

Episode 217-- Your Man Card Reissued The Truth About Masculi...

 Tue, Jan 31, 2023 1:39AM  35:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

masculinity, gun violence, men, boys, norms, gender norms, masculine, people, psychologists, called, depression, femininity, research, aggression, bushmaster, emotions, study, discrepancy, person, violence

SPEAKERS

Dr. Robert Levant, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson



JJ Janflone 00:08

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JJ Janflone 00:42

Hey, everybody, welcome back to another episode of red, blue, And Brady, I am one of your hosts JJ,



Kelly Sampson 00:47

and I'm your other host, Kelly.



JJ Janflone 00:48

And today, Kelly and I are joined by a really phenomenal guest to talk about a really not phenomenal topic, in many ways.



Kelly Sampson 00:56

Yeah, we're gonna be discussing masculinity. We're gonna talk about gun violence and some of the tropes and constructions around masculinity.



JJ Janflone 01:09

Yeah, and how I think kind of like these weird intersections of like masculinity incel culture, violence, and then in particular, gun violence. And to do so we're joined by one of the experts on this topic, Dr. Ronald Levant, who we're gonna talk about his book, in particular, his most recent book, *The Tough Standard*, which we linked in the description of this episode. But I think we can go ahead and just jump right into it and hand it over to the expert.



Dr. Robert Levant 01:38

I'm a psychologist, I trained at Harvard, and have taught at Boston University where I directed, what became a very nationally prominent project, called the BU fatherhood project. That's kind of where I started, I guess. My claim to fame, most people would regard me as really one of the chiefs or leaders in developing the subfield of psychology called the psychology of men and masculinities. And I've been working in that area for 45 years. Most recently, my interest has shifted to gun violence. And you might ask why? Well, first of all, I feel personally threatened by it. Because we've had, we've had gun incidences here in Akron, Ohio. But secondly, I've been so annoyed that every time a gun violence episode occurs, and unfortunately, they occur all too often, there's never a focus on the fact that over 90% of the time, the perpetrator is a boy or a man. And so I started digging into this. And the first thing that I encountered was the fact that even though most gun violence is committed by boys and men, the vast majority of boys and men well over 90% are not violent. So that's kind of where I got into this.



JJ Janflone 02:50

Yeah, that that strange intersection of most folks are not violent, and yet the violence that is occurring, particularly with firearms is overwhelmingly that one gender? Right, yeah,



Kelly Sampson 03:01

And we, there's a lot of talk about masculinity and femininity, and you can, you know, see that in the halls of government to people at a coffee shop. So what does the term masculinity mean? Like, what is that referring to?



Dr. Robert Levant 03:16

Well, that's a great question and the ideal place to start. So I'm going to put forth two definitions. One is sort of the definition in conventional discourse, the way that kind of most ordinary citizens, not academics, like myself, think about it, and most citizens think of masculinity as synonymous with being male. You know, they don't, most people don't go much further than that. They think, well, that's men or masculine boys or mask. But psychologists, sociologists, other social scientists think about it differently. We think about masculinity and femininity for that matter, is really a set of norms or expectations for people's thoughts, feelings and behavior based on their biological sex. We call them gender norms, and everybody knows about social norms. We, you know, we live by social norms, you know, pretty much most

