



MASCULINITY, (MIS)RECOGNITION AND FAILURE: NOTES FROM THE RESEARCH ON YOUNG MEN AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Prof. Artūras Tereškinas
Vytautas Magnus University

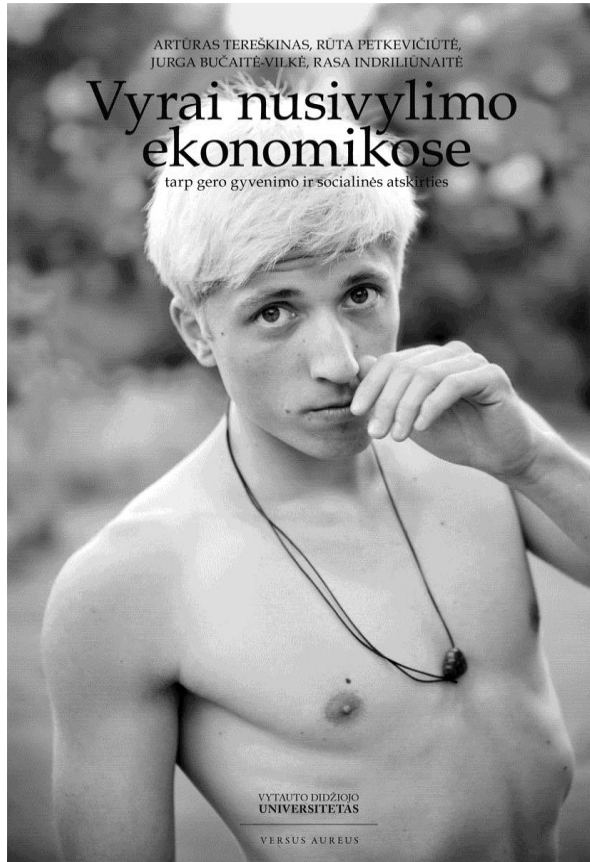
23/05/2016, Beni Mellal, Morocco



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



MEN IN THE ECONOMIES OF DISAPPOINTMENT: BETWEEN GOOD LIFE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION



This presentation is based on this book and my new article in progress “Postsocialist Gender Failures: Men in the Economy of Disappointment”.



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Masculinity as a social genre

- Masculinity as a flexible social genre that produces regularities in men's behaviour in everyday interactions.
- Masculinity patterns men's expectations and organizes ways of their behaviours, hopes and emotions.
- Moreover, different masculinities can be seen as “spaces of transformation, nodal points that are supposed to produce general social intelligibility while encrusted with constantly changing noncoherent meanings” (Berlant 1997, 86).



Masculinity as a practice

In the dominant research tradition (Carrigan, Connell, Lee 1985; Connell 1987; Adams, Savran 2002; Jagger 2008), masculinity is conceived not only as a social genre but also as a practice because to be a man means to enact an acceptable long-term performance that reiterates socially established norms of masculinity.



Masculine “norms”

- What do men have to perform and what forms do they have to reiterate?
- The “self-obvious” norms of traditional masculinity include paid work, stable income and men as family breadwinners (despite women also being employed).



Masculinity and recognition

- Judith Butler associates gender and desire, and desire, with recognition. Social norms that define gendered lives also imply desires that are not individual but socially formed.
- To desire means to desire recognition since recognition always describes social agents as socially vital beings (Butler 2004, 1–2).
- In order to be recognized, men must succumb to the dominant genre of masculinity and reproduce themselves as subjects who conform to dominant social norms.



Masculinity and recognition

- According to Athena Athanasiou, “Recognition is an apparatus that discursively produces subjects as human (or inhuman, subhuman, less than human) by normative and disciplinary terms such as those of gender, sexuality, race, and class” (Butler, Athanasiou 2013, 90).
- Gender is one of the most important normative terms that construct a valuable male subjects; it makes some male identities intelligible and respectable and exclude others as marginal and undesirable.



Masculinity and recognition

- The masculinity practices and values that prevail in contemporary Western societies, according to Skeggs define men as “reflexive, enterprising, individualizing, rational, prosthetic, or possessive” selves (Skeggs 2011, 496).



