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‘Becoming’ a possible threat: masculinity, culture and questioning among unaccompanied young men in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

A debate on masculinity and immigration rose across Europe in 2015 after an incident with sexual harassments taking place in Cologne, Germany. The incident refuelled a debate positioning unaccompanied young men as a possible threat. This article is based on a research project where we during this time ethnographically followed 20 young men, having arrived in Sweden as ‘unaccompanied’ minors. The aim is to examine how the young men themselves talk about, reflect on and negotiate masculinity and gender during this period. The article concludes that masculinity cannot be approached as something stable easily being inherited or transferred from one’s origins. One difference for ‘unaccompanied’ young men is how conflicts or tensions emerging in relation to issues of gender and masculinity tend to be interpreted differently, and publicly, putting the young men in a ‘gendered situation of questioning’.

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Introduction

A debate on masculinity, sexuality, culture and immigration arose across Europe in 2015. It was fuelled by reports of an incident in which a large group of young men with immigrant background sexually assaulted women in Cologne, Germany, on New Year’s Eve. The event created a polarized debate about the alleged masculine culture of violence these young men brought with them from their place of origin (Hark and Villa 2017). A similar debate took place later in Stockholm, Sweden, when news reports claimed that the police had knowingly silenced reports of assaults perpetrated in 2015 by ‘unaccompanied’ children during a festival (Wierup and Bouvin 2016). This, however, later proved to be untrue; only four out of eighteen police reports could be tied to young people from Afghanistan (Rågsjö Thyrell 2016).
Both events refuelled a debate on ‘unaccompanied’ young men as a possible threat, where their sexuality and views on gender were tied to their culture of origin. It also reproduced a heteronormative discourse, in that all young men were perceived as heterosexual. The debate often manifested itself in a claim that ‘they’ need to learn ‘Western’ values, in terms of sexuality and gender equality, because their country of origin promotes views on sexuality and gender different from those found in the ‘West’ (Hark and Villa 2017). Such a debate reflects what Mills and Keddie (2010) refer to as placing disproportionate blame on people already marginalized by race, ethnicity and class.

Research on men and masculinity has pointed to how young immigrant men, especially young Muslim men, have come to occupy the public interest in Europe. These young men are often described using terms such as ‘dangerous’ and tied to discussions on terrorism, youth riots and immigration (Archer 2003). They have become the new ‘folk devils’ (Alexander 2000; cf. Cohen 1972/2002). In this public discourse, masculinity is connected to a specific immigrant, or Muslim, ‘culture’ that is passed down across the generations. However, as pointed out by several researchers, masculinities need to be understood as relational identities that are constructed in everyday life (Archer 2003). Boys and men are active parts in these constructions of masculinities, but also draw on the constructions found in available discourses of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Although this has generated some interest among researchers, there is still a lack of research on gender and migration focusing on migrant boys and men (Charsley and Wray 2015), on ‘non-white’ or ‘minority’ masculinity (Alexander 2000), and on these young men’s own views and experiences (Archer 2003).

Sweden has a long history of receiving migrants and ‘unaccompanied children’, during the second world war, when about 70,000 children arrived from Finland, and onwards. Between 2009 and 2013 approximately 2–3,000 children per year were seeking asylum. In the past couple of years, however, Sweden has toughened its immigration rules, one reason being the unusual number of ‘unaccompanied’ children (35,369) entering Sweden in 2015. After implementing the tougher rules, it went down to 1,334 children (2017). The municipalities are responsible for the reception of the child, who is appointed a custodian and placed either in a group – or a family home (Migrationsverket 2017).

During this time, including the events in Cologne and Stockholm, three colleagues and I worked on a two-year research project where we ethnographically followed 23 ‘unaccompanied children’ in Sweden, of whom 20 are young men. The events put ‘unaccompanied children’ into the public spotlight, they were considered dangerous young men and possible threats (cf. Hark and Villa 2017). These views seemed to be based on essentialist and static assumptions or rumours about them, but never or seldom included
their own perspectives. Parallel to these events, the participants’ own lives went through changes, some reunited with parents and some were being increasingly questioned owing to the shifting opinion, which was reflected in how they talked about gender and masculinity over time. The aim of the present article is thus to examine how the young men themselves talk about, reflect on and negotiate masculinity and gender during this period.

