of patriarchy, power, and inequality in science and society pushes us to center the cultural ideological context in this conversation, which extends beyond boys and men and masculinity. Our efforts to promote healthy masculinities must coincide with (re)structuring society to center the margins and dismantle the cultural ideologies that engineer inequality and undermine the core human needs, capacities, and desires of *all* humans. Cultivating a culture of authentic relationships is not only the key to promoting healthy masculinities but the pathway to nurturing healthy humans and societies.

*Keywords:* human development, patriarchy, cultural ideologies, resistance, Carol Gilligan

“A Relational-Cultural Framework for Promoting Healthy Masculinities” presents compelling evidence of both the harms of hegemonic masculinity and the promise of nurturing the *nature* of boys and men toward health and liberation. Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) use relational-cultural theory (RCT) to foreground the relational nature of humans and the situatedness of our relationships within cultural contexts. They state that “RCT addresses how systems of oppression silence authenticity, keep people isolated, and maintain injustice” (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022, p. 322), and they argue that authentic relationships—with each other and ourselves—are a pathway to healing. This framing is well aligned with my research in human development and focus on how young people develop their identities and relationships in cultural context (Rogers, 2018, 2020; Rogers & Way, 2018, 2021; Rogers, Versey, et al., 2021). In this commentary, I bring a developmental perspective into focus with discussion of Carol Gilligan's landmark scholarship on

human development in a patriarchal society (1982, 1993, 1995, 2011; Gilligan et al., 1990, 2018), which is largely overlooked in Di Bianca and Mahalik's article. Gilligan's critique of patriarchy, power, and inequality in science and society pushes us to center the cultural ideological context in this conversation, which extends beyond boys and men and masculinity. Our efforts to promote healthy masculinities must coincide with (re)structuring society to center the margins and dismantle the cultural ideologies that engineer inequality and undermine the core human needs, capacities, and desires of *all* humans.

**Carol Gilligan on Culture, Patriarchy, and Inequality**

In 1982, Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. In this award-winning book, Gilligan (1982) observes “how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men's eyes” (p. 6), such that the dominant theories of human development echo the patriarchal *culture* rather than the *nature* of humans (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Gilligan et al., 1990). In response to this patriarchal gaze, Gilligan (1982) included “the group [women] left out in the construction of theory to call attention to what is missing in its account” (p. 4). By listening to women and girls (and young men) process moral decisions in their personal lives, Gilligan heard a voice that was contrary to leading theories of development, including Lawrence

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The author has no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Kohlberg and Erik Erikson, that elevated autonomy over relatedness, cognition over emotion, and identity over intimacy—and ultimately men (the “masculine”) over women (the “feminine”). Knowingly, Gilligan (1982) made a point to explicate that the “different voice” she unveiled, though embodied by women, was “a voice characterized *not by gender but theme*” (p. 2, italics added); it was a human voice that made evident that humans do not *naturally* develop to be hyper-autonomous and emotionally stoic, but rather that the patriarchal culture in which they grow up *nurtures* such disconnection from self and others (Gilligan, 1982, 2011; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). Grounded in empirical observations of those systematically marginalized in psychology and society, Gilligan offered a theory of human nature that centers relationships, emotionality, and connection as core human needs, desires, and drivers of development (Gilligan, 1995, 2011; Gilligan et al., 1990, 2018).

Gilligan continues to be distinctively recognized for calling attention to gender inequality in psychology and bringing women into psychological theory, and her work was widely cited throughout the 1990s for its landmark contributions to the field (e.g., Rutherford, 2020). Yet, Gilligan’s critique of culture, patriarchy, and inequality in society and psychology is often lost. She not only “included” women and girls in her research but positioned them as human and thus integral to the story of human development—a radical resistance to patriarchy, power, and inequality. My own research follows in this tradition of listening to those excluded to (un)learn and disrupt what is “known” about human development. Listening to mostly Black and Brown children and adolescents over the past decade, I have learned that youth negotiate multiple social hierarchies and cultural ideologies, related to gender, race, sexuality, class, as they form their identities and relationships (e.g., Rogers, 2018; 2020; Rogers et al., 2020; Rogers, Versey, et al., 2021). Moreover, young people do not simply accept or accommodate cultural “norms,” they often question and challenge such ideologies, rejecting harmful expectations and stereotypes, crafting liberating counternarratives, and affirming their identities in ways that disrupt oppressive cultural narratives—in society and developmental science (Rogers & Way, 2018, 2021). This research is not only *for* or *about* youth of color, it is about how humans develop within and in response to a cultural ideological context (Rogers, Niwa, et al., 2021; Rogers & Way, 2021).

