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"I would never start a fight but…". Young masculinities, perceptions of violence and symbolic boundary work in focus groups

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Abstract

This paper explores the link between masculinity and violence in socially integrated young men's discussions about risk-taking and violence. Traditionally, violence, or rather the capability of violence, is depicted as a key cultural marker of masculinity. However, recent theoretical developments point to changes in the normative boundaries for performing appropriate masculinities, not least among young people. These discussions about potential cultural changes form the backdrop of the paper. By combining focus group methodology and an interactionist analytical approach I investigate how the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate physical aggression is negotiated and how acceptable masculine identities are performed as part of these negotiations. Through this the paper sheds light on the narrow boundaries between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' violence, the highly situational character of these judgments and the intersections between gender and ethnicity in the

performance of morally superior masculinities. The research is conducted in Denmark in 2013-2014.

Keywords: violence; youth; sociology; performativity, criminology; Othering

Introduction

In the literature, violence and masculinity has traditionally been linked and scholars have argued that the capacity for violence is a more or less 'universal' feature of masculinity in Western societies (Kimmel 1996; see also Messerschmidt 1993). While this obviously does not mean that all men are violent, being able to act violently if necessary; to protect and defend one's family, one's belongings and oneself, and being able to signal dangerousness and aggression are traits often perceived and characterized as crucial markers of masculinity (Messerschmidt 2013; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Hollander 2001, Lander et al. 2014). This can also be seen as way of reasserting or defending one's position in the broader hierarchy of masculine identities (cf. Connell 2000; Manninen et al. 2011) and to avoid being perceived as 'unmanly'. Some researchers, though, have argued that in "conventional" society the dominant cultural norms today reject violence as legitimate (Jon 2014) and that more 'caring' (Elliott 2016) or 'inclusive' (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2014) masculinities are on the rise, especially among young people. So far, the main focus of Inclusive Masculinity Theory has been on attitudes towards homophobia and less on physical aggression, while the notion of caring masculinities focuses on men's participation in caring practices and care work. Hence we know little about the scope of these alleged changes and whether they concern other aspects of masculine identities and relations. The paper aims at contributing to this discussion. Based on a combination of focus group methodology and an interactionist analytical approach I analyze young men's identity work in discussions on risk-taking and man-to-man violence. More specifically, based on a qualitative study among socially integrated Danish youths I investigate how the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate physical aggression is negotiated and how legitimate masculine identities are performed as part of these negotiations. As I will show, such

identities are in part performed through processes of 'Othering' that position Danish men as morally superior to ethnic Others and which call for an intersectional approach to understanding how 'proper' masculinity is accomplished. This is situated in a Nordic setting; a setting often described as promoting a 'modern masculinity' that emphases gender equality, dialogue and involvement and a distanciation from 'traditional' masculinity (Lander 2014; Hearn et al. 2012; Johansson & Klinth 2008).

The focus group participants are students in upper secondary education and only a minority admitted to actually having been involved in fights (as victim or offender). This, however, did not mean that they could not speak about aggression and violent situations; almost all of them had either witnessed or heard friends recall incidents and in that way had a stock of narratives about violence ready at hand. Sandberg and colleagues (2015) argue that the abundance of such narratives illustrates the central place of *stories* of violence in everyday lives and that such stories carry multiple meanings (ibid, 1168; see also Presser & Sandberg 2015). This means that while violence is both material *and* discursive (Hearn 2014), this paper focuses on the discursive level; on how cultural meanings are conveyed and negotiated in discourse. This does not entail a conflation of the material realities of violence (cf. Hearn 2014; Hearn in Andersson 2008) but simply an insistence on the necessity of understanding the cultural meanings associated with violence. In the focus group discussions the participants bring forth their own experiences or retell stories they have heard, and analyzing how this unfolds provides insight into how the participants' normative conceptions of violence as well as of masculinity are activated as they try to reach a shared definition of these situations.

