CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS

IBSEN’S NORA REVISITED

Fatherhood in Ibsen

Idealised Fathers and Murderous Moms

Fear of Falling
The year 2006 marks the 100th anniversary of the death of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Throughout this year, a wide range of events will be arranged all over the world, highlighting the importance of Ibsen’s legacy and providing opportunities for fresh interpretations of his work. Ibsen proclaims the freedom of the individual: “For me freedom is the greatest and highest condition for life”, Ibsen wrote in a letter in 1882. He has made generations reflect on fundamental rights and values. Many of the social and personal conflicts in his plays are still relevant, as are the gender norms he challenges when he lets Nora leave because she no longer wants to live the confined life of a doll. Even today, some of his texts are censured and some of his plays prohibited in parts of the world.

Toril Moi, Professor of Literature at Duke University, USA and originally from Norway, says that Ibsen’s literary work is unique because he is perhaps the only male author of the 1800s who perceived the situation of women to be at least as interesting as that of men, in both a philosophical and dramatic sense. As part of the ten-year anniversary of NIKK Toril Moi gave a lecture at the University of Oslo on November 28 entitled “First and foremost a human being: Gender, body and theatre in A Doll’s House”. In this annual English edition of NIKK magasin we report from this lecture, which was based on parts of her forthcoming book on Henrik Ibsen’s plays.

Unni Langås, Professor of Scandinavian Literature at Agder University College in Norway discusses in her article why Nora in A Doll’s House is such a strong character in European drama and why she still is important for feminists worldwide. Her suggestion is that the audience can identify with and sympathize with Nora, who is so obviously trapped in a gender hierarchy, which calls for a very painful decision. She has to choose between the family, the children and a decent life for herself. Despite progress in the formal regulations of gender equality, this is still a highly relevant question for women today.

As in A Doll’s House the patriarchal father appears in almost all of Ibsen’s works. In the play The Wild Duck the family relationship is represented through the father-child relationship. In his article Jørgen Lorentzen at the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research at the University of Oslo explores three forms of fatherhood in The Wild Duck: the patriarchal father, the fallen father, and the loving, but helpless father. Ibsen’s dramatizations of fatherhood are part of a contemporary social debate in which fathers and paternal authority are subjected to a sweeping critique. Again we see how Ibsen confronts us with problems and topics still relevant today. Fatherhood, authority and masculinity in today’s society are precisely the topics of several other research contributions in this issue.

Trine Lynggard
Editor
NOR A - challenging fixed ideas
In Ibsen’s play, fixed ideas of what a woman is are challenged by Nora’s actual performance. When she performs acts that are generally reserved for men, or withdraws from practices associated with women, she shows the gender attribution of these acts to be social constructions.

PAGE 4

NORA – A Human Being
- The key sentence in A Doll’s House is Nora’s assertion that she is “first and foremost a human being”. But Nora does not claim her humanity before she has explicitly rejected three other identities: the doll, the wife, and the mother. Toril Moi pointed out in her lecture held at the University of Oslo in connection with NIKK’s ten-years anniversary.

PAGE 7

IBSEN’S THREE FATHERS
The patriarchal father, the fallen father, and the loving, but helpless father are significant forms of fatherhood in Ibsen’s drama that correspond to actual father roles in Ibsen’s time, among them the role of his own father.

SIDE 10

Texts of Scandal
What place do feelings and intimacy have within the literary field? Do forms of typical women’s literature such as the letter or the personal confidence count for proper literature?

PAGE 14

Love and Authority
Mother sets the limits, but Father resolves conflicts. A study of the parenting of Norwegian youth.

PAGE 18

speeding Boys
Examining the myth of Finnish working-class, car-oriented, fast-driving and drink-loving masculinity.

PAGE 23

Manly or Unmanly?
The group of unmanly men is an important category in the definition of masculinity.

PAGE 27

Parenthood in Murder-suicide news
How fatherhood, motherhood and violence are connected in newspaper narration.