Despite the fact that Gilligan has made significant contributions to human development and “theorizing connection as primary and fundamental in *human life* . . .” (Gilligan, 1995, p. 120, italics added), her scholarship has consistently been relegated to *women’s* development, relevant to girls and women alone. This pattern reverberates in the present article. Gilligan is cited in collaboration with scholars (whom she trained) who applied her relational theory of human development to the study of boys and masculinities (Chu, 2014; Way, 2011), but

the three decades of groundbreaking research on human development under patriarchy, which is rooted in the voices and experiences of girls and women, is conspicuously absent.

This absence brings attention to the persistence of patriarchy and the implicit idea that a focus on boys and men is sufficient to address a culture of dehumanization and disconnection for everyone. It is not. It is not enough to allow, or even to encourage, boys and men to be emotional *also*. If we only focus on allowing boys to be emotional, we (may) create space for (cis-heteronormative) men to be “more human” but that does not necessarily equate to dismantling the power hierarchy that situates men over women. We see this, for example, as fathers are celebrated for being emotionally present for their children, while mothers are critiqued for pursuing intellectual interests or careers; consequently, parenting remains devalued when done by women but esteemed when done by men. We must stop belittling boys who express vulnerability by calling them “sissies,” *and* we must stop demonizing girls who assert their autonomy as if such human needs and desires are innately gendered. Valuing emotionality (and other human capacities), in other words, must coexist with valuing women (and all persons). To “reject hegemonic masculinity” (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022, p. 322) means repositioning those who are systematically dehumanized as fully human so that the full spectrum of human needs, desires, and capacities are equally valued, available, and accessible for everyone.

### A New Setpoint for Culture

In the edited volume, *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*, Way et al. (2018) write:

There is a conflict between human nature and the modern culture we have constructed. We want to connect within and across communities, but we live in a society that is rooted in ideologies, beliefs, and values that prevent us from finding what we want and need most to thrive. (pp. 3–4)

From this perspective, the quest for men to be vulnerable, for example, is not about changing the nature of men but changing the culture that nurtures us. Our human nature prepares us to connect and empathize, to care and be curious (see de Waal, 2010; Gilligan, 1995; Hrdy, 2011; Way et al., 2018). Our task, then, is to cultivate a culture that allows these human capacities to flourish.

It is understandable to bemoan the gravity of cultural change, the magnitude of righting the multitude of wrongs that ail us. Like the conveyor belt analogy that Beverly Tatum (2017) offers to explain racism in the United States, the conveyor belt of hegemonic masculinity is structural, engineered to perpetuate inequality via multiple forces (media, parents, peers, laws, policies) at every level of the ecosystem. The conveyor belt carries each of us through life, socializing us in small and big ways, into our respective social roles that ensure the perpetuation of inequality. But we do not have

to be carried along with the conveyor belt. We can turn around and run with intentionality in the opposite direction (Tatum, 1997/2017), against the grain, and more importantly toward our full humanity. We can reset the cultural thermostat to value empathy and connection, humility and kindness, equality and justice. We can build communities where human vulnerability, connection, and compassion flourish rather than wither.

Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) similarly emphasize potential and possibility, underscoring that “despite how embedded in the dominant culture hegemonic socialization is, it is not set in stone.” Situating the problem of hegemonic masculinity in society reminds us not only that we *can* change it but also that we do not need to “intervene” on the nature of boys to do so (Chu, 2014; Way, 2011). While this work requires disrupting toxic cultural norms, it also means synchronizing with our human nature. Cultivating a culture of authentic relationships is not only the key to building healthy masculinities but the pathway to nurturing healthy humans and societies. Carol Gilligan taught us this more than 40 years ago. It is time we listen and begin to tell truer and more complete stories about *all* humans.

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Received October 15, 2021

Revision received December 13, 2021

Accepted December 14, 2021 ■