Much contemporary research on men's violence towards other men focuses on violence among offenders; (young) people who are already in marginalized positions, part of youth gangs or other criminal groupings (for very recent examples see Bengtsson 2015; Heber 2015; Sandberg et al. 2015). This violence is often depicted as part of a specific subculture or 'code of the street' (Anderson 1999) and in that sense seen as strongly connected to the cultural norms among specific groups. In contrast, research on socially integrated young men's experiences with violence is limited and often linked to the night-time economy, as are most of the stories that the participants in this study bring forth. For instance, in an American context, Copes and colleagues have studied adult American men who are "conventional" in most regards, but who have been involved in multiple bar fights. By investigating the 'codes for violence' among these men, the researchers show how the interviewees' "general willingness to fight" (Copes et al., 786) was still guided by a restrictive code or set of principles for when and how to engage in such fights (Copes et al. 2013: Hochstetler et al. 2014; see also Tomsen 1997; Thurnell-Read 2011; Schnitzer et al 2010).

In contrast to this research, the paper takes a micro-level, interactionist approach to the negotiations of violence and masculine identities in a sample of socially integrated youths. More specifically, by analyzing the symbolic boundaries that are negotiated in focus group interviews the paper goes beyond showing a link between the performance of masculinity and the capacity for violence and sheds light on the narrow boundaries between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' violence, the highly situational character of these judgments and the intersections between gender and ethnicity in the performance of morally superior

masculinities. Below I introduce the theoretical framework before I present the methods and data of the study.

Analyzing symbolic boundary work in stories of violence

The analytical approach draws on a broad interactionist framework, conceptualizing the meanings of events, actions etc. as ascribed through social interaction (cf. Blumer 1998) and identities as inherently social and continuously performed and maintained through identity work or face work (Mead 1967; Goffman 1959, 1967). More specifically, to investigate the negotiations of what is perceived as legitimate and illegitimate violence in the focus group discussion I draw on Lamont & Molnar's (2002) concept of symbolic boundary work. Symbolic boundaries are defined as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (Lamont & Molnar 2002, 168). In other words, investigating symbolic boundary work means looking at the categorizations that are negotiated and the symbolic meanings and values attached to these categories as part of this. While some categories are already heavily laden with meaning, others are more readily up for negotiation; regardless of this, categories are "inference rich" (Stokoe, 2006, 474), meaning that they carry important cultural knowledge. Symbolic boundaries are shaped by the particular social context in which they are negotiated, "particularly by the cultural repertoires, traditions and narratives that individuals have access to" (Lamont & Molnar 2002, 171). The categories established through this are often hierarchically ordered, meaning that they establish a "hierarchy of moral worth" (Small et al. 2010, 17).

Boundary work not only constructs categories of legitimate and illegitimate actions or objects but also categories of legitimate and illegitimate (gendered) identities (Lamont & Molnar 2002). As Chris Brickell puts it, 'socially available meanings and discourses can be understood as resources or materials with which selves are constructed" (Brickell 2005, 37). In other words, when negotiating the boundaries for acceptable violence, the participants are simultaneously negotiating the (gendered) identities of the subjects involved in this violence as well as their own masculine identities in the group setting. In line with interactionist, performative gender theory (West & Zimmerman 1987; West & Fenstermaker 1995; Fenstermaker & West 2002; Brickell 2005), presenting an appropriate gendered identity is an ongoing accomplishment; something that we must continuously strive for. Hence, the participants in the study have to demonstrate and live up to prevailing cultural norms, not least gender norms, in order for them to accomplish masculinity, and this accomplishment relies on "how these performances are received within social interaction" (Brickell 2005, 32), i.e. in the focus group.

In situations with a risk of being perceived as on the illegitimate side of the boundary, the interviewees may try to ensure their masculine identity by *accounting* for their actions or statements in order to still come across as 'a proper man'. An account is defined by Scott & Lyman in their now classis article as "a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry" and serves the purpose of "verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation" (Scott & Lyman 1968, 46). In other words, accounts are used to explain one self, or others, when not acting in line with gendered, normative expectations. Central for the purposes here, negotiating accounts simultaneously involves the negotiation of identities (ibid., 59; Järvinen 2001). In the analysis below, I will apply

both concepts; symbolic boundary work and accounts, to investigate the boundaries that are negotiated between legitimate and illegitimate violence and, through that, between acceptable and unacceptable masculine identities. First, however, I will present the methods and data that the analysis builds on.