**Masculinity and the cultural ‘other’**

The idea that refugee men need to be educated to change their views on sexuality and gender is strongly represented in ‘Western’ politics and policies (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Olivius 2016; Stretmo 2014). It tends to be a discourse based on cultural or racial assumptions, for instance through the envisioned traditional cultural immigrant (Olivius 2016). This can be related to what Alexander (2000) calls a privileging of race in relation to ‘black masculinity’. Black masculinity has been ignored both empirically and theoretically, which has made it possible to fix black masculinity to race. Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) claim that, when interventions to educate violent masculinities are implemented or discussed, the ‘Barbarian other’ is being distinguished from the civilized ‘West’. Such initiatives, thus, tend to reproduce racial and cultural hierarchies (Olivius 2016).

A similar discussion is applicable to how Muslim migrants are approached in the ‘West’. As Lutz (2010) points out, there has been a lack of interest in investigating other patterns of social practice among Muslim men, except for their role as the patriarch and/or the perpetrator. Muslim men instead become homogenized, which tends to conceal asymmetries of power (Charsley and Liversage 2015). Such homogenizing has a long history in Western society, but has had different points of departure. One such example is how, in Britain, the image of the young Asian Muslim man has changed over the years, from being described as feminized, or ‘non-proper’, to today as a threat and a ‘masculine cultural warrior’ (Back 1996; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2014; Shain 2011). This reveals an interesting shift in how masculinity among young, immigrant men of Asian origin are being described, understood and approached. Similarly, Alexander (2000, 3) discusses how such a shift in the imagination of the Asian communities is related to a ‘phantasm of “race” [that] binds these new moral panics together, and provides the continuity with their earlier incarnations’.

When ‘unaccompanied’ young men are ascribed a dangerous sexuality and masculinity today, this constitutes, I wish to claim, another incarnation of the dangerous immigrant man. The idea that these young men carry with them specific cultural views on gender and sexuality from their place of origin, and thus need ‘re-programming’ upon entering Europe, is problematic. The idea rests on the assumption that all of us are taught demarcated
and placed values, often during childhood, that are maintained from one context to another. From a social psychological perspective, this notion is problematic, because we are continuously socialized throughout our lives, as active participants in a continuous learning process (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991). Another point is that such an idea is based on an essentialist view of ethnicity and culture, and as such creates stereotypes and dichotomized relations between ‘them’ – the ‘unaccompanied’ young men, assumed to be culturally underdeveloped, and ‘us’ – the West, assumed to be culturally developed (Hall 1997).

This notion is also problematic empirically. Many ‘unaccompanied’ children, especially those from Afghanistan, who were specifically targeted in the press, have seldom travelled a straight line from one context to another. This is true of, for example, many Hazaras boys, who have often migrated to Iran from an early age (Monsutti 2007), before once again being forced to migrate to Europe. When a specific cultural view on gender and sexuality is assumed based on origin, these movements in and between contexts are ignored. Rather than over-generalizing what it means to be, for instance, a ‘Muslim’ or an ‘immigrant’ young man, research has emphasized the major differences behind these positions in terms of both nationality (past and present) and ethnicity (Alexander 2000; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015). This discussion is partly relatable to the ‘machismo’ debate in the research on Latino immigrant men in the US. Performances of this version of hyper-masculinity are connected to marginalization and subordination rather than to a Latino heritage and the immigration process creates possibilities to challenge aggressive masculinity as well as gendered relations between men and women (Lalander 2017; Ruehs 2017).

Studies on masculinities have traditionally relied heavily on Connell’s (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity. By applying her model to multiple masculinity positions, it is possible to highlight different ways of constructing masculinity, i.e. through negotiations, contestation and reproduction (cf. Goicolea, Coe, and Ohman 2014). Hegemonic masculinities, which according to Connell’s initial assertion mean culturally dominant notions of masculinity, might be used to gain influence and power regardless of whether the men themselves in fact possess a hegemonic position. This implies that even men who do not act based on masculine hegemonic ideals can still benefit from the same ideals.

Since it was first published, Connell’s framework has been criticized, discussed and reworked (Alexander 2000; Beasley 2008; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2012). One point in the discussion, also made by Connell herself together with Messerschmidt (2005), is the importance of the social, cultural and economic location of masculinities. This could manifest itself through how marginalized men, for instance ethnically marginalized men, although embodying ‘the claim to
power’ also lack economic and institutional power (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848), which creates obvious tensions. Because a hegemonic definition of masculinity often involves being in power, a marginalized position in relation to hegemonic ideals of masculinity could be focused on re-establishing power (Johansson and Haywood 2017).