PAGE 32
Why is Nora such an influential character in global feminism? What is the power of A Doll’s House from 1879, which still affects readers and audience worldwide? And how can gender theory contribute to a new reading of this drama? I will suggest that Nora’s lasting success is due to her actions during the whole play, where her performance brings to light the many layers of strong norms that she is struggling with. These norms constitute the gendered patterns of power in society, and through the disclosure of norms, A Doll’s House presents itself as an analysis of how gender and gender subordination is produced.
The American philosopher and feminist Judith Butler (1999) has introduced the concept of gender performativity in order to understand how gender is working. She challenges the notion of gender as a sort of natural thing, inevitably tied to our bodies, while instead insisting on the political and emotional effects of how we are physically shaped. In a similar way, Ibsen changes the focus of the nineteenth century gender debate and ideology from nature to culture, from being to performing.

In a climate where woman is economically, legally and politically subordinated because she is woman, Ibsen shows the effects of this system, and at the same time demonstrates how gender operates on the level of spoken and performed acts. This manifestation must be understood as a sign of the modernity of Ibsen’s play, as well as an intrinsic quality of the dramatic genre as such.

Gender is always connected to bodies, to materiality, but at the same time, gender difference is never just a function of bodily differences. It is always characterized by discursive practices. In Butler’s view, the concept of gender is always normative, and that is why it is empowered to draw distinctive lines – to include, exclude, and discriminate. Gender is a process where norms and regulations materialize, and this materialization takes place by means of a frequent reiteration of these very norms.

Judith Butler seeks to incorporate the materiality of the body in her consequent underlining of the fact that gender is both producer and product, that the subject within these frames of condition must relate to discursive effects based on a cultural gendering and evaluation of the body, and that it is possible to defer and change the given norms because they are not natural, but shaped by human beings.

**Acting like a man**

Ibsen’s play develops around a conflict which raises the following questions: What is a woman supposed to do? And what does she do? Nora is staged within a context where the value of her actions is estimated from the perspective of the characters themselves, but in doing so, they almost always refer to the prevailing opinion. They are citing powerful conventions that precede and enable the formation of gendered subjects. The focus of the play is specifically to expose how certain actions are carried out in opposition to general gender norms.

In Ibsen’s play, fixed ideas about what a woman is are challenged by Nora’s actual performance. When she performs acts that are generally reserved for men, or withdraws from practices associated with women, she shows the gender attribution of these acts to be social constructions and thereby contests their reified status.

Nora’s two most provocative actions take place before and after the negotiations that we see unfolding during the play’s time span. Firstly, she takes up a loan in order to go to Italy with her husband, Torvald Helmer, so that he can recover from a serious illness. Because she is a married woman, she is not legally permitted to conduct this kind of financial transaction. Moreover, since her father is mortally ill, she does not want to ask him for his signature and consequently forges the certificate of debt.

Secondly, after having experienced the harsh consequences of this act during the play, she decides to leave her husband and three children at the end. Both actions radically break with prevailing conventions, the first of which is legal and the second of which is an unwritten consensus of how a mother and wife is supposed to behave. Flanked by these two major plot complications, Nora’s performance repeatedly puts her own ideas, hopes, and illusions in conflict with the surrounding sanctions and restrictions.

Nora’s own understanding of her financial activities collides brutally with the attitudes that are slowly but surely brought to light in the dialogues with the other characters. In her eyes, she has conducted a heroic rescue project for the sake of her husband’s health. To this end, she has not only acted as an autonomous person with her own business affairs, but she has also saved money and taken on some copying in order to pay back the loan. This enterprise has given her self-esteem, because, as she puts it: “It was almost like being a man.”

In her proud revelations of her deed to Mrs. Linde, Nora experiences a sceptical response. “You’re just a child, Nora,” Mrs. Linde says and refers to the strong conventions where a woman is considered a childlike creature. Nora’s childlikeness is of course both a role that she is playing and a notion produced by speech acts like those of Mrs. Linde. When she struggles to make Mrs. Linde believe her, it is in part due to the unlikely fact that a child has been acting as the manager of the family when the husband was ill.

Krogstad is the one who teaches Nora the more far-reaching consequences of her actions. In their first conversation, he has to remind her of the facts in the case, and it becomes clear that Nora has her own values and understanding of the law. She consequently refers to the critical situation, both for her father and for her husband, and cannot accept that her behaviour should be illegal. When he confronts her with the fact that the false document can condemn her in court, she does not believe it. Her law is simply different.

The further development is fundamentally linked to Helmer and his responses to events which he does not fully understand the depths and implications of. These responses reveal, however, how systematically Helmer cites discourses that produce and corroborate male power hierarchies.

