

# Is there room for new masculinities in the house of hegemonic masculinity?

Phil. Lic. Arto Jokinen

Changing Men and Masculinities in Gender Equal Societies

University of Roskilde, Denmark, 30.1.2009

I have heard that critical studies on men and masculinities have been a success story. They have also told me that there are such things as 'new masculinities' and 'a new fatherhood'. What does this mean?

I do research on violence and masculinity and unfortunately I must say that the violence of men has not decreased in the recent years, but remained stubbornly at the same level as before, or even increased. In Finland, men's violence has taken up even new forms. If we think about new masculinities or men's change from the point of view of gendered violence, there is no sense in talking about change, at least not in the positive sense, but rather we should talk about men's violence in the opposite sense. New masculinities mean new forms of violence. Maybe I should look elsewhere than violence to find changes because I have spoken and written about the change of men and masculinities throughout this decade. I would like to highlight four aspects of change which doesn't mean, of course, that these are all that it is possible to find.

## 1. New Masculinities

Dia 1.

New Masculinities

1. New fatherhood
2. The hetero/homo dichotomy
3. The Flexible masculinities
4. The feminization of working life

### 1. New fatherhood

Before the nineties men were not expected to participate in childbirth or to take care of babies. Nowadays this situation has totally reversed and men are expected to participate in childbirth, as well as in childcare and to do their part of the housework. Men have even been in the focus of parental leave policy developments in the past decade. Research literature speaks of a new fatherhood which would be more emotional and above all more present in the child's life. At the same it has become clear that men have to create the new fatherhood in a rather empty space because they cannot use their own fathers as role models. Many fathers also feel that the family economy forbids them to benefit from the parental leaves or that taking the leave would be harmful to their careers. Fatherhood has changed but housework in families has remained unequal, and women's position in the labour market is not equal to that of men. Although gender equality has not been achieved, I would say that the father's role has radically changed in parenthood. The new fathers are very different from the fathers of thirty or forty years ago.

### 2. The hetero/homo dichotomy

Another important change that has happened in the last twenty years concerns the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality. As we know, heterosexual masculinity is constructed by distinguishing it from homosexuality not only as sexual practice but more as an attitude, values and style, or shall I say, by ritual, repeated, performative acts. It is important for a heterosexual man to avoid everything that can signify him as homosexual. This has been an important division between straight and gay and it has been repeated time and again in research literature.

But from the mid-1990s a cultural change began which has meant that the traditional, heterosexual bipolar sexuality has become old-fashioned in trendy cultural and media products. Representations of gay, lesbian and transgender identities have emerged in particular in popular culture, and above all, in the areas of advertising and visual culture. It can be said that the past 20 years have been marked by the rise of the commercial queer aesthetic. In practice this means that popular culture representations and discourses have been able to criticize the ideology of the heterosexual nuclear family and to discuss heterosexuality in general as well as represent different sexual identities.

It is possible that these representations have offset prejudices against marginalized sexualities and increasing numbers of homosexuals have been able to come out of the closet. For gays it means an opportunity to live in the public as a homosexual without fear of discrimination or violence. Or does it? I will come back to this issue later. For heterosexuals it implies a reduction in the masculine pressure. Men can do masculinity in more flexible and diverse ways.

### 3. The flexible of masculinities

There has been a change from the times when there were only few dominant national masculinities to the present situation where boys and men have more opportunities to construct different masculinities and to take in international influences. Therefore new ways to be a man or new masculinities have developed. This has become possible because of new technologies, travelling and migration. Now there is a global community while small, local cultures still exist beside transnational subcultures which organize themselves through the Internet. For example, the new Nordic masculinities can get mixed with North American or Caribbean masculinities. From the point of view of masculinity studies it would be an interesting topic to analyze immigrant masculinities. There is one ethnographic study that discusses young men who have come to Finland from Africa. They had difficulties in integrating in the Finnish culture and Finnish masculinities and under pressure from the dominant culture they constructed identities through representations of black North American ghetto masculinities. So the result was a blend of African, American and Finnish masculinities. However, this work was not a study of masculinity and it did not do a proper analysis of gender.

This all means that national masculinities have got new influences and there are plural performances of masculinities which have become more flexible. Men can do masculinity through elements previously considered feminine or homosexual. Moreover, men have

more opportunities and a permission to show feelings and emotions that are labelled feminine. One way to describe this development is to use Mark Simpson's term metrosexuality which has become popular in the media. It means a style where a heterosexual man's style is mixed together with femininity and homosexual masculinity. This could mean that certain expectations of men are no longer as harsh and tough as they used to be and that men are not expected to be cut from the same cloth.

