Abstract

This study aims to add to knowledge on the relation between ageing and masculinity in society by looking at how older unmarried and childless men in a small Swedish rural community articulate their masculinity in relation to being old. The study is based on interviews with eleven men. An intersectional perspective is used to analyse how age and gender interplay in the self-presentations as well as how their identity is articulated in relation to the rural context. The interviewed men articulate their identity through the use of a logic we call ‘what I have done is who I am’. This reaffirms the rural aspect of their masculine identity as well as the work-centred values of midlife as a reference point in the identity construction in old age when their bodies to a diminishing degree can live up to the physically defined masculinity of the rural context. In this situation, the local rural community is important for the way the men perform both age and masculinity in their daily lives. The men’s place integration can have a mitigating effect as it makes it possible to have their physically defined rural masculinity accepted as the ‘truth’ of who they are. To be known, to have their history known, we argue is central for the resignification of the old, devalued, body as a masculine body. Their continued place integration is a resource in that it can sustain their self-presentation as men defined by their stoic work character and not by their age.

Keywords

ageing, rural masculinity, older men, rural ageing, masculinity
To age as a man: 
Ageing and masculinity in a small rural community in Sweden

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Introduction

During the last few decades there have been considerable development in the study of men and masculinities. This has made it possible to name men as men – that is, as gendered and not genderless humans (Hearn 2011). However, research on men and masculinities has of yet paid all too little attention to the study of older men (Calasanti 2004, Calasanti and King 2005, Hearn 2011, Sandberg 2011), while gerontological research with a gender perspective has mainly studied women and women’s situations (Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003).

To age is to change, and this also relates to how masculinity can be performed. Older men are often seen as less masculine, if masculine at all, than younger or middle aged men (Silver 2003, Spector-Mersel 2006). In this article we look at men who can be hypothesized to meet more specific challenges to their masculinity when older than many other men. We have interviewed eleven older men who have lived all or most of their lives in a place where rural values predominate and where traditional male occupations, activities and skills articulate what it means to be a man. These men are strongly attached to that place. In addition to this they have remained unmarried and in most cases run their own household. On the one hand they have conformed to the conventional model of the physically defined rural man. On the other hand, their lives have taken an alternative turn, as they have not formed a family of their own. While getting older these men will inevitably lose some of the abilities that are necessary to be able to continue with many of the activities where masculinity can be performed and where their skills can be of use to others.

The aim of this article is to add to the knowledge about the relation between ageing and masculinity by looking at how these unmarried and childless men articulate their
masculinity in relation to being old. The more specific questions that the article addresses are: How do they articulate themselves as men across the life course? How do they negotiate the relation between ageing and masculinity as old? We try to understand the articulations of the men through an intersectional perspective, using both age and gender to understand the identity construction (cf. Hearn 2011, Irni 2010) and how it is articulated in relation to the rural context. This is not least important since older people, to a larger extent than younger people, express attachment to the place where they live (Gilleard, Hyde and Higgs 2007) and integration in the neighbourhood both among researchers and policy makers is seen as key to ageing well (Smith 2009).

Connecting masculinity and the rural

The physical environment has significance for organizing behaviour according to a locally modified age order. The rural context has consequences for the way people act, think and feel, and the interaction between people and place needs to be addressed if we are to understand how age and gender is performed. As Hopkins and Pain (2007, 288) hold, ‘seeing age and life course stages as socially constructed categories rather than independent variables means that space and place gain significance’. In research on ageing, the concepts of ‘ageing in place’, ‘place integration’ and ‘attachment to place’ has been used to understand which place-related factors enable people to age with continued independence. The concept ‘ageing in place’ originated as a way to explore and promote ageing in local communities (cf. Bedney, Goldberg and Josephson 2010, Gardner 2011). Like Cutchin (2003), others have instead used the concept of ‘place integration’ in order to highlight how place is a process, in contrast to the subject-object dualism inherent in much research from the concept of ageing in place (cf. Johansson, Josephsson and Lilja 2009, Wiles 2005). Most people come to be increasingly place-bound as they age and the individual biography becomes progressively more tied to the place and its history with time. It is therefore possible to argue that the place of residence, both as a physical, a social and an emotional space, becomes increasingly important for the sense of who one is (Gardner 2011, Gilleard, Hyde and Higgs 2007, Hagberg 2012). In order to understand the articulations of the interviewed men, we therefore need to consider the individuals’ pasts, and the way the individual biography is integrated with the rural context and the performance of gender and age.