First he reinforces Krogstad’s threat by underlining his disgust towards people who forge someone else’s name and get away with it “by tricks and deception.” He also explains this kind of unethical conduct as essentially tied to mothers: “Nearly all the people who have become corrupted early in life have had liars as mothers.” The consequence is that Nora’s fear grows, and suddenly she refuses to see her children.

Then he decides not to give back Krogstad his job in spite of Nora’s very insistent requests, partly because he cannot stand Krogstad, and partly because he needs to confirm his authority as a man and director. Then, when he has read the letter from Krogstad, he reveals
his lack of integrity when he first con-
demns Nora for being “– a hypocrite, a 
liar, – worse still, – a criminal!”, and sec-
ondly when he forgives her after all, 
only because Krogstad has returned the 
forged document.

Helmers reactions expose the goal of 
his thinking and acting, namely to pro-
tect his own reputation as director of the 
bank and head of the family. Even his 
erotic life depends on the gender hierar-
chy: “I wouldn’t be a man if precisely 
this feminine helplessness didn’t make 
you twice as attractive to me.” Finally, 
Helmer appeals to Noras consciousness 
by bringing in cultural and religious 
conventions, as well as his own well-
known patronizing attitude when she is 
about to leave.

Trying to fight the attempts to 
icarcerate her within conventions, 
Nora seeks to dispute the frames of her 
entrapment and transgress the prevail-
ing understanding of what a woman is 
supposed to do. Opposing the blame 
directed towards her because of the loan 
and forged signature, she answers with 
another kind of logic. When Helmer 
appeals to her consciousness as wife and 
mother, she replies that she no longer 
believes in those concepts.

Nora explicitly challenges both 
unwritten and written laws of the socie-
ty in which she has lived her life and 
formed her personality. Noras experi-
ence in a culture with two sets of norms, 
one for men and one for women, makes 
her rethink the conditions of being a 
woman. Her concluding act is to leave 
a situation where her actions are not 
appreciated, but condemned, exactly 
because she has tried to act like a man 
while being a woman.

**Acting like a woman**

Nora’s behavior is more smoothly 
accepted when she is acting like a 
woman. Her femininity is a forceful and 
divulging demonstration of how gender 
is performed. In Nora various historic 
versions of womanliness are collected 
and exposed. She is a child, a liar, a 
dancer, a doll, a narcissist, a flirt, a 
seductress, and so on, and she clearly 
acts out her different roles. She plays 
along in order to please Helmer and 
manipulate him, but also because she 
does not want to disclose her many 
secrets, trivial and serious.

In response to Helmers explicit anti-
loan policy, she says about potential 
creditors, “Them? Who cares about 
them?” In this way, she appears to him 
and to the audience as an irresponsible, 
even cynical, person who cares about 
nothing else than her own little private 
universe. This narcissistic carelessness is 
labeled female by Helmer: “Nora, Nora, 
you’re a typical woman!”

With this statement, he is clearly cit-
ing common knowledge and simultane-
ously confirming it. His speech act defines 
a woman as superficial and narrow-mind-
ed, while Noras spoken attitudes corre-
spondingly invite him to do so. Nora is 
using femininity as a way of hiding her 
secret, and at this moment, she does not 
really comprehend the implications of this 
strategy. But the beholder, who knows her 
to be acting a part, will probably under-
stand that Noras lack of care could be illu-
sory, and the gradual revelation of her 
financial enterprise certainly confirms this 
suspicion.

Noras pivotal performance is the 
tarantella dance, which is Helmers 
choice for her appearance at the mas-
quera de. As a Neapolitan fisher girl she 
be is supposed to incarnate youth, sensual-
ity, eroticism, and chastity. Her role is a 
perfect reply to male desire, a desire that 
Helmer verbalizes very explicitly when 
the couple returns home from the party.

For Nora, however, the dance has a 
much broader significance. The actual 
performance is staged as a rehearsal 
before the ball, and Nora uses the situ-
ation in an attempt to control the course 
of events. Desperately afraid of seeing 
Helmer open the letter from Krogstad 
which will ruin his reputation, Nora is 
prepared to die. The tarantella is a dra-
matic climax and a last feast before 
catastrophe. In this scene, Nora uses her 
body as a sign for a crisis that cannot be 
verbally represented. The body is her 
ultimate language.