But when I said that the bipolar sexuality has become obsolete and that homosexuals have more room in the public arena, does it mean that they really can come out of the closet, or does it mean that these changes have happened only in the area of popular culture, especially in visual culture? I would like to be able to say that by gay, lesbian and queer representations it is possible to stand out from the crowd. However, it is not political action that seeks to influence the attitudes and values or to construct or deconstruct identities to differ from the heteronormative ones. It is commercial queer aesthetics or queer flirt. Divergent identities are constructed under the norm and hetero-friendly gay, lesbian and queer representations are based on the idea of absorbing the marginal into the hegemonic heterosexual culture. Queer is exciting and exotic but at the same time the mainstream remembers that queer cannot be too queer. That is why queer tames to fit the terms of the norm.

For example, representations of the mainstream have established a few queer representations that are under control such as the stereotypical gay who is "an elegant, trendy, white, well-to-do urban male" or another who is "a classy and well-groomed teddy bear" who are the best friends of every heterosexual woman.

I think that representations of queer serve heterosexuals more than homosexuals or queers, because the social space of heterosexuals has widened towards homosexuality. Metrosexuality is one example of this. Another simple example comes from the nightlife. Gay clubs have been places where gays can meet each other, look for company, partners and sex with the assumption that all men in that place are homosexual. Straight men have stayed outside largely because they are afraid of being stigmatized as gay. Nowadays this fear is not so deeply rooted and straight men can go to gay clubs because of curiosity or just to party. In this case whose social space has become wider: the gays' or the straights'?

Furthermore, when we look at men who have power, and their masculinity, it is quite clear that these changes will not affect them. Their masculinities are very traditional and patriarchal. Life in public as a homosexual can prevent career progress, particularly in decision-making positions. There are only two men who lives openly as gay in the Finnish parliament which of course cannot be true. The rest of them cannot all be heterosexuals. I do not advocate that all people should have to give a public statement about their sexuality but it seems to be dangerous for your career to differ from the norm of heterosexuality. Queer representations exist in our daily lives but still remain safely in the cultural texts, and even there, they are tamed to suit the viewers. They are not too wild or strange.

#### 4. The feminization of working life

It has been said that the working life and the consumer culture more widely have become feminized which means that the skills that have been considered characteristic of women will become necessary in working life. These skills are such as the ability to do teamwork, flexibility and having good communication skills. I myself would still add to this list appearance, because particularly women have traditionally worked in fields which have been based on appearance. But nowadays appearance has also become increasingly important in the fields where men work. The feminization of working life also means that there is less traditional physical male work. Working with computers looks more and more like secretarial work used to in the earlier times. This is one feature of the debate on the crisis of masculinities or men.

It seems that there are some changes in the thinking of the situation of men or even new masculinities, but at the same time there are elements which work against this change.

#### 2. The Agrarian Warrior

The new masculinities are new in relation to the old, dominant or patriarchal masculinity, which can be described by the concept of hegemonic masculinity. But what does it mean at the national level? What does it mean in the case of Finland? In order to understand masculinity in Finland in the 21st century, we have to look at the wars in 1939 to 1944. I do not argue that the military masculinity of that time still exists but I insist that the ideal masculinity of that time is still a living heritage in representations such as war literature, films and comics as well as the official discourses. The myth of military masculinity, which I call the agrarian Finnish warrior, contributes to today's masculinities.

At the war time the image of the male Finnish soldier was strongly constructed by texts in the national literature. In those texts the nature and the environment were strongly linked with people. The people cultivate the environment but the environment moulds them too. The men's military skills came from their ability to adapt to the Finnish barren nature and to get their livelihood from it. Working in the fields and forests, in cold winters and the rough geography, had shaped the whole Finnish national character – of both men and women. Finns are a hard-headed, tough and stubborn nation but they don't need much to be satisfied. In addition, they don't talk much and they don't show their emotions in public. These qualities were needed in the war whose battlefield was in the backwoods and the enemy was much stronger than Finland. The image of Finnish men as the world's best forest fighters who are inborn soldiers was made by these materials during the war and also in later representations. A close relationship with nature is highlighted to the extent that the nature is an ally of the Finnish army against the enemy, as in this poem.

**dia**

The endless Finnish wilderness  
Make a living wall against your persecutors!

By fighting with us, carry

Your boys on your snow-fields  
Give us your spirit  
Our strength is your strength

Of your wilderness make a grave for the enemy  
(Wilderness hymn)

The war was also called “a logging site” in which case it was like everyday work. The men did not use fancy uniforms, instead they had simple and rough grey uniforms and many men left for the front even in civilian clothing. In public discourses it was easy and natural for the men to change their axes, hoes and ploughs for rifles. This all means that the civilian and military roles had intertwined.

