



Youth negotiation and performance of masculine identities in rural Estonia



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Masculinity
Young people
Identity performance
Affordances
Rural Estonia

This paper explores key shared places and practices through which young men in rural Estonia perform and construct masculine identities. Whereas powerful images of rural places and rural masculinity exist and are reproduced in public discourse in Estonia, not much is known about how masculinities are constructed by the 'real' rural men living in the countryside. In this paper, we draw on a participatory research project and focus on the everyday lives and places of young rural men in order to illustrate how masculine identity emerges in situated practice and interaction. Our findings show that rural gender identities are relational, dynamic and multi-faceted. The young rural men in our study actively performed different aspects of masculinities *in relation to* available physical resources and social groups. Our findings suggest that the young men are in the process of exploring a multiplicity of different ways of how to be a rural man while actively negotiating the rural context.

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'If there are only two paths for the boys in Estonia, either winning the Olympic Gold or buying vodka for mom's pension, then things are bad indeed. Couldn't we include a handy middle-class family man somewhere in-between as a respectable option for being a young man?'

(Aavik, 2013)

1. Introduction

In public discourse in Estonia, rural men are often represented as marginalized losers. 'Rural men are all dumb,' sings Vaiko Eplik, a popular Estonian rock musician. Eplik's song speaks of his disappointment at seeing the male population of rural Estonia destroy itself with alcohol abuse, violence and high-speed cars (Alas, 2007). In a similar vein, a popular short film 'Alien' ('Tulnukas') from 2006, which has earned a cult status amongst young people in both Estonia and abroad, depicts rural Estonian men as reckless short-sighted 'rednecks' (Alas, 2007). The biggest newspapers of Estonia talk about the typical rural man – the middle-aged, unemployed and unmotivated male, living with his parents and often dealing

with an alcohol problem (Tamm, 2010; Eesti Ekspress, 2010; Aavik, 2013).

Whereas powerful images of rural places and rural masculinity exist and are reproduced in public discourse in Estonia, not much attention has been paid to how 'real' men living in the countryside construct masculine identities and which kinds of masculinities are constructed. The representations of rural men seem to ascribe what Stenbacka (2011: 243) termed a 'non-negotiable rural identity', overlooking the agency of rural men in adapting and re-creating different facets of masculinity and the multiplicity of (changing) relations and places through which rural masculinities are lived out and negotiated. For example, with the decline in traditional masculine work in rural areas, young rural men in particular do not necessarily stay 'stuck' in traditional ways of performing gender identity but are rather likely to construct alternative and more flexible masculinities.

Whereas traditionally hard physical labor, mastering the technology or nature in the context of a farm, were key sites for the construction and affirmation of the 'tough' rural masculine identity (Clove, 2005), today it is not uncommon for rural men to work in health or care sectors and perform what Bye (2009: 286) termed 'caring masculinities'. Furthermore, Bye's research (2009) in rural Norway highlights that 'real' men living in rural areas do not only or predominantly construct their masculine identities in relation to (traditional) work but also emphasize their role as fathers or perform masculinity through hobby activities. Rural masculinity is hence not static but dynamic, continuously constructed and

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negotiated in different spaces and through different social relationships.

In this paper, then, while acknowledging the influence of broader economic and social processes on the rural context as well as on gender identities, we emphasize the role of everyday social relations and places in the negotiation of rural gender identities. Our aim is not to present an exhaustive picture of rural masculinities but rather to argue that rural masculinities are multi-faceted and constantly created and re-created in a variety of ways in everyday life, in relation to available physical and social resources. Drawing on [Butler \(1990\)](#), we consider masculine identity as a performance that emerges in situated practice and interaction rather than being an ascribed and static notion of social difference. In line with [Hopkins and Pain \(2007\)](#), we explore gender identity as a relational practice and pay attention to the specific effects generated by intersections of masculinity and other markers of social identity. In this paper young people's environments are conceptualized as a mix of physical and social affordances that can potentially be used for and influence the construction and performance of gendered identities ([Gibson, 1979](#)).

In the remainder of this paper we will first address three theoretical contexts relevant to the analysis of our data: gender-identity as a relational performance, social and physical factors influencing identity performance and spatial and temporal variation in identity performance. We will focus in particular on resources for identity construction available for young men (16–18 years old) in their (rural) environments. After introducing our research location, participants and methods of data collection, we examine practices in three places which emerged as key shared places of interaction for our research participants: boat trips on different rivers across Estonia; parties at home and friends' places; and dancing at the House of Culture. In the context of these places, we explore how masculinities are constructed in relation to different groups, i.e. adults, girls and urban males, and to different physical characteristics of each place.

