

Masculinity Therapy for the Needs of the Contemporary Labor Market

Henri Hyvönen

In the contemporary labor market, the self is becoming important as a proactive and reflective source of lifestyle choices. An increasing number of health authorities, commercial actors, and volunteer organizations have started to define the proper way to care for the self as a reaction to current or anticipated problems in working life. Contemporary regimes of self-care include, for example, mindfulness exercises to deal with work-related stress, various diets as enhancers of physical activity, and the shaping of personal attitudes in response to increased insecurity in the labor market (Cederström & Spicer 2015). Under these regimes, individuals are being challenged to shift their gaze to their bodies and behaviors, and shape them to fit the new demands set by working life.

In the present study, I have focused on how men participating in the post-industrial labor market in southern Finland think and talk about their practices of work-related self-care as well as how the Finnish media portrays and constructs the norms surrounding men's work-related self-care. Methodologically, the present study addresses men, work, and care of the self by drawing from

a socio-economically diverse sample of men's speech produced in semi-structured one-to-one interviews as well as media representations of men practicing work-related self-care. These data were analyzed by taking into account the situatedness of individual men and their mutual, for example, socio-economic differences, while still aiming to point out the discursive resources and cultural flows that are present-at-hand, intelligible, and usable for contemporary Finnish men despite their position in current working life.

A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO MEN AND MASCULINITIES

Critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM), a research tradition born within women's studies in the early 1980s, set itself a simple research task: to find men, to name men as men, and to screen men's doings and undertakings in order to produce knowledge on men's position in unequal social structures (Connell 1987; Hearn 1987). In the early 1990s, we learned to speak about gender as shifting and fluid, being constituted and brought into being

by the actions through which we conduct ourselves as gendered subjects (Butler 1990). However, under a feminist gaze, men have fared well against the deconstruction of gender. In theoretical discussions of CSMM, men still appear mainly as material in terms of power, ownership, and their location in social structures, and they are most often analyzed in terms of dominance and subordination (Beasley 2015). This theoretical tradition has also informed men's health research, in which both risky behaviors (Dolan 2011) and intentional self-management of one's body and bodily performance (Connell & Wood 2005; Riach & Cutcher 2014) have been understood as demonstrations of masculinity supporting men's power.

Men are material, yet mythical beings (Whitehead 2002). CSMM has managed to develop a problematic relationship to mythologies surrounding men. Analytical interest has mostly focused on how certain myths legitimize men's position in the current gender order and how they motivate men to do certain things: to kill, to destroy, to protect, and to provide. Less attention has been paid to the illocutionary acts in which these myths are produced, as well as men's encounters with these myths and how they make use of them (Reeser 2010). Although men keep occupying dominant positions in working life, their subjectivity, agency, and increasing existential insecurity have been left undertheorized in the situation where working life increasingly reinforces the importance of individual bodies and their capabilities.

Andrea Waling (2019) argues that although the prevalent theoretical tradition in CSMM successfully describes societal power relations between different groups of men and women, it does not illuminate men's agentic and affective encounters with gendered expectations. Therefore she is inclined to ask how men's orientation towards certain behavioral patterns occurs, what the process of this orientation looks like, and how men actively negotiate this orientation. As a point of departure from relational, neo-Marxian takes on men as holders, users, abusers, and victims of power in unequal social structures (Connell 2012; Hearn 2014), my research has focused on men as subjects of exercises of power that are productive

and not simply oppressive. Thus, I have been able to point out how and why certain idealized images of men practicing work-related self-care are now constructed in public discussions, and how men experience the surrounding norms, either as limiting or enabling their self-care.

In the present study I have rethought the gender category term *masculinity*, which I still use, in line with R.W. Connell (1987), to depict differences inside the social category of men. Concurrently, I reject Connell's notion of hierarchies between masculinities as an outcome of competitive and hierarchical relations between men, "the approach that gives a central place to the patterned relations between women and men (and among women and among men) that constitute gender as a social structure" (Connell 2012, 1677). Instead, I welcome the notion that the social category of men is a political issue, and certain masculinities are carefully shaped and produced to achieve certain ends. In line with recent theoretical discussions in CSMM, my study adopts the concept of hybrid masculinity to depict men's incorporation of performances and identity elements previously associated with various femininities (Bridges 2014).