In the book Migrant Men, this tension becomes very clear (Donaldson et al. 2009). On the one hand, masculinity is by no mean fixed or unchangeable. On the other hand, it is often approached and experienced as quite solid by ‘migrant men’ themselves. What becomes clear, however, is how they use familiar contexts in their new locality to approach their masculinity. This could be expressed through work – being expected to be a breadwinner, or through family life – being expected to be a good father (Donaldson and Howson 2009). Such concepts are valued in their new locality as well as in their old one. Rather than approaching masculinity as something fixed that is brought from the men’s country of origin to their new country, masculinity needs to be analysed globally as well as locally. Local, ‘Western’ hegemonic ideals of masculinity influence and provide ways of experiencing one’s masculinity to the same extent as one’s previous experiences of masculinity do.

Such an understanding of masculinity – as something influenced equally by the past and the present – is reminiscence of Stuart Hall’s theory portraying ‘cultural identity’ as something that is both becoming and being, where cultural identity has both an axis of continuity and one of discontinuity (Hall 1997). The masculine identity and approach to masculinity share two axes, one of continuity – i.e. global ideals, and one of discontinuity – i.e. different local ideals. Moving from one context to another could, thus, promote different ideals of masculinity, but it could also promote continuity in certain aspects of ideals of masculinity – such as being a provider or showing strength. The issue of masculinity and sexuality among immigrant men thus cannot be approached without keeping locality in mind.

**Method**

The present article stems from a project on youth between the ages of 15–22 years (when the project started), both male and female, who arrived as ‘unaccompanied’ children and who have permanent resident status in Sweden. They have lived in Sweden between six months and five years. Most of them are now adults, which is why I have chosen to refer to them as ‘young men’. Our main interest in the project is how the young people reflect on their lives and their possible agency, and how they themselves create meaning and portray their everyday lives.

The participants were approached in different ways to capture different experiences and conditions. Some were recruited through official agencies, some through civil society organizations and others through previous
contacts. Using several initial contact points to sample participants has been shown to limit possible gatekeeper bias that might otherwise occur when only organizational gatekeepers are used to gain access (Bloch 2007). The participants have different backgrounds, although the largest immigrant groups arriving in Sweden at the time the project was initiated, from Afghanistan and Somalia, are over-represented. They have different living conditions and current life situations; some are working, others are going to school, and a few are doing neither. Three of the participants are female. The present article, however, will focus on the young men’s narratives.

We gathered empirical material for this qualitative, long-term follow-up study for two years. The research group followed the everyday life of 23 ‘unaccompanied’ youth by conducting ethnographic research as well as interviews. We met each participant at least once a month, depending on their own wishes and schedules, by taking part in activities and conducting interviews, through ethnographic observations and informal conversations. The activities have consisted of everything from just hanging out, meeting up with friends to, on one occasion, washing a car. Following them over a two-year period creates opportunities to track changes in narratives and public discourses over time, thus allowing us to capture changes in how they perceive the society around them as well as themselves. Kohli (2006) writes about how ‘unaccompanied’ children who have spent long periods in foster care tend to become ‘closed book children’, only providing ‘thin narratives’ for fear of being disciplined. We noticed something similar, but also how our long-term design and constantly reflecting on our approach, as well as building relationships allowed us to gather ‘thick narratives’, which are more nuanced and complex (Kohli 2006). One example of how this became clear in our study is that the discourses of ‘unaccompanied’ youth changed over time and how this change was reflected in their narratives over time. Another example is how the lives of the participants changed over the course of the study. For instance, some participants were reunited with their birth parents, which shed new light on their identity constructions.

The interviews and observation notes have been transferred and transcribed from the digital recordings. Drawing on qualitative analysis, I have searched for important themes and sub-themes (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014) in the participants’ narratives that are related to the aim of the article, such as masculinity, gender and sexuality. In line with ethnographic research methods (Lalander 2009), I have searched for complexity and interpreted the participants’ narratives as constructions of an explanation different from that provided by the public, medial and political image of the ‘unaccompanied child’. Expressed in the article are, thus, the voices of the young people, and through these my interpretations. They are not ‘objective truths’, but experiences and interpretations important
to understanding how the participants talk about, reflect on and negotiate masculinity and gender.