of what we do is dictated by social norms. Few people think that there are also norms for behavior based on your biological sex, but there are and being based in society, they change with historical era and culture. For example, one current norm for masculinity is and this just came up recently, is restrictive affectionate behavior between boys and men. This just came up because I was recently interviewed for a magazine about Tom Brady's affectionate relationship with his son, Tom Brady, the football player. And, you know, that's considered I mean, it is considered so norm breaking that people gave him a lot of pushback on it. Yet, if you go back to Abraham Lincoln's time, the opposite norm was in effect. Men were expected to not know be verbally, but physically affectionate with each other. And when they visited each other, they would sleep in each other's beds. Not for sexual purposes, just, you know, to be close to each other. So these norms change. And we've documented, you know, that around the world, there are variations in these norms. So these norms, these are norms that are not built into the Y chromosome. They're not connected to testosterone, but they're gender norms. And why do we even have gender norms? Well, the reason we have gender norms is because, you know, basically going back to Biblical times, we lived in a patriarchy. Abraham and all of his buddies were called a patriarch. You read that in the Bible. We are a patriarchal world, and what that means is that men call the shots and they set up the rules. And the gender norms are designed to enforce male dominance over women primarily. But the way that our norms are set up in the US, they also set up white cisgendered, heterosexual men's dominance over all other men. I should include Christian men's dominance, since we're now living in an era of renewed antisemitism, and Islamophobia. So, so that's really what it is. It's called hegemonic masculinity by sociologists, reflecting the fact that it's a hegemon of white cisgender heterosexual men over everybody. So that's kind of why, why we have these norms, and the feminine norms. And I've also developed, done research on femininity ideology, include complementary norms, like dependence and deference on men. So that's kind of how I define masculinity as a psychologist,



JJ Janflone 06:58

That is so helpful. And I think also just gave Kelly and I 18 other podcasts that we want to have. Also, can we be friends? We all hang out. Because I think this is so important, because so much when we're talking about gun violence, we're talking about a really complicated multi-level issue that intersects with every aspect of American life. And so I don't think you can separate this, this hierarchy of control and power that you've you've laid out from any of this conversation. And I think that that introduces to, you know, is this sort of definition of masculinity, or is hegemonic masculinity - Is there something kind of inherently violent in that, right? Because it's positioning one particular type of person over others?



Dr. Robert Levant 07:46

Yes, in fact, okay, so let me just kind of fill in a few more details. So the way we study masculinity is through psychological scales in, you know, psychologists develop scales to measure emotions, thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and we have a really well developed set of methods for doing this. And, you know, I mean, it's not perfect, but it's gotten very good lately. So, in measuring masculinity, we measure several aspects of and we measure beliefs, is I believe, beliefs are central. So what are these beliefs? These are beliefs about how boys and men should think, feel and behave. We call the traditional masculinity ideology, ideology, because it's about beliefs, traditional. Because it's really been the dominant set of gender

norms. In the post world war two era, it's really continued, although I have evidence that is changing in some respects, in the last decade or so. One of the one of the norms is aggression, you know, one of the gender norms for masculinity is aggression, toughness, dominance, aggression, all of that kind of stuff. So, let me talk to you a little bit about how masculinity is developed in boys. Most boys in the United States - and this varies somewhat according to other intersections with a person's identity like race, social class, religion, ability, status, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera - but the themes kind of are cross cutting. So most boys in the United States still, as boys, somewhere between the ages of four and six, are made to feel that conformity to masculine norms is obligatory, They get the message that if you step too far out of line, you will receive punishment and it may be severe. In the way it's defined for boys. It was that way when I was a boy, but it's still that way. Which is that you should not walk, talk, throw or act like a girl. So masculinity, right off, is defined as the opposite of femininity. And so boys study girls very carefully, and they do the exact opposite of what the girls do. And this creates all kinds of problems, because what happens is that any child of any sex is going to have a variety of personality traits. And that child will be unique from another child. And you can give like any personality stress tests, like the Big Five, personality tests, to 100 kids, and you'll find lots of variation. This boy will be more extroverted, this boy will be more neurotic, this boy will, you know, it just goes on and on. So if you let's say you measured 100 boys on aggression, we have a scale for that called the buss perry aggression scale. And you put up the scores on a on a histogram of slide, and you'll see that it follows a curve, kind of like a bell shaped curve. It might be slightly skewed, you know, to the left or the right, but the scores will range from very high to very low, with the vast majority in the middle. If you take a boy who is very low on aggression, and force that boy to be aggressive, think of the harm you're doing to that boy's personality. I mean, imagine, you know, in the western world for eons, going back to at least to Aristotle, Western society has been based on a philosophy of individualism. You know, to thine own self, be true. Be the self that one truly is. Or, as Oscar Wilde, put a tongue in cheek, "be yourself, everybody else is taken." So when you're forcing a boy to not be himself, you're not only distorting his personality, but you're forcing him to be someone other than who he is, which goes against the grain of our entire civilization. So that's kind of what boys are up against. And if there's one thing that your audience learns from this is that, please be careful. Be mindful of the message you send to young boys. And I say this not only to parents, but teachers and coaches and religious counselors, and makers of video games and toys.



