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# Young Icelandic Men's Perception of Masculinities

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**Abstract**

Iceland enjoys an international reputation as one of the most gender equal countries in the world. This article analyses how young men in Reykjavík, the country's capital, perceive masculinities as they orient themselves in surroundings where gender equality is regarded as a common goal and a behavioral norm. The analysis, based on qualitative interviews, shows that the men in the study are heavily influenced by gender equality discourse and welcome change and the ever narrowing gap between genders. At the same time, they express uncertainties as they describe both changes and stabilities in what is expected of them as men. There are clear indications that masculinity is more broadly defined than before, that nowadays more things are "permissible," and yet despite this liberalization, certain homophobic attitudes still linger on.

**Keywords**

young men, gender equality, Iceland, hybrid masculinity, fatherhood

This article explores how young Icelandic men perceive masculinities and sheds light on how they relate to different ideas and concepts of masculinity. Masculinities must be seen as a historical phenomenon, and the social practices and ideas involved must be examined (Arxer, 2011). Scholars have identified changes in ideas on masculinities in the Nordic countries in the last two to three decades, such as the emergence of "the involved father" (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015), the "decent" Nordic man (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011), and the "new father" (Eerola & Huttunen, 2011). Iceland provides an interesting setting for this kind of study as it fares well on most indicators of gender equality and has, for example, for eight consecutive years topped the gender gap list published by the World Economic Forum (The global gender gap report 2016, n.d.). The international press has even labeled Iceland "the most feminist country in the world"

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(Johnson, 2011). Therefore, looking briefly at both the historical and theoretical context should help shed light on how young men in Iceland interpret masculinity.

## Historical and Theoretical Context

The question of making theoretical sense of perceived changes in the social situation and opportunities of men and women in the last decades has resulted in a number of diverse answers. This is not least when it comes to the issue of men and masculinities where Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity has been scrutinized and found wanting in some areas.

Looking at the relatively few studies in Iceland on the main historical characteristics of masculinity, a remarkable uniformity emerges, pinpointing characteristics that may perhaps be labeled *hegemonic masculinity*. Historically, Icelandic society seems always to have valued stoic characters, independence, strength, and resourcefulness, a blend that has been described as "Viking masculinity" (Björnsson, 2002; Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). In 18th- and 19th-century Europe, individual and homogenized structures of ideal masculinities were increasingly characterized by bodily strength, self-control, independence, and character (Lorentzen, 2011), and the discourse taking place in Iceland at that time was similar. The construction of Icelandic masculinity was deeply interwoven with the nation-building efforts of the 19th and 20th centuries (Hálfdanarson & Rastrick, 2006; Matthíasdóttir, 2004), especially among the Icelandic ruling-class males. They extolled the virtues of self-discipline, courteousness, orderliness, and meticulousness embodied in the bourgeois nationalist leader Jón Sigurðsson, who emphasized the importance of self-discipline for each individual and for society as a whole (Björnsson, 2002).

For the main part of the 20th century, a combination of this bourgeois and "Viking masculinity" remained as an ideal. Being independent, strong, rational, self-disciplined, and hardworking were the ideal manly traits (Kjaran, 2015). This was also a period characterized by a clear division of labor between men and women and a similar division of what was thought to characterize men and women. This all started to change in the 1960s and 1970s when married women began to invade traditional masculine areas such as the labor market, higher education, and politics. What began then has resulted in a fundamentally changed social landscape seen, for example, in the fact that 79% of women between the age of 16 and 74 are active in the labor market, 48% of members of parliament (MPs) are women, and women are now 65% of those receiving a university degree (Statistics Iceland, 2015). These changes in the social situation of women obviously affect the social situation of men.