We have continuously concentrated on the ethical aspects of the study, especially because ‘unaccompanied’ youth are in a situation often determined by authorities and official representatives. It was important not to become, or be interpreted as, yet another official figure determining their lives, but to constantly work and reflect on the trust the young people have granted us. The research group had regular meetings during the study period to discuss ethical issues and to reflect on dilemmas and various considerations to be made. These meetings became an important part of the research project. Every meeting was structured so that everyone presented dilemmas and events that occurred, the other researchers provided critical reviews and discussions on possible approaches and solutions, all with the young people’s well-being in mind. We believe that such a purposeful and structured approach was necessary to building trust and protecting everyone involved from harm. One example is how we initially asked for written consent, but then realized that use of documents was often associated with negative experiences of authorities. We thus switched to verbal iterative consent instead, that is working together, participants and researchers, in a partnership through continuous dialogue and negotiations concerning the project, its changes over time and individuals’ roles in the project (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007). The participants could themselves decide what to talk about or what to do when they met us, and they could of course decide not to meet us at all or to end their participation at any time. The study is approved by the ethics commission in Lund (2014/482).

I will now move on to how the participants talk about, reflect on and negotiate masculinity and gender. I will do this, first, by relating their narratives to the discussion on cultural heritage and keeping masculinity culturally intact, before going on to nuance that discussion.

**Keeping masculinity intact?**

To some degree, the idea that these young men do their masculinity in accordance with their cultural heritage can be interpreted as being pertinent in our study as well. One example of this concerns being the oldest son in the family of origin.

Halid: I am the oldest in the family [...] that is why I feel a bit more responsible than he [his younger brother] does.

Halid is now 18 years old and came to Sweden from Iran. His brother was the first he reunited with, but his mother and other siblings joined them later. Relating one’s current situation to the notion that the oldest
brother has more responsibility for the wellbeing of the family is quite common among some of our participants. Feeling responsible for younger siblings probably applies to most of us, but it also responds to a common cultural conception that the older brother in certain cultures must assume more responsibility for his biological family (cf. Alexander 2000; Archer 2003). This is also how Halid himself explains his position as the oldest son. On another occasion, he tells us how he would not cry in front of his brother. Instead he locked himself in his room while crying, because it is not possible for ‘us to do that in front of each other’, as he puts it. Here masculinity is connected to ideals of being strong and not showing fear or sadness (cf. Kimmel 2005). It is also related to their difference in age.

Another aspect of habits affecting new situations is depicted in some of the young men’s narratives about encountering young women. Adar, 20 years old and born in Syria, tells us that there were many interesting things about living in a dorm at school. One thing being: ‘Girls, I’m not used to that. Where I came from, I went to school only with other boys’. He laughs, a bit embarrassed. In Adar’s case, there is a difference between what he is accustomed to and how his life is in Sweden.

However, these conceptions capture only a part of how the young people approach gender, culture or habits. Rather than following a clear line from their cultural background to their new locality, their approach is messy and affected by how their life has taken shape in their current environment, as well as their relationships in their family of origin.

Farid, 19 years old and from Pakistan, tells us how his mother wants to give him away in marriage:

Farid tells me this might very well become a fact, but not without him accepting it. He is sure his family would accept it if he were to meet a ‘Swedish’ girl and get married. Sometimes, he himself tells his family over the phone: ‘You’ll have to find someone for me now’, to joke about it (observation note).

It is possible to interpret Farid’s statement as meaning he is being forced into marriage, thus as an indication of cultural practices being passed down through the generations. However, it is also possible to interpret the situation through how Farid’s own agency and humour are used to resist and complicate the cultural narrative. His own narrative contains cultural aspects as well as individual agency and possible resistance. Chuhan, now 20 years old and born in Afghanistan, but having fled Iran, reveals to us a similar tension:

Chuhan: The girls […] just hug you, ‘hey, how are you?’ You know, how do you say, could you say sexual power, something.

Interviewer: Girls, meaning the women working at the group home?
Chuhan: Yes. They are very nice, you know. Boys coming from Asia, [the staff] know [the boys] are Muslim. You can’t come and sit on the same bed, being close, hugging ‘hi where have you been? Everything will be alright’. Only an hour [she] did this [he is showing how she massaged his thigh].