Methods and data

The analysis is based on a qualitative study conducted in Denmark in late 2013 and early 2014. The overall focus of the study was young people's perceptions of and experiences with practices that are often deemed 'risky' and the interviewees were recruited from high schools and vocational training schools in three different regions of Denmark; the Copenhagen (capital) area and two provincial regions. Students were asked to answer a brief questionnaire through which I established contact with students who had experiences with regular cannabis use, other drug use, steroid use, being involved in moped/car accidents or being involved in violence. Those who were willing to participate in an interview gave their phone number and were contacted by phone later on and invited to gather a group of their close friends for a focus group interview or to participate in an individual interview. Altogether, 52 young people were interviewed across 13 focus groups and five individual interviews, two of the latter being follow-up interviews.

The focus groups were generally small in size. Most consisted of four participants (ranging from two to eight), reflecting the informant-driven sampling procedure in which the main criteria was that group members knew each other well and hung out regularly. This ensured that participants were at ease in discussing topics that might be considered sensitive in a 'traditional' focus group consisting of people who do not know each other beforehand

(Barbour 2007). A total of 36 men and 16 women aged 17–25 (mean age 19 years) took part in the study. While some focus groups were gender-mixed (four), the majority were either men-only (six) or women-only (three) groups. Because of the recruitment strategy, the final sample was more diverse than anticipated; most interviewees were enrolled in high schools (31), a substantial minority in vocational training (14), three had finished education and moved into regular jobs and four were on the margins of the educational system. Overall, the sample can be characterized as socially integrated in the sense of not having been convicted and not being on social benefits. Most focus groups lasted around 90 minutes (from 70 to 120 minutes), all were videotaped and transcribed verbatim. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were promised full confidentiality and hence names and other identifying characteristics have been anonymized.

In this analysis I mainly draw on the focus group interviews as these give insight into the social processes through which norms and values are constructed and negotiated as they unfold (Farnsworth and Boon 2010; Halkier 2010). A central theme in the focus groups evolved around perceptions of 'risky' situations, using a ranking exercise and photo elicitation, i.e. showing the interviewees a number of pictures provided by the researcher and asking them to comment (Harper 2002, 2012). Such stimuli materials are common in focus group research as a way of generating discussion on a topic decided by the researcher (Barbour 2007; Demant 2012; Halkier 2010). The photos included depicted a cannabis joint, lines of white powder, a handful of colored pills, a speedometer at 200 km/h, a group of people fighting in a street and finally the flexed arm of man lifting a hand-weight. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the discussions that evolved around the picture of a street-level fight. The picture was shown in all groups but the young women in the gender-

mixed and women-only groups either did not comment on it or briefly mentioned a situation involving some of their male friends. In the analysis below I investigate the symbolic boundaries that are negotiated, first in relation to situations in which violence and violent reactions are categorized as legitimate, and second in relation to situations in which violence is categorized as illegitimate. As part of this I analyze which identities these symbolic boundaries construct and how the participants attempt to present themselves on the 'right' side of the boundary to present themselves as 'proper' men in contrast to the illegitimate and deviant 'Other' (cf. Lander 2014).

Analysis

At a first glance, the initial reactions to the photo of street level fighting were characterized by a dis-identification with what was going on in the picture and a distanciation from fighting as such. The focus group participants conveyed attitudes such as "that's not me at all, I stay away from that" (Mark), "I think it's completely ridiculous to start a fight; you are out to have fun, not to fight!" (Dennis), "I think it's *so* dumb, fights and stuff like that – it's not necessary" (Adam) and "it ruins your night out, when you are out to just have some beers, calm and quiet, and then get into a fight – no" (Oscar). The general attitude towards violence and being involved in fights was in the majority of the focus groups clearly negative, and getting into fights was rejected for a number of reasons: that fighting is something that specific 'kinds of persons' do (cf. Mark), that fighting in itself is 'ridiculous' and 'dumb' and in that way illegitimate and an indicator of bad judgment (Dennis and Adam) and finally that it does not fit into their perception of what 'a good night out' should be (Dennis and Oscar). While some groups, and some interviewees in other groups, were not necessarily rejecting that violence might on occasion be exciting,

fascinating or thrilling, the negative attitude to violence and fights nevertheless dominated. This might be related to the young interviewees' relative lack of first-hand experience with actually being involved in a fight: while a few interviewees told about how they on a number of occasions had participated in fights, been assaulted and assaulted others either as part of a group of hooligans (two young men), as a former member of gang-related groupings (three young men) or because their parents slapped them (two young men), the majority had very little experience with this. This lack of embodied experience with fighting seemed to be central in their general distanciation from fights as well as in their reasons for perceiving of this as being quite dangerous and uncontrollable.