2. The construction of gender-identity: masculinity as a relational performance

[Butler \(1990\)](#) argues that gender is not a given static structure, but rather a performance that is enacted continually at specific social sites. [Butler \(1990\)](#) sees gender as multiple, performatively constituted and in a constant flux. Within their everyday lives and local places, people constantly (re)define themselves and negotiate their identities in interaction with others ([Hopkins and Pain, 2007](#)). [Lysaght \(2002: 59\)](#) illustrates that different audiences, locations and circumstances can 'ensure a highly divergent and even contradictory performance'. [Lysaght \(2002\)](#) observed men in her research continually shifting between what she calls 'dominant' and 'subordinate' masculinities depending on their location in either their relatively safe residential communities in Belfast or outside these boundaries. When gender is conceptualized as something that individuals 'do', in contrast to something that they are (or are born into), gender is viewed as relational, contingent and subject to transformation depending upon locational and positional change ([Lysaght, 2002](#); [van Hoven and Hörschelmann, 2005](#); [Hopkins and Pain, 2007](#)).

The social context and the physical setting are the key factors influencing the performance of gender identities ([Lysaght, 2002](#); [Hopkins, 2006](#); [Bye, 2009](#)). First, the social agents, the participants as well as the 'audience' have an influence on gender performances ([Lysaght, 2002](#)). In their research with teenage boys in London, [Pattman et al. \(2005\)](#) found that boys were presenting themselves in different and at times contradictory ways depending

on the gender composition of the interview-group. According to [Pattman et al. \(2005\)](#), the presence of girls in mixed-gender interviews made the boys feel comfortable to present themselves as more sensitive and critical towards for example bullying than in male-only interviews. In a different context, [Hopkins \(2006\)](#) demonstrates the relationship between gender negotiation and age. His findings show that young Muslim men perform a different kind of masculinity in the presence of their fathers as compared to when they are with peers ([Hopkins, 2006](#)). Second, the physical location or the 'arena' of the performance can favor certain types of performances over others (cf. research on prison masculinities by [van Hoven, 2011](#)). Nature and the outdoors, for example, provide a context where men can demonstrate their ability to cope with extreme weather conditions and hostile landscapes or to 'control' the environment ([Saugeres, 2002](#); [Little, 2002](#); [Little and Panelli, 2007](#)). Particularly within the rural context, (hu)man–nature interaction is found to play an important role in the construction of powerful ideas about masculinity ([Cloke, 2005](#)). A respondent in [Bye's \(2009: 282\)](#) study, for example, pointed out that in rural Norway 'If you, as a man, are not interested in hunting and the outdoors, it can be a real problem'.

In this paper, we also draw on [Gibson's \(1979\)](#) theory of affordances as a starting point for exploring relations between identity performance and space. [Gibson \(1979\)](#) argues that elements in the environment have functional significance for individuals and can afford various opportunities for action and interaction. [Gibson \(1979\)](#) terms this significance and the resulting opportunities 'affordances'. Affordances can be physical, such as a stream affording water and cooling, but can also be social, for example the presence of other people affording opportunities for social interaction, playing or nurturing ([Clark and Uzzell, 2002](#)). For example, in their study of adolescent places [Clark and Uzzell \(2002\)](#) compared the affordances of town center, neighborhood, school and home. They found that in contrast to the town center and the neighborhood, the home as a closed indoor environment shared with family, did not afford young people opportunities for social interaction ([Clark and Uzzell, 2002](#)). Instead, the home environment had the most affordances for different types of retreat, retreat together with close friends and retreat involving security-seeking ([Clark and Uzzell, 2002](#); cf. [Trell and van Hoven, 2012](#)).

The above outlines gender identity as a *relational practice*. However, when focusing on the ways in which individuals perform and construct their identities within multiple relations and spaces, it is relevant to remember that each place carries in it a particular power-geometry. Individuals are thus never completely free to do or enact anything they want.

3. Multiple ways of being a man

Focusing on the ways in which individuals perform and construct multiple identities, [Valentine \(2007: 19\)](#) sounds a note of caution about not underestimating how the 'ability to enact some identities or realities rather than others is highly contingent on the power-laden spaces in and through which our experiences are lived'. In the case of young people, for example, age is an important factor influencing their use of and behavior in their environments. [Hopkins and Pain \(2007: 288\)](#) point out that 'people have different access to and experiences of places on the grounds of their age, and spaces associated with certain age groups influences who uses them and how'. Compared to young people, the legal and societal status of adulthood affords adults more influence, a greater voice and more freedom of action in the use of places (and the definition of barriers to places) ([Hay, 1998](#)). In 'protecting' adult places, public and commercial space or town centers in particular, young people's presence and behavior is often controlled using symbolic and

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