

Gender Warrior's Theory Belied By Junk Science

By John Haskins

In June 1998 a stunning press release from a Harvard University research hospital announced findings that “carry massive implications for what appears to be a larger national crisis, one that we are now seeing can cause serious violence. ... The time has come to change the way boys are raised — in our homes, in our schools and in society.”

Sounding the alarm was Harvard psychologist William Pollack. His book, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myth of Boyhood*, boasted groundbreaking “findings about the true nature of boys,” the dangers of “conventional expectations about masculinity” and “outdated gender stereotypes.”

With breathtaking leaps, *Real Boys* spun anecdotes of adolescent turmoil into proof of the claim by radical feminists and homosexuals that traditional masculinity is pathological.

By the following spring, seeking a politically correct spin on the Columbine High School tragedy in Littleton,

Colo., the media anointed Pollack as Harvard's genius on boyhood and prophet of an apocalypse of masculinity. *Real Boys* was driven to best-seller status by media attention.

Pollack confidently asserted the politically correct view of homosexuality: “For generations, experts in psychology and psychotherapy did not entirely understand homosexuality. Based on numerous studies by top scientists we now know that homosexuality is not a psychological ‘disorder’ or ‘disease.’”

Offering no evidence, Pollack alluded airily to “scientific findings” but conceded offhand that scientists *still* don't really know anything about homosexuality.

Nonetheless, he had no doubt about his own competence to handle any sexual ambivalence that might ail your son. For example, one distraught client discovered that her 17-year-old son and a male teen neighbor “had been getting together in the afternoons, drinking beer and then masturbating each other.” Unsurprisingly, the mother sought help.

Pollack said he “would be happy to help the boy examine the feelings he was experiencing,” but was “not willing to try to change the boy from being whoever he truly was.”

Among Pollack's “discoveries”:

- People's “irrational fears” and “hate” — code words for Judeo-Christian morality — cause suicide among teen-agers experiencing homosexual feelings;

- “[H]omophobia — not homosexuality itself — is what makes the lives of gay people so difficult”;

- “We need to help our sons to puncture old myths about homosexuality”; and

- “Failure to impart these messages to boys can place our sons in serious psychological, if not physical, danger.”

What did Pollack cite as evidence for the above? One wispy anecdote about a 15-year-old who hanged himself.

“Findings” such as these from Harvard get you on television to sell books. The *New York Times*, *Newsweek* magazine, *20/20* and the *Today* show all came running. Sequels followed. The media ignored academics who smelled not science but politics. Meanwhile, Pollack remained strangely evasive about the location and content of his research.

But several parents whose sons recently graduated from the Belmont Hill School in Massachusetts told the Parents' Rights Coalition and a local newspaper that the research done on their sons couldn't possibly justify announcement of a national crisis of disturbed boys. They complained that their sons were used to drive a political agenda and that Pollack bypassed the crucial matter of parental consent. One father was even refused a copy of the questions his son had answered.

Moreover, the boys apparently had no choice about participating, despite their discomfort with Pollack's questions. One vividly remembers, “I was asked how often I thought about killing myself — not if I did [but] how much I did.” The options: once a year, once

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: WHICH QUESTION DO YOU THINK WOULD BE INAPPROPRIATE FOR A PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER TO ASK A STUDENT?



a month, once a week or once a day.

"No one around me took the exam seriously with such one-sided and leading questions," another boy told the *Massachusetts News*. "The test turned into a complete farce when kids began calling out their answers to their classmates in an effort to make a joke." The former student adds: "We were absolutely shocked when [told] threateningly [to] sign our names." Coercion to participate or to sign one's name violates the guidelines of the American Psychological Association.

Bruce Cohen, president of the renowned McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., admits that if the allegations are true the research would not have met the standards of the Harvard-affiliated hospital where Pollack works. Cohen told me: "Certainly, one would have to get permission from someone before doing research on children."

In the days after Pollack surveyed the Belmont Hill boys, a former pupil says, "It became a badge of honor to admit that one had filled it out incorrectly to spite this test which, no matter how accurately answered, in no way reflected the student."