Noras performance opposes those 
concepts of gender that connect it either 
ito a core of identity or to superficial sig-
nification. Instead, her various roles and 
actions investigate the frames of activity 
that are culturally given and accepted 
for female behaviour. When constantly 
running into difficulties created by the 
conflict between her intentions and 
ideas, the narrow pattern of accepted 
conduct, and the quality and value of the 
offered roles, she is brought to ques-
tion the powerful norms that govern her 
life.

**Identification and deeper understanding**

Why then is Nora a strong character in 
European drama and why is she still 
important for feminists?

The impact at a personal and politi-
cal level is that the audience can identi-
fy with and sympathize with Nora, who 
is so obviously trapped in a gender hier-
archy, which calls for a very painful 
decision. Why does she have to choose 
between the family and children, and a 
decent life for herself? Despite progress 
in the formal regulations of gender 
equality, this is still a highly relevant 
question for women today.

The impact at a theoretical level is 
that Noras way of performing exposes 
how she struggles to define herself and 
her female identity in opposition to 
legal and cultural norms. By disclosing 
how gender is produced through a 
materializing of bodily and verbal acts, 
A Dolls House gives us a deeper un-
derstanding of the effects and operations of 
gender as such.

**REFERENCES**

Boler, Judith: Gender Trouble. Feminism and the 
Subversion of Identity (1999), Routledge, London and New 
York 1999

--- : Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’, 
Routledge, London and New York 1993

Ibsen, Henrik: A Dolls House (1991), English translation by 
Jean Tindale, Solum, Oslo 2002

Langås, Unni: “What Did Nora Do? Thinking Gender with 
A Dolls House,” in Ibsen Studies, forthcoming

Professor Unni Langås is Head of the 
research project Kroppens betydning. 
Konstruksjoner av kjønn i nordisk 
litteratur. 
http://www.hia.no/hum/nordisk/kroppen
IBSEN’S NORA:

“First and foremost a human being”

By journalist TURID ØVREBØ

-The key sentence in “A Doll’s House” is Nora’s assertion that she is “first and foremost a human being”. But Nora does not claim her humanity before she has explicitly rejected three other identities: the doll, the wife, and the mother, Toril Moi points out.
T oril Moi, professor of Literature at Duke University, USA and originally from Norway, is regarded as one of the world’s leading researchers in gender studies. Her latest book, a study of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, will be published as Ibsens modernisme by Pax Forlag in Oslo in May and as Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy by Oxford University in August. As part of the ten-year anniversary of NIKK, Moi gave a lecture at the University of Oslo on 28 November entitled “First and foremost a human being: Gender, body and theatre in A Doll’s House”. This lecture, which was based on parts of chapter 7 in Moi’s forthcoming book, will be published in Norwegian in the Norwegian journal Samtiden in February.

In her lecture Moi contended that Ibsen’s literary work is unique because he is perhaps the only male author of the 1800s who perceived the situation of women to be at least as interesting as that of men, in both a philosophical and dramatic sense.

- A woman should not have to choose between being a woman and being a human being, but women must often make this choice in literature and in the culture at large. In the works of Ibsen, uniquely, women are not present in the culture at large. In the works of modernism, Moi claimed.

The doll as a literary figure

When Nora attempts to explain how she feels about her life and marriage, she uses the doll figure to describe her former self. She says that her father “used to call me his baby doll, and he played with me as I used to play with my dolls” (p. 82). She, herself, carries on the tradition: “And the children in turn have been my dolls.” (p. 83). Nora leaves because she no longer wants to live the life of a doll. Toril Moi emphasized in her lecture that the doll is the most important metaphor in “A Doll’s House” and made a comparison with the use of the doll figure in Corinne, ou l’Italie by Germaine de Staël, a novel she considers to be a precursor to A Doll’s House.

- Corinne is forced to remain silent during gatherings simply because she is a woman, and she complains that she just as well could have been “a doll easily improved by mechanics”. Whether Corinne is forced to be silent or she is accused of being theatrical, she is reduced to being a mere body. In the first case, the body becomes a grave; in the second, a theatrical performance. In either case, she is not listened to, her words are not heard, and her humanity is not acknowledged. Consequently, Corinne is trapped in a dilemma in which she is either theatricalized or forced into silence, Toril Moi explained.

