

A clinical *tour de force* that leaves some theoretical questions unanswered.

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Tyminski, R., *Male alienation at the crossroads of identity, culture and cyberspace*. Routledge 2019

Robert Tyminski's *Male Alienation at the Crossroads of Identity, Culture and Cyberspace* is a testament to the author's rich experience and skill in working with boys and adolescent males. In an age in which virtual reality, social media and gaming erode the nature and character of the self in general, and masculinity in particular is identified as suspiciously toxic, it arguably has never been harder to grow up male. On the one hand, young men are increasingly taught to curb aggressive impulses and physicality; on the other, they may spend hours a day role-playing online as absurdly muscled parodies of power and destruction. Publicly, dialogue, sensitivity and relatedness are earnestly preached to young men. Privately, these same young men gather in cyberspace to assume roles as omnipotent destroyers and conquerors. Boys grow up with extraordinarily conflicting expectations. Tyminski artfully addresses the full range of contemporary challenges addressing young men and the psychotherapists who treat them: changing concepts of masculinity, gender, race, sexual orientation, immigration status and the siren song of virtual reality of social media and games.

In addressing these emerging cultural forces Tyminski is careful to consult the most up-to-date research and analysis. He investigates how contemporary debates about masculinity are informed by foundational problems of "1) essentialism versus social constructionism; 2) mutability; 3) biological, social, and psychological differentiation between masculinity and femininity; and 4) affirmative and negative perspectives shaping intervention and research" (p. 43). He notes the impact of gender ideologies as well as homosexuality as a challenge not only for gay males in a heteronormative society, but also for straight males whose sense of masculinity is in part rigidly constructed as a reactive

defense against same-sex erotic feelings. Growing up male is even more complicated for immigrants who have to negotiate the complications within American culture while at the same time balancing the notions of masculinity from their family's culture of origin. In addressing these cultural and environmental factors, Tyminski is careful to ground his reflections in current research. In this sense, *Male Alienation at the Crossroads* serves as a valuable resource for contemporary sociological and psychological research, particularly as it pertains to male development. It also serves as a crash course in the latest online games, as well as facts concerning the "dark web" that many young men may be familiar with but many of their therapists (including this one) are not.

In traversing this varied terrain, Tyminski, a Jungian analyst, brings to bear a broad theoretical knowledge and familiarity with Jungian and psychoanalytic thought. Tyminski mobilizes Jung to highlight the archetypal challenge of masculine development, particularly archetypally destructive shadow dangers. Tyminski's status as an insightful Jungian analyst emerges not only in his references to Jung but also in his highly refined metaphorical sensibilities, his talent for making meaningful connections in the material of his patients. Tyminski is also at home in the literature of developmental psychology (Erickson and Piaget) and psychoanalysis--particularly Bion and Winnicott. For example, Tyminski notes several clinical cases involving "puncturing"--smashing glass, or cutting one's own skin--and conceives such punctures as symbols of a failure of psychic containment: "I would hypothesize impairment in Bion's alpha function" (p. 76). Elsewhere, he accounts for gangs in terms of Bion's notion of the basic assumption group (p 148). Tyminski employs Winnicott to shed light on the anti-social behaviors of male adolescents (p. 120) and modifies Winnicott's concept of the good-enough mother to explore the character of the good-enough father (pp. 166-168).

But the highlight of *Male Alienation at the Crossroads* is Tyminski's rich and varied clinical case descriptions. Tyminski (p. 186) quotes Jungian analyst Ellen Siegelman for the proposition that "Much therapeutic work consists of unfreezing the metaphors that have

patients in their grip and relativizing them, showing that their entrenched metaphors represent one way of looking at the world.” Tyminski’s clinical vignettes put on display *his* unique talent for “unfreezing the metaphors” of his patients. For example, Tyminski (pp. 23-30) describes his work with his nineteen-year-old patient, Zack, a depressed young man who “spent his time on the Internet, surfing various social media websites and imageboards” (p. 24). Zack educates Tyminski concerning Internet “imageboards:” “They are a dark zone of the Internet. Some of them are harmless. ... But there are some of them that aren’t very reputable” (p. 27). What makes imageboards unique is that their written or visual content disappears within minutes—leaving no trace. Imageboards are suited for expressing extreme, offensive or illegal content because nothing can be traced back to the poster. Tyminski observes that Zack’s

description of the dark zones suggested he might have used these online imageboards as lifeless containers for his projections, although he never got any human feedback and was only left with web-based crumbs devoid of meaning. It seemed that Zack was describing, in a dream-like manner, how he felt about opening his dark zones to me. (p. 28)

This is an insightful description of the *specific function* of the imageboards in Zack’s psychic economy (containers for his projections) and how these dark zones shed light on the therapeutic relationship. But Tyminski’s intuition allows him to see further. He perceives in the phrase “dark zones” a metaphorical key to understanding Zack’s way of being. It makes sense of Zack’s impulse to hide, and his averted gaze and inaudible speech (p. 24); it makes sense of his alarm when a psychological test unexpectedly sheds light on his inner world (p. 25); it makes sense of Zack’s severely restricted emotional and social life (pp. 27-28); finally, it makes sense of Zack’s career choice in technology (p. 29).

