

*Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the
Crisis of Connection*
by Niobe Way

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Niobe Way challenges the 'culture that perceives boys and men to be activity orientated, emotionally illiterate and interested only in independence' (p.2). In *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection* she presents her cumulative findings from over twenty years of research into the emotional lives of adolescent boys. Way contends that American boys are resisting cultural assumptions about masculinity by having intimate, emotional and vulnerable same-sex friendships that are as intense and complex as those society expects of girls.

Way is well established in the field of developmental psychology; over the past two decades she has published one other monograph and numerous collaborative studies on adolescent friendships. Although *Deep Secrets* is rooted in Way's substantial body of longitudinal research, it aims to appeal to the general reader and so is not a strictly scholarly treatment of the subject. While the comprehensive footnotes indicate the academic basis of her approach, Way's tone suits the casual reader, making no assumptions about existing subject knowledge, thus making her work accessible to a far wider audience than would ordinarily be reached by a Professor of Applied Psychology.

Although accessibility is her paramount concern, Way is nevertheless careful to explain the validity of her methodology. She draws her conclusions from '135 adolescent [14-18 year old] boys who

attended high school in the United States [...] whom we have interviewed for at least two years as part of three separate studies of friendship' (p.78). The participants were ethnically, racially and economically diverse, which is important because demographically 'they better represent boys in America than do the White, middle and upper class boys who populate the best selling books [...] and frequently cited articles' (p.79).

Way followed the 'Listening Guide' developed by Brown & Gilligan (1992) to rigorously analyse the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended one-to-one interviews. Although statistical tests cannot be applied to her data, Way maintains that quantitative survey methods 'do not capture the nuance or meaning of an event or experience' that she is interested in (p.39). This focus on the framework surrounding the boys' responses is key; Way rejects 'thin' surface explanations in favour of 'thick' explanations which provide deeper analyses of how culture shapes our views about behaviour. Thus, Way investigates the impact on boys of living in a society 'where core human capacities such as emotional expressiveness, responsiveness, empathy, and needs such as intimate friendships are given a sex (i.e., girl) and a sexuality (i.e., gay)' (p.29).

Deep Secrets is well structured. Particularly useful are the short sections at the end of each chapter that sum up ideas covered and draw preliminary conclusions. In the two introductory chapters Way gives an overview of assumptions made about boys' friendships and the way in which her research challenges these. She uses quotes such as '[My best friend and I] love each other ... that's it' (p.1) to surprise the reader into reassessing their understanding of such relationships. Way also

contextualises her work with a survey of existing research on boys, friendships and masculinity.

The next section focuses on friendships during early and middle adolescence, beginning with a chapter entitled 'Sometimes You Need to Spill Your Heart Out to Somebody'. Here Way shows, through extensive quotation from interviews, that boys seek emotionally intimate male friendships and feel that without someone to share secrets with 'you will go crazy or mad or [...] be depressed' (p.97). She illustrates boys' awareness of and resistance to expectations about masculinity by their recitation, but ultimate rejection, of 'macho mantras': 'I'll probably show it to you like I'm gonna get mad because you dissed me but really I'm gonna get mad because I love you and I miss you' (p.113).

Way goes on to consider the influence of parents upon boys' ability to relate their feelings and the impact of social hierarchies at school upon their resistance to gender stereotypes. Way concludes that boys perceived as 'masculine' – as denoted by athleticism or ethnicity, for example – are allowed more freedom and flexibility of emotional behaviour by their peers compared to those that are lower down the social scale.

Chapter five, 'Nick and George: Stories of Resistance', is the first of two case-study chapters, the other being chapter eight, 'Fernando and Danny'. These crucially allow the reader access to the interview process, as well as illustrating Way's findings and conclusions by tracing the radical changes in individual boys' relationships and behaviour over a number of years. However, repetition of some quotes from earlier chapters gives the unfortunate impression that Way has quoted rather selectively from interviews to maintain her narrative. This undermines

her thesis by implying that it is not so common for boys to articulate such strong feelings about their friendships.

The final section considers boys' changing friendships during late adolescence. Way begins by noting the pattern of loss during this period: many boys no longer consider themselves to have close friends and often become more distrustful and wary of betrayal. However, the desire for intimate friendships remains and continues into adulthood, as noted by a number of other studies (e.g. Levinson, 1978).

Way then moves towards a critique of the 'thick' cultural explanations for boys' increasing isolation as they grow up. Central to this is the emphasis on individualism, alongside the latently homophobic and sexist rejection of male intimacy and vulnerability stemming from anxieties about being considered gay or feminine. Here Way brings her analysis of boys' relationships into dialogue with a range of psychological, sociological and anthropological studies. She also takes on a manifesto-like tone: 'We do not need to fix boys as much as we need to help boys remain confident in their knowledge of the social and emotional world' (p.228).

The final chapter of *Deep Secrets* demands social change. Way highlights the multi-faceted 'crisis of connection' that pervades modern society, exacerbated by our reinforcement of a gender divide that insists boys do not have the same emotional needs and desires as girls. She questions why we cannot see that our assumptions about gender are often contradicted by reality and suggests 'we are blinded to what boys are, in fact, doing and saying because we do not believe that our beliefs about gender are a product of culture' (p.276).

Way's extensive use of quotation from her interviews is effective because it gives us access to the private emotional lives of boys in their

own words. However, the critical reader may find that they cannot accept the conclusions Way develops from these excerpts without viewing more extended sections of the interviews or a more thorough breakdown of her analytic results. Though footnotes allow the reader to follow up cited research by the author and other scholars, the frustrating lack of bibliography makes these sources less accessible.

There are limitations to this study, particularly because Way regularly invokes the spectre of homosexuality as an explanation for boys' behaviours without considering whether friendship patterns differ significantly in homosexual boys. Way is aware of this failing though, stating that a few boys did define themselves as gay or bisexual in interviews, but the small sample size meant that she was unable to draw conclusions from their data to compare with heterosexually identified teenagers.

Deep Secrets is, for non-specialists, a valuable introduction to psychologists' developing appreciation of the depth of boys' emotional lives, which convincingly explains the importance of reassessing society's assumptions about masculinity. Unfortunately, Way too often revels in her freedom from the constraints of journal publication to make this anecdotal study truly satisfying for the academic reader.

Bibliography

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