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The Concept of Experience in Studying Men

The paper aims at introducing the concept of experience as a mediator between the pure cultural constructivism and the studies on men's everyday life. The experience is defined as a verbalization of actual events. Thus it is shaped by culture and language, but at the same time, it refers to the non-discursive realities of human life.

The problem: men between becoming and being

In opening up the concept of manliness for critical research, the idea of gender as a cultural construction has been essential. In this context, the term "masculinity" has been innovatively and diversely used to historicize the changing nature of being a man. Most commonly it has been defined as an ideal stereotype or as a "real cultural essence" of manliness. Masculinities - and especially hegemonic masculinity - can be understood as cultural constructions, which shape, direct and define the actual behavior of men. The culture "fills" men with ideals of manliness, patterns of behavior and knowledge on what a man is and ought to be.

The constructivist standpoint is not free from significant problems in Critical Studies on Men. First of all, to build up a mono-causal link from masculinity as an ideal to the actual, subjective being a man falls short in oversimplifying and generalizing the complexity of a manly subject-constitution. This shortcoming is not avoided by adding anti-types, counter-masculinities, or oppressed masculinities into the scheme¹. "Masculinity" can only grasp the *idea* of being a man; signifying a man as an object of structures and ideals. Secondly, to use the term masculinity in a very general way in the actual research process may lead into a situation where it is at the same time both the object of the study and the explanation model used to explain itself. Masculinity may become a meta-narration comparable with modernity - actually, it often comes close to being a translation of modernity in gender studies. Specific

ways of human behavior and speech are read as signs of "masculinity", which again is produced by "culture". But how is such a culture produced, if not by human subjects?

As Eve K. Sedgwick has pointed out, sometimes masculinity and men do not have anything to do with each other. In research, they must be separated as their own spheres. Also Jeff Hearn has criticized Men's Studies on concentrating too much on the abstract and often on undefined levels of masculinities instead of studying what men actually do.² Source texts which, for instance, propagate for an ultra-militant ideals of manliness, do not construct one-to-one the subjectively experienced manliness.³

Another approach on men would seem to avoid the over-interpretation of the masculinities as cultural ideals: studies on men's everyday life. To study men as having a voice of their own is certainly welcome. This perspective proportions the cultural ideals of masculinity with the subjective level of being a man and sees men more in *being* than in a mere cultural *becoming* in relation to the ideals. Here lies also the problem of perspective. As the source basis of studying men's everyday life is highly subjective (interviews, diaries, correspondence etc.), this may transfer to an "illusion of subjectivity" in the study. Furthermore, it may also create an "illusion of authenticity", which does not take into account the culturally mediated nature of "subjective" sources. In contrast to the concept of masculinity, the personal voice of men may overshadow cultural power relations, the constructive nature of being a man, and historical changes in manliness. The man stagnates into a subject of being instead of the object of becoming.⁴

Both of the above-mentioned perspectives are useful and do not have to exclude each other. But how to combine them without letting the other perspective dominate the other? A special problem concerning gender studies has been to combine a constructivist view with a subjective one without giving way to the essentialist idea of sex, which is often (implicitly) dominating in the subjective accounts of gender⁵. In the following, I attempt to apply the concept of experience into historical research on men and to contemplate on the consequences of this application.

Concept of experience: being in becoming

First of all, a difference must be made with colloquial use of the word "experience" and scientific use of the term. In the latter case, experience (*Erfahrung*) is understood as a culturally mediated form of objective events and pre-discursive impressions (*Ereignis & Erlebnis*). An experience takes its shape in continuous processing and verbalizing of impressions. Experience is an individual praxis, which at the same time reproduces, modifies and changes the social structures of knowledge. Socially accepted and understandable language gives meaning for impressions and events, thus forming an experience.⁶ Therefore, individual experiences are already culturally pre-shaped through previous experiences, through the inventory of language available and the semantic systems of interpretation, through norms and values - in short, through cultural paradigm. Experience is not a clearly definable substance of things, but a process under tension of the actual events or impressions and the socially accepted and available means to verbalize these.⁷

But experiences do not merely reflect the transfer of cultural paradigm or tradition into subjective realities. They are also formed within a tension between the past, the present context and the subject's horizon of expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*). This horizon is, of course, also a cultural construction. Nevertheless, the events and impressions, which are worked on to the experiences by the subject, do not necessarily fit in to this ideal construction - they may both consolidate or undermine the cultural paradigm forming the horizon. It seems that cultural ideals and expectations are triggered so high that more commonly than not, they are unreachable by an individual. Experiences are often nothing more than a series of unfulfilled expectations.⁸ Thus the subjects are bound to continuously re-evaluate what they have experienced, and in this process also to re-evaluate their horizon of expectations, their past, and the cultural paradigm, which presumably leads to the fulfillment of their altered expectations.

