Abstract

The main argument in this article is that the contemporary image of masculinity and of young men’s construction of masculinity – in research as well as in popular literature on these issues – often is very stereotypical. This observation forms the point of departure for this article and the issue at hand here, namely to plead for a more elaborated, complex and less normative and biased discussion of young masculinity. The text brings forward empirical studies and anecdotical examples of masculinity in transformation. Some of the examples help us to destabilize the notion of stable gender identities, whereas others deal with more or less subtle re-definitions of men and masculinities. The aim of the article is not to develop new theories or to arrive at more specific empirical findings. The ambition is instead to bring forward the question and to suggest some possible ways of dealing with the problem of one-dimensionality and the reproduction of stereotypes.

Key words

Young masculinity, sexualization, identity, male bonding, heteronormativity
The Full Monty – Masculinity undressed

Thomas Johansson
Thomas.Johansson@kultur.gu.se

Masculinity as the “Other”

Just as the woman is often viewed as the Other in society – that is, as someone defined in the man’s gaze – the man is also transformed into the Other in many texts focused on gender (cf. Holland et. Al. 1998, Francis 2000). Which men actually embody the manifest, autocratic and self-assured masculinity we find in, for example Simone de Beauvoir’s work, and in a great number of contemporary feminist texts? This view of masculinity serves as a description of abstract male dominance and of structural power relations. Yet when we approach the level of everyday reality, the picture becomes more complex and contradictory (Bengtsson 2001, Hammarén and Johansson 2005).

The contemporary discussion on gender and sexuality has largely been pursued within the framework of feminist theory. This is also true of youth research. A lack of problematization of the young man has helped to strengthen the picture of the one-dimensional man (cf. Willis 1977, Lalander and Johansson 2002). This picture may have been functional and useful as a tool in criticizing hegemonic masculinity, but the question is whether it didn’t also help to create a simplified view of gender. The following significant description of young men and women is taken from an English study of sexuality among youth in the late 1990’s:

The contrast with how young men learned about sex was striking. Where young women were being educated to guard their reputations and protect themselves from danger, young men were learning that real men were knowing agents in pursuit of sexual pleasure. The gendering of learning about sex was connected to differing and gendered languages of sex, love and romance (Holland et. al. 1998:7).

Although this quotation and the empirical study is almost ten years old, similar kinds of interpretations and analyses of youth culture, sexuality and differences can easily be detected in contemporary studies (Magnusson 2003).

In the beginning of the new century, a number of studies were published that provided a partly new and more multifaceted picture of young masculinity. This research has contributed to the growth of a more complex view of young men (Connell 1995, 2000, O’Donnell and Sharpe 2000; Frosh et al. 2002). However, even though the image of gen-
der is more developed and refined in these British studies, there is still a lack of descriptions of a more nuanced and gender equal masculinity.

In recent studies on gender identities in general, and in particular on masculinity, we can see a partially new development. Young women are taking the initiative and are no longer merely passive onlookers. Male repression is no longer accepted. In fanzines and other contexts, young feminists make fun of the vulgar man. He is scorned and subjected to brutal and ironic jokes. More and more, young men are beginning to call themselves feminists and to support the struggle for gender equality (for examples, see Johansson and Hammarén 2006, Johansson 2007). Values are clearly changing. This becomes even more obvious when looking at fatherhood in a Swedish context, where the ideal of the gender equal and caring father is almost hegemonic (Johansson and Klinth 2007).

This article can be seen and read as an exploratory investigation into young masculinities. The text is a mixture of a more general theoretical discussion of gender and the construction of masculine identities, and empirical examples used in order to explore the boundaries and the more specific movements and changes in contemporary culture. The empirical material is collected from the work in association with a research project on youth culture, sexuality and gender in transformation (Johansson 2007). The sample of texts and studies used in this article, have been selected on the criteria that they present some interesting trends and changes in the descriptions and analyses of contemporary Swedish masculinity. Therefore, it is of course a quite biased selection of studies, but nevertheless they all have something crucial to say about how young men approach issues of sexuality, the body and identity.

