

## **The making of a ‘new man’: Psychosocial change in a generational context**

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### **Abstract:**

In the wake of changing gender relations, the theme of ‘new men’ has become a salient research topic. How does it become not only a moral imperative and external ‘duty’, but also something that (some) men actually desire for themselves? In this article we seek to trace how this new desire has been created over three generations in Norway, both in regard to changing ideals of masculinity as well as patterns of parental identification – patterns that are in themselves not possible to grasp outside ongoing changes in gender relations. The analysis is based on the material of a study of 12 chains of grandfathers, fathers and sons, interviewed in 1991, with a follow-up of the sons ten years later. In order to understand the idiosyncratic way that such changes are lived by the subject, we will follow the case of John, a man from the youngest generation. Our main argument is that social change and psychological desire are dynamically interwoven at any given historical moment, and that changes in gender relations must be understood in a cultural, generational, as well as psychobiographic perspective.

Keywords: psychosocial change, masculinities, fathering, generation, desire

### **Introduction**

We met John for the first time in 1992, when he was 18 years old. He was a participant in a three-generational study of women and men, and interviewed twice – the first time at the age of 18, the second time when he was close to 30. John is one of the working class boys in the sample: his father, who died when John was 16, worked as a janitor, and his mother used to clean the floors of the grammar school. At the time of the first interview, John is in the final year of high school and is one of the more aloof boys in the class-room. He is dressed in black with a leather jacket that his (male) classmates envy and nurtures only one great dream: to drive across the USA. He describes himself as an outsider and wants to do something creative in life – possibly become a writer. When interviewed ten years later, he has settled down with

a wife and a four-year old son, working as a temporary salesman in a bookshop. His urge for creativity seems in many ways transformed into caring for his son, for whom he feels what he calls 'heaven-defiant love.'

*My wife stops me if I fall too heaven-defiantly in love with him and his accomplishments. It is not really a good thing, absolutely not. /.../ all the time...thinking that my parents must have done something wrong, so unconsciously I try to become the opposite kind of parent. It is very vague, obviously, but I feel that is what I must be doing, since my son in a way has become such a contrast to myself as a child. /.../ we talk a lot. When I am cooking, we talk together, we eat and talk together, all the time, I am probably too insisting on getting him to talk, to tell, not to close up inside himself.*

There are at least two striking things in this quotation: firstly, *gender equality* seems to be a practical reality to John, a reality that he shares with other young fathers. The youngest generation of the study actually lives in a society where such equality is official policy, reinforced by different legislative measures. The second thing that stands out in the quotation above, is the *intense emotional quality* in the description that John gives of his relationship with his son: cooking, talking, eating, telling and opening up, combined with a love that is almost too much (at least for his wife). Fathers have of course always been emotionally engaged with their children (cf. Lorenzen 2006). What seems to be new, is the affective investment in the 'nitty-gritty' that earlier was considered exclusively female or an externally imposed duty of a modern man (Aarseth 2007, 2008). In this paper we wish to explore *how this new desire is created* over the historical time covered by the three generations in our study, both with regard to changes in discourses of masculinity as well as the patterns of parental identification – with the psychobiography of John as an illustration of the way the subject lives such changes in idiosyncratic ways. The argument of this paper is that such an analysis will not only shed light on the particular case at hand, but also contribute to a broader understanding of cultural change as always already psychosocial.

### **Same old, new men?**

In many ways, John fits the image of 'new men' practicing fatherhood in child-oriented ways that has recently been depicted in social research. Such men are for instance described in a

four-generational study of fatherhood in Britain, where Brannen, Moss and Mooney (2004) found what they call ‘hands-on’ fathers, eagerly taking part in nappy-changing and baby-talk in the youngest generation (cf. Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Aarseth 2007). This is mostly celebrated as a progressive tendency towards gender equality as well as a positive development of male caring competences, but it has also been interpreted as yet another move to keep old gender hierarchies intact. Such deconstructive interpretations often reduce claims about changing gender (at least the male part of it) into an almost almighty hegemonic masculinity that seems able to ‘hybridize’ any counter-forces into resources for its own stabilization (cf. Demetriou 2001, Redman 2001; Allen 2007). In our view, such critical vigilance in relation to (tacit) reproductive assumptions in new cultural patterns is important, however, it is also limited in scope.