Tyminski’s intuition and attentive perception also emerges in his account of ten-year-old Carlos who had been diagnosed with mild to moderate mental retardation.

Something in Carlos baffled me. I observed him in his classroom, which operated as a therapeutic milieu, and saw moments when he seemed more attentive and curious. However, whenever a teacher noticed him, he withdrew and became his typical dulled and confused self. One day, I followed him out to recess, and he was walking into the wall like a drunk. He was clumsy, and had poor muscle tone, and sometimes tripped and fell, so I had thought his walking into the wall was another aspect of his sensory-motor problems. (p. 84)

Tyminski notes that at the time he was working as a supervisor at the clinic (specializing in the treatment of children with autistic spectrum disorders) and supervised the therapist treating Carlos, whose intellectual disability diagnosis could include lack of physical coordination. It would have been perfectly normal, in light of Carlos's diagnosis, for a supervisor to see nothing amiss in Carlos's behaviors. But Tyminski saw things that roused his curiosity. He saw *moments* when Carlos showed abilities significantly beyond that which his diagnosis might suggest.

So, Tyminski went digging. He looked at Carlos's chart again to for clues (pp. 84-85). He noted Carlos's father died of cancer when Carlos was six years-old. This struck Tyminski as significant. He recommended that the treating therapist call social services to find out more and discovered that Carlos's father died of stomach cancer. Then, he recommended that the therapist track down relatives who knew about Carlos's father. This investigation bore fruit. Carlos's father, it turns out, was an *alcoholic*. Suddenly, "Carlos's dullness, confusion, slurred speech, and stumbling now seemed to be possibly about something else, an identification with a lost parent at a precious moment in Carlos's life" (pp. 84-85). Tyminski recommended to the treating therapist that he direct Carlos toward remembering his father. As a result,

Carlos began to speak louder and without slurring his words. He started to join in games at recess and was physically rather agile. He didn't stumble. He was more

focused in his classes and his teachers began to feel he was learning. ... We all could see Carlos's turnaround. (p. 85)

This is a quintessential Jungian move. Just as Jung's psychological instinct moved him to look past the prevailing medical view to see *meaning* in the ravings of the psychotics he treated at the Burghölzli, Tyminski's instincts moved him to look past a DSM diagnosis to explore other ways of understanding Carlos. He came up with the remarkable hypothesis that Carlos's veritably drunken *body and mind* were "a living memorial to the dead parent" (p. 85). Carlos was dull and staggered about so as to keep close to his departed father. His body had become a living metaphor of his father's drunkenness. Carlos's improvement upon explicitly remembering his father suggests that Tyminski was right. Carlos no longer had to play at *being* his father when he could *remember* him. The case of Carlos is a striking example of the sort of clinical inspiration animating Tyminski's many case examples throughout this book.

Had this book been entitled *Treating Boys and Adolescents in the 21st Century* (or something of the sort) I would have few, if any, criticisms of this excellent work. But it is called, *Male Alienation at the Crossroads of Identity, Culture and Cyberspace*. The focus is on alienation, and this is framed in cultural terms. This creates an expectation that this book will address cultural factors that lead to alienation. Stated differently, the book's title indicates a focus on a *modern cultural condition—alienation—with personal impacts on young men*. The Oxford dictionary defines alienation as "[the] state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved." Alienation is cultural and social. It has to do with belonging, or the lack thereof. Alienation is a specialized term. One would think that early in his book Tyminski would specifically explore (if not define) what *he* means by alienation. But it is not until the 204th page of a 217-page book that Tyminski defines alienation as "distance from others and oneself, seclusion and loneliness" (p. 204). The alienation that he focuses on is "accompanied by a dense barrier to entry into [the adolescent's] inner worlds" (p. 204). There certainly is an

acknowledgement here of the social dimension of alienation—“distance from others” and “seclusion”—but there is no mention of the lack of belonging. More importantly, alienation is broadened to include “distance from ... oneself,” an internal split, or a false-self/true-self dichotomy. Tyminski’s definition of alienation here is not merely a possibly inelegant formulation. It reflects how Tyminski uses the term. Since Tyminski sees alienation as much in intra-psychic structure as arising from social or cultural forces he uses the term as a descriptor for a heterogeneous variety of psychic experiences. As a result, the meaning of alienation becomes overly diffuse in that it is applied to almost any psychic malady, whether arising from development (poor attachment), contingent events such as trauma, or from the general malaise of modern culture--as manifest in the Internet and virtual reality.

Male Alienation at the Crossroads of Identity, Culture and Cyberspace is an outstanding exploration of contemporary issues facing therapists treating boys and young men, rich in clinical detail and thoroughly researched. As such, it can be highly recommended as a resource for clinicians and researchers. But it does not quite reach to the heart of the predicament created by cyberspace and virtual reality: how does this cultural phenomenon fundamentally change the nature of the *self* and what does this mean for a young man’s sense of belonging, not just among family or peers, but in the *world*? One might even push the question further. If virtual reality has actually *changed* the nature of the self, are the old theoretical constructs of Freud, Jung and Winnicott—which arose in a cultural context in which virtual reality was absent—adequate to understand a new self that has been forged in the heart of cyberspace?

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