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'It is men who die and all that, so what is new?' Male vulnerability, institutionalised masculinity and the present absence of a problem in Swedish rescue service accident prevention

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ABSTRACT

Men die in accidents more frequently than women. However, the statistical facts do not necessarily translate into any self-evident discussion of addressing men and masculinity construction in work with accident prevention. This article draws upon theories of masculinity, affect and haunting in order to discuss social and institutional processes that support a gender-neutral approach to accidents, where the high frequency of men is just something you accept. The analyses are based on observations and interviews with people who work with accident investigation and prevention within the rescue service in Sweden. The article suggests that male vulnerability is reiterated as a haunting phenomenon beyond the responsibility of the rescue service which reproduces masculinity as a form of cruel optimism.

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Introduction

In the field of masculinity studies, a number of scholars call for a more active engagement with current developments in feminist theory (Beasley, 2013; Berggren, 2014; de Boise, 2015; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Reeser & Gottzén, 2018; Waling, 2019). One area of such possible engagement is the concept of affect (Allan, 2018; Hickey-Moody, 2019). Focusing on affect could for instance, as Reeser and Gottzén (2018) point out, shift focus from analyses of men's emotion to the intensification and channelling of affect, opening a different approach to social relations that constitute the world of men, noting that 'Hegemony works in part by playing on affective intensities, by coopting them' (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018, p. 151). In this article, I take inspiration from Allan (2018), who argue that the concept *cruel optimism* developed by Lauren Berlant may help the understanding of how affect influences the relationship between masculinity and risk. According to Allan, the concept may be used to address how masculinity is reproduced as an unattainable ideal and a fear of failure, noting that 'men seem to fail a lot at being masculine' (Allan, 2018, p. 181). However, I do not use the concept of

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cruel optimism as an analytical concept but rather as a way to address my research problem and raise concerns about the affective atmospheres of disengagement, silences and haunting associated with men's vulnerability.

In Berlant's original work, she formulates cruel optimism as a relation, where 'a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming' (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). This is according to Berlant a specifically important approach in relation to research on precarious living conditions, reinstating the potential of hope in critical analyses. The purpose of the concept of cruel optimism is to serve as an antidote to 'the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to a dream' and the way that 'dreams are seen as easy optimism, while failures seem complex' (Berlant, 2011, p. 123). Berlant's approach draws on Sedgwick's critique of the cynical mode of critical analyses and the consensus on 'the paranoid trust in exposure' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 141). According to Sedgwick, the problem with such 'paranoid reading' is its bad track record when it comes to social change of unveiling power and making wake up calls, suggesting that 'the efficacy and directionality of such acts reside somewhere else than in their relation to knowledge per se' (ibid). Instead of subjecting critical approaches to such 'strong *negative* affect theory', she asks for 'experimenting with a vocabulary that will do justice to a wide affective range' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 145).

Translated to the context of masculinity studies, this raises concerns of how critical approaches to men and masculinity are reduced to a negative affect theory. What do we for instance accomplish by stating that men engage in risky behaviours? If masculinity is a form of cruel optimism, how could we formulate critical perspectives that contribute to change in male vulnerability? In this article, it is argued that the problem with male vulnerability is not the lack of knowledge on risks or awareness or how masculinity construction influences male vulnerability. To the contrary, the awareness that men are exposed to risks and die violent deaths because of masculine ideals may itself be part of the problem, enforcing an acceptance that this is 'just the way it is', or an all too familiar effect of masculinity norms. Statistics show that men die by accident or by suicide at a significantly higher rate compared to women (Barnes, Brown, & Tamborski, 2012; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003; Phillips, 2006; Rasmussen, Haavind, & Dieserud, 2018). Of all the individuals who die in fires in Sweden, the number of men, compared to women, is reported as being almost twice the size (Jonsson, 2018). Men outnumber women as fatalities, in all ages and in all categories, except in cases of fires that are caused by abuse. In some categories of death by fire, such as intentional self-destructive actions, the number of men is five times higher than women (Bergqvist & Jonsson, 2012). The corresponding figure for accidental drowning is 83% for men, and in specific categories, such as boat accidents, the number is as high as 92% for men (Gustavsson, Olsson, & Andersson, 2013). In collisions between trains and people, men are about two or three times more likely to be the victim than women (Rådbo & Andersson, 2012). These figures are not unique, but rather reflect more general tendencies regarding men's vulnerability (Barnes et al., 2012; Marcos-Marcos, Mateos, Gasch-Gallén, & Álvarez-Dardet, 2019; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003; Phillips, 2006). These are all known and familiar facts, not least to those who work with accident prevention. Still, it does not necessarily translate into any self-evident discussion of addressing men and masculinity construction in this work.