JJ Janflone 12:17


Yeah, and I think this brings up I think, as you pointed out too like, it's one of those things where I think how things have kind of progressed, it's more of this perfectly, or it's that it's more acceptable for women or for girls to be interested in boy or male coded things, but for the reverse, not to necessarily be true. Right? That's certainly, and that kind of, I think fits with the hierarchy, too, right? Like, certainly one would be interested in boy things. That's who's in charge where it can't - You can't go the opposite direction. Yeah, if that makes sense. And I think that that kind of comes out, - you're very excellent book with your co author that I highly recommend everyone check out will be in description of this episode, the Tough Standard. Within that book, we're only gonna be talking about a portion of that today. But you really drill down on to how gun violence occurs, kind of within this this world. So when we're talking about like this intersection, though, of masculinity and violence, I'm wondering, Where does firearms ownership or firearms, where do they play into it? Is it just isn't an extension of... here's a masculine toy, right? Or is there something else at play there?

 Dr. Robert Levant 13:25

Well, I think guns are, you know, part of the definition of masculinity part of it, but there's a more precise answer that we need to get into. I recently did more research, after I did the book, and published an article in June last year. And what I did see, I went outside of my comfort zone. Most psychologists, psychology and most social sciences are very, very siloed. You know, we only read psychologists, sociologists, rarely read sociology. So I broke the rule, and I read sociology, cultural anthropology, criminology, social work journals. And what I found was an amazing concordance, and agreement across four social science disciplines. Now they use different words to describe it, they have different methods for studying as you would expect, but they come up with the same thing. That the the reason why a small minority of boys and men commit these heinous acts has to do with feeling that their masculinity has been threatened. That's going to be very important. So just to give you an idea of how this is studied, we have proxies for it. So one proxy is punching a punching bag. So here's a study that was a kind of, you know, one of the most creative: they take 100 men, randomly assign them into an experimental control group - this is what psychologists do - and the experimental group is asked to perform a feminizing task. In this case, braiding the hair on a mannequin doll and putting in pink ribbons. The control group is asked to do a masculine task; braiding a rope to make it stronger. Okay, like when I was a boy scout, we learned how to braid rope, talking less, and things like that. So that kind of idea. Then after each group completed the task, they were given the option to sit quietly in a room or punch a punching bag. Who do you think chose more often to punch the punching bag?

 JJ Janflone 15:33

The group that felt that they needed to prove to the observer, that they're tough.

 Kelly Sampson 15:38


And that kind of connects to what you were saying earlier, which is a lot of the gender norms for masculinity is the opposite of femininity, they have to do something feminine now they're like, Okay, I need

 JJ Janflone 15:50

... or something coded feminine too, because -

 Kelly Sampson 15:53

- I say coded feminine. They felt like, oh, I have to do the opposite of that to kind of earn this back.

 Dr. Robert Levant 15:58

Exactly, exactly. So this phenomenon that really seems to differentiate the males who are likely to commit violence is general hostility and violence, and those who are not to commit violence