In the first and second section of the article, I will argue that the contemporary image of masculinity and of young men’s construction of masculinity – in research as well as in popular literature – often is very stereotypical. This forms a point of departure for the article and the issue at hand here, namely to plead for a more elaborated and less normative discussion of young masculinity. The following sections bring forward different empirical studies and examples of masculinity in transformation. The examples of soccer-playing women help us to destabilize the notion of stable gender identities, whereas the following sections deals with more or less subtle re-definitions of men and masculinities.

Finally I will return to the question of youth research, gender identities and sexuality. The aim of the article is not to develop theories or to arrive at more specific empirical results, rather more to bring forward the problem and to suggest some possible ways to deal with the problem of one-dimensionality and the reproduction of stereotypes.

**Ambivalent Masculinity**

When we talk about *the man as norm*, we are primarily referring to male dominance and to how science, literature and politics, among other things, have taken their point of de-
parture from men’s definitions of social reality. *Normative masculinity*, however, refers to something else – to how men have been forced to adapt to, mold themselves after and submit themselves to narrow norms for what a man should be. Here, male repression becomes repression of men.

There exists an established and rather stereotyped picture of young men (Mac an Ghaill 1997). This picture of men is recurrent in the media, research and in the everyday conceptual world. It often portrays them as independent, potent and dangerous. But how is it created? What causes many young men to become the bearers of this conceptual world? Is the picture of manifest male sexuality part of how young men think they should present themselves? In other words, is this picture normative in nature? If so, to what extent is it possible to get behind the more explicit and obvious aspects of young men’s self-presentations?

The polarized view of young men’s and young women’s sexuality is in great need of problematization (Hammarén and Johansson 2001, 2002, 2006). The classical image of the passive woman and the active man is today replaced by a more complex picture (Nixon 1996, Morris-Roberts 2004; Jonsson 2007). This does not imply, of course, that power relations between the sexes have undergone a complete change and that equality now prevails. It is still the case that, in many social and cultural contexts, men occupy dominant and women subordinated positions. But while it is important that we see and work to counteract repression, it is also of great importance that we acquire an adequate picture of our complex and sometimes paradoxical social reality.

When looking more closely at the everyday and the intersubjective level, we find a considerable number of contradictory patterns. The excerpt below is from a group interview:

**Interviewer:** Is it important that the man takes the initiative?

**Samuel:** It should be that way, but sometimes the guy doesn’t dare to, then he’s ashamed.

**Anna:** The ninth-graders are gonna have a dance and not one single guy has asked a girl, all the girls had to ask the guys.

**Samuel:** The guys don’t dare to, they’re afraid of being turned down

**Anna:** Wimps

**Samuel:** Their friends tease them about it.
Anna: So what, it’s not fatal, if you don’t dare to do things nothing will ever happen, it’s ridiculous, “no, OK, no then,” then you just walk away.

Samuel: But what if she says no, and her friends come and tease you.

Anna: Oh, my God, whatever (Hammarén and Johansson 2001:13).

Are young men self-assured, autocratic and secure in their sexuality? There is a great deal left to explore here. The image of the young man has been created on the basis of conceptions of masculinity that often lack ties to social reality. It is instead part of the same ideology that contributes to reproducing the image of the passive and subordinate young woman. In order to find security, the young man seeks out homosocial environments in which he can interact with men and find strength in a male community. In such environments, a macho attitude is sometimes cultivated and, in some cases, sexist jokes are ordinary fare. Yet “behind” this homosocial surface, we often find a complex masculinity characterized by insecurity and a number of social phobias. How many men do not find it difficult to use a public urinal? Not to mention the countless sexual encounters with women that fail completely, ending in impotence.

In contemporary society, we see an increased sexualization of the body. Both men and women are exposed as sex objects (Nixon 1996, Johansson 2007). Certain body parts receive more attention than others, particularly breasts, stomachs and bottoms. The demands on these body parts are gradually increasing: They should be perfectly formed, hard and aesthetically pleasing. The gender division based on different traits has been replaced by a classification based on the sexualization of body parts (Johansson 1998). For many young men, this means that new demands are added to their already fragile sexual identities and problem-filled attitudes toward their own sexuality. It is a relatively new development for young men that their stomachs should look like washboards and that they increasingly tend to look judgmentally at each other’s bodies. If the worst comes to the worst, this striving for perfection may help to create a new bodily image of masculinity which covers a fragile sexual identity.