In their development of a theory of inclusive masculinity, Eric Anderson (2009, 2011) and Anderson and McCormack (2015) argued that men (or most men) have undergone a shift from hegemonic masculinity ideals to a more inclusive masculinity. Accordingly, men are more likely to express their feelings and show physical intimacy, such as touching or hugging each other. Moreover, Anderson has argued, performances of inclusive masculinity do not entail homophobia, because men today do not need to confirm their masculinity by distancing themselves from performances of

femininity. The reasons for such a shift are to be sought mainly in the broadened roles of women. This moving away from traditional hegemonic masculinities seems to have taken place in Iceland. Opinion polls in the 1990s showed Icelandic men wanting to work fewer hours and spend more time with their families. Voices were raised in politics and among trade unions calling for an increased focus on the role and situation of men particularly regarding their family life (Gíslason, 2007). This was met in a number of ways, but the main change came in the spring of 2000 when the Icelandic parliament unanimously granted fathers a 3-month nontransferable paternity leave, which came into full effect in 2003 (Gíslason, 2007, 2009)

Following this legislative change, between 80% and 90% of fathers have availed of this right compared with 0.2% to 0.4% who took parental leave prior to the change (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014). Studies show that the participation of fathers in daily care for their children has grown steadily (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gíslason, 2013). This means that young men growing up in the first decade of the 21 century were brought up with a different attitude toward fatherhood and childrearing than previous generations (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Gíslason, 2009).

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the ideology of neo-liberalism with its emphasis on marketization, privatization, and diminished role of governments (Brown, 2006) began to make a serious impact on Icelandic discourse and society (Ólafsson, 2011). This was based on an extreme idea of individualization, and masculinity ideals were affected. In the late 20th century, taking the initiative and becoming an entrepreneur was an evident masculine theme: being an active doer in your own life, being your own boss, and building your life, your house, and your company (Jóhannsson, 1997). These themes are somewhat similar to the traits that epitomized the risk taking, self-assured Icelandic bankers before the economic crash in 2008 (Pétursdóttir, 2011). In this atmosphere, some men distanced themselves further from feminine traits, drawing a clear line between themselves and other "less" masculine men, often using homophobic or sexist discourse disguised as jokes (Jóhannsdóttir & Hjálmarsdóttir, 2011). Nevertheless, gender equality is today an integral part of the national identity in Iceland, as it is in the other Nordic countries (Holli, Magnusson, & Rönnblom, 2005; Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). Within that identity, notions of masculinity, such as the "decent" Nordic man and the "caring father," have "been actively promoted by various policies" (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011, p. 427) and influenced public discourse.

Legislation regarding sexual orientation has also changed radically in the last three decades so that there is no longer any legal differentiation between people based on their sexual orientation (Kristinsson, 2014). This change is in line with majority views in Iceland seen, for example, in the results from the fourth European values study (conducted 2008-2010) where attitudes toward adoption by same-sex couples were more positive in Iceland than in other European countries (Takács, Szalma, & Bartus, 2016).

There is therefore a mixed scenario facing young Icelandic men today. The ideals of independence and individual strength blend very well with the neo-liberal ideology. At the same time, men are much more involved in family life and child care than before and one of the classical markers of a "real man," homophobia, has taken a

beating. Neither family life nor the caretaking of (one's own) children seems to clash with neo-liberal ideals but more so with the ideals of the strong, independent Viking, as attachment to others invites vulnerability.

Simultaneously, Icelandic men (and women) face challenges in many areas of gender equality. Apart from efforts of state institutions to initiate and promote changes toward gender equality, grassroots feminism has been vibrant in Iceland exemplified, for example, by the Slut Walk in Reykjavík which was launched in 2011 (Fontaine, 2011). The radicalism seems to be rising with the record breaking Slut Walk in July 2015 where around 30,000 people, about 9% of the population, marched in support (Kaaber, 2015). The reason for this is the ongoing battle with a sexist discourse and rape culture, which has fueled online feminist initiatives such as #freethenipple (Rúdólfsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, in press).

Anderson's theory has been criticized and scholars have argued that this shift is more in line with hybrid masculinity, where men incorporate "bits and pieces" (Demetriou, 2001) of both femininities and subordinated masculinities, which does not necessarily entail withdrawal from harmful hegemonic ideas. Moreover, that men use what is convenient and fashionable and by doing so can distance themselves from the idea of being old-fashioned without having to critically challenge traditional notions of masculinity (Bridges, 2013).

