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The Unruly Young Men

Exploring some Key Constructions of Masculinity within Swedish Social Services

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The article draws on two research projects conducted at the University of Gothenburg and highlights how social workers construct and reconstruct young masculinities. In the light of recent debates in India, induced by the gang rapes in New Delhi, the intersection between masculinity and class is of great relevance to social work. Research from both countries highlights a problematic situation within social work as boys from lower social classes often are predicted to become low achievers or drug addicts. Instead our focal point should be turned towards how we in interaction with our surroundings are shaped as males and females.

Keywords: Social work, masculinity, class, ethnicity, social construction

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INTRODUCTION

Debates about masculinities have been part of the academic agenda for several decades (Connell, 1991; Salminen-Karlsson, 2013). In the field of social work, constructions of masculinities often come to a head at the intersection of class and ethnicity. Viewing this intersection in social work practice, young men are of special interest as their constructions of masculinities often involve factors such as risky sexual behaviour, violence and criminality (Andersson, 2008; Baird, 2012; Connell, 1991; Verma and Mahendra, 2004; and IRIS KF, 2013). Gender issues and issues relating to violence in male sexual behaviour among young people is also a topic of research in India (Verma and Mahendra, 2004; Verma and others, 2006; and ICWR, 2002). Constructions of young masculinities, also in relation

to violence and risky sexual behaviour in the big cities of India, appear to show the same patterns as found elsewhere in the world (*ibid.*) However, similarities are most obvious in the intersection between class, gender and masculinity (Verma and others, 2006). The intention of this article is to critically examine the constructions of the “unruly young men” as perceived by the Swedish social services within the social work context.

Contextual Intellectual Constructs

As mentioned, shared intellectual constructs can be applied to specific contexts. Different groups, organisations, institutions and communities create their own constructs based on larger constructs such as class or gender. Social work is an example of an arena that contains several shared intellectual constructs. In this context, shared intellectual constructs on the constitution of reality, or how institutional tasks should be handled, means that social support is shaped and distributed accordingly. These shared intellectual constructs become self-evident in the organisation and will, together with legal, organisational and professional frameworks, form the glue, or the institutional discourses that provide institutional identity and legitimacy (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009; Järvinen and others, 2005; Hall, 2003). While some of these shared intellectual constructs, or discourses, may hold a dominant influence on the institution, it should be mentioned that parallel discourses often exist within the same institution or group, either coexisting or competing. Furthermore, other constructs emanating from other fields or contexts play an important role. Some of the areas where different constructs are competing include drug addiction (West, 2006), ADHD, and so-called honour related violence (Carbin, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 1999). The existence of competing constructs is a prerequisite for a broader course of action for the individual, the group and the institution. This article will give examples of both dominating and competing shared intellectual constructs, related primarily to masculinity.

Using our own research, this chapter will discuss some ways of understanding and meeting the unruly young men. A special focus will be put on how their family situation and background is described and problematised. Throughout the chapter we will localise these boys or young men in relation to the area of child protection within Social Work.

Research Material and Approach

The article draws from two research projects conducted by the Department of Social Work at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden where the

empirical data was gathered and analysed by the researchers. The first project focused on studying the perceptions of both ideal and problematic masculinities among social workers working in non-residential child protection for teenage boys. The second project focused on how immigrant boys and their families were perceived and met by social workers working in residential care as well as in child protection. Both projects were conducted in the western part of Sweden and altogether 46 interviews were carried out. Both projects were part of the research network 'Parenthood, Children and Youth in Modern Family Cultures, led by Professor Margareta Bäck-Wiklund.

Excerpts from the research projects will serve as examples of how the reasons for and aims of social interventions in situations with young men are constructed within the child protection services, and how these constructions mirror the main discourses about gender, masculinity, ethnicity and social work in society. In this respect, language — which words we use and how we use them — plays a central role when categories are constructed and upheld. Language is in this article viewed as more than just an existing phenomenon — it does something. To linguistically dominate a person, group or situation is an efficient way of executing power, control and normalisation.