Essentially, this development reflects the ambivalence we observe in the formation of gender identities. There is no unequivocal development here. Men continue to develop strategies for protecting themselves and for accepting the challenge of acting like “real” men. The categories masculine and feminine are also being filled with new and contradictory contents, however (Butler 1990). In the next section I will continue to explore these questions, with a particular focus on the masculine body.
The male body

In today’s society, we often hear that men have also become objects – that young male bodies are circulating on the “meat market.” Something has happened, but what? The discussion on the “new man” made considerable headway during the 1990s. This development was tied both to men’s increased frequency of appearance on advertisement billboards and to men’s increased interest in fatherhood. The first shouts of joy were soon replaced by more guarded reactions from feminists, politicians and experts on gender equality. The hope of the new man was not realized. How should we interpret this?

The fact that young male bodies are being exposed in the media and advertisements could be viewed as a positive development. It is no longer just the woman who is defined in the man’s gaze – this relationship has become more reciprocal. One good example of this is found in the film *The Full Monty* (1997), which is about a group of unemployed men in Northern England. Desperation and apathy are transformed into something hopeful when the men come up with the idea of organizing a striptease show. They have a long way to go, however. The project is complicated by resistance on the part of family and friends and, not least, by the men’s own psychological barriers. In order to carry out their plan, the men are forced to meet and confront conceptions of the unmanly and to come to terms with their own prejudices. The entire genre of advertisements, films and other media that thematize and problematize “the manly” and that operate in the borderland of what is seen as the feminine clearly contain a potential for change.

Of course, we may object, arguing that the aesthetization of men’s bodies does not automatically lead to a radical change in gender patterns or power. These tendencies are so peripheral that they can hardly affect the gender order. It is also possible to conduct an analysis that instead indicates increased self-repression and the creation of an illusory surface that, rather than resulting in equality, reinforces hegemonic masculinity. The men in *The Full Monty* probably do not continue stripping, but eventually find real jobs.

When we inspect and scrutinize men’s bodies and men’s sexuality, it is often done via the woman’s gaze. Young men are frequently presented as sexually threatening – as potent and turned on. These creatures are ready to pounce upon young girls and take advantage of them. The man’s sexuality is regarded as animal and his sexual appetite is insatiable. Young men are not interested in understanding their own sexuality, in getting in touch with their emotions or in exploring their gender identity. They are simply there, as pure existence. Just like the young man in the TV commercial who stands drilling into the ground while a group of women devour his body – a symbol of pure potency!

If we move beyond all these muscles, washboard stomachs and potent male heroes, what do we find? We consider that this field is relatively unexplored. Male sexuality has seldom been studied seriously and, above all, it has not been problematized. Discussions on how masculinity is constructed often concern behavior, physicality and the superficial. Young
men are observed and studied with a focus on behavior and action. There is no information, however, on what is happening on the psychological level. In this way too, an imaginary picture of the young man is created. What is often observed are young men’s desperate attempts at presenting themselves as successful, potent and in control. But these kinds of presentation of the self in everyday life often conceal a great uncertainty.

With respect to the formation of masculinity, what is perhaps most interesting and relevant to focus on today is ambivalence, uncertainty, fragility and young men’s difficulties in forming a functioning identity. Fear of impotence – which is a horror for many men – is a central aspect of the formation of masculinity. This impotence is not only a matter of the physical ability to satisfy a partner, but has a much wider significance. What we see today is how men look for outlets for different parts of themselves in different places. In love relationships, young men work toward equality, but among male friends they may sometimes act out their extreme sexism. The difficulties inherent in allowing these aspects of masculinity to melt together result in a relatively fragmented identity (Andreasson 2005, 2007). It is here, in this fragile identity, we may find the roots of the violence perpetrated by men, of men’s problems with being present fathers and of the fact that society has a long way to go before achieving gender and social equality.