According to Bridges (2013), the change Anderson describes is inadequate evidence that we are moving toward increased gender and sexual equality. Moreover, there is considerable research indicating that what is in play here is hybridization (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) where the concept "hybrid" is used to address cultural interbreeding (Burke, 2009). Demetriou (2001), in his thorough critique of Connell's ideas about hegemonic masculinity, suggested the term "hybrid masculinity" in explaining how notions of masculinity shift. Demitriou (2001) wanted to use the concept of a hegemonic bloc that was able to reproduce patriarchy in a "constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration" (p. 355). This hybridization is then much more deceptive and unrecognizable, and what appears as counter-hegemonic and progressive might just as well be a reproduction of patriarchy (Demetriou, 2001). For example, the relationship between masculinity and homophobia can be seen as undergoing transformation so that homophobia is not disappearing but merely transforming, that is, gay culture is now something heterosexual men have to embrace in some way to show cultural integration (Bridges, 2013; Pascoe, 2007). These changes have primarily taken place among young, heterosexual, White men, which "speaks to the flexibility of identity afforded privileged groups" (Bridges, 2013, p. 61) and does not necessarily present any challenges to inequality (Bridges, 2013).

The setting for our study is therefore a society that has fairly rapidly moved in the direction of gender equality, seen as an ideal and promoted in legislation and in public discourse. In light of these changes, it is interesting to look at young men's perceptions of masculinities. The analysis shows that young men perceive a shift toward "new" masculinities in several areas in Iceland. We further discuss whether the changes they relate are merely stylistic or substantial.

## Method

This article is based on semistructured interviews with nine young men conducted between 2012 and 2014, the length varying from 90 to 180 min. Each participant was interviewed once. All the interviews were conducted in Icelandic by the first author and quotes in this article have been translated into English by the authors. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball samples. The criteria of the purpose sample included participants being between 18 and 25 years old, having no children, and living in Reykjavík. The interviewees identified other possible participants through the method of snowballing. The participants are all with one exception (Sigurður[1]) college or university students, all categorized as White and able. They all define themselves as heterosexual. Participants were asked to describe and reflect on their conceptions of masculinities. Within that framework, some themes were introduced by the interviewer while others were introduced by the participants, often surprising the interviewer. This is, however, common in semistructured interviews (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011), as the participants are given space to discuss their experiences and views (Kvale, 2007).

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a useful research tool when it comes to analyzing interviews and has the "potential to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The data were read and re-read for related themes and coded for certain research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013), for example, how the men in the study perceive available masculinities. In the second step of the analysis, the research question became more focused, that is, how do the men perceive today's masculinity? How do they use generation, age, family, women's practices, and other men's practices to articulate their position?

## Findings

During the interviews, the concepts of old and new masculinities came up. This wording was not used by the interviewer, but was introduced by the participants. It was used as a means to position themselves regarding what kind of men they perceived themselves to be. This distinction between old and new masculinities clearly manifested itself in the narratives the men put forward. What the men describe as new ideas of masculinity are not necessarily brand new, but are rather put forward to contrast the difference between the new and traditional.

The findings are divided into three sections, beginning with a reflection on what the men felt was a certain disorientation among other men regarding gender roles. This is then followed by a discussion on their perceptions of new and old notions of masculinity.

### *Disorientation?*

Feelings about disoriented notions of masculinity were evident. The men never talked about themselves as disoriented or unsure, rather they attributed insecurity and

disorientation to other men, especially young men. Sigfús said that among his generation, men were simply more confused regarding their identity, "there are so many roles to choose from." Skarphéðinn agreed and said, "men are taking on many roles at the same time . . . , young men now I think are more confused than before . . . , we take longer to educate . . . , to figure out who we are." Here, the men talk of this as a recent development, something young men are now having to contend with. They feel like there is a certain confusion regarding what it means to be a man.

Both Sigurður and Kjartan felt the same, that the idea of masculinity is in a state of flux, Sigurður stated that "the idea of masculinity is just . . . , it's neither here nor there." He adds, "I think that there are no dominating ideas . . . , there are traditional ideas, there are new ideas and there are in-betweens." Here, the men seem to be describing to some extent the paradoxes of their roles as men. They then follow up by reflecting on whether the increased independence of women has anything to do with this.

Skarphéðinn felt that men are "experiencing impotence of some kind in relation to the increased independence of women." Sigurður talked in a similar vein and said that "men are raised to rule; they learn that from the environment . . . , therefore they feel like they are losing their position." Both Sigurður and Skarphéðinn noted that they are not describing how they feel but rather how they see this as outsiders, these are not their views. Steinar, however, feels that women are allowed to express themselves more freely than men because of increasing feminism in Icelandic society. He was frustrated when he talked about feminism and said men are always afraid of being portrayed as sexist. This is not surprising as societal changes, such as gender equality initiatives, might well make some men feel threatened, as borne out in research done by Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, and Wojnowicz (2013). The men described general uncertainty regarding men's position and they in some way link that to societal changes that result in more gender equality.