Here one can find an active role of the subject in the concept of experiences. Although language and cultural paradigm greatly determine the direction of experiences, there is a subjective sphere where individuals can both feel their existence and consider themselves as active participants in their own life. The extent of this private sphere is by no means a solid standard, but depends on the historical context. Still, even in the most totalitarian societies,

this sphere has not been completely colonized. It might be useful to understand the monolithic "cultural paradigm" more as a collection of available or forced cultural discourses, the diversity of which varies historically. Thus, a person is loaded with a (potentially) asymmetric and contradictory inventory of cultural identities, systems of interpretation, and discourses, which may lead into surprising combinations of interpreting certain events and impressions. Nevertheless, the need to share one's own experiences socially seems rather to standardize subjective experiences than to lead to complete arbitrariness.

The concept of experience and gender

The concept of experience can be translated to concern more precisely gender and men. Thus, the object of the study on men would be the experience of men in certain historical circumstances. In this context, the cultural pre-shaping of experiences could be translated as an internalization of the gender order and the gendered language bound to that. The ideals of manliness would be situated in the subject's horizon of expectations, where they would work as a sort of a production machine of the social reality. The fuel of the process is the need to become "a Man" - to identify as a man. But instead of understanding the relationship between ideal and subjective existence as a compulsive machinery without any loopholes, one should study how ideals and the gender order are indeed experienced by men and how ideals transform into action. Which are situations and mechanisms that activate certain ideals? How extensive is the available spectrum of experiencing manliness in a certain historical context? And how do the experiences of men change their cultural ideals and the horizon of future?

There is a special problem in studying men's experiences of their own gender; the mostly implicit nature of this experience. It is important to notice that culture does not only affect the verbalization of events and impressions into experiences, but that even the very perception of them is culturally shaped. Both men and women quite automatically perceive other people as men and women. This division is made at the moment of observation, and is not culturally neutral, but includes a variety of norms, expectations, and values. This "gendered gaze" takes a variety of cultural premises concerning men and women for granted,

and this axiomatic, self-assuring nature of perception does not open gender for mutual communication or negotiation process. In contrast, observations turn into “facts” and “evidence” of gender difference. The same is often true in men perceiving other men and themselves.⁹ Gender is not easily explicitly expressed or socially shared; more often, it is a part of the cultural pattern according to which people experience their life. In other words: subjects experience themselves as men and women, but they rarely directly experience their masculinity or their femininity.

Because of the mostly implicit nature of gender, historical research on men has to concentrate on premises and logic, which are embedded in the ways men talk and write about their experiences, and in what they do. When defining the subject of the study on men’s experiences, I consider it important not to predefine these experiences by using determinative categories or ideal types, which already shape the answers to the research problem. So, instead of studying what it means to be a war veteran, a father, a soldier, or a husband, it might be more fruitful to ask how did the men experience home-coming after the war, how did they experience having a child, or how did they experience their time in the army. This option would let men themselves to position cultural categories like veteranhood or fatherhood into their experiences, and it also lets women to have their word on these same experiences. In this way, a broad social reality shared both by men and women is open for research and possibly makes visible the differences and similarities in the ways men and women experience it.

In short, the concept of experience attempts to insert being into becoming - without naïveté. It concentrates on social structures, on the semantic systems of interpretation, and on the use of power, but tries to avoid making involuntary puppet-objects out of men. This is done by taking seriously and literally things men themselves say or do, as, although these things can be claimed to be “mere constructions”, they do have an impact on the social reality *per se*¹⁰. Nevertheless, the concept does not consider the ego-documents of men as being something authentic or depictive of “real essence of manliness”. They are also mediated and culturally structured testimonies. Indeed, a point of departure for the whole concept is that there does not exist some deep, authentic essence, which should have priority over “superficial levels” of reality in research. But even if such a hidden truth is an illusion, the subjective *experience* of authentic being-a-man is real and should be taken like that. So,

the concept of experience can be understood as a point of intersection between the social structures and the subject, between the objective and the subjective reality.

Consequences on research

The concept of experience opens at least the following historical relations for research: (1) structures and ideals – subjective experiences; (2) prediscursive impressions and events – verbalized experiences; (3) past and future – the space of experiencing; (4) the experiences of men – the experiences of women; and (5) the objective reality – the subjective reality. It goes without saying, that such a task as sketching experiences of men in this framework requires both diversity of methods and diversity of sources.

The sources for this enterprise can be roughly divided into those, which tell about the social, cultural and political regulation of the sphere of experiencing, and into those, which tell about the substance of the subjective experiences inside this framework. To understand the dynamics between the cultural context and the subjective experiences this division must not be understood as categorical: not only does the cultural context shape experiences, but also the socially shared experiences may start to form their cultural context.