In the following sections I will now turn to some empirical material, and examples collected from different studies. I will start with a study on female masculinity, more specifically on soccer players. Then I will use some more investigations in order to get closer to and “read” the fragile construction of contemporary masculinity.

What is masculinity?

Girls who act in a way that can be seen as masculine have often been described as tomboys. This concept has been particularly popular in psychologically oriented discussions on adolescence and gender. It has also found a strong foothold in popular psychology and in everyday life. The term is commonly used to signify a deviation or a phase of development. In the field of developmental psychology, scholars have gone so far as to see the tomboy as a stage in a longer developmental phase. This is something that some girls, who perhaps have identified unusually strongly or weakly with their father, go through and are then done with. The question is, however, whether this must or should be viewed as a developmental phase. Other types of analyses of the phenomenon of the tomboy can be made from the perspective of gender theory (cf. Halberstam 1998).

Jesper Andreasson (2005) has studied a Swedish women’s soccer team. He has focused primarily on the young women’s strategies for creating gender, a process that takes place at a kind of point of intersection between “feminine” and “masculine.” This is above all a matter of fending off and dealing with people’s attitudes toward women’s soccer and of tackling the strong tendencies toward masculinization. Soccer is evidently first of all con-
The attitudes and ideas encountered by these young women often concern how people view the combination of soccer, femininity and sexuality. In these connections, the young women are considered and seen as some type of hybrid.

In his study, Andreasson shows how these young soccer-playing women create, through their physical existence, a questioning of the boundaries between the sexes many are used to drawing. It is in this connection that the notion of tomboy appears, probably because this Gestalt can be used to name a hybrid. Consider the following excerpt:

Yeah, I am. So I guess you could say I was a tomboy (laughs). Once even, when I was playing, it was the final, the other team’s coach came up to me. He said: “no, is she going into the locker room, I don’t believe it’s a girl.” He was going to check if I was a girl or a guy. So I have been a tomboy. (Kia, 18 years; taken from Andreasson 2005:30).

As a rule then, young women who play soccer are associated with masculinity. This is part of the same pattern that causes women who enter traditionally male-dominated domains to be viewed as masculine. At the same time, we currently find ourselves in a process of change in which more and more people are becoming aware that the boundaries between the sexes are socially constructed. Moreover, these boundaries are also becoming increasingly relative in nature. In other words, it is no longer obvious where the boundaries shall, should or can be drawn. This creates a certain margin for negotiation.

This becomes clear when we look more closely at the body. To become a good soccer player, you must build up your body and increase your muscle mass. Changes such as these are readily associated with masculinity. In this respect, we also see a delicate balancing act between what is viewed as a reasonable sacrifice and a possible bodily change. Ultimately, the body is the clearest marker of gender. This is also a question of the young women’s own subjectivity and gender identity. In many cases, the physical changes required to excel as a player are in opposition to the ideals of beauty and body that characterize contemporary ideal femininity.

Thus, it may be ultimately necessary to choose between soccer and femininity. For many young women, these increased demands on them to exercise, compete and reshape the body also result in their quitting sports altogether. As one of the young women in Andreasson’s study (2005:26) expressed it: “You still think about how it’s going to look. You don’t just want to have a body for soccer, you want to look good too. That’s what I think anyway, I don’t know about the others, but it should be both ways. Looks are still important, not just soccer. Like soccer thighs, I wish mine were smaller, and I guess the others on the team do too. But mostly you exercise for soccer, to get bigger. (…)”.