Masculinity and recognition

- In postsocialist Europe, this capitalist subject of value “pre-disposed to labour [and] driven by the lure of money” and conspicuous consumption “is promoted across government policy, political rhetoric, popular culture and academic discourse as the normative, the good and proper subject” (Skeggs 2011, 502).
- Following Skeggs (2011), it is possible to argue it is this perception of this capitalist subject of value that makes men to accept “compulsory” masculinity.



Unemployed men

- These theoretical and empirical insights (Berlant, Butler, Athanasiou, Connell, Skeggs) can be illustrated by the case study of young unemployed men in Lithuania.
- 18 semi-structured interviews with 25–39-year-old unemployed men conducted in 2013 are used for the case study. The analysed men comprised a rather heterogeneous group: almost all were not married, half of them had a university education, most men had several previous jobs, some of them held illegal seasonal jobs. All research participants were unemployed for more than 6 months.

Project “Social Exclusion and Social Participation in Transitional Lithuania” (VP1–3.1.-ŠMM-07-K-02-045) funded by the EU structural assistance to Lithuania (VP-1-3.1-ŠMM-07-K) “Support to Research Activities of Scientists and Other Researchers (Global Grant).”

Masculinity, recognition and failure

- According to their attitudes towards masculinity, work, failure and success, two types of men were distinguished.
- The first type called “men of toxic normativity” included most men was passionately attached to the norm of neoliberal successful masculinity that enabled them to sustain the illusion of both recognition and self-value. Most men of this type had a university or other higher education.
- The second group of the respondents called “impasse men” largely consisted of men with high school education and the experience of illegal temporary jobs. Their negligent attitude towards work, success and recognition was characteristic of these men.



“Men of toxic normativity”

- Although unemployment is accompanied by negative affects such as disappointment and anger, it does not destroy men’s attachment to normative masculinity and toxic optimism. What lies outside conventional understanding of success exemplified by a good job, material wealth, stable partnership/family etc. brings disappointment. But this disappointment is a consequence of personal failings and not of structural factors including the system of social welfare, the changes in the labour market and state policies towards youth employment.



“Impasse men”

- The second group of men called “impasse men” whose attitudes towards both masculinity and failure and success bring unexpected pleasures that contradict the views of the above discussed respondents.
- These men do not think of paid work as an integral part of their masculinity identity and they do not care enough (or pretend to not care) about being recognized as valuable capitalist subjects.
- For most of them, paid work is only a means to consume since, in their opinion, not work but consumption defines a “real” man. The earning of money by being involved in random short-term jobs is a sufficient measure of their masculinity.
- Material shortages or the lack of money is, in their respondents’ words, the only inconvenience in their lives.



“Impasse men”

- Shame and discomfort that accompanied unemployment did not bother all these men (or they attempted, during the interviews, to pretend that paid work played an insignificant role in their lives).
- They were cynical towards the widely accepted masculinity defined by the norm of paid work, competitiveness and financial success. Their version of masculinity was not constrained by a family, childcare or breadwinning responsibilities.



“Impasse men”

- As it was mentioned before, social (mis)recognition is dialectically related to self-worth and self-value. Hiding under the exterior of bravado, these men rejected recognition as superfluous.
- Masculinity of these is more closely related not to their desire for recognition but with their survival attempts and dreams of a “livable life” (Butler 2004).



“Impasse men”

- The norms of masculinity exist only in so far as they are actualised by men’s everyday behaviour and repetitive social practices.
- In this regard, the respondents’ bravado and careless attitude towards paid work contradict normative masculinity. It is possible to argue that the “impasse men” is least attached to this masculinity and embody the most amorphous male identity.



Conclusion

- The two groups of men – toxically normative and impasse men – discussed here differ in their attitude towards the norms of masculinity and their understanding of it as a social genre.
- By sticking to the optimistic scripts of valuable capitalist subjects, the first group of men of “toxic normativity” attempts to adjust to the version of masculinity influenced by global capitalism and neoliberal discourses.



Conclusion

- The “impasse men” did turn their failures into success by disregarding normative masculinity and constructing their lives outside the frames of successful manhood. Although living beyond an available genre of masculinity might be costly and uncomfortable, its rewards lie in accepting and wearing failure as a badge of male identity.



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