Like Corinne, Nora tries to assert her own existence by finding her voice. Corinne loses her voice and dies without being understood or acknowledged. Ibsen’s Nora, however, finds her own voice and asserts her humanity: “I believe that first and foremost I am a human being, just as much as you are.” (p. 84; translation amended)

Nora’s tarantella

Toril Moi also accentuated the tarantella scene in the second act as a performance in which Nora demonstrates her own humanity as opposed to her “dolliness”.

- Because of all the melodramatic elements found in the tarantella scene, it is easy to conclude that the scene only shows how Nora theatricalizes her own body, and in this way she consents to being reduced to a doll. This scene, however, goes beyond such a limited reading, Moi underlined. In her point of view Nora’s tarantella is a graphic presentation of a woman’s struggle to make her existence heard, to make it count. She also explained that the tarantella scene shows more than Nora as a dancer. It also dramatizes two different ways of regarding her dance.

- First, we have the two men. I suspect that they view her through a theatrical, semi-pornographic lens. For them, Nora’s dance is an exhibition of her body; their view of her turns her into a “mechanical doll”. But while Nora dances, Mrs. Linde, who also knows Nora’s secret, comes into the room. Mrs. Linde sees Nora’s pain; she also sees that the men do not see it. They only see Nora’s wildly agitating body, Moi pointed out. She emphasized that this scene invites the audience to see Nora both as Helmer and Dr. Rank and see her and as Mrs. Linde sees her.

- Whereas the first two theatricalize her, the third sees her as a suffering human being. But the scene does not ask us to choose between the two perspectives. If we try to choose, we will find that both possibilities result in a loss. Ibsen’s dual perspective, which I view as the awareness that it has become impossible in the modern world to distinguish between the theatrical and the authentic, plays a central role in Ibsen’s modernism, Toril Moi claimed.

She showed that the audience knows even more about what is at stake for Nora because they have just heard that she has decided to commit suicide when Helmer learns the truth:

KROGSTAD: You mean you...?
NORA: Now I have the courage
KROGSTAD: You can’t frighten me! A precious pampered little thing like you...
NORA: I’ll show you! I’ll show you!
KROGSTAD: Under the ice, maybe? Down in the cold, black water? Then being washed up in the spring, bloated, hairless unrecognizable...
NORA: You can’t frighten me. (p. 56)

This masterful exchange conveys to the audience the picture that Nora has in her head while she dances the tarantella. It explains why Nora cannot help but answering “It does” when Helmer says that she is dancing as if her life depended on it. Ibsen demonstrates once again the power of the theatre to convey a person’s inner suffering. This gives those of us sitting in the audience a precious opportunity, Moi said: If we do not acknowledge Nora’s humanity, then perhaps nobody will.
**Wife, mother, daughter**

In this way Moi showed in her lecture how Nora refuses to be a doll, but she also emphasized that Nora refuses to define herself as a wife and a mother in the following dialogue:

**HELMER.** It's outrageous that you can betray your most sacred duties in this way, **NORA.** What do you count as my most sacred duties? **HELMER.** And I have to tell you! Are they not the duties to your husband and your children? **NORA.** I have other equally sacred duties. **HELMER.** No, you don't. What "duties" might you have in mind? **NORA.** My duties to myself. **HELMER.** You are first and foremost a wife and a mother. **NORA.** I no longer believe that. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, just as much as you, - or, at least, that I'll try to become one. (T oril Moi’s translation from the Norwegian text.)

Moi argued against many critics who have insisted that if Nora wants to be a human being, she cannot continue to be a woman. Such assertions assume that a woman must choose between regarding herself as a woman or as a human being. This is a traditional trap of gender discrimination (a point Moi has previously discussed in her essay “I am a woman”). Such arguments refuse to admit that a woman can represent the universal just as much or just as well as a man. They are prisoners of a picture of gender in which the woman is always the particular, always the relative, never the ordinary, never the norm. The fact that Ibsen himself never places her humanity in opposition to her femininity is evidence of his political radicalism and his greatness as an author, Moi said.