The young women who continue to play soccer and who also are successful gradually move further away from “the feminine”. Now, their bodies and cultural image are not
only associated with masculinity, but also with “lesbianism.” It seems that the better they become at soccer, the more fit and skillful they become, the more they embody something outside the normative and conventional. Successful female soccer players must, therefore, deal with people’s ideas about them as both masculine and lesbian. Consider the following excerpt from Andreasson’s study:

I can tell you it’s very common. Yeah, I can. So it’s no fun for people who aren’t (lesbians). It’s not fun to hear it all the time: “oh, you’re homosexual, you play soccer.” You get to explain it, like, 300 times that you’re not a lesbian. But it is really, you know, it is common. When we were away with the national team and talked to people from the other soccer clubs, we heard that there’s also a lot if it in their clubs. It’s almost, not scary, but when you say you’re on the national team or play elite level soccer, that’s when it comes up. ’Cause in division five or four, there you can be more girls, more girlish. But at the higher levels it easily gets more boyish. Except I don’t know really, maybe it’s just ’cause the players are better. I don’t know, maybe it just happens somehow that it’s that way. But it always comes up; those questions always come up. It’s almost like you should have the answer printed on your forehead and walk around with it, so everybody would know you’re not a lesbian (Jennie, 18 years; taken from Andreasson 2005:24).

The example of the soccer-playing young women illustrates part of the dilemma of gender construction. Though we see today a greater tolerance for a more relative gender determination, it is clearly still the case that the boundary is drawn somewhere. This commonly concerns the body and our understandings of what defines a masculine versus feminine body. In contemporary society, it is completely acceptable for a young woman to have a muscular body, as long as her muscles are not as large as those of a man. The boundary is absolutely drawn at the female body-builder, who is viewed by many as deviant, as an anomaly (Johansson 1998).

Young soccer-playing women, especially those who are successful, exist in some respects at the point of intersection where issues of gender, sexuality and identity are hottest. They bring to the forefront and clearly highlight the question of intersectionality. It is when we take something to its extreme that we can first seriously elucidate the boundaries that exist in the culture. When young women come too close to what is often viewed as the masculine, suspicion is cast on them and they are depicted as cultural hybrids.

In the following sections, I will study and analyze a few examples of how young men do gender. I will in particular focus on borderlands in which men tend to approach and define the feminine. How stable is the construction of masculinity? What boundaries are drawn and kept? To what extent is contemporary gender identities chosen and made?
Heterosexual love?

In the early research on young masculinity, the construction of the young heterosexual man was seldom questioned or problematized. Instead, researchers have rather naively accepted and based their work on young men’s self-presentations. This has helped to create a rather stereotypical picture of young masculinity – a picture also found in mass media depictions of gender. Using the tools provided by gender studies and critical men’s studies, however, we can today present a more nuanced picture of young masculinity. In her study of ten young male university students, the Swedish psychologist Lina Paulsson (2005) has captured some of the uncertainty and ambivalence that characterizes contemporary masculinity. The study focuses on heterosexual love and on how gender is constructed in the meeting between a man and a woman.

According to Paulsson, the performance itself and the performative aspects of masculinity constitute an important component of the construction of gender. Thus, this is a matter of doing masculinity. The young men in the study describe themselves as most “masculine” when they find themselves in situations where they are taking care of, protecting or buying something for a woman. In other words, it is when the young men are “leaning on” hegemonic masculinity that they experience themselves as most masculine. Consider the following example from Paulsson’s study (2005:43):

Lina: In what kinds of situations did you feel like a man, then?

Joel: For example when you walk through town holding hands or arm in arm or something. Or when I’m lying on the couch and she cuddles up to me, it made me, or it’s like she somehow feels safe with me, and it, I think, really made me feel that way. It’s ridiculous but it also feels that way sometimes when I treat her to things, like. And it felt good when we were out eating or something at a restaurant (…) to get to be or to get to pay, like, at times like that. Oh, I don’t know, it’s hard. Then when she stands on her toes to kiss me too, that also made me, or I don’t know it’s also when she wants me to hold her or something that also makes a great… well.

Although, as a rule, the young men aimed at gender equality and wanted to see themselves as modern men, they often staged situations in which they ended up in a dominating position in relation to the woman. Paulsson shows clearly how the heterosexual love relation is created and maintained. This occurs through small means and often through dramatizations. For instance, couples use clichés and patterns taken from popular culture to stage their love. Yet Paulsson also shows how fragile and temporary this construction can be. If the staging and dramatization themselves fail, the relationship may quickly
deteriorate. This occurs in particular when the young men discover that they are begin-
ning to find themselves in a weak position.