In this article, I explore how the statistical significance of men is interpreted within professions in the field of accidents and accident prevention, more specifically the rescue service in Sweden. The aim is to develop an understanding of why the statistical facts do not necessarily translate into any self-evident discussion of addressing men and masculinity construction. Affect and cruel optimism are relevant here in order to develop an understanding of how these ‘facts’ are interpreted and known in specific ways, enforcing an affective atmosphere of disengagement and resignation within an institutional and professional setting. The article presents analyses of observations and interviews with people who work with accident investigation and prevention within the rescue service in Sweden, focusing on institutional practices that support a gender-neutral approach to accidents. It is argued that this not only reproduces men in an unmarked position in this work, but more importantly also reproduces and reinforces a silencing of men and masculinity as a societal problem.

The article first introduces research on masculinity and risk, followed by a presentation of the theoretical approach to institutions and institutionalised masculinity that is used as a frame for analyses in the article. Then the material used for the article is presented along with the research project. After this, there are two sections of analyses, the first focusing on how the statistics were interpreted and the second focusing on firefighters, who have a more of a hands-on approach and first-hand experience in handling fatal accidents, most often involving men. The article ends with a discussion on the conclusions drawn in this article.

Masculinity, risk and vulnerability

Risk and risk-taking has always been a central topic in the research on men and masculinity (Ericson, 2014; Connell, 1995; Laurendeau, 2008). Men tend to engage in voluntary risk-taking in pursuit of self-control and a stoic form of masculinity (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). As Kimmel notes, men ‘take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood’ (Kimmel, 1996, p. 129). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that the social determinants of men’s health had been addressed long before the introduction of masculinity studies. However, the theorisation of masculinity construction and hegemonic masculinity contributed with a deeper understanding of these social determinants and men’s exposure to risk. Critical studies of men and masculinity examine why men, to a larger degree than women, are attracted to dramatic and dangerous practices, including high-risk organisations (Ely & Meyerson, 2010), extreme sports (Laurendeau, 2008; Robinson, 2008), health risks (Courtenay, 2000; O’Brien, Hunt, & Hart, 2005), and resistance to security routines (Ericson, 2011; Baigent, 2001). In a study of the high rates of drowning among men in New Zealand, Moran (2011) argues that while men and women engage in aquatic activities, such as swimming, at a similar frequency, the important factor to take into consideration is *how* they engage in these activities. According to Moran, the gendered asymmetry in death rates needs to be connected to how activities such as swimming and aquatic recreation become sites of masculinity construction. Moran claims that ‘aquatic recreation is a primary site for masculinisation because of its inherent risk taking, its associated dangers, and its often very public challenge to one’s physicality’ (Moran, 2011, p. 261). In an overview of research on gendered differences in health and longevity, Marcos-Marcos et al.

(2019) stress that this is an area of research that demonstrates that we need to seriously address the ‘dominant construction of masculinity as a promoter of unhealthy practices, characterized by an assessment of attitudes of resistance, aggressiveness, risk adoption or ‘emotional illiteracy’ (Marcos-Marcos et al., 2019). The dynamics of the construction of masculinity is important to take into account if one is to make sense of the social processes and the ‘sociological autopsy’ of men’s death in accidents and suicide (Rasmussen et al., 2018).