to commit violence in general, including gun violence, and those who are not. In psychology, we have a specific term for discrepancy strain. And what that means is the discrepancy between the way a man wants to perceive themselves or his ideal self image, and how he actually sees himself or his real self image. It's the big discrepancy that's problematic, in a lot of ways. So we have this finding from, you know, in every single study that I reviewed, they use proxies - they did not look at actual instances of gun violence. So some of the other proxies might be scores on scales of misogyny, or hostility to racial and ethnic minorities, or hostility to sexual and gender identity minorities, or religious minorities, what have you. Or it could be self reports of violence, which are problematic because as social desirability people don't like to admit that they were violent. So it's all kinds of problems, but that's the best we have. I then found three sources of information about actual perpetrators of gun violence. One is a database of school shooters. The second and third were each qualitative studies respectively, of what are called murder suicides, and mass shootings. Now, obviously, these categories overlap somewhat. So I had these resources, the school shooter database was put together by a psychologist in Pennsylvania, Peter Lineman, and when I did my book, you couldn't search - it didn't have a search term masculinity, or masculine, or male or whatever. But that subsequently was changed. And I recently for this June publication, searched for masculinity, masculinities manhood, all the different synonyms, and I got 18 hits. And I read the case histories and what is compiled is amazing. Includes their school records, court records, health records, as well as their own writings and videos and all of this stuff. So like take, let's take the Sandy Hook perpetrator. Peter Lehmann is not up on the latest research on masculinity. So he refers to this as damaged masculinity, rather than as the way I would call it, discrepancy strain. So there it is, some of these very same perpetrators. And we're going to come back to Sandy Hook in a minute. They feel that they have not measured up to their own internalized ideal of being masculine. Now, the same thing was found in the murder suicides, and the mass shooters. And those were qualitative studies rather than databases. So now we have okay, we've connected this discrepancy strain, precarious manhood threaten masculinity, different terms describe the same thing. Basically, men feel that they're not masculine enough. We've connected to not only a propensity for violence, but also to gun violence.

K

Kelly Sampson 19:18


And, you know, you've made this distinction in your work, where you've made it clear that while the majority of men are not going to commit violence, the majority of gun violence is perpetrated by men. And is it fair to say that what you're getting at with this research is basically that of that proportion of men who are perpetuating this gun violence, some of that, especially when we talk about things like mass shootings or intimate partner violence or hate crimes, some of those men at least some proportion of it, part of what is motivating that is that they have this sort of discrepancy this gender discrepancy. Yeah, that's is that fair?

D

Dr. Robert Levant 19:58

Yeah. I would say more than one part of it. A big part of it, a big part of it. So let's talk a little bit about us go back to Sandy Hook. You know, and it was in the news recently because of the settlement of Alex Jones, all that stuff. But the reason I bring up Sandy Hook is not because of Alex Jones is because of the Remington settlement. I mean, Remington is a gun manufacturer that makes the Bushmaster, which is a military assault rifle. And was the exact type of gun that was used in Sandy Hook. The survivors and parents of the Sandy Hook victims, sued Remington and they want a \$73 million settlement. The way in which the Bushmaster was marketed was

through, at least in print media, it was a picture of the weapon, which is an ugly thing, I swear. But then it says underneath it, "your man card re-issued," re-issued. So it's appealing to men whose masculinity who feel their masculinity has been threatened, who feel they've lost their masculinity. There's a direct link between that marketing campaign and the research that I reported in June of 2022. It couldn't - if Remingtons aim was to promote more mass murderers, they could not have come up with a more precisely tailored ad. Because they're appealing to the very men who are likely to do that.

 Kelly Sampson 21:27

It kind of reminds me speaking of gender norms, like all the research on the other side, in terms of femininity, how companies will create a problem and then tell you they can solve it for you. You know, that's like a big thing. So it's just really interesting to kind of see how these things are crafted to sell products.

 JJ Janflone 21:45

Yeah, let me if I can take a step back too - I wonder, like what you would say, in your professional opinion. And from all the research you've done... Like what what impact do ads like this have more broadly? You know, because I can hear people listening to the say, well, that's just an advertisement, right? That can't possibly encourage someone to use something to commit a violent act. Like what would you kind of say to that?

 Dr. Robert Levant 22:10

Well, it's only an extremely tiny minority of men who will do this. So you can expect that probably 99.9% of the people who see the ad won't be affected by it. But it's that .1% that will buy a Bushmaster and use it.

 JJ Janflone 22:27

So if that's the case, you know, if most people could see that Remington ad not respond, then why does it matter? Why do we have to change the behavior?