Rather than viewing the love relation as something complete – as a stable cultural pat-
ttern – Paulsson chooses to study how this relation is constructed, which provides us with
a great deal of information on the processes, super- and subordinations that are part of
the formation of heterosexual love. This perspective also helps us analyze how young
men balance between more fixed pictures of masculinity and their own ambitions to
change or to become something other than, for example their fathers. Paulsson also
shows how important it is for these young men to end up on the correct side of norma-
tive sexuality, that is, to avoid appearing overly passive, feminine or in any other way un-
masculine. The greatest threat is feelings of desire and experiences that are potentially ho-
mosexual. Consider the following interview excerpt:

No, the idea that I would dare fall in love with a guy is way too charged for me. Or
I’ve never like, there’s probably some barrier like, deep down that stops it. Plus I
don’t want to, or it would complicate my life even more (laughs) if I was interested
in guys I guess, or I’m afraid of it (taken from Paulsson 2005:56).

This quotation points towards the often subtle and diffuse distinctions between homo-
and heterosexuality, and between different ways of performing and doing masculinity.
Many of the informants in contemporary studies on masculinity also show a great aware-
ness of gender theories, heterosexual norms and also of the researcher’s agenda. This
heightened reflexivity is often noticed in studies on sexuality and gender, where the in-
formants are in many cases well aware of recent developments in gender research.

In parallel with a liberalization of views on sexuality and greater openness with respect
to different sexual lifestyles, there of course also exists a more conservative and highly influ-
ential view. Just as Foucault (1978) has pointed out, boundaries are constantly being drawn
to separate the acceptable from the unaccept able. These boundaries vary across eras and
cultures, but do exist in all societies. In Sweden and probably many other countries greater
scope has been created for reflecting upon and even staging different sexual lifestyles. At the
same time, we must not forget that sexual minorities are often the victims of prejudice and
contempt. Today’s young people are performing a delicate balancing act between wanting
to fit into the crowd and daring to acknowledge their own bodies and desires. Certain types
of performativity are also more accepted than others (Butler 1990, Johansson 2007).

Radical masculinity

There are an increasing number of Nordic men today calling themselves feminists (Sö-
rensen 2000, Wasshede 2005, Johansson 2007). This is basically a matter of supporting
the ongoing struggle in society for gender equality and equal rights. The young men, however, do not always have an obvious position. They must seek out a possible and comfortable position from which to act. This implies, for example, that they must come to terms with their own background and identity. A great deal of these young men’s energy is devoted to self-criticism and attempts at redefining their male identity. This may be manifested in many different ways: everything from feelings of shame for being part of the patriarchy, to involvement in common efforts to combat injustices.

At the beginning of 2000, the anthology Prick Raiders (Pikstormerne) was published in Denmark (Sörensen 2000). The authors described their book as a sequel to, among other things, the Swedish and Danish wave of books in which young feminists made themselves heard. The book constitutes an attempt at creating a forum for men to write about alternative pictures of masculinity. Here, a large number of young men write about their anxieties, their causes for rejoicing and their views on gender. In many respects, the purpose of the book is to make feminism a common project, across the gender barriers. An additional goal is to show that even young men can become engaged in these issues and actively pursue the struggle for a new and more gender-equal society. In the introduction, the editor writes that the aim of the book is to create a space for a pluralistic picture of masculinity. The intent is not to “turn men into women,” but instead to increase and broaden men’s scope of action.

The young men who become involved in these issues and who wish to create a better society also encounter a great number of conflicting reactions. They are forced, in particular, to face their own ambivalent images of masculinity. In the Swedish sociologist Anna Hedenus’ investigation of young feminist men, we find a clear picture of this ambivalence. Men sometimes feel that the feminist perspective is too imperative and binding. In the end, their own sex is only experienced as a burden. This serves to obstruct rather than facilitate their work. As one young man in Hedenus study (2005:70) expressed it: “I’ve experienced that I’ve been like seeing the world through feminist glasses too much. In the end you don’t dare do anything, ’cause you realize that everything you do do as a man, and as a man I do everything wrong. And then you just feel bad”.