Again, on the one hand, it is possible to read his narrative as a cultural expression. He, being a Muslim boy, cannot have physical contact on a bed with a woman. On the other hand, he is talking about a sexual assault, where a female staff member sits on his bed, touches his thighs, using as he describes it, her ‘sexual power’. He might use concepts known to him – being a Muslim boy – to be able to describe and better understand the situation at hand – being abused by a female staff member (cf. Donaldson et al. 2009). Chuhan has since received support through an organization for ‘unaccompanied children’ and is now engaged in supporting other migrants.

Every participant has left one locality for another. These different localities could have different masculine ideals, ideas, values and relations. Parts of these local hegemonies could influence how masculinity and gender are approached in a new local context. When Halid talks about his role as older brother or when Farid talks about marriage, this could reflect local hegemonic, gendered ideals from their place of origin, which are thus used to keep certain masculinity ideals intact. One occasion when different localities de facto meet is when families reunite after having been separated.

**Now, I must ask my dad**

For the participants, the return of their family sometimes creates tensions between what they have grown accustomed to and what their family expects of them. In this section, we will mainly listen to Tiago’s experiences of reuniting with his dad. Tiago fled Syria alone; he is now 19 years old and studying. His narrative exemplifies how he adapts to, negotiates and resists different aspects of masculinity and culture.

When my family got here, I was happy. I don’t have to think whether they’re ok or not. They’re here and it’s great for us. But, you know ‘Arab families’ (Laughs), they don’t get it, they think this is Syria […] before I lived alone, I could do, meet who ever I wanted. Now, I must ask my dad.

The ambivalence around reuniting with the family is shared among many of the participants in our study, but Tiago puts it into words. Although he is happy about them being reunited and no longer needs to worry about them, he also expresses an ongoing change regarding his own agency and freedom. He explains this using two discourses, one cultural and one related to his father being new to Sweden.
One cultural explanation he uses is that his father sees himself as ‘wali amr’ – the head of the family.

Tiago: I’ve grown up now, and know more about Sweden, but he doesn’t want to listen, he wants to decide for himself. I was supposed to arrange school for my sister, I went there and got told they would send us an application form. After a couple of days, my father talked to a friend of his, an Arab, who also fled to Sweden. They’ve not been here for long, maybe as long as my dad. The friend told my dad how their daughter already had a school. When my father heard this, he told me how we needed to go back and talk to the school. I told him no, we need to wait for the form and fill it out, but he wouldn’t listen.

Although his father is trying to re-establish his position in the family, Tiago is the one who knows how to get by in Sweden. On another occasion, his father needs to get his papers in order at the employment agency, which ends in Tiago needing to help. According to Tiago, this makes his father feel bad, but he is unable to express it. Instead, his father ‘becomes quiet’. Tiago does not, however, always use the ‘wali amr’ cultural explanation. He is also able to relate his own experiences to his father’s.

Interviewer: The first times we met, you remember asking me if women, then dogs and then men had rights in Sweden?
Tiago: (Laughing) Yes, I remember, but that’s true. No, I’m kidding […] I didn’t really believe it. You know my dad asked me several times when they were in Turkey if it was true. He believed it. You know many people in our countries believe men have no rights in Europe.

Interviewer: What does your father think now?
Tiago: I think he still believes it to some extent (Laughs) […]
Interviewer: Why do you think he believes that?
Tiago: You know when they’re in Turkey or Syria, someone from Sweden arrives and talks bullshit and then it becomes a rumour, then when they arrive in Sweden, they believe it’s true.

This explanation is more related to being new to Sweden, hearing rumours and stories on the way, and trying to figure out how things work in one’s new locality. Here Tiago and his father share the same experiences of hearing rumours and then trying to make sense of them upon arriving in Sweden.

Some of the participants have reunited with their families. Their narratives partly correspond with how children migrating with their family can describe similar positional changes within their family, for instance by becoming ‘cultural mediators’ in their new locality (De Block and Buckingham 2007; Orellana 2001). For the participants in our study, this position change is clearly related to the reunification, and to tensions or conflicts related to them as individuals, their relationships within the family, and to what they have learned in different local settings. Tiago uses both
cultural explanations – presenting different perspectives on gender and masculinity – and explanations related to experience and a lack of control in their new locality, to understand this shift. In their new locality, Tiago’s father embodies what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call the claim for power, but he also lacks economic and institutional power. Thus, his actions and how they affect Tiago need to be analysed along both an axis of continuity – his position as a father, and one of discontinuity – his socio-economic position as a newly arrived immigrant (cf. Hall 1997).

