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introduction

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From older men to boys: Masculinity theory and the life course(s)

Feminist theory and practice have always focused on *life* – and its course or courses. This has necessarily meant in particular a concern with various and variegated gendered life courses.

What has come to be known as ‘the life course’ is necessarily partly about men and masculinities; at the same time recent theoretical debates on men and masculinities have implications for rethinking the life course. This relatively undeveloped and two-way relation of men and masculinities, on one hand, and the life course, on the other, is the subject of this special issue.

In recent years there has been a major growth of social studies of the life course, including in particular studies of childhood, older people and ageing. From at least the early 1980s, there has also been focused attention on the question of gender in and of the life course, mostly inspired by feminist scholarship, and especially interventions on older women’s lives (for example, Macdonald and Rich 1983, Rossi 1985). Around the same time a number of collections of gay men’s life stories were assembled (for example, Hall Carpenter Archives 1989, Porter and Weeks 1991), sometimes with implications for implicit or explicit critiques of the heterosexual matrix.

Such various approaches have been elaborated in terms of wide-ranging gendered perspectives on gender and ageing (for example, Arber and Ginn 1995) and the interconnections of identity and gender across the life course, ageing and generational change (for example,

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Hockey and James 2003). They have also been important in the development of teaching innovations, in both more academic and more professionally orientated education.¹ The concern with the gendered life course has been further stimulated by scholarship on health, the body and disability, as well as their intersections with various critical theories, such as postcolonialist theory and queer theory (for example, Jakubowicz and Meekosha 2002; McRuer 2006).

More specifically, the pervasiveness and complexity of ageism, towards both younger and older people, and their interconnections (Hearn, 1999), as well as the links of ageism to gender in relation to both younger and older persons (Thorne 1993, 2004; Pringle 1995, 1998), have been established. However, even with the impact of such initiatives many (mainstream) accounts of the life course still remain gendered to very limited extents.

Gendered approaches also often directly or indirectly problematise the notion of the life course itself, especially those versions that (fore)see a series of smooth, non-gendered transitions with changes in ageing, generation, body and (dis)ability. Indeed over-simple understandings of the life course can be critiqued on a number of grounds. They may assume relatively fixed stages of childhood, adulthood and old age, as well as often reproducing explicitly or implicitly sex role conceptualisations of gender, including the portrayal of heterosexual(ised) sex roles and social realities. Instead, it may be now more accurate to think of life *courses*, just as we may talk of sexualities or masculinities in the plural.

Amongst those approaches that have addressed gender relations, the explicit study of men and masculinities has been uneven, often undeveloped. This has meant that gendering the life course has still often meant “bringing women into the (non-gendered) picture”. Very important though that is, this does not necessarily examine the gendering of boys and men within life course perspectives. Meanwhile, Critical Studies of Men have also developed considerably, both theoretically and empirically, over the last thirty years or more as a part of Women’s Studies and Gender Research.

This has prompted much more focused, gendered studies of boys and men across the life course; the gendering of especially older ‘teenage’ boys and younger men (for example, Mac an Ghail 1994, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002), on one hand, and older men (for example, Thompson 1994, Jackson 2003), on the other, has become more explicit. Less developed are two particular areas. First, there is a relative neglect of the insights of new social studies of childhood in examining boys particularly younger boys, and their

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relations not only with girls, but also with adults. The second lacuna is the gendered ageing of men of 'middle years', just as norms of whiteness and 'men' themselves have often been left untheorised – un-ethnicised/un-racialised and ungendered, respectively. Adult men typically just *are*, without both gender and age!

Critical Studies on Men examine how men and masculinities are gendered, and how those gendering processes intersect with other social relations and social divisions. This approach argues for studies on men that are critical, interdisciplinary, relational, materialist, deconstructive, anti-essentialist. Research within the field has, among other issues, focused on historical and contemporary constructions of different masculinities and developed critical approaches to the socio-cultural hegemonies, constituted in interplay between masculinities and other socio-cultural markers such as class, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality. This development has involved the interrogation of masculinities of "configurations of gender practice" (Connell 1995), including hegemonic, subordinated and other masculinities. In turn, these masculinities frames have become subject to debates and critique in terms of conceptual (un)clarity, contextualisation, embodiment, contradiction, intersectionality, and other challenges (for example, Whitehead 2002, Hearn 2004).