THE CONSTRUCT: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Young, angry and uncontrollable men have for a long time caused headaches for those in power. Just before the dawn of the last century high profile citizens such as politicians, academics, and religious leaders in Sweden expressed their concerns over the conduct of the recently urbanised boys and young men, notorious for their amoral and uncivilised behaviour and hanging around street corners. These worries led to the appointment of a body for specific inquiry, the so-called Gang Boy Commission. As a result Sweden's first Child Welfare Legislation was introduced in 1902 (Lundström and Sallnäs, 2003; Qvarsell, 1996). The legislation, and the debate preceding the laws, was steeped in moralism, in which the consumption of alcohol, rebellious behaviour, theft and violence came to be characteristics assigned to the "unruly young men".

This first child welfare legislation needs to be understood in the light of major social changes taking place in Sweden. One dramatic change was the rapid industrialisation of Sweden where a large part of the population left the countryside for work and a better life in urban areas (Wiklund, 2006). An industrial working class appeared and their children were often

described as ‘misbehaved’ or ‘vagabonds’ and generally belonged to criminal gangs. Thus one of the most debated social problems of the early 20th century was created. These concerns can also be understood through the lens of class conflicts. The new category of working class boys were seen by the bourgeoisie pillars of society as immoral and depraved. What also has to be mentioned was the widespread fear of facing a situation similar to that in Russia; a revolution led by the urban poor. Social workers were called to act upon this immorality, depravation and threat to the existing powers.

The Contemporary Gang Boys

Contemporary Sweden is influenced by at least two strong images of the social services. One is picturing the disciplining controller and the other the deputy parent who, preferably with parental consent, steps in to safeguard the child when parents are unable or unwilling to manage their parental duties.

Research shows that socioeconomic conditions, and more specifically protracted dependency upon social benefits, is the most influential factor explaining placement in out-of-home care such as foster home or residential care (Lundström, 2000; Vinnerljung and others, 2008). This is mainly applicable to children of low educated, unemployed lone mothers dependent on social benefits. Many of the adolescents who are subjected to interventions from the social services have a non-Nordic background, which is often considered a cause of social problems (Johansson, I-M, 2011). However, research proves that “foreign background” in a Swedish context is of secondary importance compared to the socioeconomic situation of the families (Franzén and others, 2008; Vinnerljung and others, 2008).

While studying verdicts from the administrative courts dealing with coercive care of children and youths (SFS 1990:52), Astrid Schlytter (1999) found that boys and girls were treated differently within the judicial system. The boys were, in the assessments preceding the verdicts, allowed to drink more alcohol, use more drugs and be more aggressive before authorities reacted. Hamreby (2004) states that the verdicts focused upon the criminal activities of the boys and were silent about their sexual activities. Girls on the other hand were seen as requiring help from society to safeguard their bodies and control their sexuality. When boys were placed in out-of-home care, it was in order to train them to become capable manual workers. They were to be taught discipline and work ethic. The girls were trained

in domestic work and caring for others. Ingrid Claezon (2008) argues that normativity and difference-making is prevailing. Her study points out how girls in social services' assessments are described as manipulative, willing victims, and immoral. Boys on the other hand are described as active, proud, sexually unproblematic and driven by instinct. The male body and the care of it are given a central position in the construction of gender. While the female body is seen as receptive and an arena for sexual desire as well as something that needs to be supervised and protected, the male body is seen as strong and demanding. The excerpt below is an example of how social workers construct the bodies of the young men as active and full of pride.

It's also interesting, many of the boys we get have a great talent, a balance. They learn incredibly fast. Jumping forward, backwards, balancing, snowboarding, wakeboarding. They learn. Often they have good bodies. I don't know what... It's an observation I've made. They've got six-packs that you know that if you just gave them the right food they would get damned good athlete bodies. They could do anything (Johansson, 2006).

The informant expresses an admiration for the masculine young bodies, an enthusiasm for their future potential provided they are given the right nutrition. They can become anything they want. The construction of the ideal masculinity contains an almost sexual admiration for their bodily perfection. The young men might have all prerequisites for succeeding in life, but they are also constructed as problematic:

Often it's about problems at school or aggression, that kind of problem, fuss and so on, hanging around gangs or so. And then you see that the parents depend upon social benefits or a sibling has been in trouble. So you have some knowledge of them... (Johansson, 2006).