However, this lack of direct involvement in fights does not mean that the participants were unfamiliar with violence as such. First, violence is often represented in the media (news, popular culture etc.) and one may argue that we are in that sense all exposed to violence in our everyday lives. Second, as the discussions in the focus groups continued it became clear that the interviewees did in fact recall violent experiences and situations from their own lives. This could be situations in which they had felt threatened, been assaulted or seen others be assaulted. When looking into these discussions, the picture is more complex and the initial rejection of fights and violence is less clear. Instead, the discussions reveal an intricate relationship between their readiness to engage in violence or not and their negotiation of acceptable and legitimate (masculine) identities. While in some situations they accomplish these identities *through* emphasizing their capacity to act violently, in other cases it is exactly the ability to *resist* from a violent response that is emphasized and incorporated in their masculine presentation of self.

Men of honour?

In line with the link between masculinity and the capacity for violence mentioned earlier, and despite their general dis-identification with violent behaviors, most interviewees did find a violent response legitimate in specific situations. What these situations have in common is that they involved a threat or offence to a person categorized as close to them – a friend, family member or a girlfriend. In the quote below, Jesper and Ulrik (in a focus group with five people) are recalling a situation from a recent night out:

> Moderator: So do any of you [in the focus group] get into fights in town?
>
> Jesper: Mh, well, we are, like, both ways.
>
> Moderator: So it's more like -
>
> Jesper: - you get some [punches] and you give some back. Kind of routinely [whistles] […] This Friday there were these two girls who were… who had some trouble with some immigrants. Then me and Ulrik went over and said 'sssshht' [makes a wiping movement with his hand] and then that was it.
>
> Ulrik: You could not just stand by and watch it!
>
> Jesper: No, well done! But you are also tall as hell!
>
> […]
>
> Moderator: So there was not any conflict?
>
> Jesper: No, there was not.
>
> Moderator: But had that been the case, then you would have been prepared to just [clenches one fist]?
>
> Jesper: Yeah, because it's *girls* [emphasizes this], you know.
>
> Ulrik: Yeah, some of our best friends.

Moderator: So it was like a ’protection’ thing?

Ulrik: yes

Jesper: Yes, if anything happens.

Ulrik: Obviously, because –

Jesper: - because they [the immigrants] can be provocative sometimes if you don’t know them.

Jesper and Ulrik here present themselves as someone who are “routinely” involved in small-scale fights. In that way they are among the few interviewees who actually have embodied experience with fighting and acting violently. For them, intervening in a conflict is not seen as something extraordinary but as part of going out – at the same time as it is part of them acting in line with traditional gender norms and hence accomplishing masculinity. According to Jesper, Ulrik’s physical body – being very tall and muscular – does make such interventions easier as his mere presence affects other people; a reaction that Jesper himself cannot boast. Hence, Jesper implicitly draws attention to his own smaller physical size in accounting for why he was not the one stepping in.

In the quote, the main symbolic boundary is drawn between situations in which women are offended and situations not involving women. Even though the girls here are not their girlfriends but ‘merely’ female friends, they are still depicted as the weaker sex and hence in need of protection. We do not know exactly what ‘having trouble’ in this case refers to and whether the girls were actually in need of someone stepping in, but when focusing on how the young men are presenting themselves in the focus group this becomes less important. In the quote, the boundaries constructed are reproducing a stereotypical gender

relation in which men are seen as protectors of women, and Jesper and Ulrik present themselves in line with this as 'responsible' men, who are looking out for 'their' women (see also Heber 2015: Kavanaugh 2015). This identity is defined in clear opposition to the illegitimate masculine identity of men with immigrant backgrounds. In that way, Jesper and Ulrik are not only performing identities as proper young men, but as proper *Danish* or white men, thereby (re-)producing a view of immigrant men as 'out of synch' with Danish cultural and gender norms. These men come to represent a bigger nuisance and potential threat to women than men of ethnic Danish origin; a view that in the situation mentioned here serves to legitimate an intervention even before an actual conflict was unfolding. However, this reaction is somewhat ironic: while a central part of the 'problem' with men with immigrant background is seen to be their patriarchal gender relations and lack of understanding of Danish gender norms, this may be seen as exactly what they themselves resort to when 'protecting' their female friends. The image of the 'problem' immigrant man is reoccurring throughout the data and I discuss this at length in the last section of the analysis. In the example here, the combination of immigrant male offenders and Danish female victims works to reinforce the 'protection discourse' in the sense that "they", i.e., people with non-Danish background, are constructed as more provocative than ethnic Danes.