It must be stated though that the men interviewed generally regard the changes the men experience as being positive and something they welcome. They feel that the gap between the sexes is narrowing and that women are now free to do things they could not before, developments they see as being positive. "Women are much more raucous and free-spirited nowadays and that's okay. The gap is disappearing," said Sigfús. Jóhann also thought that these days women are able to do more and said that "not so long ago, it was considered very unfeminine to smoke, take snuff or drink beer . . . , women now have much more space to express themselves than my mother twenty years ago." Consequently, they felt that men's roles are changing. Skarphéðinn said that men are (or should be) allowed to be sensitive and that it is manly to "embrace your flaws." Hermann said that people are not as negative toward men studying to become nurses (a heavily female-dominated profession in Iceland), and Steinar considered the impact it may have that the leader of the Icelandic Preschool Teachers' Association is a man and wondered if it has made the occupation more inviting and open for men. Sigurður said that we think nothing of it if we see a male preschool teacher, "that's just perfectly natural." The labor market is gendered in Iceland as elsewhere with nursing and preschool teaching totally dominated by women. Instances of

men studying to become a nurse or a preschool teacher are still almost nonexistent, 0 to 3 males per year for preschool teachers and 0 to 6 males per year for nursing (Gíslason, 2011). However, the men were positive toward both occupations as a possible career for men and linked that to the changes in gender roles in society.

All in all, the men were happy with the changes they thought were taking place but probably echo the discussion around them when mentioning other men being uncertain about their role and positions in some areas. It is natural that periods of rapid social change bring about a certain amount of disorientation. What is more interesting is what the men think about the possibilities and limitations when gender roles are in a state of flux.

## *New Ideas*

*Fatherhood.* The theme of fatherhood was not directly initiated by the interviewer but came up immediately when the men were asked to give their views on masculinities. They felt that the narrative around fatherhood is changing in a positive direction. They were not fathers, and for most of them, the idea itself was miles away but still had strong opinions about fatherhood. They felt that society had moved toward more equality and that men and women should share parental responsibilities. The social and legal changes concerning paternity leave, and the changes in fatherhood practice (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Gíslason, 1997, 2009), have had an effect on the men in the study. This change can be seen both in the number of fathers taking paternity leave, which jumped dramatically from 0.2% in 1997 to around 90% since the paternity leave came in to full effect in 2003 (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014), and in the steadily increased participation of fathers in the daily care of their offspring (Arnalds et al., 2013).

The ideas expressed regarding parenthood are equal rights minded. For example, Kjartan said,

> I think that a real man is someone who admits that there are two breadwinners, who spends more time with his kids. Fathers who take paternity leave, preferably for more than three months, I think they are so cool. I think that is just so masculine you know!

His notion of ideal masculinity is gender equality on the matter of childrearing, that is, that there are two caretakers as well as two breadwinners. That is how "an equal society is built," he stated. The "involved father" discourse presented in the findings by Farstad and Stefansen (2015) dominates Kjartan's opinions. Steinar also talked about paternity leave and felt that "it's not gendered anymore. Nothing regarding childrearing should be gendered . . . , it's just your obligation as a parent." This is not always the case in reality, as mothers, for example, use twice as many days in parental leave as men (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014), are much more likely to reduce their participation in the labor market due to family obligations (Ingólfsdóttir & Gíslason, 2016) and face the fact that the expectations for parenting are much more associated with the mother than the father (Gíslason, 2009). However, Steinar and Kjartan are describing an ideal image of parenthood and one that is very much adhered to by Icelanders.

Steinar expressed views that might be deemed conservative about the respective roles of fathers and mothers but that was an anomaly. This was in relation to social activities, namely, that fathers should go with their sons and mothers should go with their daughters. Birgir felt that parents should equally take care of their children, but that kids were nonetheless often more connected to their mothers (Birgir's parents were divorced and he had little interaction with his father). Jóhann described the relationship with his parents in a similar way, he could trust his mother with everything and confide in her, but he only sought help from his father when having money problems, "I can't complain about anything to my father, unless it's money, he's willing to help with money." Here, Jóhann is describing his father in what could be referred to as the traditional father role, where being the breadwinner is central to fatherhood (Eerola & Huttunen, 2011). This was similar to the experience of Sigurður, who claimed that he did not have any positive father figure and felt quite negative toward his father. Still, he was really looking forward to becoming a father himself.