The problems of boys, at school or with aggressiveness, are reasonably serious, but are called "fuss". It seems like the problems are under-attended to. However, at the same time, we learn that the family is known by the social services, a description that adds to the categorisation as a "problematic boy" which is included in the larger "social problem" category.

The Making of a Difference

There is an abundance of studies focusing on differences between boys and girls or men and women in relation to social problems. This research is important in order to highlight a problematic situation, but if we want to reject the assumption that boys are born inclined to become low achievers or drug addicts, we will have to turn our focus towards how we are shaped

as boys and girls, men and women. And this is where the shared intellectual constructs on gender becomes interesting.

Johansson (2006) presents two ideal pictures, or dominating constructs, in her study of masculinity. She interviewed eight group leaders of social agencies directed mainly towards boys, and found two ideal images. These images are seldom acknowledged as such, but constitute ideals by being constantly used as points of reference (Connell, 1995). The first is characterised by muscles and a trimmed body, terseness, and experience of drug abuse and criminality. In the research data this image was dominating and highlighted in relation to how the professionals should behave as well as what the boys should aim for. An alternative image was also presented, but only concerning the professionals: a modern, pro-equality man in contact with his feelings and with verbal skills. One respondent named this ideal “the social worker father”. These shared intellectual constructs are recognised throughout Sweden but are located in the context of social work interviews.

The work carried out with the unruly young men within the social services can thus still be seen as characterised by ideals similar to the ones prevailing a hundred years ago. The unruly young men are ascribed characteristics in relation to gender, class and ethnicity; they are expected to behave according to these characteristics. To these traditional shared intellectual constructs on boys, men and masculinity, a new dimension has now been added, namely the immigrant boy. He is characterised as one who stands alone without a firm adult hand, who is truant from school and burns cars in the suburbs. This is now an area of worry for professional social workers. Ethnicity in relation to young unruly men has become a new and terrifying aspect, both in the area of social work practice and for society as a whole (Back, 1996; Lalander, 2008; Sernhede, 2002).

The construction of immigrant young masculinity is additionally burdened by physical and sexual violence as well as male chauvinism. The Swedish researcher Paulina de los Reyes applies an intersectional perspective on ethnicity in a governmental report (SOU 2005:41) and writes that young immigrant men are perceived differently, not only in relation to Swedish young men, but also in relation to young immigrant women. De los Reyes argues that young women of immigrant background are often perceived as exotic, interesting, and unthreatening. In a Swedish context young immigrant women are frequently portrayed as heroically breaking free from oppression, often through education and turning their backs on the traditions of their parents. In contrast, when applied to

young immigrant men many positive aspects of young masculinity, such as strength, authority and drive are transformed into brutality, aggression and pushiness; not a hero but a vessel for traditional, oppressive hetero-patriarchal ideas (ibid).

Social Services as a Normalisation Practice

The social services as an institution is both helping and controlling. This double mission has been thoroughly examined by Banks (2002), Johansson, I-M and others (2008) and Payne (2005). Järvinen (2002) points out that even though the social services as an institution is powerful, social workers experience a lack of power. Strong governance combined with conflicting messages and shared intellectual constructs seem to be part of the everyday life for child welfare workers. Here, as in the case of the unruly young men, the point of departure is how professional actors perceive the boys. How well do they fit into the norms and frameworks offered by the social services? One social worker commented:

I think, in general, when we deal with social problems you kind of want it to work. Our boss talks about normality. And then it's about staying in school and getting into normality as they say, whatever that means. And I think, kind of, you try to arrange them into some kind of normal state. (Johansson, 2006).

This social worker clearly expresses that he and his colleagues have a task to normalise the boys. The explicit aim of the professionals is normality. In this case it is about school attendance. Not only are the boys subjected to interventions that guide them towards a life which could be considered as normal, but the parents too are forced by the child protection services to bring up their unruly boys in the 'right way'. The 'right way' of child rearing seems to include 'the Swedish way' of guiding children through childhood, as the excerpt below points out. This family has a non-Western background and the upbringing of children is seen by the social services as dependant on culture and class, where the Swedish way of child rearing will make up for cultural as well as class deficiencies in the past. The social worker acting in the best interest of the child suggests parental training for the mother to meet with Swedish standards.