Firstly, it seems to run into the problem of how to understand *change*, since it does not actually address new forms of gendered practice. Such changes are seen not only in Scandinavia but in other Western countries, as well (cf Brandt and Kvande 2003; Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Johansson and Klinth 2008; Aarseth 2008; Rochlen et al 2008; Finn and Henwood 2009). In Norway, the 30-year old law on gender equality covers areas like equal rights to education, equal salary for equal work, and laws against discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality. There has also been a promotion of women joining work outside the home both by extended periods of parental leave and guaranteeing public child care above the age of one. The percentage of women partaking in work outside the home has gone from 44% to 78% in the period from 1974 to 2008, and this great increase came in the middle generation of our study. The trend for men is, although slower, in the reverse direction, i.e. from work to home: the use of the ‘father quota’ of the parental leave (now extended to 12 weeks) has increased from a meager 1-2% in 1988 to a vast majority of 90% in 2008 (Holter, Svare and Egeland 2008).

Secondly, when change *is* addressed, it is often interpreted in terms of *external* impact and constraint, whereas the subject remains non-agentic and undynamic (cf Blackman et al 2008). This is not least noticeable in regard to (especially heterosexual) men who have often been depicted as the unchanging gender within both feminist and queer theory (for a criticism of this tendency, see for instance Corbett 2006; Reis and Grosmark 2009). We do not contest the importance of such influences or disciplining in the construction of the ‘new man’; John’s

new kind of fathering will probably also involve strivings for social approval. Still, focusing on new social and cultural constraints does *not* account for the intensity of feeling in John's case, an intensity that implies that 'new fathering' is not only a question of adaptation but a desirous activity in itself. Such desire is obviously not independent of John trying to be a man in a specific cultural time and space, and certainly not without inherent ambivalence and conflict. Yet, it is important to grasp - not just to do justice to John as motivated, dynamic subject, but in order to understand social and cultural change itself.

To understand this interwoven process of change and desire to change, we will follow a psychosocial line of inquiry. To us this represents a concern for how and why the subject lives the discourses and culture, including both conscious and unconscious motivations for doing so, since macro historical change is always idiosyncratically met on familial and individual levels – taken up, redefined and/or rejected (cf. Layton 2006). Equally important, however, is that psychobiographically evolved motivation also becomes an impetus to cultural change itself, in ways that are unforeseen and impossible to predict (cf. Rudberg and Nielsen 2005; Rudberg and Nielsen 2011). It is within this web of large and small histories that 'new men' like John are both reproduced and creatively productive.

## **The study**

In our study *Gender in change*, three generations of men were interviewed parallel with three generations of women (Nielsen and Rudberg 2006). The data from this project includes 22 female and 12 male chains, each comprising interviews with at least two generations. We initially interviewed approximately the same number of boys and girls in the youngest generation, but the follow up with fathers and grandfathers was not as successful as the follow up with mothers and grandmothers. The reason for this was partly psychosocial as fathers were less inclined than mothers to participate, partly demographical as fewer grandfathers than grandmothers were still alive, reflecting the fact that men on average have children at a later age than women, and die earlier. The male chains consist of 22 sons (John is one of them), 12 fathers and 7 grandfathers, all interviewed in 1992 when the youngest generation, the sons of our study, were 18 years old (final year of high school, academic stream). The sample was selected with the sons as the anchor in the study, involving both observations and interviews at two different schools in Oslo, the capital of Norway. The sons were interviewed

again 10 years later, at the age of 30. The social background varies between the generations, reflecting social as well as geographical mobility in the sample. Most of the grandfathers are from rural working class backgrounds, the fathers mainly from an urban working and lower middle class, whereas the sons are equally often from working and middleclass families. Most of the grandfathers were born in 1910-20, the fathers in 1930-50, and the sons were all born in 1971-72. The age span of the fathers was rather wide - actually for some overlapping with the age of grandfathers. Although this makes it problematic to analyse the generations strictly in terms of cohorts, it is in our view not impossible, since these men have joint experiences of *being* men and fathers in the same historical circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

In the following we will explore the intertwining between culture and subjectivity through three perspectives of change. The first perspective is related to the cultural changes shown in the *discourses on masculinity* that are predominant in the three generations of men; changes that also open up to an understanding of the wider historical context of the gender system. The discursive changes will then be set in relation to *generational shifts in parental identification*, with data from the female generations as a comparative backdrop, in order to detect how such discourses could be emotionally animated in relational ways. And finally, illustrating the complex and idiosyncratic way that the position as 'new man' is taken up and energized, we will take a closer look at some aspects of the *psychobiography* of John.