Handling everyday life

Although some aspects of gender are influenced by life in the country of origin, through the axis of continuity, gender is also influenced by everyday life in Sweden. Before specifically discussing this in terms of masculinity and gender, we need to consider the participants’ ways of dealing with information, knowledge and expectations in general, especially when there are differences between what they are used to, based on previous experience, and what they experience in their new home.

Saleh is now 18 years old. He fled Iran with a couple of friends, and now lives in a family home. He goes to school and works in an elderly care unit. He is now reunited with his much younger brother. Saleh gives us an example of how unfamiliar things were at first.

Saleh: Everything was sort of unfamiliar at first, difficult to understand. The rules, the relationships with the boys and the staff.

Interviewer: In what way?

Saleh: You know in Afghanistan and Iran some rules don’t exist, for instance respect, some rules are lacking. In Iran, the boys fight each other, or young boys and girls, no problem, not serious; the police will not react. However, here, very different. Also, with some stuff, it was hard to, well get started. Then I did. It was hard, but still fun to get to know new people and learn a new language.

According to Saleh, certain social issues created challenges for him in adapting to a new context, for instance, how to act in relation to staff and friends. Things are, de facto, new to him and things are hard to learn, but these situations are turned into a learning situation. The boys’ do not resolve such situations by using a cultural key from their past, but rather by combining what is new and old to better understand and handle everyday life. Saleh continues:

I usually talk to my mother [in Sweden] because I know she can help me much more than my parents [in Iran], because they don’t have a good education. However, they do have experience, but so do my parents [in Sweden]. In addition, she’s well educated and can help me much more. So, I sit down with [my mother in Sweden] and talk to her and she gives me advice. It’s good.
Saleh calls both his foster parents in Sweden and his parents in Iran his mother and father. Although he emphasizes that all his parents have experience, he turns to his mother in Sweden for advice. For him it is not about what he is used to from Iran, but what he needs to be able to cope with his everyday life. This means using knowledge that is most suitable, regardless of whether it comes from his parents in Iran or his parents in Sweden. A similar conversation takes place with Mahmoud, 17 years old and born in Afghanistan:

When new [people] arrive, we start to explain, how we live here, how you could live in Sweden, rules and such. Then they can manage.

Mahmoud is studying and lives at a boarding school. In his case, knowledge about how to live in Sweden is passed down by the group already residing in Sweden (cf. Wernesjö 2015). Implied in the discourses surrounding these young men and boys is often the conception that they uncritically carry certain gendered ideals and cultural baggage with them that make it difficult for them to adapt (Stretmo 2014; cf. Alexander 2000). A reflexive approach to what is considered valuable knowledge for everyday life, that these young people use, thus contrasts with such a discourse. Instead, knowledge and approaches are based on their lives in their current local context, as well as on experiences from previous localities.

The participants’ approach to everyday life issues of gender and masculinity is, although not forgotten, also not guided by an inherited cultural compass. They approach gender and masculinity reflexively, using experiences and knowledge aggregated through their lives and different relationships to make sense out of what is happening here and now. When talking about adapting to life in a new locality, Tiago says:

Tiago: But I do believe it’s harder for Arab men, they think so much about ‘rujuliet’ [manliness]. It’s [there] all the time. This isn’t manly and that’s manly. You shouldn’t dress like that, it’s not manly, you shouldn’t talk like that it’s not manly. All the time.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Tiago: I don’t know, there are two sides [of it], there are beautiful things about manliness, but there are other things that are hard […] Let’s say your friend needs help, then you must help, if your family needs something, you’ll do it. Period. That’s nice. If someone does something to you, you shouldn’t run away, like a dog. Stuff like that, it can be nice.

Interviewer: What’s not good then?

Tiago: Well, like I said. You should wear these clothes and these, and you should talk to that one but not that one […] He could approach me, telling me: ‘It’s not nice you wear these clothes’. Alternatively, if you wear a necklace or earrings or whatever. If you ask [why], he tells you
'it's not manly'. My man, get away from me, yo! I don’t tell you your clothes are ugly, right.