Yes and we must not forget that they have lived a very simple and poor life in their home country. But yet the mum has seen herself as a good mother. She has been able to give her children something from whatever possibilities she had. Then they arrived in Sweden, got in touch with the child protection and we argued that she has to care for her children in this and that way, consider this and that and well different cultures were fighting with one another. Sometimes I think it is not needed to be proved that the mum is an inadequate mum concerning care

and attention of her children because she doesn't know of anything else. I have come across that several times. I think she can develop her parental skills. She has to know what to do; she has to get more knowledge (Johansson, I-M, 2012).

Perceived Explanations of Unruly Behaviour

How do these shared intellectual constructs on gender and unruliness have such a strong position within the Swedish child social welfare? So far, this article has discussed “the unruly young men” and some shared intellectual constructs found within the child protection sector. But these boys, or young men, do not live in a vacuum. They are most likely part of families, networks and social communities. Three discourses that might help us understand some of the discursive contexts in which the unruly young men are understood and encountered are outlined below.

“Lone and Insufficient Mothers”

Many adolescents who are subjects of interventions from the social services live with single mothers, and we know that there are more boys than girls in open settings and in out-of-home care (Socialstyrelsen, 2011). Johansson (2006) deconstructs the construct that boys at risk are perceived to be in need of a male role model. This highly problematic construct is discussed in relation to, among other, discursive and social phenomena of the lone mother. The sons of single mothers are perceived to be in need of an adult male to identify with and look up to for guidance; a role that the single mother is not seen to be capable of fulfilling.

The quotation below is from the research project on migrated families and their contacts with the Swedish social services. It serves as an example of how these mothers are perceived as incapable of fulfilling the entire parental role.

It's not very uncommon that a lone mother with several kids lets the oldest son take over, so to say. The mum hasn't been able to set adequate limits. Sometimes we say that he has put on a suit that's too big [...]. And in this he has developed a pattern. He's become the king (Johansson, I-M, 2012).

According to the above excerpt, the insufficiency of the mother has put the older son in a difficult situation. To assume the role of the absent father by an overburdened mother is considered as normal among professionals within the child protection context (see also Franséhn, 2004). Note that nothing is said about the father and the responsibilities he has failed to carry. The example below shows how another lone mother describes

herself as struggling on her own when her son fails at school and in other aspects of his life.

I struggled so hard but never got an answer. Everyone, the police came here and screamed at me, school called every day and harassed me: “come here and get your son!”. You know, all the time, all the time. And I wept and wept and thought that something was wrong with me. I had to run from work. Who wants employees like that, running from work (Johansson, I-M, 2011).

This mother is overwhelmed with work and responsibilities. The school and the police expect her to fulfil her responsibilities as a parent. Besides her parental duties, she has to manage her job. As a single parent she blames herself for her son’s behaviour. Why are the child protection personnel unable to understand her distress? A social worker expressed concerns of lone immigrant mothers becoming dependent on the welfare system; she instead suggested that a private network be mobilised to assist in such cases. When probed further about the existence of such networks, the social worker answered:

Well, but it’s so typical for these mums. Lone immigrant mothers are so lonely. They have nobody, no relatives to step forward. And it also happens that their own group pushes them away because they’ve been beaten by their husbands or had too many lovers. So they are not very popular (Johansson, I-M, 2012).

Why does the situation of lone immigrant mothers seem invisible to the social services? One potential obstacle is the culturalisation of universal situations and problems. This means that the problems experienced by immigrants are interpreted as cultural characteristics rather than social issues. Hence, they do not receive the kind of support they are entitled to (Skytte 2007; Johansson, I-M, 2012). The first excerpt is an example of culturalisation as it states the role of the son in cultural terms. The second excerpt highlights the policies within the social services which may be obstacles to understanding the ground realities faced by immigrant mothers. A third obstacle is gendered figures of thought that makes the individual situation disappear and replace it with wide-spread stereotypes, for example, “the immigrant woman” as worn out, oppressed, exposed and a victim of both patriarchal and ethnic dominance.