This special issue builds on recent critical debates on and around men, masculinity/ies, gender relations and intersectionality to (re)consider their implications for the study of boys and men at different stages of the life course. Thus, in different ways the contributions represent examples of: first, gendered (and intersectional) analyses of boys and men at different locations in the life course; and second, analyses of the life course that explicitly gender (and intersectionalise) boys and/or men.

The idea for this special issue arose from ongoing research work on Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) at Tema Genus (the Department of Gender Studies), Linköping University. CSMM is a key focus of research at Linköping (for example, Frangeur 2007) and one of the four specialist research areas at Tema Genus. All the contributors are members of The Research Group on Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, Linköping University, established May 2006. The five main contributions in this special issue are the result of two doctoral courses on CSMM held in the Autumn term 2006 and Spring term 2007 (<http://www.tema.liu.se/pub/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=8103&a=55202>). Along with these six of us producing this issue, Þorgerður H Þorvaldsdóttir was also a member of the seminar group. This research links with the work of the recently established Swedish national research council funded Gender Centre of Excellence at Linköping and Örebro Universities (GEXcel – Towards a European Centre of Excellence in Transna-

tional and Transdisciplinary Studies of Changing Gender Relations, Intersectionality and Embodiment). One of the main Themes of GEXcel is: 'Deconstructing the Hegemony of Men and Masculinities: Contradictions of Absence', and within this there is a sub-project centrally concerned with the life course, namely that on Ageing, Older Men and Disability.²

In this special issue particular attention is given to the importance of different forms of contextualisation, including methodological and regional contexts. These articles also illustrate some of the benefits of detailed studies, showing how some of the complexities and contradictions of boys' and men's life courses. The special issue seeks to question any simple, unproblematic notion of the life course, and partly for this reason the usual time chronology of most life course study is reversed in ordering the articles.

Thus, we begin with Linn Sandberg's article on older men. Drawing on feminist theory and queer theory and by way of two detailed interviews, she presents some neglected perspectives on older men's everyday lives. These include questions of embodiment, sexuality and the social construction of 'maturity'. Lucas Forsberg addresses the question of fatherhood, a subject that has been examined at length but often not strongly in relation to recent debates on men and masculinities. Through ethnographic study, he examines the everyday practices of fathers in Swedish middle class heterosexual families where an ideology of 'new', involved fatherhood appears to operate. Next, Dag Balkmar considers a range of ways in which driving and especially dangerous driving, is gendered, in the context of the Swedish governmental policy of 'Vision Zero' ('Nollvisionen'). This proposes that road safety cannot be traded for mobility. In the gender-neutral language of traffic safety policy, implicit adult men are contrasted against young(er) aged drivers constructed as problematic to traffic safety. Adult men just exist!

The last two articles are focused on younger men and boys. First, Kjerstin Andersson presents a detailed example of the construction, in language use, of the relation of violence and masculinity. The context is a study of boys who have been violent and are now in residential care, undergoing Aggression Replacement Training (ART). She shows that violence towards girls is not generally accepted, at least in terms what they say in this institutional and interview context, among these otherwise violent boys, and how when violence to a girl is admitted, the boy in question positions himself as morally justifiable, so producing a successful masculine position for himself. Finally, Paul Horton critically examines what has become a key concept in recent studies on men and masculinities, that of hegemonic masculinity. He suggests that the concept needs to be re-situated in the specific context in which it is being used. In this, he addresses hegemonic masculinity

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through searching for *traces* at regional and local levels, and their intersections. Drawing on ethnographic research in an all-boys' school in New Zealand, he analyses how the boys (re)produce hegemonic masculinity in their daily interactions.

Jeff Hearn (Guest Editor)

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I would like to thank Þorgerður H Þorvaldsdóttir for her contribution to the doctoral course group, Keith Pringle for comments for earlier drafts of this and the five main articles, and Ulf Mellström for facilitating the special issue.

Notes

- 1 For example, the course outline for Gillian Bendelow's 'Gender and The Life Course', University of Sussex, is an example of a very valuable teaching resource (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/gender/syllabus/2007/L3093.html>).
- 2 The other two sub-projects are on Transnationalisation and Virtuality.

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Key words