### **Generational changes in the discourse of masculinity**

Let us start by taking a look at how the discursive patterns of masculinity generally have changed throughout the three generations. What is an 'ideal man' according to these men? Not surprisingly, we see both continuities and shifts over the generations. The grandfathers stress values like honesty and fairness and, according to their class position, the importance of being either a solid worker or a publicly responsible citizen. Although many of the grandfathers like to present themselves as rather wild when young, 'real' life starts with

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews with the men were conducted by two research fellows and were taped and transcribed. In addition field notes were produced from every interview. The authors, who interviewed the women in the study and took part in the observation of both girls and boys at school, have analysed the material on the basis of this interview material.

providing for a family. Thus, the interviews are full of work place stories (even after retirement), only mentioning children in passing (and often in connection with dramatic events like, for instance, their children's death). Of course, this does not exclude emotional involvement, which is for instance seen in the tenderness conveyed in one grandfather's description of his meeting with his dying newborn: *'I saw him, and he looked at me. He is going to be a boxer, I said'*. In contrast to their relative verbosity about work, the grandfathers get quiet and embarrassed when asked to describe themselves, and their meager self-descriptions are actually almost identical with their ideals. Thus, even though it could obviously be hard to *be* a man in this generation, to *construct* oneself as one, seems to be experienced as a rather non-ambivalent affair.

The middle generation is more troubled: they actually often define masculinity in negative terms to the point of stressing the importance of not being *'excessively masculine'*, as one of the men puts it. They are much more willing to talk about themselves than the grandfathers, and in doing so some of them use a new psychological vocabulary, talking about their *'alienation'*, *'insecurity in a masculine milieu'*, their childhood as a *'disastrous time'*, and an experience of *'inner rage'*. The negative definition of masculinity in combination with this psychological reflexivity leaves an impression of a generation struggling in conflict with themselves. However, the psychological discourse can also be quite useful when it comes to re-structuring a (traditional) individualized position. There are some important differences in the way men and women use the new psychological interpretation in our interviews: women tend to make it into a tool for refining their understanding of the relational field, whereas men tend to focus on their own uniqueness often promoting personal growth (Nielsen and Rudberg 2006; Rudberg and Nielsen 2011).

The youngest generation appears to have accomplished a sort of resolution of their fathers' insecurity: they actually resemble their grandfathers in that they define masculinity in positive terms and without much ambivalence. However, the content has changed: just like their fathers they talk about an ideal man as someone who is able to combine the tough and the soft; a man should be both *'charismatic'* and *'bend over to pick a flower'*; or *'bake bread'* as well as *'climb mountains'*. Although the ideals seem both paradoxical and even megalomaniac at times, they are also rather flexible and open-ended. And so are the self-descriptions, which more often than not seem open-ended to the point of being endless. The middle class boys in particular make use of a psychological discourse, and actually even

more so than girls from similar backgrounds in our study – perhaps indicating a sort of gendered ‘cultural lag’. Still, even though there is definitely a more relational touch to the self-descriptions of the youngest generation than among their fathers, underlining notions of individuality and uniqueness is a continuing trend.

### **John – a ‘real man’?**

18 years old, John is a very salient exponent of this through being a self-defined outsider at school. This does not exclude his being versatile in the psychological discourse, which is evident in his reasoning about being a man. He likes being a man, he says, and thinks of masculinity as a ‘*primitive force... narcissistic, self-celebrating, and macho*’.