However, not only situations involving women can legitimate a violent response. In the quote below a group of four high school students discuss an incident during a night out:

> Jakob: This was actually at a night club. There was this one guy, non-Danish background, who was jumping into me. I just stood there and I was pretty drunk

and was with – jumping, dancing with some girls, and then he just jumped into me and I pushed him away and then he just punched me, and before I even looked up he ran away, I did not manage to get a hold of him. But otherwise I'm actually against violence when going out. I think it's ridiculous […]

Moderator: So for instance the guy who punched you, if he had not run away would you then have hit him back?

Jakob: Yes [nods his head]

Moderator: It could have happened, because you were annoyed?

Jakob: No, not because of annoy – because someone like him should not get away with it, not because of his [immigrant] background, but because a person who punches someone else when going out, completely unprovoked somehow, or where he has been provocative and gets a reaction and then acts on that, ehm, I just cannot stand that. So if I *had* taken hold of him then [laughs and shakes his head] I had punched him back once and then all his friends had probably beat the hell out of me, but I actually think I would be willing to take that […]

Rune: I also think that I'm more the 'hit back' kind of person

Jakob: Yes.

Rune: - I would never start a fight, but if someone hit me I would hit back

Dennis: I think it's completely ridiculous to start a fight, I mean, you are out to have fun, not to knock down someone [everyone signals they agree]

Jakob: But that does not mean that you put up with it if someone does something.

In the quote here, the young men are constructing a symbolic boundary between violence that is "completely unprovoked" and in that sense 'random' and illegitimate in contrast to violence which somebody 'asked for', and which is therefore more understandable. This boundary links to Rune's categorization of himself as "the hit back kind of person", not the one who starts a fight, hence identifying with the morally acceptable identity available here. Again, as in the example above, the immigrant 'Other' is constructed as the problematic masculine identity; the one who is associated with violence that is illegitimate and the identity against which the young men in this quote can position themselves as 'proper' young men. However, while being provocative or starting a fight without any reason is scrutinized and depicted as "ridiculous" and illegitimate, this does not mean that one should abstain from violence overall. Despite Dennis' attempt at a rejecting violence more generally, and Jakob's own initial statement that he "otherwise" is against violence, Jakob himself also emphasizes the necessity of not "putting up" with anything; a stance also found in other focus groups with a focus on ensuring respect (cf. Manninen et al. 2011). In that sense, the boundary between illegitimate and legitimate, and even necessary, violence is narrow.

Another boundary constructed in the quote does not directly concern the nature of the specific situation as much as it concerns different motives for action (Mills 1940). Thus, Jakob rejects a feeling of annoyance as his reason for wanting to punch back at the guy from the club and instead emphasizes how he acts on the basis of a set of principles or values; that he "cannot stand" when "someone like him [the guy]" gets away with what Jakob perceives as 'foul play' or mere stupidity. Through this Jakob creates a boundary between acting in affect on the one hand and rational or value-based actions on the other; a

boundary that can be seen as corresponding to stereotypical views of what constitutes femininity (the emotional) and masculinity (the rational), respectively (cf. Heber 2015: Hochstetler et al. 2014). In constructing this boundary and siding with the rational and value-based approach, he thereby also reinforces his own masculine identity as a rational and moral man – and feminizes those who resort to emotional motives for action. Further, his own brave (and hence masculine) position is emphasized by mentioning how the 'immigrant' guy from the club "ran away" instead of standing up for himself.