Rural masculinity

Research on men in rural areas work from the concept ‘rural masculinity’ (Campbell and Bell 2000), and as with much research on men and masculinities, it departs from the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). In the field of rural masculinity,
the exploration of the ways of being a man in a rural setting aims at analysing the intersection of masculinity and rurality and how these interact and produce specific subjectivities with consequences for the environment as well as for personal relations (Campbell and Bell 2000). Research with a focus on gender and gender relations in rural areas has mainly focused on young and middle-aged men involved in agriculture (Little and Panell 2003, Liepins 2000, Saugeres 2002) and forestry (Brandth 1995, Brandth and Haugen 2005). Accordingly, less research has been done on people that are involved in other economic and social activities.

In relation to the focus of previous research on masculinity in rural areas, it is not surprising that a central theme is the significance of having control over the land and the capacity to control the forces of nature and the elements, not least by means of heavy machinery (Little 2002, Saugeres 2002). Being competent operators of machines not only re-articulates men’s connection to other men – it is within the hierarchies of men that they are to be judged – but it also simultaneously authenticates their distance from women. Studies from a range of Western countries have shown that the capability to perform strenuous physical tasks is another defining element of masculinity in rural areas, both in forestry and agriculture (Brandth 1995, Brandth and Haugen 2005, Liepins 2000, Little and Leyshon 2003). Rural cultures have traditionally been centred on ‘physically defined masculinities’ and ‘the heroisation of the work-hardened bodies of men’, as Brandth and Haugen (2005, 16) put it (see also Nilsson 1999, Nordin 2007). All this points to rural masculinity as strongly tied to nature and the land where masculinity is achieved and performed (Campbell and Bell 2000, Saugeres 2002). This is so even though there have been substantial changes in the articulation of masculinity in many rural areas during the last decades, as tourism and the service sector have grown at the expense of agriculture, forestry and small manufacturing industries, not least in the Nordic countries (Berg and Forsberg 2003, Brandth and Haugen 2005). Even though rural masculinity has been associated with qualities of masculinity such as ruggedness and physical fitness, it should also be noted that in the Swedish context there are strong negative associations between rurality and masculinity as rural men are often seen as backwards, uneducated and an antithesis to the image of the egalitarian Swedish man (Nordin 2007).

It is, however, not uncomplicated to define rural masculinity as something that is distinct from urban masculinity, and perhaps not desirable since this would ignore the many variations and overlappings in masculinity and geography. There are considerable differences regarding how the rural is structured both socially and economically between countries, but also between regions in countries, and this of course has effect on gender relations (Berg and Forsberg 2003). For example, rural areas in the Swedish south are more densely populated than the rural north. Campbell and Bell (2000, 539) suggest that we should instead focus on how the masculine and the rural intersect ‘on a symbolic level’ as the distinction rural/urban seems to have considerable force in how people in rural
areas understand and define themselves, both in the West at large as well as in Sweden (cf. Lukkarinen Kvist 2011).

What is clear from this short overview is that there is very little research done on ageing in rural areas from an explicitly gender-focused perspective (cf. Nilsson 2011, Trentham 2010). Research on rural ageing has likewise not engaged with gender theory to any large extent. But with age it becomes increasingly difficult to perform masculinity in the ways that previous research has described as defining of rural environments. This highlights the need to adopt an awareness of the meaning of age and ageing in how masculinity is performed and perceived by different men as they adapt differently to these changes.

### Ageing and masculinity

Older people are generally perceived as rigid and unable to adjust, and their lives are often seen as static, unproductive and a burden to society (Nilsson 2008). But to age is to live through changes, physical, psychological as well as social. With increasing age it becomes more difficult to live up to many of society’s ideals of what a man supposedly should be. Age and ageing are factors that require people to constantly modify their gender performance. If we understand gender as a situated achievement in need of constant performance (Laz 1998, West and Zimmerman 1987), it is also possible to understand how and why older people are often ignored as gendered beings as with age it becomes increasingly difficult to act in accordance with normative masculinity or femininity. This is especially the case after retirement, since work is an arena where men can hold dominant positions and remain masculine up to and beyond late middle age through social power, despite not living up to bodily ideals of masculinity. After a certain point, ageing brings a loss of social status and this consequently has implications for older men’s sense of self as men and in what way masculinity can be performed. This means that ageism and sexism intersect in complex ways that can make some men highly influential in some areas of life at the same time as they are looked down upon (Hearn and Sandberg 2009).