Symptomatically, one of his fondest memories is a trip to the Pamplona festival, and his favorite authors are Hemingway and Miller. Although John can see some destructive aspects of this primitive masculinity, his definition is rather non-ambivalent:

*[Masculinity means] to be able to control, put oneself in the limelight, show that you are strong, that you manage things, and I mean... it does not need to have any negative consequences either, because there is so much one can do...you do not have to fight and kill to show that you... you can just as well write or be an artist, you see what I mean... I think that is much stronger in a man than in a woman.*

This definition of masculinity is probably not all that easy to reconcile with notions of gender equality. Feminist struggle is necessary, he claims, but it must not attack the fundamental difference, ‘*since men and women live in two different worlds, spiritually*’. The only thing he envies women is their capacity to bear children. ‘*I would have been very happy to be a mother*’, but he is scared of fatherhood, because that would make him feel ‘*helpless*’. To raise a child is not part of ‘*a man’s nature*’ the same way as it is for a woman, according to John. Thus, in relation to content, there is no smooth continuity between this image of masculinity and John’s intense involvement in child care ten years later. It could go either way: adventurous Pamplona or involved fatherhood. And maybe that is just the point: the paradoxically combined, open-ended masculinities in the youngest generation will set the stage for several possible outcomes. Although John’s self-presentation in the first interview seems traditionally individualized almost to the point of parody (Pamplona, Hemingway,

drive across America, become a writer) the wish for love, friendship as well as openness about relational problems are also admitted to without hesitation. In this way he depicts himself more like a Romantic hero, who is able to harbour both hard and soft sides.

### **Intergenerational transmissions and psychological identifications**

How does the emotional intensity that John seems to invest in ways of doing gender come about? Discourses on masculinity do not invade young male heads like aliens from outer space, or become internalized without any mediating relational experiences. Such experiences are of course not restricted to the family – for a young man like John the striving for masculinity very much takes place among friends as well as at school and in relation to a striving for a new intellectual, middle class habitus (cf. Redman 2001). Still, the family is both an important arena for direct or indirect performance of the official equality policy, and a context where some of the most potent emotional loadings of cultural constructions of gender become ingrained. In an earlier analysis (Rudberg and Nielsen 2011) we have traced some generational patterns of identification through the way informants in our study talk about the relative similarity/difference and closeness/distance in relation to parents. Such an ‘operationalization’ of the concept of identification does not in itself capture the complex psychological dynamics involved in the process. Still, the results indicate some important historical shifts that will provide a necessary context for an in-depth analysis of psychosocial change, of the kind endeavored in the case of John.

In the oldest generation *both* women and men orient themselves towards the parent of the *same sex* as themselves: the daughters feels most alike and closest to their mother, who is respected for her competence and hard work, although the father often is idealized and depicted as the one who would play with you and show you the world. The sons also identify with the same-sex parent - the father - and although not so personally close, they seem joined together through activities and work. Father may be described as ‘*unique*’, ‘*Jack of all trades*’ and the centre for the community: ‘*Everyone had to go and visit my father*’, whereas mother is hardly noticeable: ‘*She was like “excuse- me- for- living”*’. When mother is mentioned as more than a person ‘*who never sat down*’, it is in the capacity of giving comfort in early childhood. For both women and men, this same-gender orientation seems to reinforce the solid gender division in their mainly rural culture. For women, it involves a blurring of



competence and emotional support in a female community - where men come to symbolize a bit of fresh air. For men, this pattern of identification with idealized fathers, where emotional needs are defined as 'childlike' and relegated to a female care-taker, might indicate the allegedly deep split between masculinity and intimacy in a generational perspective.

In the middle generation there is a new, but still *gender-similar*, tendency to make 'cross-over' identifications, i.e. to be oriented towards the parent of the opposite sex. For the daughters this often implies that mother becomes almost totally dethroned, and the conflictual temperature is high. The idealization of father is at its peak, and he is often the one the daughters feel closest to, as well. Although not as clear, there is similar tendency among the sons in this generation to feel both most alike and closest to the parent of opposite sex, namely mother. This does not necessarily imply any harsh conflicts with father: '*He was a somewhat bad psychologist*', one man says, '*but there was nothing really evil in him*'. The women's tendency to strong and positive cathection of the father could be interpreted in relation to the struggle for social and psychological autonomy that has been shown to be characteristic for this female generation (Nielsen and Rudberg 2006). For the men, the new identification pattern could actually open up for more integration of intimacy in their self-constructions; we might even discern the vague contours of an emerging 'new man'.

