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# Transforming Cowboy Masculinity into Appropriate Masculinity

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In the presentation I present my chapter in “*Masculinities in the Criminological Field*” edited by Ingrid Lander, Signe Ravn and Nina Jon (2014), funded by NSfK.

Criminological enquiry commonly overlooks the *gendered* aspects of the social control of *men*. By studying a protective school for boys with a gender perspective, I have found that controlling boys to a great extent means controlling masculinity. In my study, I have analysed empirical material from Foldin protective school (1953–1970). Through an analysis of the narratives about the boys employed by the school and other social support and control systems, I aim to uncover the masculinity discourses that shaped the school’s work. Is a well-documented fact in criminology that those who are registered as criminals and subjected to social control in the form of court orders and custody by the child welfare services, predominantly are working class boys (Willis 1977, Christie 1982, Mattsson 2005). My analysis of Foldin’s effort to form a *proper boy* is therefore also an analysis of a class-specific masculinity discourse.

When analysing Foldin’s control of the young boys with a gender perspective, it is evident that just as controlling girls means controlling femininity, controlling boys means controlling the boys’ gender and their deviations from accepted forms of masculinity. In this chapter, I will make the case that a masculinity perspective is useful for understanding both why young boys commit crime and why their custodians react so strongly to even relatively trivial forms of crime. I will present my concept of cowboy masculinity, and show why this is useful term for understanding young boys’ masculinity projects.

## Cowboy Masculinity

Instead of viewing criminal activities as a matter of deviancy, I will approach them as part of boys’ identity formation. To conceptualise this, I draw on Messerschmidt’s influential work (1993, 1997, 1999) on the connections between crime and masculinity. Messerschmidt argues that crime can be a strategy for ‘doing masculinity’ (Messerschmidt, 1993, Jon, 2007). For boys and men with low income, limited education and low societal status, it may be difficult to feel and be perceived as ‘a real man’. Boys and men in this situation may instead achieve status, self-respect and notoriety through violence and a willingness to fight. By committing crime, marginalised boys and men uphold their identity as ‘real men’. They are utilising the one instrument available to them: Their bodies. Young criminal boys have at all times presented themselves and been regarded by others as tough guys (Whyte 1981, Cohen 1955, Ericsson et al. 1985).

I term this masculinity project *cowboy masculinity*. In this concept, the cowboy represents a plethora of mythical heroic figures of cultural importance, especially to the working class. This concept does not preclude that resistance can be a key element of such a masculinity project, but shows that it is one of several aspects. In addition to accentuating what young criminal boys are inspired by and not merely what they are opposing, one of the strengths of the term 'cowboy masculinity' is an emphasis on the boys' *style*. This emphasis is in line with the so-called 'Birmingham school' (Resistance through Rituals 1975, Willis 1977, Hebdige 1979).

In my study of Foldin protective school I find, not surprisingly, that the boys who were sent there by the child welfare services primarily came from poor, marginalised families. As previously mentioned, it is a well-documented fact in criminology that the sons of the working class are the ones who get institutionalised because of their involvement in crime (Spitzer 1974, Christie 1982). The boys of Foldin had grown up with limited access to resources. Faced with this situation, it seems like many attempted to 'be a man' through the display of cowboy masculinity, and by adapting the style of a tough guy. They were 'doing masculinity' by employing modes of behaviour broadcasted by the popular culture of the 1950s and 60s.

At Foldin, the limelight was on the boys' masculinity projects. For the most part the staff explained the boys' problems by means of their 'toughness' and their eagerness to 'show off'. Even though the staff were aware of the boys' backgrounds and their poor beginnings, their life stories and preconditions were pushed to the side in their day-to-day lives at Foldin.

The Foldin staff attempted to steer the boys' masculinity projects away from what they regarded as over-compensational, anti-social toughness and crime. Teaching the boys the meaning of proper masculinity seems to have been one of the central aims of the stay at Foldin. The boys were to learn and practice that which the adults thought they have not yet grasped: how to be a real man.

### **An Appropriate Masculinity**

Through explanation and exhortation the adults attempted to make the boys improve by appealing to their common sense. As previously mentioned, the aim of the stay was to make the boys strong and independent. This project was complicated by the fact that there were limits to *how* independent they should become. While on the one hand the boys must build up an inner strength enabling them to resist temptations, on the other hand, being *working class*, they must be subordinate and subservient. And this is further complicated by the fact that there were limits to how subordinate a boy could be while at the same time conforming to the idea of a proper masculinity. Too subservient, and they would be branded with the stigmatising label 'unmanly' (Liliequist 1999, Lorentzen 2004, Ekenstam 2005). The Foldin staff shared the boys' contempt of cowardice

and femininity, and while attempting to prune away what they regarded as unmanly exaggerations of masculinity, there was a thin line between too much masculinity and too little. According to the Foldin staff, a boy was limited by the necessity of being proper. However, there also was, as we have seen, a constant risk that the boy became *too proper* - thereby breaking with the norms of what constituted a real *boy*.