 Dr. Robert Levant 22:34

Well, here's the thing. We have to deal with the fact that starting out very early life boys are made to feel that masculinity is obligatory. We have to find a way to interrupt that. There's another part to the gun violence thing that I didn't mention. So to overcome that reticence, you know, that natural human reluctance to kill somebody, you have to have an acquired capability. And I theorize and looked into the literature, the extent that I could, that gun ownership, gun enthusiasm and gun carrying is a way of desensitizing people, men, I should say to the idea of killing another person. And you know, I mean, as a psychologist, I imagine that when a man, you know, puts a, you know, puts a holster and a gun on his hip fantasies go through his mind as to what he's gonna do with that. I mean, he wouldn't put it on if there weren't fantasies

there about that. Some of the research suggests that's, there's this once study about no longer made, Mayberry RFD that the gun owners in that particular study were white men, and the people they were afraid of were people, men of color. And so their fantasies involved, you know, using the weapon against men of color, who they thought were a threat to them. That's kind of, you know, what this person found in her research. So I do think that's another element I don't think just appealing to a boy or man's sense of loss of masculinity is enough. I think it's it's a part of it. But that boy or man has to kind of have gotten over this other hurdle, let's say in terms of being ready to pull the trigger on people

K

Kelly Sampson 24:19

that kind of wanted to talking about suicide, because of course, when we talk about gun violence that is so significant. It's the largest number of deaths, and we know that gun suicide does impact everyone. But it is true that it still does impact men more than women? And I'm wondering, how do... how does masculinity and the gender norms associated with it - How might it contribute to that discrepancy in terms of suicide rates?

D

Dr. Robert Levant 24:46

Okay, let me just take a 30,000 foot view on your question and talk first about depression. Depression is the psychological disorder that most often leads to suicide. Depression is interesting because worldwide women meet the diagnostic criteria for depression, whether it's major depressive disorder or others, twice as frequently as men. In psychology, this is an enormous effect size. Gigantic, twice as off is huge. I mean, if I get an effect size, you know, point five, I consider it good. But this is like, way over that. Now there's no biological, nobody has discovered any biological basis for this. So it appears not to be based in biology. But psychology researchers have shown that the prototypical symptoms of depression, violate masculine norms, crying for one thing, sadness, grief, guilt, and he Donia. listless as all of these things are just simply not masculine. So psychologists like Michael Adass, colleague of mine, has talked about mass depression.



JJ Janflone 26:10


The stoic guy, you've got to hide it

D

Dr. Robert Levant 26:12

You've got to hide it, you've got to hide it. And but it's got to come out somewhere. So where does it come out? It comes out in a couple of ways. Aggression is one way, irritability and aggression. So Adass would advise clinicians, you know, to not only go through the diagnostic criteria for depression, but also asked about irritability, aggression, getting into fights and arguments. Another aspect of it too, for a different set of reasons we can go into if we have time, is that men when they many men, not all men, many men, when they're confronted with difficult feelings, try to drown it out with alcohol. You know, I feel bad, I'll open up a frosty you know, and men meet criteria for alcohol use disorder four times as frequently as women. So that's, again, if if you're a clinician, and your male patient is a heavy drinker, I really probe for

depression as well. So men do not kind of show up in primary care or psychologists offices as depressed and they might fly under the radar screen. And we all know that untreated depression is insidious. That it just erodes a person's sense of self to the point that people will contemplate suicide. And for men, it most often occurs through a weapon. Again,

 Kelly Sampson 27:34

I want to key in on something else you said, which is sometimes the way that men will cope with feelings of depression is to numb themselves sorry, with alcohol, because alcohol and firearms don't mix. And there's a lot of research around that component as well, not even in the research I've seen isn't necessarily gender, but just saying like alcohol, firearms do not mix,

 Dr. Robert Levant 27:57

right? Alcohol doesn't mix with a lot of things.