In the youngest generation, the parallel story of women and men (from same-gender to cross-gender identification) seems to dissolve. The daughters tend to return to their mother as the parent with whom they identify, which is not so strange, since the quest for autonomy might no longer be such an all-encompassing issue. The identification patterns among the sons are more diverse: very few describe any direct conflicts with their fathers (which we actually could have expected because of their age); the tone is nuanced and matter-of-fact: father may be a bit too '*manager-like*' as one of the young men puts it, but otherwise quite ok. They can identify with either father or mother or pick a bit of both, but the dominant trend in this group is that they proclaim to identify with *nobody at all*. This 'non-identification' could be due to their life phase, which usually involves stressing independence. Still, that does not explain the gender difference (none of the young women shows signs of such non-identification); and in the interviews 10 years later the trend is actually strengthened rather than diminished.

Before we return to the case of John, we will take a closer look at those identification patterns that we find most puzzling and psychologically relevant in the making of 'new men', namely

the cross-gendered identifications in the middle generation, and the non-identifications in the youngest one. The reason for this is that the changes in gendered identifications in the youngest generations seem to be connected to the gendered identifications and ambivalences in the middle generation. The question we pose is how to understand these identification processes, and the emotional investments that are involved in an intergenerational perspective?

*The middle generation: playing both sides?*

We have stressed the symmetry in the pattern that mothers tend to be dethroned by their daughters in the middle generation, and fathers by their sons. But there *is* one important gender difference in this cross-gender identification: the men seem to use less emotional energy in the process. The rather heated conflicts with mother among the women could be understood in relation to their historically new quest for autonomy (Nielsen and Rudberg, 2006), but how are we to understand the shift from father to mother as identification object among the men? As the relative lack of conflict suggests, the 'push' away from fathers is usually not as emotionally loaded as the push away from mothers among the women in this generation. It seems to a great extent related to the social mobility and new cultural demands for flexibility that make the fathers' fixed identity outdated and unattractive to the sons – or as one of the men says, in an ironic tone: '*My father is the last member of the working class in this country, you see*'. In other words, the detachment from father tends to be associated with his strict work ethic or collective loyalties, resulting in a life without freedom and pleasure. Although these are important issues connected with societal changes, they might be more psychologically manageable than the struggle for autonomy and boundaries of self that was at stake for the women.

At the same time we can see that the 'pull' towards the mothers among the men is quite hesitant and without the kind of idealization that the daughters showed in relation to their fathers. What the men themselves emphasize as a reason for this new identification is not that they want to become *like* their mother, but the *closeness* that they have with her. In an earlier Norwegian study Holter and Aarseth (1993) made a similar observation: the turning away from the father in this generation is connected with his lack of emotional presence. Such emotional distance between fathers and sons has been the case in earlier generations as well, but only now it seems to become such a paramount *criterion* for (dis)identification, also reflecting new cultural demands. This double process of detachment from father and bonding

with mother will also create a potential for relational openness in the men themselves, often expressed as a wish to be a more emotionally present father than their own (cf Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Finn and Henwood 2009). This implies that men and women become more similar in relation to their involvement with children in this generation. Still, as the shift towards identification with the mother seems to be based primarily on the care that she can offer her son, the gendered split that was seen among the grandfathers will not be abolished. Perhaps, the insecurity that men in this generation show in defining masculinity - an insecurity that is not seen among either grandfathers or sons - implies that they continue to 'play both sides', having no safe cultural or psychological home of their own (cf Holter and Aarseth 1993).

To lose one's cultural home, or to transgress the boundaries of what has been the culturally self-evident doxa is a painful and anxiety-provoking affair, according to Lynne Layton (2006). Through a psychoanalytic re-interpretation of Bourdieu's (1984) theory on (class) distinction, Layton proposes that 'doxa is transmitted in conflictual relational experiences and thereafter held in place by emotions such as humiliation, shame, anxiety, love' (Layton, 2006:47). Breaking such deeply installed boundaries will be associated with basic fears of regressing into a needy, dependent position, actually risking losing your subjectivity. The ambivalence among the men who 'play both sides', could involve such fears due to transgressions in relation to both the new class trajectory that they have entered and their quest for a new masculinity. In line with Layton's analysis, this might provoke anxieties not only about losing their cultural home, but fears of regressing into a position where they might lose their status as (grown up) subjects all together. The negation of (traditional) masculinity that is so striking among these men, and which points in a more relational direction - might therefore simultaneously instigate efforts to an 'updated' and in some ways even strengthened individualization which still involves demarcation from what is regarded as feminine/weak.