To this we need to add that older people in general lose their social status in the last stage of life. Therefore, a gender order has to be understood in conjunction with an age order in which age categories are perceived differently and that people have different capacities and possibilities to be agents at different points in their lives (Andersson et al. 2011, Calsanti 2009, Laz 1998).

Research has pointed out that ageing men are perceived to be in a process of emasculation, that older people in general are seen as sexless and that older men are rendered invisible as gendered and are placed into the general category ‘old’ (Silver 2003, Spector-Mersel 2006, Thompson 1994). Studies have also shown that men in higher ages often try to renegotiate what being a man is in relation to their situation, if they care for or lose a long-time partner or become frail and in need of care themselves. These are situations...
when independence and autonomy are compromised (Balaswamy, Richardson and Price 2004, Bennett 2007, Moss and Moss 2007, Ribeiro, Paul and Nogueira 2007, Russell 2004, Smith et al. 2007, Stelle and Uchida 2004). Some men, as Slevin (2008) demonstrates, try to distance themselves from the category ‘old’ using bodily techniques and exercise. Still, it is the signifiers of the young/middle-aged man that are used in this process of renegotiation and as a reference point in the denial of age and ageing.

In the sociology of age it is well established that every culture has dominant ideas, ‘social clocks’, concerning what is the ‘normal’ or ‘expected’ progression of life through time (Neugarten 1979, Neugarten, Moore and Lowe 1965). These social clocks are used to time life events such as graduating from school, first job, marriage, becoming a parent, retirement and so on in a normative progression through the life course. The age norms that are connected to the social clocks are thus used by individuals to plan, understand and evaluate one’s own life as well as others’ lives. In relation to this, Spector-Mersel (2006) claims that all cultures offer men and women hegemonic gendered life course scripts that attach social clocks to their life courses, but in the West these conclude in late middle age. And this also results in the ideological dominance of midlife and the values attached to it. According to Spector-Mersel (2006) this results in a lack of ‘life course scripts’ that older men can use to understand their situation as well as be evaluated as men by others. This lack of cultural guidelines for how to be ‘both a “true” man and an aging person […] constitutes the context within which older men struggle to build acceptable identities’ (Spector-Mersel 2006, 68). This context of lack makes older men highly interesting for research as it can reveal otherwise invisible norms of dominance and subordination in relation to both age and gender.

Life courses and identity construction through interviews

The results presented in this article are based on interviews with eleven unmarried and childless working class men between 68 and 84 years old. The interviewed men lived in a small rural municipality in southern Sweden with approximately 4000 inhabitants. The municipality has a strong rural character and consists of several smaller communities of between 200 and 900 inhabitants.

The interviews took place mainly during the winter and the cold and snow-clad landscape came to have an impact on the interviews in providing topics to establish contact with the respondents, and to highlight the advantages and difficulties with their living arrangements. All the interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents by the first author. Most interviews were between two to three and a half hours long. Two of the interviews were around one hour.

Methodologically, we used a life course approach in the interviews (Jeppsson Grassman 2008) and a constructionist perspective to understand how the men articulated their
identity (Laz 1998, West and Zimmerman 1987). This means that the focus in the interviews were on the life course of the individual and not only on one life phase, for instance the life phase as retired (Hareven 2000) even though an emphasis was put on their life in the present.

Interviews with a life course perspective have been used to study ageing, both generally and with a gender perspective (cf. Jeppsson Grassman 2008, Snellman 2009, Thorsen 1998, Trentham 2010, Öberg 1997). Analytically, this means an interpretative work that takes account of the time dimension and what is unique in the respondents’ life courses, as the past is significant in how the present is shaped and how people think about the future (Giele and Elder 1998). But the retrospective character of the interviews also means that it is especially important to underline that what is expressed during the interview is a product of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Like Reynolds and Taylor (2004), following Mishler (1999), we argue that narrating a life story is a social action that is situated in a specific time and place as well as a performance of identity as a life history is articulated with the help of and in relation to culturally available discourses. This way, the narrative is constitutive of identity in the present rather than reflecting previous events in any simple way.

The place integration of the men

In this first empirical part of the article, we look at the place attachment and place integration of the men. In order to analyse the men’s articulation of themselves as men it is necessary to describe their situatedness both in time and place, as these provide both opportunities and restrictions in how gender can be performed.