The situations described here all categorize the (potential) 'victim' as vulnerable and in that sense worthy of defense. What comes across in the quotes examined here contrasts with the initial, general rejections of violence as being silly and not worthwhile, and demonstrates an important methodological point about the difference between discussing attitudes at a general level and discussing specific episodes. Nevertheless, the findings in this section are to a large extent in line with previous studies on the link between masculinity and the capability of violence, and the masculine identities enacted are adhering to quite traditional gender norms. In sum then, what unites the discussions above is to be 'a man of honor' and asserting an appropriate masculine identity by defending others, confronting wrong-doers and by not putting up with any offences oneself. However, it is also clear that such 'wrong-doers' are often depicted as men with non-Danish ethnic backgrounds, and this intersection between gender and ethnicity becomes central in the boundary work and negotiations of legitimate and illegitimate masculine identities.

Unworthy fights, unworthy opponents

In addition to situations in which violence was categorized as legitimate and as part of normative masculine gender performances, the focus groups also included examples of the opposite; i.e., situations in which violence was constructed as illegitimate and in that way as questioning the link between masculinity and violence. In this section I will take a closer look at the boundary work and presentations of self that these situations involved. In the quote below, three young men (vocational training, aged 17, 19 and 19) are discussing whether they would be willing to engage in violence or not.

> Sebastian: I don't want to get into a fight I know I'm going to lose. I mean, if they were pinching my little brother I would obviously come, but if you can avoid it, then why do it? I'm not the type of person who is looking for a fight, but in an emergency or if my family is involved, then I can do it.
>
> Moderator: Then you can do it?
>
> Michael: But I think everyone can then -
>
> Sebastian: - Yes
>
> Michael: If it gets to that I can definitely fight back, even though I'm not the most buff guy in this world–
>
> Sebastian: Exactly!
>
> Michael: - I mean, then I'm sure I could fight back. But if it's just some drunk idiot saying 'you're so ugly I can't believe it', well then I guess I can live with that […]
>
> Martin: I only get to the point where I consider it [fighting back]. Because I can get really angry with someone, just wanting to slap them, but I don't. Because

> then I realise that it's not worth it at all, wasting your time on a person you can't be bothered with anyway.

In line with the previous quote, the young men here are also constructing a symbolic boundary between "types of persons looking for fights" and types who do not, and they clearly present themselves as belonging to the latter category. But while in the quote above the need for making a stand in order to gain (and reassert) respect was still emphasized, here the discussion evolves in a different direction and Martin, Sebastian and Michael construct a new boundary, i.e., between fights that are worth the effort and fights that are not. Despite admitting to the 'honorable mode' described earlier, if necessary, they construct this as reserved for "emergency" situations and hence something that happens very rarely, in contrast to the more everyday-like situations that typically happen when going out. These fights are "not worth it at all", because the opponent is typically "some drunk idiot" and hence not someone to be "bothered with anyway". In this, they are presenting themselves as 'the bigger person'; as the ones who are able to take a step back and not be caught up in frustration and anger but act in a controlled and rational manner. In other words they are asserting their masculine identities through distancing themselves from being emotional (cf. also Tomsen 2005). Hence, while this emphasis on being controlled and rational was earlier on used to legitimate violence as part of deliberate and willed reaction, here it is part of distancing oneself from violence as such, but still part of the attempt at accomplishing masculinity (cf. Lander 2014). Similarly in other focus groups participants are talking about being able to "stay cool" and "walk away".

This relates to another aspect of the quote, i.e., Sebastian's initial comment that he does not want to engage in fights that he knows he is going to lose; on the one hand presented as a rational and calculated decision and on the other also reminiscent of the notions of honor and respect emphasized above. However, this statement also links to yet another symbolic boundary constructed between fights that are fair and fights that are 'unfair'. Unfair fights are characterized by an opponent who is physically bigger and stronger, or by merely being outnumbered. Hence, elsewhere in the same focus group Sebastian describes how he on a recent occasion "ran away, because there was too many 'gurks' [derogatory term for immigrants from the Middle East]", and in another interview Anton describes how he was beaten up and adds "but they were, like, 20 guys or something like that. Such 'jallahs'. They just started kicking and hitting me". Unfair fights put the opponent in an illegitimate position as guilty of 'foul play' or as a coward, afraid of a fair fight. In this way, 'unworthy opponents' are unworthy not only because fights are stupid but also morally unworthy. Furthermore, by positioning the opponent as morally unworthy, the otherwise problematic position as victim of a violent encounter becomes acceptable (cf. Burcar 2013; 2014).