An appropriate masculinity, *a proper boy*, was in the eyes of the Foldin staff a boy of strong character, cleanly but not vain, dutifully obeying his superiors with a smile, but without being under their heels. He was a proper worker, who got up in the morning and earned his daily bread with joy, understanding the value of his labour. Furthermore, he supported his peers, he was decent and nice, and he shared his gifts generously. But he did not buy himself friendships and he did not suck up to people. He did not pick fights, but if challenged he entered the battle willingly. He stood his ground.

The space of action for a 'proper boy' existed somewhere in between an exaggerated masculinity and a weak and puny style bordering the effeminate. Similarly, several studies have showed that women have to balance a proper femininity (Pedersen 1996, Bengs 2000, Ambjörnsson 2004). The aim of Foldin protective school was to teach the boys the right balance.

## **Conclusion**

It is easy to get upset when reading about how the Foldin boys' experiences and histories are being pushed to the sideline. It is also upsetting that the 'treatment' of the boys is about making them get up in the mornings, stay clean and do what they are told. It does not seem as if Foldin addresses the boys' real problems. And the difference between the Foldin that I studied and today's institutions is not all that great. Studies highlight that the goal of contemporary institutions is to achieve 'behaviour correction, socialisation and strengthening responsible behaviour' (Venås 2005, Mattsson 2005, Laanements and Kristiansen 2008). The goal, like at Foldin, is building inner strength, and the means are almost identical: strict routines combined with positive role models.

The Foldin staff did not see that the social arena created by institution did not enable the boys to alter their masculinity projects. Neither did they recognise that the boys, the way I see it, were already skilled at being 'men' - given their circumstances. The majority of the Foldin boys had grown up in troubled environments, lacking resources. They responded to this situation by adopting a tough style and employing cowboy masculinity. The boys were 'doing masculinity' by utilising their contemporary resources, communicated by the popular culture of the 50s and 60s (Bjurström 1982). The staff, however, merely saw immaturity, irresponsibility and a lack of character, to be addressed by longer stays at Foldin.

The idea of Foldin was not merely storing the boys somewhere while waiting for them

to grow up, but to foster a proper masculinity. As argued by Holter and Aarseth in this line of thinking, 'gender identity [is] a package of sorts, a concrete but somewhat indeterminable good' (Holter and Aarseth 1993:77). Gender identity becomes something a boy inherits from his father. In the eyes of the Foldin staff, the boys' fathers had either been missing, or otherwise failed in this task. Hence, they themselves must step into the fathers' shoes as male role models.

To this day, the work of the child welfare system is not marked by a strong gender perspective. It could benefit from recent studies of gender and in particular of masculinities. Increased awareness about gender as practice, relations and processes will reduce the risk that child welfare workers undermine their own project - like the Foldin staff did.

The norms for accepted and hegemonic masculinity have undergone great transformations compared to the time when Foldin protective school was operative (e.g. Holter and Aarseth 1993, Ekenstam et al 2001, Reinicke 2002). In particular, men's increased involvement in child care and the changing role of fathers have been monumental (Holter and Aarseth 1993, Johansson 1998, Brandth & Kvande 2003). Moreover, society's understanding of violence, including its definitions, has changed dramatically since the 50s and 60s. While it is evident from the Foldin archives that avoiding all forms of violence was tantamount to cowardice, avoiding violence is a central norm of our time.

In many ways, traditional masculinity has gone out of fashion, and will in most settings be regarded as archaic. At the same time, some traditional masculinity ideals are very much alive and kicking (Whitehead and Barrett 2001). The ideals of 'the new man' live side by side with the values that guided Foldin's effort to form a proper masculinity.

Even in the wake of great societal changes, my conclusion is that that which defined the space of action for a proper boy in the 50s and 60s, still affect the boys of our time. One must not be too tough - but neither must one fall into the pit of unmanliness. Any associations with cowardice, weakness and lacking self-control are undesirable. For the boys of today, like the boys of the 50s and 60s, stories of dangerous missions, courage, toughness and independence are still amongst the most easily accessible.

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