The interviewed men had remained unmarried and only one of them had cohabited with a woman for an extended period of time. All the men, except for one who lived with his brother, live alone. Eight of the eleven men live in houses and three live in small apartments. Five men reside in the countryside while the others resided in one of the villages in the area. Previous studies have shown that unmarried and single men in rural areas tend to live close to where they grew up to a larger extent than those that live with a partner and have children (Hagberg 2011, Wenger 2001). Out of the eleven men that we interviewed, eight had grown up in the municipality where they live. The other three men grew up in neighbouring municipalities. This way, the individual biography of the men was very much tied to the place where they lived. The strong connection that the men had to the area is exemplified by a key-sentence of one of the men:

I’ve lived in this parish for as long as I’ve lived. I was born here and I’ve lived here and worked here. I’ve never been in any other place.
Three of the men were disabled in some way but it was only the oldest man who received home help organized by the municipality. Some of the men got help through neighbours with tasks such as shovelling snow, but those who lived in the countryside relied on themselves for this. There were examples of men who lived in houses without modern facilities and one of the men did not have a toilet indoors or an electric stove for cooking. Most of them also depended on having a car and being able to drive to carry out errands such as shopping and going to the bank. Even though it was important for the men to remain independent, their living arrangements were precarious and they faced having to leave their house some time in a not too distant future.

**Daily activities**

For the men who lived in the countryside, most days were spent around the house or in the surrounding area. Several of them owned forestland and tended the forests themselves. For some of the men, this is more or less a daily chore. A common pastime for the respondents was taking walks around the area where they live. Taking walks was often a social activity for the men as it was done either with someone else or in order to meet others, such as neighbours, acquaintances and friends (cf. Gardner 2011). Even though there were examples of men who describe themselves as socially isolated, most men spend a lot of their time with friends and helping others, especially other older people who for example don’t have access to a car. This is expressed by one man who described how he organized his days:

> Well, I get up at 7:30 and have some breakfast. Then I go out and do something and I need to go shopping sometimes and so. Then there’s the mail in the afternoon, so I get to read the demands for payment [laughter]. No, but [the days are] very different and there is always someone who needs help with something and so on.

Some men, on the other hand, received help from friends and neighbours with chores they could not manage themselves. For example, during two of the interviews, a friend or neighbour opened the unlocked door and entered the house without asking to be let in. In one case the visitor called out, ‘I brought the newspaper!’ as he entered the house. After seeing the interviewer, barely saying hello, he went out to shovel snow off the roof of the house without a word. His helping actions were self-evident for both parties and did not need to be spelled out.

The daily life of the men were to a large extent carried out in the area where they lived and the people they associated with are usually people that they have known for more or less their entire adult lives. Because of this, their lives and doings were to a high degree integrated with the place, its history and the people who lived there. The place integration
of the men in the local community and in their neighbourhood is conditioned on interdependence that provides opportunities for social support as well as independence, at the same time as it was a site for the performance of identity. With Gardner (2011, 203) we conclude that the ‘capacity to engage with “the other” is represented by neighbourhood in a way that immediate domicile cannot demonstrate or prove’. The place integration of the men, and the social relations in which their daily life is intertwined, are vital in upholding and maintaining their identities in situations where their ageing challenges their possibility of being seen as men.

The importance of work and physically defined masculinities across the life course

In this section of the article, we analyse how the men articulated their masculinity with an emphasis on the relation to rural masculinity. In the final section we look at how this relates to ageing and being old. After having described their childhood most of the men quickly moved on to their working lives; what they had done and how the work was performed. All the men were working class and most of them had been involved in manual labour throughout their lives. The pride in, and the continued importance of, work was shown in that some of the men had prepared themselves for the interview by putting together memorabilia they had from their previous employments.

Common to the men was to describe themselves as having worked hard physically and been exposed to tough conditions. This is a theme that runs through most of the men’s life stories. A man who’d worked in forestry and as a truck driver summed it up in just a few words:

In those days, no one said it was heavy. You just had to keep hauling.