White masculinities? The ethnic minority Other and violence

As is clear from the sections above, the symbolic boundary work in focus here not only serves to construct specific gendered identities but also specific ethnic or racialized identities. While all the men in the sample are of ethnic Danish origin, the opponents described in the stories about violent situations are not. On the contrary, as the quotes above have illustrated, on a number of occasions the opponents are described as having ethnic minority backgrounds. Further, this is often not just stated in a matter-of-factly way but wrapped in derogatory terms, using racialized Danish slang. While it should be

emphasized that this does not pertain to nearly all situations recalled in the focus groups, it comes across when considering the discussions as a whole to an extent which calls for reflection. The fact that the interviewees seem to find ethnicity important to mention when recalling the situation indicates that this carries a particular meaning in understanding experiences with violence and being in violent situations. Consider the quote below:

> Johan: Today, fights are all about being cool and tough, I think, at least compared to what my parents are saying about when they went out [when they were young]. Because back then, if people got into a fight it was just the two of them fighting and afterwards they would talk like friends again that.
> Hjalte: You would not have 20 people come running and starting to hit the person.
> Johan: Well, I am convinced that if you get into a fight with an immigrant in town today–
> Hjalte: - yes –
> Johan: Then before you know it there are four other immigrants ready to jump at you –
> Daniel: Yes
> Hjalte: And it does not matter what happened, if the immigrant guy was actually being an idiot, or whatever happened. I mean, his friends just show up and then [snaps his fingers] 'oh well', then they are pissed at that person and suddenly they are five against one and you just stand there….

The four young men here link a general narrative of 'the decline of morals' in relation to the implicit codes of honor surrounding street-level fights to increased immigration and hence changed norms and values. The assumed change of norms could have been discussed without mentioning ethnicity, but Johan brings immigrants into the discussion without any objections from the others. To further investigate the link between ethnic minorities and violence I will draw on the concept of Othering, originating from post-colonial studies. This concept can be defined as "*discursive processes by which powerful groups […] define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups*" (Jensen 2011, 65). For the young men in the study, the inspiration for these problematic characteristics is easily found in Danish media which often portray ethnic minorities in general, and ethnic minority young men in particular, negatively. Hence Andreassen (2005) has shown how Danish media representation of minorities build on a number of stereotypes such as 'the criminal immigrant' and 'the sexually aggressive Muslim male' (Andreassen 2005; see also Jensen 2011).[1] At a discursive level, such stereotypes legitimate the Othering of ethnic minority men and reinforce the perception of normative masculinity as the 'modern, Nordic man'. As Jensen writes, "*othering concerns the consequences of racism, sexism, class (or a combination hereof) in terms of symbolic degradation as well as the processes of identity formation related to this degradation*" (Jensen 2011, 65, my emphasis). Hence, in the episodes described in the focus groups, ethnic minority men are described as "not to be trusted", "provocative when you don't know them", as always moving around in huge groups and hence posing a proper threat because "all their friends" will help them out etc.

[1] The image of the Other ethnic minority man as linked to violence and crime is not specific to the Danish case. See for instance Gottzen & Jonssen (2012) on how 'Swedishness' is constructed as 'progressive' and 'civilized' in contrast to the Other who is constructed as 'traditional', 'criminal' and 'problematic'.

This ethnic minority Other is on the one hand constructed as 'dangerous' and 'unreliable' and in that way as an opponent that legitimates violence responses, especially when the victim is a girl or woman. On the other hand, however, the ethnic minority Other is also depicted as an 'unworthy' opponent who is not adhering to 'fair play' conventions but 'always moves around in groups'. The point is that the Othering that occurs in the focus groups in this study enables the young men to present themselves as not only 'proper men', but proper *Danish* men, or in other words as morally superior to the identities ascribed to the ethnic minority men. As the analysis has shown, such assumed characteristics serve to justify a potentially violent and indeed 'racist' response towards ethnic minority men to counter this alleged aggressiveness (cf. Hervik 2004; Heinskou 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the discursive understandings of the link between masculinity and violence in a population sometimes overlooked, i.e., socially integrated young men who have limited experience with being involved in actual fights themselves. Despite their limited embodied experience with physical man-to-man aggression, they had a stock of stories about violence ready at hand and utilized these stories to discuss the intricate boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Through the analysis, the paper has added to our understanding of the cultural significance of violence in mainstream (youth) culture. Accomplishing masculinity through violence cannot be relegated to some 'deviant' form of masculinity, confined to very specific groups – marginalized, criminal, subcultural etc. As the paper has shown, this link has a broader validity that may seem surprising given indications of cultural changes in hegemonic masculinity concerning other

aspects of (young) men's lives (cf. e.g. Anderson 2009, Elliott 2016) and not least given the sample's demographics and location in an otherwise relatively gender-progressive context.