A number of qualitative studies have demonstrated that the construction of masculinity makes men less likely to seek help or care for their health (Courtenay, 2000; Himmelstein & Sanchez, 2016; Springer & Mouzon, 2011). As pointed out by Allan (2018), as mentioned in the introduction, it seems that ‘masculinity is getting in the way of safe health’ (Allan, 2018, p. 185). This is a seemingly contradictory situation because the refusal to accept help ultimately places men in a difficult situation, where losing control over one’s body is a result of neglecting health advice. Some studies have also found that seeking care and being receptive to safety information may itself become integrated with certain masculinity constructions, for example, as a way of regaining mastery (O’Brien et al., 2005). Notwithstanding this, an increase in security measures may also encourage new risk-taking behaviour. For example, in his study of firefighters, Baigent (2001) describes how the introduction of security routines in firefighting alters masculinity construction practices. Not long ago, male firefighters would resist using protective equipment, such as breathing masks, revelling in the status of having ‘leather lungs’ and demonstrating that they did not need any technical help. This attitude changed when the firefighters began to realise that the breathing masks actually allowed them to get closer to the fire and thus exposed them to more intense heat (Baigent, 2001).

In ethnographic studies of men engaged in risky practices, it is argued that it is simplistic to blame men for taking risks, if we want to gain a deeper understanding of the motives and desires that produce male vulnerability. Men simply do not admit that their activities are dangerous, even when all the facts show them to be wrong, and this is a key to understanding the problem (Creighton, Oliffe, McMillan, & Saewyc, 2015). In ethnographic studies of men’s risk-taking practices with their use of motorised vehicles, Balkmar (2012) and Joelsson (2014) argue that it is not the risk-taking itself that these men chase, but rather avoiding risks and mastering security. Taking risks is something that the men who participated in these studies distanced themselves from, even whilst they are engaged in risk-oriented practices. Such studies reveal a dilemma: men and masculinity are strongly linked to risk exposure, but individual men report that they strongly oppose reckless behaviour. As Reeser and Gottzén (2018) point out, the virtue is not risk-taking per se, but rather the display of self-control. One alternative explanation, presented by Joelsson (2014), is that it has to do with display of being ‘care-free’ men. Joelsson notes that ‘the greaser culture creates a discourse where a lack of care for oneself and others is legitimated’ (Joelsson, 2014, p. 192). Following this, risk-taking becomes a form of power and violence on society and a tacit refusal to show care for others. Death and accidents not only affect the individual but also other people, including family and friends, as well as bystanders and the professionals who are tasked with dealing with the aftermath of an accident. Instead of assuming that risk-taking is selfish, foolish and irrational, we should think of it more in terms of an attempt to protect certain rationality and a desire for freedom from restraints and obligations.

Assuming an association of risk-taking and masculinity may also be problematic. Because such a move tends to defer the responsibility of masculinity construction onto others, the failures, for example—as in the case of the present article—the dead. In an exclusively male ethnographic study of firefighters who were tasked with monitoring fires in forest areas in the United States, Desmond (2007) describes how these men downplayed the risks that the work entailed. Desmond reports that fatal accidents were common in the profession but that the firefighters insisted that this did not prove that the work itself was dangerous. According to the firefighters, the work was not deemed to be dangerous as long as security routines were followed. From their perspective, colleagues who were injured and killed could be blamed for violating the professional code of conduct, since one should never take any risks. According to the logic employed by these firefighters, the concept of ‘risk’ was reduced to ‘the incompetence of the dead’ (Desmond, 2007, p. 250). According to Desmond, this position was also reflected in formal accident reports. For example, ‘accident investigations usually describe, if not always, the perished as unsuitable and careless’ (Desmond, 2007, p. 251).