“The Fatherless Society”

Yet another shared intellectual construct influencing how the social services view the unruly young men is the image of today’s youth as lost and cut off from traditions and authority compared to earlier generations. Alexander Mitscherlich (1963; 1993) related the hedonism and disobedience in the young men with what he called “the collapse of the father society”. He

developed his thoughts in *Society Without the Father* (1963; 1993) and described how industrialisation and urbanisation enforced the reshaping of the Western family. This reshaping had some dramatic consequences: the father is no longer an authority as he works away from home. Combined with the fact that the Western world is no longer ruled by kings and despots, it creates a youth (read: male) living for the day, not taking responsibility and not obeying authorities — a fatherless youth. Mitscherlich was influenced by Freud and the same construct influences how we view mothers and especially single mothers today. In a traditional psychoanalytical discourse, which still influences many social workers, the mother is seen as the primary provider of care and the father is given the role of helping the (male) child end the symbiosis with the mother and to guide the boy into the world and out of the family sphere. In a family where the father is absent, this can, according to this construct, become problematic. The boys are expected to continue a symbiotic relationship with the mother who, per definition, cannot execute authority since this is a quality only ascribed to the man/father. This becomes highlighted in relation to the shared intellectual construct on the single mothers presented above.

Nourishing this figure of thought is an essentialist perspective on gender where men are seen in one way and women in another. This figure of thought dominated when Freud's ideas imbued society, but it is heavily questioned in contemporary discussions of sex and gender. In relation to a worldwide and vivid debate and the movement towards, for example, same sex marriages, the old, traditional and stereotypical view on genders seems increasingly problematic.

“The Working Class Lad”

Stereotypes or ideal images of masculinity are, as we have seen above, highly connected to class, but also to ethnicity. Hirdman (2003) describes a division of ideal masculinity: a man of the body and a man of the head. The man of the body is mainly a working class ideal man, or as Hirdman puts it “the idol of the unemployed, the excluded and the humiliated” (2003: 189). The man of the head is the intellectually potent, modern middle or upper class man. Some researchers suggest that these ideal forms of masculinity are enforced through late modern capitalism; men of the head harvest successes while the men of the body, seldom with experience of migration, are found dwelling in the shady part of society. The men of the head simultaneously nurse a certain desire for the traditional ‘lumberjack

masculinity'; a desire not always socially spoken but expressed when drunk or in homosocial situations. In some contexts the fact that you can stand huge amounts of alcohol, drink and drive or end up in fistfights are seen as ingredients in a desirable masculinity (Connell, 1995).

This image of an ideal masculinity is present also in social work, and is tightly entwined with class. When a social worker was asked to reflect on what reality the boys in a programme for juvenile delinquents were being prepared for, he replied:

Is it possible to say that they have different prerequisites these youths? That sometimes ... they won't even get a job. But then I think "Being into working at a car painting workshop - I would've died I think. I know what it means to work in a place like that. All male norms and so on [...] and maybe it's better to get into a place like that. Rather than commit crimes. And criminality and... I don't know. But, in my work it's better not get into a lot of fuss. But at the same time, I would never have wanted to. It's not the same (Johansson, 2006).

The social worker describes his, and the social services', task of helping the young man seek employment and quit criminality and unruliness. The goal is a job in a car painting workshop, something the trained social worker cannot dream of doing himself. With manual work follows what the informant calls "the male norms". He keeps a critical distance from such jobs when it comes to his own life, but finds them relevant for the young unemployed men.

"The Immigrant Lad"

Contemporary unruly young men are frequently described as immigrant boys rather than working class lads. They are often discursively located in the poorer suburbs of big cities. Swedish social work with immigrants has since the 90s been described in terms of problems (Lundström and Sallnäs, 2003). Media tends to put ethnic labels on gang rape, female circumcision and honour related violence (Hammarén, 2008). Particularly the concept of honour related violence has gained a large amount of media attention as well as attention from the social services in Sweden since the 2000s. This decade saw murders of several girls from so-called 'honour' cultures. In this context social structures and norms were rarely problematised (SOU 2006:79; Sernhede, 2002). Thus the social workers are relatively well informed on honour related violence. However, we question whether they have the vigilance and the tools needed to analyse problematic family situations also in relation to normative and socio-economical preconditions and discrimination. Several studies show a tendency among social workers to individualise social problems without reflecting on social