It is interesting to look at those young men, not yet fathers, and with no intention of becoming fathers just yet, and see how their notions of fatherhood are very much stemming from their ideas of what it means to be a man. The young men would seem to concur that there is a change in attitude toward fatherhood and they are quite happy about that. Three of them describe their own fathers as having been distant and uninvolved, but make a distinction between the traditional and the new father figure, and in so doing clearly distance themselves from their fathers. The public discourse about fathers being active participants from the beginning is dominant, which has led to a reconstruction of cultural norms and the way fatherhood is narrated. This clearly affects the men in the study.

*Intimate friendship among men.* All of the participants talked in one way or another about friendship and emotions. The experience was that some of their friends were able to share their feelings and Skarphéðinn said, "I have friends that dare to admit if they are disappointed by something and that it affects them." Then again, they thought that some men are too confined by the old concept of masculinity that emphasized being tough and strong and not revealing one's feelings. As Jóhann put it, "I know a lot of guys that, you know, don't talk about anything and just drink."

Helgi experienced that his friendships had become more intimate as he grew older, that today there is more room for sincerity, "What has maybe changed now is that I tell them everything, tell them more about how I feel. Often I was just telling them about things that happened, but not expanding on how it made me feel."

It was evident that the men used humor and playfulness to approach other men and often serious and delicate topics could be touched on within that atmosphere, so the young men create some kind of social event around it. Sigfús explained, "If I really need him (his friend) I whip up this social event like, 'Can you come over and eat pizza and watch a DVD?' . . . Make up some activity instead of saying 'I need to talk.'" Heart to heart chats were often embedded in some activity, for example, going out for a beer, watching a DVD, or playing a videogame. Then, when this activity started, the men could open up and be frank. Jóhann elaborated, "I would call and ask 'Do you

want to come out and do something?' Then we would do that and THEN I could talk about my issue . . . I would not just call him and say, 'I need to talk.'" Although portrayed as a change by the young men, this seems to be at least partly in accordance with traditional views on masculinities where men must do something to justify being together and talk.

Many of them had more female friends than male. Jóhann, for example, finds it easier to have a sincere conversation with his female friends than the male ones. He said that some of his guy friends were so closed and competitive that they would balk at any attempt to have a sincere conversation.

In relation to showing feelings, there were many paradoxes. Jóhann especially felt that he was not allowed to share his feelings with some of his old friends and not with his father either. The issue about keeping up a certain appearance was also evident, that is, that you cannot reveal your sensitive side because then you are vulnerable. Arxer (2011) showed similar paradoxes in men's freedom to express their emotions. It is acceptable to show emotions with friends in some relations but not okay in other contexts.

The men nevertheless proclaim to having caring friendships in their life, relationships where they find a way to express emotions and give each other emotional support. This seems to indicate a movement away from stereotypical and traditional notions of masculinity, such as those shown in Skúlason's (2014) research where he interviewed Icelandic widowers. Many of them had experienced isolation after their spouses' death due to lack of close friends/social networks.

*Hybridity.* It was evident that the men distance themselves on some level from traditional ideas about masculinity. They do that, for example, by highlighting some uniqueness and thereby separating themselves from the "average Joe." Sigurður states that he does "not care about preconceived roles. I'm just really happy being who I am . . . playing the right gender role, I couldn't care less!" Here, Sigurður quickly distinguishes himself from the stereotypical man and declares his independence. This is in line with the strong individualist discourse of our time (Rose, 2010) where the individual is supposed to be able to define himself without any relation to gender norms. Kjartan also separated himself from his friends and said, "I think my ideas about masculinity are totally different from other guys. I think mine are right . . . that they are better." This was also evident in Bridges's (2013) research where his participants described their ideas and views as being better than other men's to make a distinction between themselves and "other men."