MEN INVENTING THEMSELVES IN FINNISH WORKING LIFE

CSMM scholars have long argued that men are always changing, and masculinities are in flux. Stephen Whitehead (2002, 120–123) argues that one major shift characterizing the most visible representations of men is that militaristic male myths were during the 19th and 20th centuries increasingly accompanied by men's heroic masculinities in working life. However, I argue that the ascendant ethics of care of the self in men's lives is not just a new step in the development of the culturally intelligible and widely legitimized masculinity constructed and demonstrated in paid labor. Instead, I argue that care of the self also enables men to turn the deconstructive gaze on themselves and to study the history of their own manhood. The question of what the members of the social category of men do has been all important in CSMM up to this point. Finnish society, including

Finnish men, is currently proposing another equally important question: What should we do with the social category of men?

I use the concept of therapeutic ethos to refer to a moral way of being, living, and doing which draws its language from popular representations of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis (Brunila 2012). Not only the availability of psy scientific knowledge but also the increasing visibility of the gender equality discourse problematizing a sharp gender difference make men aware of their own way of being a man as a behavioral pattern with a history and certain intended functions. My study shows that masculinities are not only changing, but that one empirically verifiable feature of current masculinities is their ability to make men aware of their masculinity and their gendered identities as personal attributes that can be spontaneously changed.

Concurrently, this decreasing of social pressure to be a man in any particular way has paved the way for men's happy and devoted participation in increasingly psychologized organizational culture. It is characterized by a shift from a militaristic and hierarchical "management by perkele" towards a carefully constructed strategy of "management by wandering," the key tools of which are energizing, inspiring, and sparring (Kantola & Kuusela 2019, 107–111). These organizations are characterized by the ethos of efficiency, with "proper treatment on the basis of accurate diagnosis" (Helén 2007, 163) as their motto.

By pointing out the numerous connections between care of the self and discourses produced in commercialized and organizational settings, I emphasize that, from my analytical standpoint, I do not view self-care as a vehicle for emancipation and liberation. In line with the recent feminist critique of the notion of self-care, I reject the idea that nurturing and loving the self constitute a resistance movement against market forces and external control (Gill & Elias 2014). Men, who increasingly pursue healthiness, a functional body, and personal wellbeing, do not pursue wellbeing as an abstract goal, for example, a self-assessed "good life." Instead, wellbeing is rendered as an instrument for pursuing further goals and turned

into a product that can be bought by individuals and organizations (Cederström & Spicer 2015; Heyes 2007). Engagements with these discourses are characterized not only by self-assessed rationality, but also by an affective relationship to an imagined past of irrational manhood.

As men are increasingly pessimistic towards the conventional cultural expectations set on men, they also renegotiate their relationship to paid work. Genderless worker citizenship, an outcome of hybrid masculinities in the current feminized labor market, is not about absolute self-sacrifice for work. Instead, it aims at taking responsibility for oneself at work and concurrently seeking the best possible balance between the necessary nature of work and one's own wellbeing. Previous CSMM has, not unreasonably, recognized the close links between men and paid labor, and aimed to recognize men and to name men as men in those situations where men's gendered power is hidden and taken for granted in terms of its legitimacy (Collinson & Hearn 1994). The present study suggests that scholars in the field of CSMM should also be able to recognize men as something else than men: for example, to recognize them as worker citizens and participants in numerous regimes of self-care that regulate their orientation towards working life and their identifications with masculinities.

MEN IN THE PUBLIC EYE

I have, up to this point, discussed men's participation in working life in terms of subjectivity, resistance, and practices of freedom, therefore intentionally making a shift away from the focus on the structural position of men in Finland. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural context characterized by gender inequality and gender asymmetry in working life still becomes visible in my study in how this setup is portrayed in the Finnish media as a situation worth preserving.

