

Adrift in a hard man's world

The struggle to conform to an outdated idea of masculinity can fuel anger and alienation among boys and young men, argues a leading sociologist

Angela Pownall



What does it mean to be a man? Acting tougher than you really are. "Bros before hoes." No cissy stuff. American sociologist Michael Kimmel, who is described as a leading academic on masculinity, says phrases like these define today's men and boys.

Speaking to parents at one of Perth's most prestigious boys' schools this week, Dr Kimmel argued our idea of masculinity is based on life in the 1950s and is contributing to many of today's social problems.

Late on a Friday night in Northbridge last year, five teenage boys attacked a man, punching and kicking him in the head as he lay defenceless on the ground.

A court was told it was a "senseless and violent" attack fuelled by drugs and alcohol.

Dr Kimmel says, with 90 per cent of violent crime committed by young men, our problem stems from not knowing how to talk about masculinity.

"What propels so many of these crimes is not necessarily economic deprivation, but they are crimes where guys are proving their masculinity," he says.

"Some of it is being done on a dare, some is being done because 'my girlfriend should do what I want her to do and if she doesn't I'm going to hit her', or 'I'm entitled, I should have this'," he says.

Likewise, he questions why debate about recent mass shootings in the US have revolved around teenagers, guns, violent video games and Goth culture rather than the white middle-class boys who carried them out.

Dr Kimmel says in the quest to be dominant and powerful, other masculine qualities — such as honour and integrity — have been lost among today's men. Combine that with the secular nature and fractured families of today's society and, he says, young men are left to find their own moral compass ... or not.

Back to the Northbridge fracas, Dr Kimmel argues cases like that are a performance of masculinity by young men for young men.

"I'm sure they are quite out-of-control drunk, but I'm willing to bet if these guys encountered their boss or supervisor as they were marauding around drunk, they would not beat them up," he says.

"There are some people who are off limits and some who are not. That means you're making a decision and you're not out of control. Once you're in that realm,



Encouraging caring qualities: Michael Kimmel talks to students Ben Sloan, Ewan Grylls and Cameron Schoonakker. Pictures: Lincoln Baker

you're now in a social relationship rather than saying 'don't drink'," he argues.

Dr Kimmel says that over the past few decades women's lives have changed dramatically in terms of academic and career achievement, family life and sex, but men's lives have changed little.

"What has not changed is what we think it means to be a man," he says. "The ideology of masculinity has remained relatively constant over the past 40 or 50 years."

Dr Kimmel, who lectures students at New York's Stony Brook University, says demographic changes, such as the growing life expectancy, which is 94 years for young people of today, have led to an extension of adolescence. He says there has also been an increase in over-parenting.

"There's the problem if you micro-manage every nanosecond of your kid's life. What happens to them is the result I get with young people in university who are far less resilient, far more risk averse than previous generations.

"They are very good at pleasing adults but they are frightened of taking responsibility for their behaviour."

With a less welcoming and sustaining economy today, Dr Kimmel says young people do not know how to build a career and move from job to job after short periods.

"Young people don't have the same career trajectory as their grandparents. They change not only their job but field of work two or three times in their lifetime," he says. "They don't know how to be small and humble in their ambitions."

He also raises concerns about

the removal of a constant adult presence in young people's lives when they get to places such as college campuses.

"This is particularly important for young men, because what you have is all these boys who have been so dramatically over-parented during their high school years, these guys are coming into college eager, desperate even, to prove their masculinity and are coming into a place where they are not around grown-ups," he says.

The same situation can be seen in sports clubs and among gangs

of teenagers who go out in Northbridge at night.

"I'm talking about the Peter Panic syndrome, guys who are so desperate to prove their masculinity that they take all kinds of risks that other guys their own age are saying to them 'you've got to do this otherwise I won't see you as a real man'."

So what can we do stop boys "drifting"?

Dr Kimmel says our notion of masculinity needs to expand to embrace human qualities such as caring, loving, being vulnerable and expressing feelings.

"Instead, we ask men to cut themselves off from that part of being human in the name of masculinity. We can reduce a lot of the pressure that a lot of guys are feeling. They feel things, but they don't have a language for it.

"Men turn sadness into anger. The one emotion we do have permission to express is anger. So we'll turn anything into anger; frustration, disappointment, grief, anything because that's the one thing we can feel."

This contributes to, Dr Kimmel argues, higher levels of alcohol and drug abuse among men compared with women, as men use it to self-medicate for their inability to be themselves.

David Cutler, from Relationships Australia WA, agrees with Dr Kimmel's take on masculinity and says he has experienced it among men on the parenting courses he runs.

"They recognise they are feeling quite unlovable and powerless," he says. "They do not like that, but there are few other people they can go to express that. It's much easier to land up at the pub and drink yourself into a stupor and say that's real mateship."

Dr Ian Lillico, a former City Beach High School principal and now a consultant in gender and boys' education, also agrees with Dr Kimmel.

However, he argued parents were withdrawing their input as a role model to their children early, allowing the sometimes dangerous influence of children's peer groups to be greater than that of parents.

"They started to pull out rather early, quite often as the child is approaching upper primary school," he said. "They have got to keep talking about boundaries, morals and values."

But it's not just parents, Dr Kimmel says, but society as a whole that needs to have a conversation about what it means to be a man.

"Masculinity is a performance. The kind of conversation we need to be fostering, generating and encouraging in our boys is one between who they really are and what is being asked of them in this performance."

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