Kjartan described how becoming a feminist has changed him, "And then you become a feminist and critical thinking gives you the opportunity to change your mind." His becoming a feminist has distanced him somewhat from his old friends who made jokes about it. However, he felt like they were coming round to his way of thinking and that he has had a positive influence on them. Kjartan was the only man in the study who described himself as a feminist, the other men did not use that term. Still all of them are under the influence so to speak of what Pétursdóttir (2009) termed the "aura of gender equality." Social discourses on the importance of gender

equality and changed gender roles have had an effect on men and women alike. Sigfús explained that "now it's charming to women if I say that I iron my own shirts and that I can bake."

It is not just what you do, it is also how you appear that matters. Sigurður and Jóhann both talked about challenging the norm through one's appearance. Sigurður said,

> I think it's equally manly to look like a werewolf and to dare challenge that werewolf image, for example, by going out in public in some provocative outfit. I think that's cool and not in the least less masculine.

Here, Sigurður defines werewolf as someone manly who has a frizzy beard and hair and the provocative outfit as being something conventionally feminine, like a pink outfit. Nevertheless, being masculine is still important even when challenging the popular masculine norm. Jóhann described how he challenged the norms as a teenager by wearing women's shirts and jackets. He did this "to stand out and be unique." Later, he said that he had often "experienced myself, and talked about myself, as a lame excuse for a man." Here, he is narrating hybrid masculinity a lot like the participants in Bridges's (2013) research where some of the men described themselves as "lady-like" (p. 73).

In the prelude to the economic crash in Iceland in 2008, bankers (overwhelmingly male) were celebrated as masterminds and labeled "business Vikings" (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011), something that did not go unnoticed by the participants. They stated that money is not important to them and that other qualities are more appreciated now, like being musical or artistic. They feel that traditional male hegemony is on the decline, though ambiguity can be detected as we see in the next section.

## *Old Ideas*

*Homophobia.* In relation to homosexuality, Helgi described how men are called fags and gays when failing in soccer, especially when tackled. He said he too blurts it out from time to time. Still, he added, "I'm not that kind of guy you know who shouts at a gay guy in the street . . . I have a tolerance for, if I speak for myself, . . . , gay people." He maintained that there are prejudices everywhere, though few would verbally abuse gay people by shouting out "fucking faggot" like people do on a soccer pitch (further on masculinity and football in Iceland, see Stasi & Evans, 2013). This is what Anderson (2009) would describe as declining homophobia, that is, that homophobic jokes directed at straight men have somehow lost their derogatory meaning. However, we agree with Pascoe (2007) who states that what this means is that "fag discourse" still prevails as a policing mechanism. Helgi acknowledged that many people "have nothing against gay people." Still people seem to use the word gay as a derogatory term. Even though prejudices are rarer, according to Helgi, he thought that people still call a feminine guy, who is possibly sensitive, gay. If a man who puts a lot of effort into his looks wears a pink t-shirt, then there are people calling him " . . . fucking faggot."

Still, Helgi believed that some men would get away with the pink t-shirt, especially if those men were muscular and macho. This is in line with what Sigurður said about looking like a werewolf and dressing up in pink. It is clear that the pink color itself is not at stake here. Rather whether you have some form of social capital within the hegemonic framework, that is, where you are situated in the hierarchy of men.

Jóhann discussed homosexuality from a different angle than Helgi and used the stereotype about gay men (gay aesthetics, see, for example, in Bridges, 2013) to elaborate. For example, he claimed that he would not get away with wearing high heels, he would be considered "flamboyantly gay." He added that he could not explain to his female friends that his wearing heels was a "feminist statement," they simply would not buy it. He draws the line at high heels, but as noted earlier, women's shirts are acceptable.

Jóhann's relationship with his mother is also an issue here. He recollected, "as a teenager I was deeply concerned whether my sexual orientation was misinterpreted because of my good relationship with my mum." He connected this to the stereotype about "gay men they talk to their mum once a day . . . I call her twice a day . . . fuck, what does that mean?" Jóhann is relying on gay aesthetics to narrate his identity, making jokes about this and saying that he considers himself a lame excuse of a man, as noted earlier. When doing this, he disguises heterosexual privilege and mitigates the inequality gay people face, as explained by Kjaran (2015). In all this, it is clear that Jóhann utilizes what is at hand and makes it his own. He is situating himself within hybrid masculinity when he is distancing himself from traditional masculine ideas that he sees all around him. Instead, he associates more with femininity and subordinated masculinity as homosexuality, using gay aesthetics. This is probably easier for him to do as a young educated, straight, leftist man. He does not lose any social capital by this as other men might. If anything, he is probably increasing it by distancing himself from stereotypical masculinity.