He speaks about the time during his productive work years and about his own character as a working man. At the same time his words function as a contrast to, and perhaps a critique of, working life today where a man doesn’t have to prove himself physically in the same way. Another example of how the identity of the men was articulated during the interviews is given in this extract from one of the interviews. The respondent’s father had been a woodcutter and the man had followed his father to his job from an early age. In the following quote, he talks about his first job and how it came to define him:

Then it became the forest, for good, forestry, and it was in connection with – because the small farm couldn’t sustain us fully but only from time to time so – father had horses in later years, not later years, but later. Before that he had oxen when I was little. There aren’t that damn many that have taken timber by oxen.
If we look at this statement as identity work what is interesting is the first part where he says 'Then it became the forest, for good, forestry' since it is not coherent with the rest of what he said about his working life. According to other parts of the interview, he worked for twelve years in forestry and then for a few years in a sawmill, before moving on to a furniture factory where he spent the main part of his working life. Counted in years, working with forestry was only a minor part of his working life and, at the time of the interview, he had been retired for almost 25 years. Instead, forestry and working in the forest are to be understood as markers for how he wanted to present himself in the present, at the age of 80, rather than as a factual description. It asserts his identity as one of rural masculinity as it connects him as a man to nature and the rural economy.

As noted above, to be able to work hard and be a competent worker was a prominent feature of the way the men talk about themselves. One example is told by a 77-year-old man whose last position was at a local company:

**Respondent:** Yes, and then I wanted to retire and they barely let me, you see, since I had a position that was quite important. But no one really thought it to be anything special. I felt a bit sorry for my successor so I said to him 'you have to come down so you can have a look at the stuff'. I had books, you see, and you had to write consignment-notes and there were dangerous goods and there was lots of stuff. But he said 'I'll come down later'. But he never came by until he started to work. And then I told him 'now you really have to work', and he didn’t make it to the end of the first week.

**Interviewer:** Really? Didn’t he?

**Respondent:** No, he’d passed out on the floor so they had to pick him up with an ambulance, really, so it didn’t work out. It was a disaster. Because there was no one that really replaced me. I had two apprentices, but you know they could barely write their names. It was awful.

This man, like several others, asserted his competence as a worker by telling a story of how his own skills were vital for the company, yet unrecognized. Telling these stories of how they worked, how much they worked and the skill with which they performed their task is not something that is resignified and looked upon from a different perspective in old age, at the time of the interviews. Their self-presentation and identity construction is done by invoking and using their past doings rather than their present ones as retired. The work-centred values of midlife are thus used to construct an identity in old age through a logic we call 'what I have done is who I am'.
Remaining unmarried

The role of work in their life also turned out to be important when the topic of relationships and remaining unmarried was brought up in the interviews. Work and their character as hardworking men were used by most of the men to explain why they had remained unmarried and never formed a family. The interviewees explained how they had come to remain unmarried throughout their lives in ways similar to these two quotes:

Respondent: I don’t know what it was, but I had too much else to do, so it never happened.

Interviewer: But when you were in your forties, did you feel that that you were different because you weren’t married and didn’t have children?

Respondent: No, I don’t think I did. I never thought like that. I know a woman who used to ask my oldest sister ‘why doesn’t he marry?’ ‘Well, he’s married all right’, she said, ‘No, but he isn’t?’ ‘Oh yes, he’s married to his work’, she said, because I spent all my time there [laughs].

Norms regarding couplehood and the forming of a family are still strong in society (Adeniji 2008, Ambjörnsson and Bromseth 2010) and the role of breadwinner and parent have traditionally been associated with being a ‘real’ man (Connell 1995, Johansson 1994). To remain outside of heterosexual couplehood is therefore to risk being seen as deficient or deviant and not having achieved manhood properly (Nilsson 1999, Nordin 2007) and perhaps even more so for those that have come to remain childless (Engwall 2010). The use of work as an explanation to why the men have not formed a stable heterosexual relationship can be, in relation to the strong norms connected to this, seen as a way to deflect negative assumptions regarding their character as men. Their potentially deficient status as men is countered by an elevation of their character as hardworking.

The men’s narratives about themselves as strong and capable professionals reflect the physically demanding jobs most of the men have had. At the same time, they are central in how the men articulate their masculinity—something that also shows how their capacity to work is used to explain their lack of a heterosexual long-term relationship. The harsh conditions that most of the men grew up in contained with high probability situations where it was difficult to live up to physical demands. To work in forestry, as most men had done, was hard, strenuous and difficult to keep on doing as the men approached middle age. This is mentioned by some of the men, but not emphasized. Instead, the dominant narratives are about being the first in line in the face of difficulty and strenuous tasks. Other studies have shown that talk of work among older retired men is used to
keep a sense of continuity and self-worth (Moss and Moss 2007, Nilsson 1999) and the persistent use of the logic of ‘what I have done is who I am’ shows how the physically defined masculinity of the rural context remains important as a reference point long after retirement.