Masculinity and haunted institutions

The focus of this article is not specifically directed at why men die, but rather how meaning is constructed around those deaths within an institutional and professional setting. This focus is based on the recognition that institutions are central to the reproduction of hegemonic power relations, such as masculinity construction (Connell, 2009; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). By examining the difficulties of addressing men and masculinity, it is possible to gain knowledge of how institutions ‘think’ and put issues such as gender in their ‘proper’ place (Douglas, 1986). This is an important approach to this article, with its focus on the institutionalised forms of masculinity. As Dorothy Smith (2005) suggests, we may learn a lot about institutions and ruling relations if we listen carefully to the frustration they create and acknowledge that people’s frustration and struggles illuminate the ‘actualities of the social’ (Smith, 2005, p. 57). This is a form of approach to institutions that starts from the assumption that institutions do not exist as an entity, but rather are produced through social practices involving discourses, affect and technology (Adey & Anderson, 2012; Puar, 2007; Rose, 2000). The critical frustration discussed in this article is a specific form of affective intensification related to death and male vulnerability and especially to the present absence of men as a relevant category in the preventative work. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon (2008) stresses that we should pay attention to how power relations are reproduced as haunting and lingering trouble, where ‘that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 17). In order to understand exclusion and power relations, she urges us to write ghost stories so that we may develop an understanding of how ‘our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted [...] by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 5). Following Gordon, it is urgent to develop an understanding of the social power of lingering trouble with male vulnerability and the ghost stories of institutionalised masculinity, or what Foucault (1990) describe as the different forms of silences caught up in the apparatus of institutions. In this way, we may develop an understanding of how masculinity is part of the work of institutions

and how institutions think or play a role in the reproduction and legitimisation of power relations (Douglas, 1986).

In this article, the work of interpreting statistics is analysed as events where participants coordinate actions and produce institutional processes, including discourse, affect and technology. When these professionals interpret statistics, they bring an 'institutional regime' into being, articulating and ordering what counts as accountable conduct within the profession (Smith, 2005). Determining *why* men die in accidents and by suicide is not self-evident but, instead, a domain of discursive and political struggles (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In order to produce a proper interpretation of the relevant statistics and develop accident prevention policies, it is required that these professionals make a number of assumptions about how these persons lived, how they felt and how they made decisions that may or may not seem irrational. Furthermore, they consider how these persons remained reluctant to make the 'right' (life-saving) decision that might seem so obvious in hindsight. Meaning-making processes articulate discourses about how a life should be lived and felt. The interpretation of statistics and the development of proactive measures is a form of 'biopolitics' which is aimed at keeping the population alive and well (Foucault, 2008) and at critically engaging in questions of which lives are recognised as 'liveable' (Butler, 2009). These discourses are expressed in talk and work practices, as well as materialised in artefacts that supposedly deal with the problem, such as installing smoke detectors, inventing self-extinguishing cigarettes and enacting building regulations. Making sense of the statistics constitutes 'discursive/affective signifying practices, involving words, affect and actions' (Mouffe, 2018, p. 73).

Researching the rescue service and the dead-men phenomena

The article is based on a research project that failed, or did not work out the way it was intended. In 2014 and 2015, I worked with a research project about how the rescue service interpreted accident statistics and developed proactive work, with a specific interest in how it interpreted the fact that most of those who die in accidents are men. This study was carried out within a broader research project funded by Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. The aim of the broader project was to produce research on the less dramatic everyday accidents and fatalities, which could support the development of proactive work and raise concerns about areas that need more attention. The study of gender issues was a separate analysis included in the project, so the project as a whole was not directed at gender issues. In our application for funding, we suggested that the project should include a study based on the recognition that men stand out in the statistics on fatal accidents. The hope was to design a research project that would integrate gender studies and more positivist and engineering approaches. In the project, this integration proved difficult, and the relevance of gender was questioned throughout the project. It was for instance expressed by colleagues in the project that gender was just included in the project to make it look good in the application. There was no real trust that gender would make a valuable contribution. In hindsight, this form of relativisation was itself a form of valuable material, reflecting the difficulties and resistance in addressing men and masculinity as a valuable perspective in accident prevention work.