In this exchange, Tiago exposes the lability of masculinity: first, by talking about an ‘Arab masculinity’ focused on being a proper man, and second, by reflecting on different aspects of the same notions of masculinity being both nice and hard to live by, and finally, by showing resistance to people who claim that he does not dress ‘manly’ enough. One thing that challenges possible movements between different gendered positions and approaches to gender, however, is how these young men also tend to be positioned as an ‘immigrant’, ‘unaccompanied’, or sometimes a ‘Muslim’, young man. This, in turn, means having to deal with being in a constant ‘situation of questioning’.

**An elevated ‘social situation awareness’**

Being positioned as an ‘unaccompanied’ young man often means being in a ‘situation of questioning’, that is, being under the constant scrutiny of society, media, people and politics. Cologne and Stockholm provide such a backdrop. ‘A situation of questioning’ forces people to be able to provide answers or defend themselves (Wernesjö 2014). For the young men in our study, this is often the case. It means facing questions and allegations regarding issues of gender and sexuality, which tended to increase during the period under study.

Farid:  One female staff-member asked, ‘Why do only men come to Sweden, why are there no women? What do the women do?’ You know, she was mean. I said, of course women also come [to Europe], also our culture doesn’t allow women to leave home, because we’re so behind. It’s because there’s a lack of democracy, where women and men aren’t allowed to do the same things. No, they can’t. Those [women] who end up in Greece, can’t get out of Greece like we do. Women can’t travel under cars, trucks and such. We did, they can’t. That’s why there are so many women in Greece. I’d say there are more women than men living in Greece.

Interviewer: They’re stuck there.

Farid: They’re stuck; it’s kind of a stop signal. They can’t get out of it […]. They try to get on planes, but you need a passport… from 1000 [EUR], maybe one can do it.

Farid returns to this event several times during our meetings; it has obviously stuck with him. At one point, he tells us that he cannot answer for the low percentage of women entering Sweden. He thinks the staff are mean for asking him these questions, somehow indicating he is responsible. He is constantly questioned because he, as a young man, managed to flee to Sweden. The questioning also implicates a certain ‘othering’ view of a masculine culture that leaves women behind. An ‘othering’ that has been
incorporated in Farid’s own way of describing his ‘culture’ as behind. Interestingly, Farid also tries to make sense of the fact that there are fewer women coming to Sweden than men. One moment he himself presents a view where women cannot do what men can, because they are women. However, he later refers to a political and social context that makes the flight more difficult for women than for men.

When Farid attended [a course in] learning Swedish, he had to join a ‘regular’ high school class for the class ‘domestic science’. The teacher then told the class how different things were in other cultures. That in some cultures, the father ate first, then the mother and finally the children. This made an impression on Farid. Why didn’t he protest, he asks himself? ‘Maybe people walk around believing this. What mother would let her child starve?’ he asks me rhetorically. ‘I’ve seen my mother give us the meat and later herself gnaw on the leftovers, for us children to have food’ (Observation note).

In this case, the teacher reproduces imaginative conceptions of immigrant families, but it is not just any kind of family that is described. It is a patriarchal family, where the father’s wellbeing comes first. For Farid, this means that he is once again exposed to a situation of questioning. His mere presence in the class elicits the teacher’s story, making him an involuntary recipient. Waldner is 18 years old and fled from Iran, but was born in Afghanistan. He lives in his own apartment and studies so that he can get work in the field of elderly care. He provides an example of another situation of questioning.

For instance, when I go to a store with my [male] friends. Then there are many thieves in the store. There are a lot. I’ve seen many Arabs stealing stuff from the stores. When we go together, the security guards follow us. They think we’re the same as the ones who steal. Therefore, yes, I feel so… I don’t like. I get mad when they… We know they follow us around. They monitor us so that we won’t steal anything. […] It’s not good for us. They will think we are the same as them [stealing]. They, as in the Swedes. They think all refugees are the same.

Waldner describes how he and his friends, a group of ‘immigrant boys’, are considered a possible threat to the store they are visiting, and thus are followed around by a security guard. His narrative shows both an elevated social awareness of being seen a threat and how this affects him. It also reveals how Waldner himself, by transferring the possible blame to ‘many Arabs’, reproduces the same discourse: the idea that ‘immigrant groups of men’ are doing the supposed stealing (cf. Back 1996). Many other participants share these experiences. Daniel, a 20-year-old from Afghanistan, talks about how ‘girls crosses the street’ when they see him, ‘they are afraid […] they wouldn’t do that to a Swedish guy’. At a couple of observations, Andy, 17 years old and from Afghanistan, talks about the public view changing and that young men with his background are now considered a threat;
because of this he does not want people to know he lives in housing for ‘unaccompanied’ youth. When people discover he is an ‘unaccompanied boy’, their attitudes towards him change, he tells us.