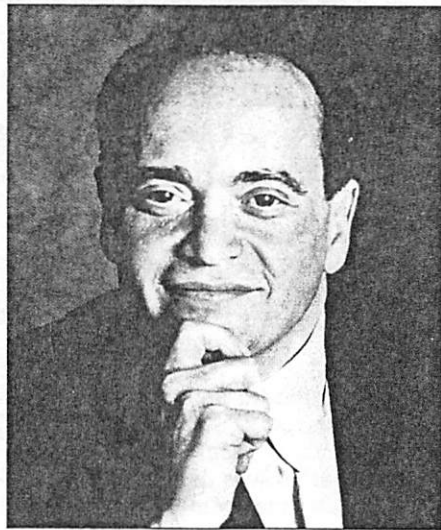
"Pollack's claims are so contradicted by statistical evidence about boys, which causes professionals like me to wonder by what methodology he could have arrived at such conclusions," says Gwen Broude, professor of psychology and cognitive science at Vassar College.

Howard Schwartz, professor of organizational behavior at Oakland University, says the new revelations confirm what he suspected: "The only question is how much of his interviews Pollack made up. I suspect it was a lot."

"Given the importance of his claims and the disagreement of other evidence, it is extremely unfortunate that the media treat Pollack's work so uncritically," says Broude. "Pollack and other trendy experts on boyhood represent a real danger to boys." In her view, "there is simply no evidence that boys suffer mass anxiety about premature separation from mothers — no evidence of any emotional epidemic of depression and low self-esteem.

"Between one and four percent of boys display such problems. And there is certainly no basis for any feminist claim that we can treat the boys who are in trouble by purging them of their basic masculine nature," Broude adds. "But the fact is that, in Pollack's world, being male is a malady, a mental illness."

Pollack's underlying goal is "to provide a theoretical basis for social engineering for a certain kind of parenting



Pollack: *American boys are in trouble.*

— from a feminist perspective," says Schwartz, who studies the impact of political correctness on institutions. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to take Pollack seriously. It makes the head spin to think that he has generalized (this) into a full-blown diagnosis of cultural crisis."

Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital may have come quietly to the same conclusion. Cohen discreetly refused to comment on the allegations but, revealingly, now claims Pollack's research was not sponsored by the hospital. This contradicts both Pollack's book and the 1998 press release announcing a "McLean study" declaring that boys feel "sadness about growing up to be men, a study by researchers at McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School has shown." Cohen also downplayed the link to Harvard and referred me to Assistant Dean for Faculty Affairs Margaret Dale, who said, "To the best of my knowledge," Pollack's research was not a Harvard study. "Pollack's study was not under Harvard Medical School jurisdiction and was not approved by HMS," according to Carolyn Connelly, director of the medical school's office for research protection. But *Real Boys* portrayed it as "derived in part from ... my ongoing research project at Harvard Medical School."

Both Cohen and Connelly reiterated that "issues" about the research had arisen previously and that Pollack had been instructed not to link the McLean or Harvard names to his research. But one would have to say it's a little late. McLean and Harvard did, after all, share the glory when the *New York Times* and the network-news celebrities rushed to hear their pro-

fessor on the need to feminize American boys before they blow us up.

Reminded of the release, Cohen said he'd have to talk with public relations about announcements of non-McLean studies. But *Real Boys* cites the research assistance of the hospital's chief librarian and four employees who typed Pollack's manuscript. Like the Belmont Hill School, and the boys whom Pollack "studied," Cohen and his hospital have found themselves well used.

Pollack, still counting his cash, is popping up all over the media and making speeches to educators and school counselors even in Texas, where the locals should know better than to buy this brand of snake oil.

Word should have gotten out long ago. Pollack's findings took a whipping last year in *The War Against Boys* by the American Enterprise Institute's Christina Hoff Sommers (see "Detailing the Abuse of Boys," Aug. 21, 2000). To Sommers, Harvard's "national emergency" that called for "major social reform" smelled funny. After requesting a copy of Pollack's study, she got a 30-page manuscript she described as "riddled with errors" and with "none of the properties of a professional paper."

"Unlike most scientific papers, which alert readers to their limits, Pollack's paper was unabashedly extravagant, declaring findings unprecedented in the literature of research psychology," Sommers wrote. "Pollack's paper does not present a single persuasive piece of evidence for a national boy crisis." She continued: "Its sparse data and its strident and implausible conclusions render it unpublishable as a scholarly article."

What was Pollack up to? "He sees no particular meaning in the role of the father. His images of fathers are just about uniformly negative," says Schwartz, author of a new book on the psychodynamics of political correctness. "The whole idea behind the revolution in parenting that he is trying to bring about is that the traditional family is throwing boys into distress by raising them to be like their fathers, rather than like women."

"I am still outraged," says one former subject, conscious of what the media made of Pollack's study. "Our immature attempt at humor four years ago should not be the benchmark for the 21st century."

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