My engagement in this research project had to do with my previous studies of masculinity construction in the firefighting profession (Ericson, 2011, 2014). My interest in those issues is also personal, based on my experiences of being brought up in a family where most of the men on my father's side worked as firefighters. My father, my uncle and grandfather have or had haunting memories from accident sites, some of which they would talk about and some they would not want to talk about. For example, visiting places in my hometown together with my father still bring up memories and stories about accidents that he responded to during his career as a firefighter, sometimes absurd calls and sometimes distressing memories. In addition to this, one of my cousins survived the Gothenburg discothèque fire in 1998, where 63 young people were killed. Engaging with these questions is also a personal concern related to my own experiences. I did not mention these experiences in my presentation when collecting material, but it may still have influenced the research process in other ways – in terms of a how I listen to the material and explore my own memories and position in relation to the research questions (Back, 2007).

The study includes interviews and observations of the work in a local rescue service. The interviews include seven accident investigators and firefighters from the rescue services in Sweden. The investigators and firefighters were specifically engaged in developing methods for preventative work that was directed at vulnerable populations. I contacted one person at the rescue service and presented the research project, and they immediately agreed to participate in the study. Based on my initial contact and first interview participant, I was invited to observe two formal work meetings that was arranged by the local rescue service. The meetings took place at two different fire stations, in meeting rooms where people would sit in chairs around a table and take part in presentations, take notes and engage in discussions. In the meeting, the accident investigator would present results from the compilation and processing of statistics, describing what effects their proactive work might have had and what routines that needed to be developed. The presentation was done using PowerPoint, showing pictures and statistical diagrams on a screen. The presentation also included examples of fatal house fires, with a presentation of pictures from the site and a description of what factors that the investigations suggested had caused this accident. The invited participants would engage in discussions and ask question during their colleagues' presentations, for instance, about how the new data would help in designing outward-oriented proactive activities for the firefighters or developing perspectives on relevant factors to be addressed in the writing up of accident investigations. Two different groups of about ten people participated in each of these meetings. As a participant, I took notes and I was interested in what was presented, both what was said and the pictures presented, and what discussions that would take place in this room and the rather open discussion of what the rescue service could do, as well as how it related to how they had worked in the past. I was also interested in the affective atmosphere and intensity, how it shifted and changed – for instance, how shifts in affective atmosphere in the room expressed a distinction of serious matters, heart-breaking matters, boring matters and exhilarating matters. I also noted the way the artefacts, the physical environment and the technology (e.g. smoke alarms, stoves and building regulations) were addressed.

Based on the observations, I contacted participants for interviews. The interviews were done individually, using a set of themes, based on my reflections from the discussion on the meeting and my research focus on men and masculinity. The interviews lasted between 30 min and over two hours. The interviews were recorded and partly transcribed to text. Although the participants were positive towards the research project, it was soon evident in the interviews that they could not see the relevance of gender perspective to the development of proactive work. This, in combination with not being approved to continue the research after parental leave, eventually brought the study to a halt. I did not feel comfortable with continuing to conduct interviews on a subject that the participants did not want to discuss, in such serious matters as why people die in accidents. Since there was also a lack of trust and support from the research team, I ended up disillusioned about the aim of the project. In this article, I suggest that the failures and lack of fertile ground to include gender could itself provide useful material, illustrating the challenges in directing attention to male vulnerability.

Men and fire prevention

In the interviews with the study participants, I noted that even though the questions of masculinity seemed relevant based on the statistics, it was utterly difficult to introduce this subject in the interviews and the discussions at the meetings that I observed. This was significant in relation to the strong social pathos in other areas that were expressed at the meetings that I observed. At times, the participants were very engaged in equality questions, arguing that the statistics can be explained in terms of poverty, ethnic segregation, a lack of care for people who suffer from mental illness and neglect of the living conditions for the elderly population. But with respect to 'men' as a distinct category, it was obviously much more difficult for the participants to provide substantial explanations. The people who I interviewed assured me that the fact that the majority of individuals who suffered from accidental death were men was not surprising. Their general approach was that there was not much to say about it. When the relevant statistics were presented to the participating fire fighters, one participant responded, 'Yeah, but we already knew that. We have said that for 40 years. We know that fires often start on the stove and that it is men who die and all that, so what is new?' The prevailing attitude was that the frequency with which men died in accidents was just something everyone already knew. When I discussed the study with my father, a retired firefighter, he commented: 'Yeah and the drowned men we responded to most often had their zipper open' – indicating that many of these men had fallen overboard whilst drunk and urinating. It seemed as if everyone already knew this, but that this, in some peculiar way, also made gender insignificant.