These examples show how a process of othering is based on representations created and perceived by others and to some extent by the participants themselves. These representations could involve being a boy, a man, a Muslim or ‘unaccompanied’, and as such carriers of a threatening masculinity. This, in turn, creates a position of questioning and being feared, which triggers elevated social situation awareness. This is evident in Farid’s case, when he regrets not having protested. His awareness of the situation and the harm it might cause him, and others, comes from a realization that these images of ‘unaccompanied’ or immigrant youth exist and are spread in society. At the same time, his position in the class and in the classroom, might have hampered a possible defence; instead he tried, as Goffman (1963/2011) puts it, to pass without being noticed. Similar examples are provided by Waldner, Andy and Daniel, all of whom try to handle a situation of elevated social situation awareness based on how others perceive them – as young men with an immigrant background and, thus, as a possible threat.

**Concluding reflections**

The debate after Cologne and Stockholm put ‘unaccompanied’ young men’s gender, sexuality and culture into focus. It came to be about them carrying with them a cultural view on gender in direct opposition to a ‘Western’, supposedly equality-based, view (Hark and Villa 2017). But, one thing we can learn from listening to how the participants in the present study talk about, reflect on and negotiate masculinity and gender is that they tend to turn what might be considered new into a learning situation. Masculinity and gender are not approached as though they exist a single line stemming from one’s origins, but along two axes: one of continuity – with influences from previous relations, cultural and historical interpretations – and another of discontinuity – affected by new relations, localities, ideals and knowledge aggregated over time. None of the axes should be read statically, but together they can create tension and conflicts. This might apply to all newly-arrived children and youth, regardless of gender. For the young men in our research, it becomes evident after following the development over time how such conflicts could emerge when families reunite after time apart or when changes occur in the public discourse.

One interesting issue, I would claim, is that the conflicts themselves are interpreted as being different. When, for instance, a young Muslim boy argues with his dad over gender issues, the conflict is used as an argument for essentialism – for instance, that the culture of origin and masculinity ideals are passed on to the boy from previous generations. However, the same
conflict could be a manifestation of the opposite – an argument for change, resistance and ambivalence. Alexander (2000, 231) similarly discusses how the young people in her study are seen either as heirs to cultural disadvantage or stuck ‘between two cultures’. To understand how gender and masculinity are approached in a ‘new’ context, it is important to recognize how the participants can both challenge hegemonic ideals and use familiar – meaning previous – concepts in their new locality to approach their masculinity here and now (Donaldson et al. 2009). Although approaches to masculinity can sometimes be traced back to the participants’ lives in another, previous locality, they can also reflect how previous experiences are used to better understand and relate to current experiences and situations.

For these ‘unaccompanied’ young men, conflicts or tensions that emerge in relation to gender, masculinity and sexuality tend to be read – as the debate mentioned exemplifies – publicly as a threat. This puts them in a gendered situation of questioning, of constantly having to defend themselves, their opinions and actions (Wernesjö 2014). They are aware of the public, media image of them as a possible threat, which affects how they navigate through their everyday life, and how they look upon themselves and others. For Andy, this shift in the public discourse made him want to hide that he lives at a home for ‘unaccompanied’ children, almost hiding his ‘stigma’ (Goffman 1963/2011). For Farid, it means feeling challenged by people around him, because as a young boy he once arrived in Sweden searching for safety. It is possible to interpret this as another incarnation of a racialized moral panic, affecting ‘unaccompanied’ children and youth (cf. Alexander 2000). Despite their different backgrounds, class, religion and age, these young men are collectively seen as a threat.

To conclude, masculinity is not stable and cannot be pinned down (Johansson and Haywood 2017). Nonetheless, it tends to be interpreted as such in the media and politics in discussions about ‘unaccompanied’ young men’s gender and sexuality. Rather than trying to uphold a certain cultural, hegemonic and essential masculine ideal, the participants use both past and present experiences and relationships to understand and navigate through everyday life. However, this navigation is complicated by how they tend to be positioned in a gendered elevated social situation awareness, forcing them to answer not only for their own gender and views on gender and sexuality, but for the public view and for all other ‘unaccompanied’ young men as well.

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