The changes in Icelandic society regarding gay rights have had effect on the men. They distance themselves from overt hatred of gay men, but they still recognize that gay is used as a derogatory term and that what is associated with gay men (and women) is still used, under certain circumstances, as a way to make fun of and put down individual men. And, sometimes, they participate.

*Emotions.* Being emotionally disconnected and not showing how you feel is something the men in the study thought was sadly still apparent among young men. Helgi felt that the "ban" on crying is inhumane because it is natural for all humans to cry. He was rather upset when he talked about this, that men "can't do this or that, and that real men do this or that." He rejected these ideas and so did Jóhann. With his mother, Jóhann was raised to believe that it was natural to show all emotions "but on the other hand I get my father's upbringing and experience this like I have two faces." His parents are divorced and Jóhann experienced a difference in how he was free to show emotions. He felt he had two sides, meaning he could "easily play that role [the hard and emotionally reserved role], but I am very aware of the fragile little man underneath."

In Jóhann's upbringing with his father, being a man meant not showing emotions: "Everything is fine . . . even if it's not fine you know . . . and you just feel good, even if you're sick." Jóhann discussed this at length and had given this much thought, maybe because of the clear distinction between how his parents raised him. He described an incident from childhood, where his father sawed off part of his finger. He told of how his father tried to "put a brave face on it but was white as snow and fainting from the loss of blood . . . I remember thinking, 'what's wrong with him, why isn't he crying?!.'"

Skarphéðinn thought that this is a dominant characteristic in Icelandic masculinity, that is, "not showing that you are affected by things" and that "not giving a damn" is cool, being emotionally detached. "Being cool, not letting anything affect you . . . and it's really lame if it shows that you are affected and sad if the girl you like doesn't like you back," said Skarphéðinn. This, as well as Jóhann's narrative about his father, resonates with what was found in Sloan's (2012) study about gender difference in managing emotions, namely, that it is less acceptable for men to show emotions such as sadness and depression and emotional expression is tightly controlled. Sigfús similarly stated that being reckless and carefree was considered manly, this notion of "not caring, I do what I want." They were critical in the way they talk about these things and, as before, applied these qualities to their friends and not themselves.

Anger is an emotion with strong links to masculinity (Sloan, 2012). Hermann described a certain demand for showing anger. He described an incident when someone spilled his drink at a bar "and there were people there who were egging me on, and kind of pushing me to fight him. I wasn't going to. But this was something that was expected of me." Hermann felt uncomfortable under this pressure and did not want to fight.

Kjartan wondered whether not caring and being reckless would work with the girls. He said this humorously, and added that "it's important to be yourself and be caring." Still he wondered if being cool and reckless would make him more attractive to girls. He answered himself, "it doesn't, but often you know some douchebag who's with some hot chicks you know." This is something he thought about and contemplated. Understandably, a very normal question posed by young straight men in heterosexual settings is, what works with the girls? What increases my chances? What do girls like in a man? When caring masculinities, like involved fatherhood, for example, become important, emotions and men's freedom to express those emotions unavoidably end up on the agenda. This is happening with the men in the study; their struggle between the traditional and modern is very clear.

*Rivalry and competition.* According to Arxer (2011), competition is a central element in hegemonic masculinity because it "promotes hierarchy in men's relationships" (p. 412, see also Bird, 1996; Messner, 1999). Jóhann talked about this competitiveness among men. He felt like everything is a competition and therefore there is a lack of compassion. Here, Jóhann is especially referring to an all-male workplace where he used to work. He said that this vying with each other is always there regardless of the topic of discussion:

> Even if it was about what you did over the weekend, it's a competition . . . who's the best, who's strongest, who's biggest . . . then I enter the space and I'm a vegetarian you know

> . . . with long hair, wearing boot cut trousers and women's shirts, it was hard, it was just ridiculous.

Jóhann felt utterly out of place and described how this male rivalry had other negative consequences,

> Men came to work even if they were really sick . . . my dad has had three surgeries on his back you know . . . just because he has pushed his body too far because of some bullshit. So that the guy beside him won't think less of him.