This attitude and resultant approach were also noted during my observations. In one formal meeting, an investigator presented a set of the most recent statistics to the group and asked them to discuss what possible significance these statistics had in relation to their work with developing proactive strategies. When the diagrams that were presented in these meetings indicated a relatively high number of male accidental deaths, some of the firefighters remarked, 'You can add that it is *smoking* men'. This remark suggested a shift in attention from 'men' as a gender group to a habit that had a more direct or causal effect with respect to initiating a fire – such as smoking. 'Masculinity' per se will not start

a fire, but a cigarette and a stove will. Similar approaches to obscuring gender issues, such that they were merely peripheral to preventative work, can be found in previous research and reports used within the rescue service. For instance, it may be concluded in such reports and research that ‘men are overrepresented among deaths in fire, but you do not regard being a man as itself a causal factor’ (Jonsson, 2018, p. 48). Gender may well be noticed and registered, but no explanation value is assigned to it.

From the interviews and observations, it seems that gender asymmetry was noted, but still not given any explanation value. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as if the position of men was silenced so that the problem with accidents was incorrectly presented in a gender-neutral way. But on the other hand, they also reassured me that they already knew all about this silence – which suggests that this was a specific form of silence, in the realm of a ‘been-there-done-that’ attitude. The problem was, according to them, that although they knew this already, there was still not much they could do about it. The problem was not theirs, not part of the institutional regime. One of the accident investigators who I interviewed said that the gender aspect of these deaths was difficult to integrate in their work with fire prevention *even though everyone knew it was important*: ‘We may know that, at least in deadly fires, there are more men who are affected, or who perish. And that’s just something everyone knows. But I do not think it is considered an important value in the planning of the preventive work, I would not say’. The fact that men die to a higher degree than women was a form of present absence (Gordon, 2008), not just as fatalities but also as having their gendered position recorded as significant, but still not integrated into the prevention work. The rate (relative and absolute) at which men suffer from accidental death and suicide is haunting not just because men die but also because they are regarded as hopeless cases and as self-inflicted.

The scene of accidents

Although the causal effect of masculinity and gender may be difficult to explain in statistical processing and learning from accidents at an aggregated level, the ‘man-as-a-reckless-being’ question remains a problem for those professionals who work on the front line in the rescue services and who respond to accidents. After all, most of the deceased people that they find are men. It is important to note that firefighters are not only confronted with death in conjunction with house fires. In their daily work, they also respond to car accidents, drownings and suicide scenes, for example where a person has jumped in front of a train or from a height. For these professionals, the fact that there exists a significant gendered asymmetry in the number of men who die in accidents is not just a matter of statistics, but rather, it is something that affects their conceptualisation of the work that they do. It is part of the gut-wrenching sides of their job, arriving too late and seeing the remains of a human life that could have been saved, picking up body parts at the train tracks or locating a burnt-out body in apartments where all the furniture bears visible marks of routine cigarette burnings.

To the accident investigators the frequency of men was a present absence, in the form of a problem without causal determinants. For the firefighters, however, male vulnerability could manifest much more sinister and affecting forms of haunting. In one case that was presented at one of the formal meetings which I attended, the deceased had

had the habit of putting out his cigarettes directly into his bed's mattress. In one of the follow-up interviews with one of the accident investigators, I asked about this case and what it must be like to arrive at scenes like this. There were marks of cigarette burning all over the apartment. This investigator responded that:

Firefighters may feel that someone must have known how it looks in this person's home. Someone in the world ought to have known. And you ask yourself: How come no one did anything about it? Surely some feel that way, but others may also have come to the conclusion that there is not so much that you can do.