JJ Janflone 28:03

I wonder, too, if then it's also you're not comfortable discussing emotions, or if you've been taught not to have emotions, and certainly I'm guessing, seeking out therapy or being open for treatment is going to be really difficult and really hard

 Dr. Robert Levant 28:16

One of the important masculine norms is to restrict the expression of emotions. Particularly vulnerable emotions. That is emotions that make you feel vulnerable, like fear and sadness, but also caring and connection emotions. Well, like I mentioned about the pushback against Tom Brady, for example, at earlier. So a big part of my research actually going back 40 years has been on what is the impact of this kind of socialization process? And the impact turns out is that men are more likely to have a clinical condition called alexithymia, means literally no words for emotions. I would ask your audience, do you know any men who when you ask them, they can't tell you what they're feeling? Or they tell you what they're thinking or what they're going to do? I bet you many would say yes, because whenever I push into a live audience, I get a lot of hands. And I know many men like that. And this is alexithymia. Leah and I study whether men and women meet criteria for alexithymia at the same rate. They do not. Men meet criteria for alexithymia more frequently than women. But like most psychological sex differences, the effect is small. It's nothing like the depression effect. It's small. It's a small effect, but it means that more men are likely to be alexithymia. Now, this kind of ties back into the gun violence thing because if, you know, the most effective means for dealing with stress and among humans, is to think about and talk about your stressor. What's bothering you with a trusted other person. If you can't put into words, what's bothering you, it just - Well, I don't know, butterflies in my chest or you got a tight band across my forehead, or I just feel bad. If you can't say what it is exactly that you're feeling, you know, you can avail yourself of this readily available method for stress relief. And as a result, many men are limited to less healthy ways of dealing with stress. I mentioned numbing oneself out with alcohol, getting aggressive, things of that nature.

K**Kelly Sampson** 30:37

When it comes to young people and people who have young people in their lives, young men, especially... Is there any advice you would give? Because especially I mean, we just saw, I think it was in the past couple of weeks, a certain person, I don't want to say his name. But who has become known for spouting these very rigid gender norms. And parents and teachers have been saying, you know, there's kids in my class that have been radicalized by this person on tik tok, and they think you know, what it means to be a man is you objectify women, and you run everything. And if you're not doing that, then you're not a man. So for people who are dealing with young people these days, what advice or sort of, I don't know what the word is, but how what should they be thinking about?

D**Dr. Robert Levant** 31:16

Well, in a short phrase, I would say, the emphasis should be on teaching children to human up, not man up. You know, these emotions that we disparagingly ascribe to women are human emotions. If boys were taught that it's okay to be empathic, compassionate, and kind, we'd have a lot less angry men in the world. 10 years from now, 20 years from now?

**JJ Janflone** 31:43

Yeah, because I would again, just to play to play devil's advocate, I, you know, I could see certain listeners, we can just say it, certain people who are into kind of Andrew Tate stuff, we can say his name. Oh, that's okay. We'll signal him. So he's arrested. He can't hear. If you know, kind of kind of in the vein of that, that would say so. Oh, are you saying that masculinity is always wrong, or that people who view themselves as masculine are inherently failing?

D**Dr. Robert Levant** 32:10

There are some of the masculine norms are quite beneficial in the right circumstances. The problem with masculinity is its rigidity. And the way that boys are made to feel they have to buy it, hook line and sinker at an early age. They have to buy the whole package. You know, certainly bravery in a situation of threat is important. Emotional control in certain situations is important. And I could go on and on. I mean, we're not saying that, that you know, exhibiting stereotypical masculine behavior is always bad. Of course not. But what we are saying is the problems with masculinity are three. One is, the point I keep reinforcing, boys are made to feel it's obligatory at an early age, and that damages them for life. Second, masculinity, other-izes, everybody except for white cis het males. White cis het Christian males, I should say white cis het Christian males who play two sports and have blue eyes.

**JJ Janflone** 33:19

It keeps getting - ? Yeah. Yep.



Dr. Robert Levant 33:22

And the third reason is over 45 years of research connected masculinity, as measured by various psychological scales, with harmful outcomes of all kinds. So that's the problem with toxic masculinity is as well this is toxic and the other masculinity is good. No, no. We have to rethink the whole thing from the get go and stop making boys feel that is obligatory.



JJ Janflone 33:47

Well, thank you so much, Professor. This was amazing. Hey, want to share the podcast? Listeners can now get in touch with us here at Red Blue & Brady via phone or text message. Simply call or text us at 480-744-3452 with your thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, cat pictures, whatever.



Kelly Sampson 34:10

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