Many of these young men have a strong ambition and will to break away from prevailing norms and gender patterns. This is a question of taking an active and conscious position, which can be manifested in different ways: everything from getting involved in different political issues to changing or elaborating one’s lifestyle. This is largely a matter of daring to break from predominating ideas about what is manly versus unmanly. There is, of course, a relatively fine line between acceptable male behavior and full-fledged norm-breaking. Today, there is probably more tolerance of people who break from the predominating gender patterns. At the same time, some types of norm-breaking entail drawing considerable attention to oneself. The Swedish sociologist Cathrin Wasshede’s (2005) study of young feminist men provides several examples of how men defy prevailing
norms and ideas about gender by dressing or behaving in a certain way. The break itself may sometimes take the form of a manifestation or a happening. Wasshede describes different types of more extreme border-crossing behavior, like for example cross-dressing, where young men buy and wear skirts, just to defy the gender roles.

In her interviews, Wasshede touches explicitly on the ambivalence and uncertainty that marks these young men’s ways of relating to their bodies, gender and sexuality. Their uncertainty is basically a question of the discrepancy between their own feelings and experiences and the level of ambition of the feminist project. They want change and to be innovative. But at the same time, it is difficult to break from conventions, one’s upbringing and other profound gender patterns. This complex of problems extends even to the formation of sexuality. Desire is not innocent, but something that has been and is formed in society. The young men are well aware of this. They have developed, therefore, a reflexive attitude toward desire. What is one allowed to desire? What is acceptable? The following sequence from Wasshede’s study provides a good illustration of how this complex of problems can take shape:

CW: Well, then what’s the least okay?

IP: Well, you can imagine... fantasies where there is clear domination and subordination or where the man controls the woman it’s like... if there’s a real clear pattern and if there’s a lot of it then... well then it’s like it conserves the gender roles pretty much.

CW: Do you think that affects your life then?

IP: Not so much, but I guess it could. And that’s probably why it feels like... like it’s really not good. I think people are affected by... what they think about.

(---)

CW: Are you blaming yourself for it, and if so, how does that feel?

IP: Well. No... it really doesn’t mean so much, from what I can tell. So I guess it doesn’t affect me all that much (Wasshede 2005:97ff).

Whereas Paulsson’s study points towards certain implicit and “slow” changes in everyday life and the construction of masculinity and identity, the different studies on radical masculinity shows some more explicit strategies used to transform masculinity. The questions
raised here is: to what extent is it possible to choose sexual identity and gender, and what happens when young people question the biological definition of gender (cf. Kolm 2003).

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The Swedish sociologist Hanna Bertilsdotter (2005, 2007) has conducted several studies of bisexual men’s construction of gender. One common dilemma for them is that other people often want to lock up and define sexuality. A person is either hetero- or homosexual. Bisexuals end up somewhere in the middle. Much of the discussion on bisexuality deals with this undefinability.

In her analyses of ten bisexual men, Bertilsdotter emphasizes the complexity of and great variation in the material. Several of the men have come out as bisexual, while others are waiting and feel no motivation to define themselves as one thing or the other. They are more comfortable with changing environments and positions, which allows them to continue to be part of the heterosexual order. They don’t need to question this order, but can instead use their different identities to fit into both homosexual environments and the heteronormative society.

In our modern media society, it has become increasingly possible to find, for example via Internet, forums for practicing different types of sexuality. The young men Bertilsdotter interviewed have pointed out that the Internet has given them the freedom and opportunity to meet like-minded people. They have been able to use chat clubs and other virtual communities to practice part of their sexuality. This has taken place without having to reveal their bisexual tendencies in everyday life. These young men have also discovered rather quickly that bisexuality is not so terribly unusual. Several of the young men have chosen to keep their bisexuality secret, but some have chosen to “come out” as bisexuals. They have encountered different types of reactions. Some people doubt it is possible to be both homo- and heterosexual, while others think it is exciting and challenging.