Skarphéðinn talked a lot about the pressure that comes with old notions of masculinity and feels that it is still an influence. The pressure he feels as "a man in his twenties . . . is that you should not show any weakness when it comes to communicating with people, talking to women and all that. You should hold your head up high and beat your chest." Skarphéðinn thinks that men are not necessarily interested in upholding this image and said, "Men are literally put in the position where they have to show a kind of predatory behavior." He feels that this is so ingrained in men's culture that they are constantly "evaluating each other" and are very aware of their position within the group.

Not being able to show weakness and the constant rivalry is something both Jóhann and Skarphéðinn think are the worst traits in masculinity. They oppose them, feel that they are harmful, refuse to subscribe to them, and consider them "outdated."

## Conclusion

The last two to three decades have seen important changes in Icelandic social development and legislation regarding gender equality and queer rights. These changes mean that young Icelandic men today face very different realities and different notions about masculinity than their elders did.

In this article, we have shed light on how young men perceive their masculinity and how they are searching for new ways of defining themselves as men. The men in the study have been influenced by the discourse on feminism in Iceland, both in positive and negative ways. They mostly welcome the changes in gender relations and the narrowing gap between men and women in most spheres of life. They describe how expectations toward them have changed, how they can be more sensitive and caring than earlier generations of men, but at the same time, they narrate some uncertainty regarding men's positions.

The young men's experiences are mixed; on one hand, they still feel burdened by certain traditional notions of masculinity, but at the same time feel freer to express friendship and are positive toward emotionally involved parental roles, something they see as representing a new type of masculinity. When men perform hybridity of this kind today, they seem to be adding to their social capital, at least in some groups. They distance themselves from traditional ideas as well as echo the discourse of the "decent" Nordic man, pro-gender equality, and not having issues relating to something being deemed feminine or gay. The paradoxical experiences toward showing emotions clearly illustrate the complexities the men face regarding their roles.

Homophobia has sometimes been used as a means by which to measure whether masculinities have become more inclusive, but in our view that is too simplistic to explain the complexity of young men's lives. While it seems here that masculinity today is broader, that more things are "allowed," there is still latent homophobia. But the young men distance themselves from derogative views and regard homophobic phrases more as a joke. It is also evident that they use female and queer practices to position themselves as new men. This is the hybrid masculinity Bridges (2013) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) discuss and might be seen as a way to diminish privilege or an attempt to show that male privilege does not exist anymore.

The young men in our study reconfigure notions of masculinity by narrating the story of the old and new. They distance themselves from the traditional ideas and describe themselves as modern men. This distinction relies on an interpretation of old masculinity as being harsh, cruel, cold, and emotionally detached, partly what has been called "the Viking masculinity" (Kjaran, 2015). Their description of the new modern men fits well with how Þorvaldsdóttir (2011) describe the decent man, how Farstad and Stefansen (2015) discuss the involved father, and with what Eerola and Huttunen (2011) describe as the new father.

The interviewees use other men's practices as a narrative in how they describe traditional masculinity. They mirror themselves in those men to establish a sense of approval as modern men of integrity. When describing this, they are at pains to distance themselves from the older generation by, for example, describing their fathers as old-fashioned and harsh. They also attribute insecurity regarding gender roles to other men but not themselves. Thereby, they declare that changes in gender relations in Icelandic society have not affected them in a negative way, but rather that some other men feel increasingly insecure about what it means to be a man.

Some changes are more superficial or stylistic than others, or at least have not yet manifested themselves in practice. They described positive changes in attitudes toward men working in female-dominated occupations, but still very few men seek work in these professions, their numbers are in fact declining. Views on fathering, on the contrary, are matched by real change. Icelandic fathers have radically increased their use of parental leave since the change in legislation in 2000, although the numbers have declined since the cuts in social benefits following the financial crash in Iceland in 2008 (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014). That seems to indicate that the father's role as breadwinner is still relevant. The men's feelings toward fatherhood can therefore both be explained by changes in societal values regarding childrearing and parenthood, as well as the changed law on parental leave. However, in all probability, neither would have changed social practice much without the aid of the other.

The young men express their readiness to step into adulthood on the basis of gender equal values and with equal sharing between men and women of life's joys and burdens as their goal. Despite a certain ambiguity in some areas, they all seem to support the Nordic gender equality project.

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1. All the participants have pseudonyms.

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