structures (Johansson, I-M, 2012; Kriz and Skivenes, 2010; Meeuwisse and others, 2011). The lack of structural analysis, combined with strong negative shared intellectual constructs of men and boys with an immigrant background, especially if they belong to a so-called honour culture, affect both how the unruly young men are perceived by the social workers and, how these men and boys judge the representatives of the social services. What is perceived as traditionally masculine amongst ethnical Swedes — to be responsible, decisive and courageous — can if ascribed to young immigrant men with a background believed to be honour related, be perceived as a threat and a problem. The importance of gender equality training for these boys is often stressed in order to make them reflect on their masculinity and masculine constructs. Boys with a non-immigrant background do not seem to be in need of this education (Back, 1996; de los Reyes, 2005; Lalander, 2008).

Unruly young men as well as the construction of young masculinity is very much debated within social work in Western societies. Often the debate includes connotations of sexuality, class and ethnicity. Class seems to play a major role in the Indian context as well, and research shows that social problems in relation to violence, risky sexual behaviour, HIV/AIDS and alcoholism are connected with poverty (S.K. Singh and others, 2010; Verma and others, 2006). Verma and others (2006) find a connection between the construction of young masculinities and social problems such as risky sexual behaviour or violence. However, poverty as such and in combination with class identity is not problematised in any of these studies.

CONCLUSION

Swedish social work has been ambivalent in its approach to these unruly young men. While they seek normalisation of deviant behaviour and an idealisation of their masculinity, they also wish to pathologise and discipline the same. Unruliness is justified because of absent fathers and weak mothers who are incapable of setting limits on unacceptable behaviour. These young unruly men therefore represent a working class masculinity that is viewed as charming and enviable—a position that is constructed in opposition to a middle class masculinity. We therefore conclude by simultaneously discussing the normalisation and the otherisation processes.

Within these complex constructions of class and masculinity, ethnicity has to be included and discussed. In a global perspective

the problematic constructions of masculinities have been subjected to several research projects (Andersson, 2008; Baird, 2012; Connell, 1991; ICRW, 2002; Verma and Mahendra, 2004; IRIS KF, 2012). However none of these studies discuss how the problematic construction of masculinity in relation to young men from the lowest social classes are construed and affect professional encounters within the social work practice, nor is ethnicity problematised in relation to this specific group. In Western research, the working class masculinity is understood to be 'a traditional man of the body' and the unruly young men in contact with the social services have to be domesticated into this construction. This construct acts as a contrast to the modern, educated middle class man, or the man of the head. What needs to be emphasised is that the latter construction in many ways also glances at and idealises the previous.

The social services offer limited opportunities for fulfilling the young men's constructions of possible male roles. Despite envisioning themselves as "men of the head", male social workers are unable to provide opportunities to these young men to do the same. This is a problematic that needs to be addressed by researchers; they need to reflect upon the norms and categories required for understanding masculinity in these young men. The competing discourses become evident when looking at the intellectual constructs of the young man of immigrant background. On him is ascribed an unwanted, but fascinating, mixture of violence, strength and danger. And, even though it is unwanted, some social workers seem to enforce this construct in their efforts to deal with him and his peers.

A critical reflexive competence, analysing different levels, shared intellectual constructs and the meaning of these, opens possibilities for renegotiations and reconstructions that, hopefully, turn out less problematic than the present ones. Swedish social work should work towards creating both material and discursive spaces where gender, class and ethnicity are constantly deconstructed and reconstructed and allows boys to take responsibility for their actions. The intersection between masculinity, ethnicity and class is of great relevance in relation to social work education as well as the practice field. How social workers construct and reconstruct young masculinity reflects, but also challenges, superior and larger shared constructs about masculinity in society. Shared constructs, dominating or competing, need to be challenged and scrutinised in Sweden as well as elsewhere in the world.

NOTES

1. *Lone mother and their sons*, led by professor Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and financed by The Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FAS).
2. *Ethnic minority teenage boys and the child protection services* financed by the same research foundation and led by professor Björn Gustafsson.

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