#### *The youngest generation: nobody's child?*

The 'two-world' strategy of the fathers is in many ways upheld by the youngest men. However, the new cultural situation involving a hegemonic discourse of gender equality will put its specific generational mark on the way this strategy is played out. The relative ease with which the sons seem to handle the ambivalences also indicates that the wavering of their fathers has neither resulted in a general crisis of masculinity, nor a defensive retreat to old

values and patterns. One could be a man, as well as oriented towards relations. One could want to conquer the world at the same time as one wants to be at home. Still, neither the ideals nor the identification patterns imply harmonious and conflict-free solutions. The emotional context for the youngest generation has involved mothers struggling for autonomy and gaining some visibility in the process on the one hand, and fathers making rather insecure adjustments to new cultural gender constructs with wavering emotional investment, on the other. Given that this is the growing-up context regardless of gender, why do the young men in this generation, in contrast to the young women, so often declare themselves as identified with nobody? While the girls combine their new individualized position with recognizable relational interest ('relational individualism' [Chodorow 1986]), the boys take another route: in general, their relational competence appears to have been strengthened throughout the generations, but their identification with 'nobody' seems also to be a sort of safe-guarding of their status as unique individuals. Somehow, the connection between masculinity and individualization remains intact – and the psychological dynamic is at least recognizable: masculine identities are still to be built around demarcation and difference, at the same time as relationality has become a less gendered issue, possibly due to the fact that both parents to a greater extent than before, have taken part in the care of their sons.

This quest for uniqueness is also shown in the way some of the young men relate to generational transmissions, through a sort of 'turning around' of the direction of identification. Whereas the grandfathers talked about personality and traits being '*transferred*' to them downwards in the generational chain, the fathers used the phrase '*to be like*' one's father or mother in a more personalized way. In contrast, several men in the youngest generation insist on the expression that '*father is like me*'; he could actually even be depicted as '*a spitting image*' of his son. Such 'turning around' might of course be due to linguistic confusion or age related egocentricity. Still, it also makes sense within a generational context celebrating flexibility, where the figure of identification is not given once and for all, and the direction of identification can be reversed. It might also be a consequence of the sons seeing their fathers as regressing into childlike positions, not just because the fathers often act like youngsters in line with the ideal of the democratic buddy-parent, but because the earlier discussed anxieties of the fathers themselves, might be unconsciously sensed by their sons.

Still, the non-identification, where generational transmissions are put in brackets, might not only strengthen (masculine) individualization, but actually also open up for more malleable

self-constructions and fluidity of gender. This implies both cross-gendered as well as same-gendered identifications and intimacies - indicating the kind of 'queer individualization' that Sasha Roseneil (2007) talks about. Although there are some such signs of gender fluidity in the youngest generation, it should not be exaggerated. Queer perspectives in masculinity research (cf. Corbett 2006; Diamond 2009; Reis and Grossmark 2009) have insisted that cultural gender binaries are the main obstacles for developing a more fluid and multiple sense of self. However, our data suggest that even in a culture where gender dichotomies are no longer as rigidly upheld (although obviously not abolished), they could remain psychologically important in the formation of identities, move to new areas and even become strengthened in some respects. It might even be the case that a cultural queering of gender will make the psychological quest for sexual difference into an almost 'queer' desire.

Perhaps, this is what is happening when so many of the young men - as we have seen, including John - deliver an adamant defense for sexual difference. The important markers for such difference are almost never connected with questions of equality at home or work, but with matters of sexuality and body, '*to keep the excitement alive*'. How to integrate the adherence to gender equality - or culturally promoted multiplicity - with this celebration of difference, might become an almost emblematic dilemma for their generation. The question is whether it is reasonable to regard it simply as a residue of old-fashioned gender stereotypes, or even a sign of general misogyny. In our view, that would be to simplify the matter: since gender difference is first and foremost connected with sexual/bodily difference, it could also be handled as belonging to a separate sphere from sharing household tasks and child care.

