

Men Defining Masculinity: It's Not About Sex

April 2, 2014 by Andrew Smiler

In surveys of nearly 40,000 men in 13 countries, character, self-determination, and work topped the list of what defines masculinity.

Imagine being asked to complete a survey in which you were asked to rate 13 characteristics commonly associated with masculinity. What would move to the top of your list and what would go to the bottom? Is being honorable more important than having success with women? Making a lot of money?

In a pair of studies, research teams did just that. The initial study was based in the West, involved nearly 28,000 men from the United States, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain, and was published in the Journal of Sexual Medicine. A subsequent study surveyed nearly 11,000 men in Asia, from China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Taiwan, and was published in the Journal of Men's Health. In both studies, the men ranged in age from 18-75, but participants skewed somewhat younger.

The men were asked "what do you think is most important to the male identity (What do you think is important to be a real man)?" and given a list of 9 items (West) or 13 items (Asia). They were asked to rate each item on a scale from "not at all important" (score: 1) to "very important." All surveys were administered on a computer. The item with the highest score was automatically identified; if men gave the same high score to multiple items, they were asked which of those items was most important.

Items 1 – 9 were included in both studies; items 10-13 were only asked in the Asian study.

1. Having a good job.
2. Having lots of money. (West: Having financial stability)
3. Being seen as a man of honor.
4. Having success with women.
5. Coping with problems on your own.
6. Having an active sex life.
7. Being in control of your own life.
8. Being physically attractive.
9. Having the respect of friends.
10. Being a family man.
11. Having a manly image.
12. Having an outgoing personality.
13. Avoiding shameful situations.

The results showed that character was central regardless of country. "Being a man of honor" was the top ranked item among Western participants and 2nd among Asian participants. It received #1 rankings in six of the thirteen nations and was 2nd in three more.

“Being in control of your life” was ranked second among Western participants and 3rd among Asian participants. It took first place in four countries and 2nd place in seven more.

“Having a good job” took 3rd place. It was in 1st place across all Asian countries combined, but only took first place in one country. But it landed in 2nd, 3rd, or 4th in nearly every country and thus took the bronze medal.

The two items related to sexuality – “having success with women” and “having an active sex life” – were in the bottom half. Success with women was ranked as the most important characteristics of masculinity by less than 3% of men in every country except Korea, where 14% – about one in seven – gave it priority and made it the 3rd most important characteristics. Less than 6% of Western men and less than 2% of Asian men said “having an active sex life” was the most important characteristic of masculinity, with averages of 3% of 1%, respectively.

It wasn’t an age thing either, even though survey participants skewed younger. The research team also looked at results based on age group, 18-29, 30-39, and so on, ending with 60-75. For these two items, scores changed by no more than one percentage point when the researchers broke it down by age group.

Asian participants were also asked about the importance of “Being a family man.” It made the top 5 list in every country except Taiwan (7th). Who says being a dad isn’t important?

What does all this tell us? It means that when guys are asked how they define masculinity, character, self-determination, and work/financial stability rise to the top of the list. If we’re really interested in helping boys and men become better people, we need to help them develop inner strength (or character), teach them how to make good decisions, and give them a meaningful education.

It also means we need to stop stereotyping guys as primarily or only driven by sex because most guys don’t define their masculinity that way. They – we – are much more than “roving inseminators” and place real value on being parents.

It’s time to kick the stereotype that men are only interested in sex, porn, and video games. Nearly 40,000 men in 13 countries spanning 3 continents told us we’re way off base.

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