The relation between a physically defined masculinity and being old

The effects of physical ageing mean that the status as a physically competent man risks being compromised. In relation to the importance that the men gave to the capacity to do physical labour we show how the men negotiate the relation between age and normative rural masculinity as expressed in the interviews.

One of the interviewed men, who was 67 years old at the time of the interview, lived in a small house located in the woods where he grew up. During his working life, this man worked as a driver for a construction company, ran a small farm and worked in forestry. He had kept on working the forest after retirement. He describes how he organizes his days as a retired man:

Respondent: It’s like, I’ve always loved the forest and it’s a hobby. It’s good exercise for the body. One feels good alternating between using chainsaw and wood splitter. To take it down in the snow and then go home and split it.

Interviewer: Do you do this every day, or?

Respondent: No, not really, it’s Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Friday is holy because then I go to town to meet the other drivers. There’s about twenty of us and we sit there at a café. So that’s holy.

Like several of the men, working the forest or doing other types of physical activities connected to the rural landscape is constitutive of how he presents himself. What is shown in this quote is the importance of being outdoors, still performing heavy physical labour, as well as the continued importance of his connection to his work-identity. For this man, the importance of his working identity is not only emphasized by his toils in the forest. He also emphasizes work as organizing his social life in that he regularly meets with his previous co-workers. He describes these weekly meetings as ‘holy’ and nothing is allowed to interrupt him from seeing them. That his work-identity is articulated as something that defines him as retired today is shown in that he refers to his former colleagues as ‘the drivers’ in present tense even though they have all been retired for several years.

However, for several of the men, getting older also meant that it had become increasingly difficult to keep up a lifestyle defined by physically challenging tasks connected to
the rural environment. One of them, a man who had worked in a store for most of his life, describes it like this:

I'm fairly worn out too 'cause my knees are kaput, as well as my back. You know when I started to work in the store you were supposed to carry all the goods to the store from the truck. It was not like nowadays when they just roll in the goods and lift it up; instead you had to unload it all yourself. [...] And it was really heavy stuff in those days 'cause flour and such things came in sacks, 50 kilo sacks, and [there were] barrels of jam that you rolled in to the store and there were five or six barrels. You had to roll them in to the store and they weighed a hundred kilos, those barrels.

This man was at the time of the interview 80 years old and had been retired for 15 years. He was partly disabled because of aches and pains in his knees that made it difficult for him to walk without a walker. He lived in a small house in the main village of the municipality and relied on one of his neighbours for many practical things concerning his house. The man’s body and his inability to complete many of the tasks connected to the physically defined masculinity of the rural context was a potential threat to his masculinity. What is seen in the quote above, however, is that the man connects his present disability to his character as a hardworking man defined by heavy toil, instead of ageing. The effects of ageing are thus played down as defining of whom he is in the present according to the logic of ‘what I have done is who I am’.

Some of the men expressed a resigned attitude to the changes that ageing had brought about. One man said for example ‘one can’t ask for much when you’re almost 80 years old’. Others were more ambivalent in describing themselves in relation to diminished capabilities and a body that could not be relied on in the same way as earlier in life. One man, 77 years old, responds like this when the interviewer asks him how he feels about getting older:

Interviewer: It sounds like you would want to be more active?

Respondent: Yes of course, hell it’s sad you see and it grieves me. It’s the only thing that I feel bad about [laughs]. But it’s possible to fix, it’s up to me. But it’s good to not have to—If one only had the drive.

Interviewer: you mean that it’s good that you can decide for yourself?

Respondent: Hell yes! Well, it seems there’s a lot to talk about.

Interviewer: Yes, it seems like you’ve had a rich life.
Respondent: Yes I can’t deny that [laughs].

Interviewer: No. But do you think that life has changed in the last couple of years?

Respondent: Yes, a lot has changed; one almost feels handicapped when one can’t keep up. When I know that things that I’ve easily picked up and carried off – I can’t even pick them up from the ground anymore. When I moved to the cabin, it was in the winter and there was just a trail in the snow that you had to tread. And then I carried, you see, one of these soapstone stoves that you make a fire in. I took it on my back, carried it for more than 300 meters. I couldn’t lift it from the ground later [laughs]. And then it doesn’t feel good! But that’s the only thing. But you know that’s what you have to accept when one becomes an old man

Interviewer: When one becomes an old man, you say?