While some firefighters surely might accept the fact that the accidents that they respond to most often involve men, there was still little interest from the participants in the study to introduce concepts such as masculinity or masculinity construction. Rather, it seemed that they would prefer to continue regarding these dimensions as just the way it is and reproducing a form of boys-will-be-boys way of thinking.

However, there are examples of firefighters who argue that the profession needs to engage more seriously with questions regarding men and masculinity. In June 2018, the Swedish trade journal *Tjugofyra7* ['Twentyfour7'] published an interview with a Swedish male firefighter who had started thinking critically about masculinity and the high rate of male fatalities. In the article, he reported that 'If society is serious about preventive work, one must try to influence men's vulnerability in accidents'. He explained that his interest in gaining a deeper understanding of masculinity and risk grew out of his frustration with his own experiences as a firefighter: 'In the fatal car accidents that I have attended during my eleven years as a firefighter, in all cases except one there was a man behind the wheel'. He also reported that when the rescue services did preventative work, it was always the case that men seemed unable to see themselves as vulnerable or in need of protection. For instance, when the rescue services handed out life jackets at the beach during summertime as part of their preventative work, he noted, 'Fathers come in and borrow life jackets for their children, but never for themselves'. The article supports the observation that concerns regarding gender (especially masculinity) are not something that firefighters lack knowledge of, but rather, they are far too familiar with these problems. According to the firefighter who was interviewed, this familiarity should be something that the rescue services need to address more actively. One way forward, according to the firefighter, could involve thinking about how men in the profession can act as role models: 'Maybe we should talk less about fires and more about suicide and about men's risk behaviour and vulnerability? Given that the emergency services are still a male-dominated organization, we could act as important role model'. The people who work for the rescue services acquire expert knowledge about how and why people die in accidents. As this specific firefighter suggests, one of the determining factors is masculinity, and there is the potential to raise concerns about how professions such as firefighters may counter such effects of masculine norms within society.

The statement made by this firefighter about acting as role models seems promising, compared to the disinterest I experienced during my interviews and observations. What is described here is that firefighters, in their role of hands-on work at accident sites, also have the ability to intervene by challenging the silences and acceptance of male vulnerability. In his statement, there are also clues to how masculinity is institutionalised, not

just as silence on why those causing accidents most often are men, but also in relation to what kind of accidents attract attention and engagement within the profession. In one of the last interviews I did with one of the accident investigators, it was expressed that some fatal accidents are rather expected because they involve people who do not live a sustainable life. These incidents will not attract the same attention and engagement in terms of learning and working with prevention, compared to accidents that are less expected: ‘You do not take it as badly when it is misery as when it is just bad luck’. As an example, she referred to a house fire where a young mother died in a house fire in a privileged area of town. As this statement and the interviewed firefighter in the article illustrate, the work with investigations and the development of prevention strategies are heavily influenced by how individuals feel and are drawn into affective intensification in response to different kinds of accidents, developing attachment to some areas of accidents rather than others – some of which they feel bad about and are haunted by and others they may rather regard as trivial and expected, such as ‘that it is men who die and all that’. As the interviewed firefighter stresses, in such a work environment and affective atmosphere, it may be much more difficult to draw attention to why men are the ‘usual suspects’ and develop proactive work that could ‘influence men’s vulnerability in accidents’.