These images took a bright form in Finnish war literature as for example in Siiri Vihantola’s book *Fire over the snow*:

It has been told that the ancient Greeks left for combat dressed in their best with heads decorated by garlands. These men of the north left for war in their work clothes. They wore their clothes for celebration. They were men of peace, men of work. But when violence threatened their freedom and country, then they did not hesitate. From the fields and ploughtails they gathered in the front which would be tough and enduring. (Vihantola 1940: *Fire over the snow*)

These two examples were from literature from the Winter War of 1939-1940. This war has been signified as a holy war against the archenemy where Finland was the last fortress of the Western civilization against the chaos and evilness of the East. The Winter War was also seen as the purgatory of a young nation of which it came out pure and strong even though Finland lost the war. It has been said that Finland was washed by fire. The Winter War connected the different groups and social classes of the Finnish society which were divided because of the Civil War in 1918. The shared enemy made the nation bond.

The second war was not so clear. The aims of the Continuation War of 1941-1944 were unclear and the allies didn’t satisfy all. Finland left to war with Nazi Germany and it is still debated whether it was a separate war from Germany or if it was just a part of the multinational German army against the Soviet Union. The result was what it was. Finland lost, but the war produced a huge amount of representations of war. Especially, the tradition of Finnish war literature is extraordinarily strong. It started in the fifties by the men who had been in the war and it has carried on to the next generations. New authors have not experienced the war but they still write about the Winter War and the Continuation War and they carry on the style of the genre. It seems to be that the literary war in Finland will never end. I would say that these wars have something that touches the Finnish masculinity. This is an issue I would like to focus on next.

The war literature which represents the Continuation War was different than the representations of the Winter War. I take an example from one book which is the most

canonized war novel called *The Unknown Soldier*, written by Väinö Linna. It was published in 1954 and it is one of the five most often read books in Finland. A film based on the novel was made already the following year and it has been said that the film is the most frequently watched and loved movie in Finland. Another film version was made 30 years later and it is very faithful to the original text. These two films are broadcast every Independence Day on television. The novel also includes training material of the Finnish army because of its extraordinary example of how to command Finnish men in war. It follows that the characters are familiar to all Finns even if they have not read the novel. You cannot escape it. It is common to describe different kinds of Finnish men by the people in the novel.

For example, there is a man named Antero Rokka who is a cold-blooded killer but at the same time a family man and a small farmer from Karelia. He says that he doesn't kill people, he kills the enemies. He doesn't care for the political aims of the war. He just wants his house back from the Russians and he rejects the officers and rules of the military. Another famous person is Viljo Koskela, who is used as an example of a perfect leader for Finnish men. He has a working class background. These two are both common men and they are easy to identify with.

Väinö Linna's aim in *The Unknown Soldier* was to criticize both the war and the time before the war. The time before the war, the 1920s and 1930s, was a time of militaristic nationalism. Väinö Linna has said that Finland was barracks at that time, and every man was understood as a warrior. In that time the ruling and hegemonic class was that part of the nation who won the Civil War in 1918 and this was the white, bourgeois side. They got power in the Civil War and during the twenties and thirties they established the hegemony. In doing this they also established hegemonic masculinity.

The white hegemonic masculinity which was a hegemonic ideal still at the wartime was that the men had to be physically and mentally strong, sporty and not allowed to use alcohol. The men had to be tough against opponents and also to themselves which meant self-discipline and self-growth. Their emotions should be in held in check. Patriotism was the same as being against Communism. The men had to submit themselves to military discipline and practice martial skills. Weapons were seen to guarantee the freedom of the fatherland. This ideal image was popular among the middle and educated class and the propertied class of the countryside, but it also became familiar to the working class through school and the military. Working class boys were initiated in this warrior masculinity before the war. Väinö Linna's note that Finland was a barracks during that time is not unfounded.

He criticized this military masculinity, the pre-war ideology and the glorification of the war. He also succeeded in this, but at the same time he wrote of, or people read and constructed, a new warrior myth based at first on his novel and, later, on the whole tradition of war literature. This picture of the Finnish man stayed on not only in the needs of the war but it also spread out to the civilian life.

In the literature the war is a terrible thing, but it is just the horrors of the war that stand up to produce a specific masculinity. Masculinity is formed through suffering in the literature. Maybe it is not warfare in the core of the representations of war, but it is the manly suffering and holding on to that suffering that constructs masculinity. The war will take a man beyond the limits of his physical and mental tolerance. And if you can go through with it, you can prove your masculine competence which is not acceptable in civilian life. Therefore representations that are meant to be anti-war can turn out to admire that specific masculinity which the war produces.