Just as for example political lesbians and feminist men defy conventional conceptions and boundaries (Kolm 2003), bisexual men are also part of a new questioning of an essential gender identity. These young people have discovered that it is possible to construct and form their sexuality, that is, that there are choices. In many respects, this discovery leads to a questioning of the heteronormative order. As Marjorie Garber (2000:66) writes in her extensive study of bisexuality:

The erotic discovery of bisexuality is the fact that it reveals sexuality to be a process of growth, transformation, and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being.
But we can also state that it is in no way easy to break away from conventions and deeply rooted ideas. These boundary walkers experience a great deal of negative reactions.

**Deconstruction Masculinity**

A common picture of young masculinity concerns *male bonding*, power struggles, hierarchies and the gang culture. These are part of the sphere of male homo-sociality. It is precisely this power sphere that is analyzed and represented in many descriptions of young men. And this, of course, colors our picture of young masculinity. Thus, talk about young men often concerns repression, power, sexism, homophobia and being alone in the world. Other aspects of homosociality – friendship, intimacy, closeness, community and emotionality – are hardly touched upon. The latter world is left unexplored.

In this article the ambition has been to discuss, bend and criticize the common and often repeated descriptions and notions of one-dimensional masculinity. Coming to the forefront in this article is a more fragile, ambivalent, uncertain, unclear and formable masculinity. These young men are reflecting, thinking, contemplating and trying to formulate an adequate male identity. Many things that may seem obvious are represented here as more flexible and dynamic. A number of strategic landings in young men’s everyday realities together provide a picture of masculinity in transformation.

By examining the limits of masculinity, we are able to look more closely at the unexplored world of homosociality. In this article, we have learned about men’s striving to be equal, their experiences of insufficiency and their general uncertainty as to what masculinity really is or should be.

The boundary between the manly and unmanly is changeable and relatively plastic, but in everyday life it is often drawn in a rather absolute manner. In the study of soccer-playing young women, we see how gender is charged with distinct meanings, how the body constitutes the ultimate marker for what, in the end, is placed in one category or the other. Masculinity is not ultimately tied to a specific body, but is instead a symbolic charge that may be found in different places. The young women on the soccer team are often considered masculine; young anarchistic men in skirts may be seen as effeminate; and young men in general may have doubts about their own identity and masculinity. What is then masculinity?

I would like to end this article in bringing up some critical points and possible developments in gender research more generally and in particular in studies on young men and masculinities.

a) Many of the key concepts in the field of masculinity studies are in need of an elaboration. Even though there have been attempts to discuss, develop and improve for example the notion of *hegemonic masculinity* (Nordberg 2001, Hearn 2004, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), this concept is still basically used in order to analyze the relation be-
between on the one hand dominating men and on the other subordinated women and effeminate men. Using this concept we often miss more dynamic and complex constructions of masculinity. Another key concept, homosociality, is often used, as pointed out above, to bring forward repression and aggressive male bonding. These theoretical tools do not bring forward complexity, changes and developments, but instead contribute to establishing already stereotypical notions of masculinity.

b) Too much focus is put on general tendencies and patterns in masculinity, and there is a lack of analysis of subversion, transgression and unusual and interesting developments in gender identities. Furthermore we need to develop research strategies and methods that can be used to capture both general and more specific tendencies in culture, and to thereby catch more subtle changes.

c) Finally I am aware of the difficulties involved in talking about “masculinity” today. I have tried to bring forward this tricky and complicated question. But when discussing young men’s ways of relating to and constructing gender, it is of course always easy to fall into the trap of polar and dualistic notions of gender. Finally, I hope that it is clear that I am not using the concept of masculinity in order to define a stable and homogeneous identity, my mission is rather to deconstruct and put masculinity in motion.

References


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Notes
1 I will use the term masculinity in order to point towards the social and cultural construction of gendered identities. The concept contains structural aspects of how gender is defined and seen in Swedish society, as well as a dimension of changes and transformations of gendered identities.

2 This is obviously a discussion which tends to come and go, throughout the modern history.