Conclusions

As stated in the introduction, the association of masculinity and risk is well documented in the research on men and masculinity. But it is also evident that approaching this association is tricky. The relation of risk and control may be lived in a lot of different ways, such as following security routines in order to perform more daring work (Baigent, 2001), putting one’s health at stake to demonstrate a stoic form of masculinity (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018), driving cars in a reckless way to demonstrate a carefree approach to life (Joelsson, 2014) or downplaying danger by blaming those who die for being incompetent at following security routines (Desmond, 2007). Maybe it is no wonder, then, that the observation that men die in accidents more frequently than women does not translate into any self-evident discussion of addressing men and masculinity construction. While the numbers may point out an obvious problem, it is still, as participants in this study suggest, difficult to break it down to proactive work – at least within an institutional context such as the rescue service. One of the conclusions of the analyses in this article is that the concept of affect and cruel optimism may help our understanding of how male vulnerability haunts institutions, such as the rescue service, as one of the ‘things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 5). If masculinity works as a form of cruel optimism, as for instance Allan (2018) suggests, then it is not enough to put names to it or give specific evidence of why it is cruel – such as statistical numbers – as this only reiterates a form of paranoid reading, where we only see what we already know. As demonstrated here, the problem to the rescue service was not a lack of awareness of these facts, but rather, they knew it all too well. The observation that men take risks and causes accidents was considered trivial, or as being just the way it is.

A second conclusion is that masculinity as a form of cruel optimism is reiterated at an institutional level, embedded in the institutional regime of the rescue service. Saying that

men are often engaged in accidents was a form of present absence, something everyone already knew but had no interest in addressing as a problem. The present absence of male vulnerability was manifested as an affective intensification of disengagement and resignation, as an identified problem that they could not use. To raise concerns with masculinity as a relevant factor in proactive work in the way I set out to do would be regarded as naïve and undermine their sense of mastering their trade or being professional, although everyone admits it was important. When the questions of men and masculinity was brought up, it challenged the affective atmosphere of the profession, showing enthusiasm and hope in an area that 'insiders' know is just hopeless. The expression that 'Yeah, but we already knew that' is one example of how the preferred approach and the affective atmosphere of disengagement was put to practice and used to put gender issues in their proper place.

A third conclusion from the analyses is that it may be difficult to formulate a critique of masculinity and risk that does not itself maintain and feed into cruel optimism by reproducing a normative position of invulnerability and mastery in contrast to 'others' who are expected to be irrational, reckless and foolish. As stated in the introduction, this research project failed, since I was not able to establish the trust and dialogue with the profession that I needed in order to continue collecting material. The analyses show that I failed to challenge the prevalent attitude that the higher rate of accidental death and suicide for men is merely 'something that we already know about'. The point is that this is not just a problem for this study or this specific institutional setting but also of how we way conceptualise masculinity without reproducing a form of 'strong *negative* affect theory' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 145). As soon as we address masculinity and risk as a form of irrationality, inability, and out-of-control behaviour, we are already in the process of othering and feminising the position of men who are categorised as 'at risk'. In contrast to the others' problematic masculinity, the normative masculine position of being in control, being invulnerable and possessing mastery remains intact. This is a position which, ironically, is exactly the mind-set that we address as the rationale behind risk ignorance. One problem identified in this study is that there already seemed to be imaginaries of masculinity construction at play within the institutional practices for which I was collecting material, which I failed to challenge or adjust to. The study discussed here illustrates how easily theoretical concepts of masculinity construction feed into affective intensification and atmospheres of distance, disengagement and resignation that turn some lives 'ungrievable' (Butler, 2009).

Finally, this article suggests that the concept of masculinity construction may itself be haunting when it puts blame on 'other' men's cruel optimism. It makes it easy to defer problems onto others, as if we ourselves have overcome it. As Sara Ahmed warns, positioning oneself as someone who has 'overcome' is itself a form of cruel optimism of the privileged, where 'experience of aboveness creates the impression of overness' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 181). Following Sedgwick, we should maybe rather be 'experimenting with a vocabulary that will do justice to a wide affective range' (Sedgwick 2003, p. 145). A more reparative reading could start from the recognition that it is utterly difficult to speak about male vulnerability in a way that does not place blame on those men who die, supposedly because they acted in a stupid, reckless or irrational manner. The examples provided here, such as the apartments filled with cigarette burnings, call for

a much deeper understanding of the social processes behind the statistical numbers than simply blaming men for being reckless.

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