### **The making of a 'new man': psychobiographic notes on John**

In John's case the non-identification which characterizes so many of his generation seems to make emotional sense, partly grounded in his memory of having to '*manage himself*' as a child with a string of frozen pizzas or hamburgers for dinner. In the first interview, we hear that his father died two years earlier, an event that he does not talk much about. It is actually only after having re-read the interview several times that the researchers discover the information, since it is mentioned in passing. His relationship to mother and father was '*not very close emotionally*', which he in a psychologically, reflexive way understands as a '*youth phenomenon*.' When he was a small boy he had nice holidays with his family, and he used to

go fishing with his father, but that turned boring. The parents are described as 'grey' and 'suburban', 'definitely not intellectual' and 'very, very working class'. He takes his parents' 'old age' as a 'warning' – and he often tells himself: 'I will never end like that!' Over and over again, he returns to the 'un-dynamic' atmosphere at home, and how he used to escape by going out drinking and smoking pot at an early age. 'Maybe you think that a bit wild?' This grey image of the family is in stark contrast to his vivid and colourful descriptions of 'interesting' friends, 'irresistible' lovers and ex-girlfriends, always there for each other. This trend to replace family with friends, a trend that was earlier connected to queer culture but now extended to young adults in general, is according to Roseneil (2007) also part of the new 'queer individualization'. However, as we have seen in John's insisting on sexual difference, it does not necessarily imply blurring the gender line in matters of sexuality and the body.

Ten years later John elaborates on the darker sides of his childhood, indicating the disappointment, shame and fear that might have been hidden in his non-identification as an 18-year old: growing up he had always thought that father did something important, like being a manager of the factory where he worked– and then he turned out to be the janitor! The most salient characteristic of his parents is no longer that they are grey and boring, but the insecurity connected with the fact that they were both very ill. He has vivid recollections of two separate Christmases, when they were fetched by ambulance, and he summarizes his childhood as '(a) subdued feeling of death and horror all the time ... Insecurity and anxiety'; '(m)any half-traumas, many vague images'.

Still, when asked if there was anything about his father's life that he would have wanted for himself, John rather surprisingly responds: 'absolutely!' The reason is that father was a sailor in his youth, and John says that his 'unbelievable stories' are his own most cherished childhood memories. The grey father had actually done many of the things that John dreamed about: seen Cuba right before the revolution, travelled in South America, and even driven across the American continent! John also underlines the physical resemblance with his father as a young man. He saw this old picture, where 'father was a perfect copy of me', he says, in a recognizable turning around of the direction of identification. He also assumes similarity when it comes to an 'urge to investigate' when father was a young man. Father probably had 'potential', John concludes in a rather paternalistic tone.

There is undoubtedly shame in John's story; shame of class indivisibly entangled with shame of his parents. Taking his background into account, the intellectual strivings of John (becoming creative, a writer) will possibly become a site of anxiety for stepping out of line and being out of place (cf. Layton 2006). John's celebration of his own outsider status at school might be a way to overcome such fear. It is reasonable to assume that his shame is guilt provoking in other ways as well, since father is not just a janitor – but also weak, sick and dying. John's hyperbolic images of strong, creative and passionate masculinity may be interpreted in light of that: John is not only compensating for father's lack of strength, as he is filling in the contours of what a 'real man' should be, he may simultaneously be filling in the void of a father who is irretrievably lost. It would be hard to understand John's way into a changing cultural position - including the one as 'new man' and involved father- without taking the pain over this loss and the defenses against this pain, into account.

In the first interview, the silence about father's death, the greyness in the descriptions as well as the flashes of idealization, tell us about a rather problematic process of mourning. The number of times that John underlines the differences and lacking connections between himself and his father seems to involve important defensive strategies of denial and disavowal, aimed at keeping both aggressions and feelings of being left and betrayed at bay. The discursive resources that John makes use of are recognizable as part of his generational repertoire: the irony, the psychological reflexivity, the striving to be different and special. But in John's case these discursive tools may also be used as ways to keep distance from the trauma of father's death. The little boy in need of a father is left far behind – or as he puts it: *'fishing was boring'* – and the young, desirable Romantic hero comes forth, saving at least himself from death and disastrous anxiety.