I argue that the images of men as primarily responsible breadwinners and heroes of working life have incorporated work-related self-care rather than been challenged by the ethics of care of the self. Echoing the words of the political theorist Cressida Heyes (2007, 82), the Finnish media, by its representations of men who care for themselves,

does not seek to liberate men that were always there, concealed, alienated, and imprisoned by the old myths of independent, emotionally restraint, and intrinsically strong men. Rather, they are reinventing men as something new that has not yet been imagined. By invoking mutually contradictory fantasies of neoliberal creativity in the free market and a neo-conservative focus on basic skills, the media presents the idea of men repairing themselves and preparing for future challenges in a favorable light.

The present study shows that Finnish society, both in its public discussions and in everyday communication in workplaces, education, and consumer markets, is characterized by the pursuit of innovation, creative destruction, and the reassessment of established social categories. The masculinities present in the speech of the participants and the idealized masculinities produced by the media have been hybridized, albeit based on different aspirations and problematizations. My study identifies tensions in the contemporary developments of masculinities in relation to both men's health behavior and their

ways of participating in working life. Men as the subjects of these exercises of power do not find themselves in a state of domination in which power relations are uniform, stable, and unnegotiable. Men practice co-optation and resistance: the ethics of care of the self offers them the possibility to make choices that deconstruct and problematize the social expectations set on men. The hegemonic idea surrounding men is not a certain idealized, normative masculinity, but a concern about men who do not have a functional, proactive, and essentially healthy relationship with themselves.

PhD Henri Hyvönen defended his dissertation Men, Work, and Care of the Self: Hybrid Masculinities in Finnish Working Life on March 19th, 2021 at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts. Associate Senior Lecturer at Stockholm University, Anders Ahlbäck, served as the opponent and Professor Marjut Jyrkinen from the University of Helsinki as the custos. The dissertation is available at <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-6939-6>.

REFERENCES

- Beasley, Chris (2015) Caution! Hazards Ahead: Considering the Potential Gap Between Feminist Thinking and Men/Masculinities Theory and Practice. *Journal of Sociology* 51:3, 566–581.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Bridges, Tristan (2014) A Very “Gay” Straight?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia. *Gender & Society* 28:1, 58–82.
- Brunila, Kristiina (2012) A Diminished Self: Entrepreneurial and Therapeutic Ethos Operating with a Common Aim. *European Educational Research Journal* 11:4, 477–486.
- Cederström, Carl & Spicer, André (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Collinson, David & Hearn, Jeff (1994) Naming Men as Men: Implications for Work, Organization and Management. *Gender, Work and Organization* 1:1, 2–22.
- Connell, R. W. (2012) Gender, Health and Theory: Conceptualizing the Issue, in Local and World Perspective. *Social Science & Medicine* 74:11, 1675–1683.
- (1987) *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R. W. & Wood, Julian (2005) Globalization and Business Masculinities. *Men and Masculinities* 7:4, 347–364.
- Dolan, Alan (2011) ‘You Can’t Ask for a Dubonnet and Lemonade!’: Working Class Masculinity and Men’s Health Practices. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 33:4, 586–601.
- Gill, Rosalind & Elias, Ana Sofia (2014) “Awaken Your Incredible”: Love Your Body Discourses and Postfeminist Contradictions. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 10:2, 179–188.
- Hearn, Jeff (2014) Men, Masculinities and the Material(-) Discursive. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9:1, 5–17.
- (1987) *The Gender of Oppression: Men, Masculinity, and the Critique of Marxism*. New York: St. Martin.
- Helén, Ilpo (2007) Multiple Depression: Making Mood Manageable. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 28:3, 149–172.
- Heyes, Cressida J. (2007) *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kantola, Anu & Kuusela, Hanna (2019) *Huipputuloiiset: Suomen rikkain promille*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Reeser, Todd (2010) *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Riach, Kathleen & Cutcher, Leanne (2014) Built to Last: Ageing, Class and the Masculine Body in a UK Hedge Fund. *Work, Employment and Society* 28:5, 771–787.
- Waling, Andrea (2019) Rethinking Masculinity Studies: Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity. *Journal of Men’s Studies* 27:1, 89–107.
- Whitehead, Stephen M. (2002) *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.