Respondent: It feels shitty.

The man describes how his stamina and strength have diminished with age but is ambivalent in how this should be understood. On the one hand he describes his diminished capacity to be active as something he has no control over. On the other hand he is ambivalent on how this should be understood. This is shown in his answer to the question regarding if he’d like to be more active where he says ‘But it’s possible to fix, it’s up to me. But it’s good to not have to – If one only had the drive’. Here he oscillates between seeing his lack of activity as a fault in character (But it’s possible to fix, it’s up to me), something that is positive and a result of free choice (But it’s good to not have to), and an increased activity as something that is desirable (If one only had the drive). To age and not be able to remain physically active is articulated as problematic and difficult to deal with. The work ethic that the men adhere to, the ideal of the rural and physically defined masculinity and the logic of ‘what I have done is how I am’ all cast a shadow on the ageing of the men. The interviews point to a difficulty in reconciling age-related changes with a sense of who they are or want to be, and there is a risk that their sense of self-worth gets compromised when the body can no longer perform the tasks that the ideals ascribe as important for being a man in the local context.

Conclusions

What stands out as an organizing principle for the men’s narratives of their careers and working lives is their presentation of themselves as men who have worked; pulled their weight, worked hard and taken on heavy jobs (cf. Moss and Moss 2007). This stands out
as more important than what kind of jobs they had done and is in line with the findings in Nilsson’s (1999) study on older unmarried men in the Swedish north. Brandth and Haugen (2005) write that rural masculine identity connects work with masculinity and men whose working lives started before machines took over much of the heavy and dangerous jobs are represented as having bodies marked by heavy toil. Even though some of the men have difficulties in performing this physically defined masculinity, the worn body is used to reflect their character as rural men. In relation to this, we see that the body is used as a symbol of masculinity as it is marked by acting out the virtues of physical and mental bravery, as well as individualism, rather than ageing. Thus, the men’s worn and non-compliant bodies are articulated as a signifier of rural masculinity. It could be assumed that their status as unmarried and childless made work and work identity a more important feature for these men during their lives. But work can also be seen as a discursive resource that is used in order to deflect negative assumptions about their character as men. By using work as an explanation for not having committed to any long-term heterosexual relationships, they emphasize their masculinity in relation to an issue that could otherwise question their status as ‘real’ men. The continued adherence to the norms and values of productivity associated to midlife, through the logic ‘what I have done, is who I am’, is an attempt to articulate a continuity in identity and an attempt to let their past define them in the present. This articulated continuity speaks of a difficulty in integrating the experience of ageing into an understanding of them as men as ageing is understood as external to who they are, as a ‘mask of ageing’ (cf. Featherstone and Hepworth 1991). The lack of a life course script for old age – a different position from which to speak and articulate identity – also serves to uphold the values of the productive normative middle age as the reference point for masculinity (cf. Spector-Mersel 2006).

Having lived their whole lives in a rural setting has had a significant impact on the way the respondents see themselves and this also affects the discourses they are able to draw on during the identity work performed in the interviews. The place as a material setting is a space that is imbued with meanings connected to locations, artefacts and people (Hopkins and Pain 2007). The people that the men interacted with on a regular basis share a long history in being part of the local community and their life histories as well as daily routines are intertwined. The context of the local rural community is important for the way the men act both age and masculinity in their daily lives. The men’s place integration is significant for the possibility to have their physically defined rural masculinity accepted as the ‘truth’ of who they are. To be known and to have their personal history known is, we claim, central for the re-signification of the old, devalued, body as masculine. Their continued place integration is a resource in that it can sustain their self-presentation as men, defined by their stoic work character and not by age. But with time this will become increasingly precarious.
Age and ageing is one aspect that constantly recasts one’s resources for acting and performing gender because of its transformative effects. This might be even more so in relation to rurality where masculinity to a higher degree is represented through physical work and practical abilities, and where alternative careers and ways of being are more limited than in urban areas. There is a need for more studies on ageing and gender in rural areas, not least since the rural context has consequences for the ways that gender structures people’s lives throughout the life course, both materially and socially. The implications of ageing in a rural setting, we suggest, therefore presents an interesting challenge to research at the intersection of ageing, gender and place, and one that needs to be addressed further.

References


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