Väinö Linna has said himself that he wanted to deprive the war of honour and give it to the men who had to experience the war. But it is possible to do this masculinity only in the context of war, not in civilian life.

It is important how his fictional people operate as ideal models. I would like to say that the Finns have an emotional link to these representations. They affect the unconscious. This is reflected in the sensitivity in how they are nurtured. They are not criticized aloud or discussed in general in any new ways. Criticism is perceived as an insult. They are taken as real persons – like your own grandfather or father who was in the war.

The theatre director Kristian Smeds dramatized *The Unknown Soldier* in the Finnish National Theatre in 2007. It was an interpretation by a new generation and the discussion about the play began already before the premiere when the theatre published a photograph of the actors of the play and it became clear that one of them was black. The public discussion in the Internet began from this racist point of view. It was seen as an insult to the veterans to put a black actor to play white military masculinity.

But this was not of course the end of the discussion. The washing machines which the Finnish soldiers crushed with sledgehammers were another problem. The washing machines symbolized the enemy. Some people thought that this would be too dangerous and it was expected that the East would comment. Furthermore, discussion was provoked by an episode in the play in which the pictures of well-known people appear on screen, including the President of the Republic, and then holes emerge over these pictures as if they were being shot at. The discussion went on for over half a year in the media and politicians, artists and even the Minister of Education took part in it. At the end, however, the play was seen as the top drama of the year.

The dispute showed, however, that the myth of war and its representations are still very holy and untouchable issues. The characters of *The Unknown Soldier* are common property and they are not allowed to be touched. They are a part of the Finnish national identity.

These military masculinities do not only work through *The Unknown Soldier* but it is a question of a whole circle of representations which again and again recycle these same attributes of the male Finnish warriors. Originally the war was described by men who were in the war but now there are lots of new writers who continue the tradition. The literary war seems to be endless and the anti-war aspect seems to become thinner as time

goes by. Although the tradition has changed to be more like a war adventure, the mythical Finnish soldier looks over somewhere in the background. That is the power of this otherwise quite harmless and stereotypical literature. It is not just the book that is published today; the question is what the book brings along with it. It brings the whole tradition of the Finnish agrarian warrior and its masculinity and that tradition does not go only to the Winter War and the Continuation War, but further. It goes to the time when Finland was a part of Russia and before that a part of Sweden. War literature keeps alive this warrior myth.

Against this backdrop it is not so difficult to understand why some people at regular intervals are concerned that the young men of today, the new masculinities, do not meet these attributes of the Finnish soldier. The young men are too fat, lazy and urbanized, and they cannot even ski properly. Finland's credible defence is threatened which means that the masculinity of Finland is threatened.

The representations of war heroes which have become icons of the idealistic masculinity in Finland fit well a part of Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity. For example, the ideals are impossible to reach without the extraordinary situation of war. The warrior is still the most masculine man of all men and masculinities. Because of this it is so difficult for a man in civilian life to become a hero. He is never capable of the same as his grandfather's generation. The modern Finnish man has been cast in the role of a loser with a woman who demands equality. New fatherhood is quite nice but it is not the material of a hero story.

These icons of the hegemonic masculinity are produced in the context of war. It means at least three aspects. War is large-scale, systematic violence; it is a world of suffering, and it is a world without women. Instead, there is a brotherhood.

How much is there really room for new masculinities touched by emotions and the unconscious in the house of hegemonic masculinity?

### 3. The new man: A soft man and a tough guy

In the 1960s a new generation challenged the authority of the earlier war generation. It brought into question the concept of patriotism and it also wanted to break away from their fathers' tough, military masculinity. It was a young radical generation which revolted against the older generation but it was also a son's revolt against a father. Although the men who were in the war themselves put into question the pre-war period of military and nationalist masculinity, the elements were preserved. Patriotism was celebrated, home discipline was tough and violent methods were used in raising children.

The new generation rejected their father's ideals of masculinity and formed their own. It is possible to say that this was the way in which the first concept of a new man developed in Finland. But it was not called a new man but a soft man. This new masculinity was everything that the fathers were not and it was an answer to feminism and the demands of gender equality. I found one very nice Internet discussion about the soft man from last

year, although the concept of a soft man came out already in the seventies – thirty years ago. The pseudonym *menota* defines soft man this way:

"A soft man watches romantic dramas and strokes bunnies and is not ashamed to admit it. He also cries in public and hugs spontaneously, speaks openly about how it is to frighten the children, and the car should not drive so fast. Soft men are not bad." (*menota* 2008.)