Ten years later, John seems more conscious about the loss and his own anxieties connected with it, and the emotionally flat tone of the first interview is replaced with sadness when talking about father. At the same time, his own dreams and ambitions have become less omnipotent and expansive – he is a family-man, without necessarily being settled and mainstream. The heaven-defying love for his son is what now makes him special (cf. Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Finn and Henwood 2009 for similar observations of young fathers). And the relationship with father is probably not unimportant in this enthusiastic fathering, either: as we have seen, father is characterized with contempt as well as admiration; he is *paradoxically*

both grey and adventurous. He is different from John culturally and intellectually, but simultaneously a copy of John himself, having pursued almost identical dreams. This conflictual identification with the lost object – father – could be recognized in the melancholic tone in the first interview, but it may also point to the possibilities of a ‘new fatherhood’, where the good father is preserved. Perhaps, it is significant that 18-year old John is able to stick to such ambivalence; at a different time and in a new context, such conflicts might not produce stand-still or regress, but rather be productive in desire to change.

### **Change and desire to change – a psychosocial conclusion**

The patterns in generational identifications that we have presented indicate both continuities and ruptures in cultural and psychological change. The story is evidently much more complicated and untidy – not just because some men do not fit into the trends described, but because any one of them will represent psychological complexities that this broad and sweeping analysis will not capture. We have explored some such complexities in one case from the youngest generation, in order to show the specific way a particular subject might move through the always intertwined dimensions of cultural, generational and psychobiographical change.

Neither cultural demands nor psychological positions are conflict-free. The destabilization that took place in the middle generation of men seemed hesitant and ‘playing both sides’. We can also register a wavering in the ‘non-identification’ among the youngest men of our study, although the ambivalence seems less pronounced in their case. Such conflicts could either represent a drive to defensive retreat or an incentive to transformation of cultural patterns. The stressing of uniqueness and creativity that we saw among the young men might be a way to handle such conflicts, resulting in a compromise between demands for individualization and care. To be ‘just’ a caretaker will not be enough for a ‘new man’ (or woman, for that matter). However, to make the relationship with your child into a ‘*heaven-defiant*’ love project might actually make it possible to combine a desire for both closeness and autonomous creativity. This is also in line with Brannen and Nilsen (2006), who conclude that the urge for creativity and non-conformity in some cases will function as incentives for the involvement with child care among young ‘hands-on’ fathers.



There is obviously no way to predict what kind of father a young man like John will be from his psychobiographical story. The task is rather reverse: to try to trace some of the emotional fuel that his specific fathering seems to involve, recognizing that the same position as ‘new man’, both discursively and as lived reality, is emotionally energized by an infinite array of such psychobiographies. In John’s case, there are many different possibilities –and they work together in unforeseen ways: he could, for instance, do his ‘new ‘fathering’ as a *rejection* of his childhood. This is what he conveys, when he tells us that he ‘*unconsciously... (tries) to become the opposite kind of parent*’ compared to his own (cf. Holter and Aarseth 1993, Bjørnholt 2009). Still, such an ‘opposing’ is in John’s case, also reasonable to interpret as a *repairing*, which would not only imply doing better for the child, but also filling the void of lost childhood for himself (cf. Brannen and Nilsen 2006; Finn and Henwood 2009). A third possibility, also in line with the loss that John has experienced, would be that his own fathering actually represents a kind of *bonding* with father - the one who after all was rebellious and creative enough to drive across the American continent. In either case, the cultural demands on ‘new men’ to become emotionally involved with their children will resonate quite powerfully with John’s personal psychobiography. The desires created through such psychological histories will become important vehicles for reproduction of cultural patterns, but also due to their conflictual nature vehicles for promoting change. The fear and pain connected with losing the security of one’s cultural home, might in certain circumstances, be transformed into creating a home of one’s own. New cultural patterns will be the result, and the emotional conflicts inherent in (re) creating them, will be part of this picture. The change in gender, including ever ‘new men’, will not be linear and seldom revolutionary, but there will be change and there will be desire to change.

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