In my study concerning the experiences of repatriation of Finnish veterans after the Second World War, the aforementioned sources consist of official documents defining this process, diagnosis principles of mentally and physically injured veterans by doctors, statistics on the social and economical background of repatriation, the public discourses on repatriation in the newspapers etc. Even further, one needs to have knowledge of preceding cultural paradigms, which the men and women of the war generation had internalized, including the ideals of manliness and the semantic systems of interpreting social reality. Luckily, this vast task has been of growing interest of both cultural and social history, and I can rely on relatively good research basis concerning more or less explicitly both the social history of repatriation and the cultural history of Finnish society in 1930's and 1940's.

Collecting and analyzing the latter group of sources, the ego-documents of the men (and women) of the war generation, seems to be a more demanding task. At the moment, my

source basis for this task is limited to about 35 "home-coming" novels written by war generation men and women in the immediate post-war years. These novels concentrate explicitly on the problems and experiences of war and home-coming. The point of departure for reading these books is that they are a mediating process between the experiences of their authors, between their artistic ambitions and conventions, and between the socially accepted and understandable way of talking about the war and the post-war society¹¹. The advantage of this genre is that they seem to offer a discursive field, where both men and women talk about the same experience of home-coming, thus making visible the similarities and differences of experience between genders. As said earlier, the imagined "authenticity" is not the selective criteria for the sources, and with this remark it can be claimed that the home-coming novels indeed tell about the experiences of their authors at a certain discursive level.

But at the same time, the highly mediated nature of the novels caused by the self-censorship of the authors and the censorship of the publishing houses situates them somewhere in the middle of the public experience of war and the subjective experiences. I wish to extend my source basis further by looking at private correspondence, diaries, and interviews, as well as accounts of public demonstrations, where veterans themselves took an active role in demonstrating their experiences and translating these experiences into a collectively shared language. But even if I would happen to find every possible source concerning the subjective experiences of the veterans, I have to accept that a great part of the veterans remained silent and that the most private sphere of experiencing will be hardly opened for research.

This leads to one more special problem of studying the experiences of men. The process of experiencing does not always lead to a clear-cut experience of a certain event. Because of the unbearable nature of the event or the lack of language to describe it, the process never breaks into the discursive level of experiences.¹² For this reason it might be necessary also to read what the ego-documents do *not* say in comparison to our expectations. Furthermore, if one accepts that there exists a subjective sphere of life outside the total reach of cultural ideals, "identity-machinery" and constructing, then the subjects may also deliberately and actively choose to stay silent and to use this retreat as a sheltering haven. To a certain extent, this logic of silence can and should be analyzed - after all, for instance the stereotypic silence of Finnish men can be seen both as a consequence and an explanation of historical

phenomenon and ideals of manliness. Silence can be both pure non-existence or fierce being and doing. Analyzing this has its limits and easily falls into speculation.

In short, the concept of experience may help to understand gender as "a way of existing"¹³ instead of being an abstract construction of ideals and norms. The concept is not based on an essentialist idea of sex; it strongly takes into account the importance of cultural gender construction. Still the emphasis on experience makes it clearer that men and women are not only produced - they also *are*.

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Notes

¹ See e.g. Mosse 1996; Schmale 2003; Schilling 2002.

² Sedgwick 1995; Hearn 1996.

³ Kienitz 2002, pp. 188-192.

⁴ Compare e.g. Walser Smith 1996, pp. 596-600.

⁵ On the problematic task of this combination, see Maihofer 1995, pp. 11-16.

⁶ Latzel 1998, pp. 17-18, 127, pp. 370-373.

⁷ Buschmann & Carl 2001; also Buschmann & Reimann 2001.

⁸ Compare Koselleck 2003a, pp. 331-335; Koselleck 2003b, pp. 67-77.

⁹ See Pasero 2001.

¹⁰ This also includes taking seriously men's experiences of being victims. As tempting as it might be to demonstrate the vagueness of such claims or juxtaposition men's victimhood to that of women's in a patriarchal society, also this experience is often part of men's social reality and thus a historical factor. For a controversial, but not a reactionary account on the issue, see Lenz 2001.

¹¹ Compare Depkat 2003, especially pp. 466-468 and pp. 475-476.

¹² Here I am, of course, talking about the trauma. Even though "trauma" did not belong to the available vocabulary of the Finnish war veterans in 1940's, I do believe it existed as a mostly undiagnosed, non-discursive psychological phenomenon. The problem of using the term is in transferring the today's diagnosis criteria and meaning of the term one-to-one to meet the social reality of the veterans in 1940's - exactly the absence of the term partly created this reality; on history of trauma see e.g. Lerner & Micale 2001.

¹³ Maihofer 1995.