However, on the other hand, the findings do not suggest that physical aggression is a straightforward or broadly accepted response, regardless of the circumstances. Rather, as the analysis illustrated, the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate violence are narrow and highly context-dependent. What unites the situations in which violence is constructed as legitimate is the categorization of the victim as 'worthy' of protection. This worthiness may be arise from being a close relation (family, girlfriend), or because the victim is innocent. On the contrary, what unites the situations in which violence is *not* legitimate is that the proponent is not 'worth it'. In that sense, the boundaries constructed are not merely *descriptive* of specific instances or situations in which violence is legitimate or not, but involves *normative* judgments of victims as well as proponents. This was not least the case in the examples involving proponents with ethnic minority background; as the analysis illustrated, the discursive Othering surrounding these examples was a key part in legitimating responses towards such groups, and in performing a 'proper' masculine identity as a white, Nordic man, even despite the self-contradictions inherent in this binary. In order to understand this, we need to not only look at *gendered* identities, but at how a number of dimensions come together. Hence, through an intersectional lens we can accommodate the ways in which gender and ethnicity are simultaneously invoked in the 'proper' masculinities constructed here (cf. Christiansen and Jensen 2014).

For the young men in the present study then, accomplishing masculinity required a very context-sensitive navigation between *both of* those two normative ideals and a calibration

of their responses in the focus groups, and by extension in their everyday lives, in accordance with these. This is supported by the various attempts at accounting for behaviors that may be close to the symbolic boundary for what is considered legitimate. Hence, in the analysis it becomes clear how being 'a proper man' here is not so much about *either* accomplishing masculinity through violence *or* abstaining from violence per se, but about mastering the *balancing* between these two opposites.

In a more general sense, the image of 'a proper man' which the analysis conveys includes adhering to a masculine 'code of honor', emphasizing rational and non-emotional logics and at times a tendency to reinforce patriarchal gender relations by positioning women as in need of defense. These are sometimes described as working class-specific ideals, and researchers have suggested how the propensity for violence among working class men can be seen as a compensatory practice, making up for a lack of other avenues for accomplishing masculinity due to structural disadvantages (see for instance Hochstetler 2014; Messerschmidt 1993). Despite the limited information on the social backgrounds of the participants in this study, the sample appears as fairly mixed and does in that way not lend much support to this thesis. Neither does it seem to be the case that violence is seen as a simple way of creating excitement (by affluent or less affluent young men) when going out (Jackson-Jacobs 2013). Rather, instead of linking violence to specific social backgrounds, this study suggests that we turn our attention to cultural factors, i.e. the role that violence plays and is given in contemporary mainstream (youth) culture. Despite symbolic boundaries demarcating legitimate violence, violence appears as a very central part of asserting masculinity, also among socially integrated youths. In particular, we may

have to look closer into how this masculine identity work is closely related to stereotypical and patriarchal gender relations on the one hand and 'everyday racism' on the other hand.

The focus group discussions analyzed above did not take place in a social vacuum; on the contrary, the participants draw on "available collective narratives" (Warr 2005, 200) from the broader social contexts in which their everyday life unfolds. Hence, analyzing the cultural meanings associated with violence and physical aggression can tell us a great deal about the significance of violence in society, and this is crucial for starting to address and eventually change this, both in terms of man-to-man violence and gender-based violence directed towards women. What the analysis can ultimately be seen as pointing to, then, is the cultural significance of violence; that the capability of acting violently in specific situations is something that 'sticks' to the image of a 'proper' man to an extent that even 'modern men', i.e. socially integrated young men from various social backgrounds in a Nordic country, cannot legitimately entirely reject violence and still accomplish masculinity.

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