During the eighties the idea of a soft man collapsed. He was no longer the answer to feminism or a piquant ideal for men. The soft man rather became the weak man. In public discussions they were signified as spineless, plump, crying geeks who lived under the women's control and had lost their masculine dignity. Masculinity had to be rediscovered.

It can be said that the softening of masculinity did not succeed, or it can be said that every change produces some kind of a backlash sooner or later. During the last twenty years there have been different kinds of discussions, representations and phenomena of new masculinities in the media and popular culture, but also in the so called high culture. The British 'new lad' was attempted to be launched in Finland but it didn't take on. The Finnish culture produced its own version of the new lad in this decade. It is called *äijä* which can be translated as "a tough guy" or "a geezer".

*Äijä* is a white, meat-eating heterosexual man who is interested in cars, guns, sports, tools, alcohol and the friendship of other men. He is able to defend himself physically and verbally and appreciates hard work. He believes in the traditional gender distinction and the woman is a mystery to him. The problem is of course that the world has changed and *äijä* has not the same chances of proving his masculinity as there still were in the fifties. Especially, there is not enough of the so called real man's work anymore and real man's work is still hard and physical working-class work.

The phenomenon of *äijä* is not, however, as simple as it sounds at first. I want to highlight it as an example of the elements which contribute to the changes of masculinities.

### 1. Rediscovering masculinity

The new masculinity is always an attempt to rediscover masculinity in relation to emancipation, feminism and gender equality. Women's emancipation forces the men to respond in some way. These changes seem to happen so that when something new comes along in so many features, the old get a new look. The new is not really new, it prefers to be called recycled old, and it is very difficult to say what is actually new and what is just old attributes in a new cover.

*Äijä* is an attempt to mix the traditional attitudes of masculinity with a new situation. *Äijä* can at first say that he supports gender and then fling a chauvinist joke because the joke is humour and men are known for their humour.

### 2. Old elements

Old elements which are very hard to shake are at least partly national. In Finland they are the respect of hard work and the everyman style. As I said earlier the national literature made the agrarian character the ideal male type in Finland which got the figure of an agrarian soldier in the wars. *Äijä* is not an urban metrosexual man; he prefers folksy things, which continues the tradition of agrarian warriors although he has to live in an urban area and work with computers as female secretaries earlier used to do. *Äijä* respects the heritage of older generations and he likes to say it too. The phenomenon of *äijä* has meant one kind of a re-entry into the values of the war generation even to the extent that the result of the war has changed so that we didn't actually lose the wars but gained a defensive win. The military didn't collapse and the Soviet Union didn't occupy the country.

Of course *äijä* has not produced all this, maybe it is more like *äijä* is a position or a figure in the discourse that reassesses the wars or the phenomenon of *äijä* is mixed with other discourses.

In any case, *äijä* is a postmodern version of the conservative, traditional and patriarchal masculinity. It shows the difficulties of changing masculinity and the ability of the hegemony to repeat new masculinities. It also tells about nostalgia for the good old days when men were men and the gender distinction was clear.

But as I say, it is still a postmodern version. It is a version of this post-industrial, information era with new technologies where the representations of the media and the visual and popular culture have become more important and where the surface is more important than the content, or that there is no content but the surface is deep. Some men understand the irony of the *äijä*'s style and they don't take it too seriously. It is a situation where a man performs a man, and he knows that it is basically like a drag performance because he has not the chance of fulfilling all the conditions that a man really needs.

*Äijä* is also a clear product of the consumer culture and market forces. They look all the time at the labels and names to give them new products and form new target groups where they can create a consumer need. Men don't "really" need the products of an *äijä* but when they identify with the position of an *äijä*, they need for example a T-shirt or a black stocking cap with the text '*äijä*'.

So, market forces need new masculinities to sell new products to men who identify these new positions. *Äijäs* do not use cosmetics but the earlier metrosexual men were a real find for the market forces because they opened totally new markets for men.

The media participate in this production of new masculinities when journalists start to report it, for example, the phenomenon of *the äijä*. It is easy to understand that trend or life-style magazines report of different kinds of new men or masculinities, but I was quite surprised when they contacted me from our main public broadcasting company and wanted to report about *the äijä* phenomenon in the main television news. When somebody writes about new masculinity, he is involved in creating and modifying that masculinity. Representations don't reflect the world, they construct it.

I think that these actors – the market forces, the consumer culture and the media – are very powerful in making a reality where these new masculinities exist, although they are not just products of the media or markets. They are answers to a certain time and they have to fulfil certain criteria to come to light.