**Refutation of Hegel**

Moi claimed that A Doll’s House can be read as a refutation of Hegel’s conservative theory on women’s role in the family and marriage. A key passage in the first act, she showed, establishes Nora’s own unconsidered acceptance of the traditional understanding of women’s position. Here Nora admits that she forged her father’s signature in order to borrow money to save her husband. Krogstad then explains to her that she has committed a crime, and claims that there is no difference between what he once did, and what Nora did, and that the law and society will come to treat them both as criminals. Nora regards this as an insult: She acted as a good wife and mother should, in the best interest of the family.

- What makes the conversation between Krogstad and Nora so Hegelian is the conflict between society’s law referred to by Krogstad and Nora’s feelings of obligation as a wife and daughter, rather than as an individual. According to Hegel, the family is not a group of individuals, but a kind of organic unit. This unit of generic members is led by the father, who is the family’s only connection to the state. Through his interaction with other men outside the family, the man achieves his individuality. Men become citizens and participate in the life of the society while women remain confined within the family unit, Moi stated.

For Hegel women never really become self-conscious individuals. They do not have access to the universal (state, law, science, art), and they do not care about this either. In the first act, Moi claimed, Nora is the personification of the Hegelian woman. She is superficial, irresponsible, concerned exclusively with her own family’s well being, and has no relationship to the law (the universal). But by the end of the play, all this has changed. Nora has undergone a transformation. She began as a Hegelian mother and daughter, and she ends up realizing that she must become an individual and that this can only happen if she has a direct relationship with the society in which she lives, not indirectly through her husband: “But I’m not content any more with what most people say, or with what it says in books. I have to think things out for myself, and get things clear.” (p. 82).

Nora even makes a point of saying that she chooses to leave her children, precisely because she is not yet a sufficiently independent individual to raise them: «As I am now, I can never be anything to them» (1998, p. 85). As long as marriage and motherhood are incompatible with women’s existence as individuals and citizens, Nora does not want any of these things.

**Something divine**

- When Helmer asks what must happen for her to return to him, Nora answers that something divine must occur: «That our life together could become a marriage» (T oril Moi’s translation from the Norwegian). For Nora the difference between a life together and marriage (which Nora now regards as an unattainable dream) is the same as the difference between living together with and without love, not in Helmer’s traditional sense, but in a new, utopian sense. Nora demands nothing less than that the concept of love be infused with a revolutionary new content. A Doll’s House rejects traditional definitions of love. What will count as love between a man and a woman in a world where women too demand to be acknowledged as individuals? What will it take for two modern individuals to build a relationship (whether we call it marriage or, simply, a life together) based on freedom, equality and love? These are questions Ibsen continually returns to. And we do as well, Toril Moi concluded.
In the play The Wild Duck Henrik Ibsen illustrates three fathers by presenting three different forms of fatherhood: the patriarchal father, the fallen father, and the loving, but helpless father. They are significant forms of fatherhood in Ibsen's drama that correspond to actual father roles in Ibsen's time.

The Patriarchal Father
Old Werle in The Wild Duck is a patriarch willing to do anything to save his own skin, including abandoning his own son. But in the end Werle emerges as the only one who seems capable of changing both his attitudes and perspective on life, and the only one capable of creating a relationship of truth and openness in his new marriage to Mrs. Sørby.

At the opening of the play, we become acquainted with Werle, both as a "stud" who has had erotic escapes and as a father who, in his instrumental reason, has not publicly acknowledged for the past 16 years that he actually has a son. His estrangement from his son is demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, Werle has not written one personal word to his son during their 16-year separation; instead, their correspondence has been strictly businesslike.

Ibsen's dramatizations of fatherhood are part of a contemporary social debate in which fathers and paternal authority are subjected to a sweeping critique. The spotlight is placed on the father, both on and off stage, and he must explain himself. The role of the father is not taken for granted.

The Wild Duck is especially effective at illustrating the significance that the various father roles may hold for the next generation. Almost as in a novel, we can read of the life connections between three generations in this tightly constructed drama.

Wild Duck Fathers
By JØRGEN LORENTZEN
Researcher at Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, University of Oslo
j.l.lorentzen@skk.uio.no

In the play we meet three real father figures in three father-child relationships: Werle-Gregers, Ekdal-Hjalmar, and Hjalmar-Hedvig. One key aspect of Ibsen’s dramas is the manner in which he weaves together these father roles. He does not separate them as three distinct forms of fatherhood, but instead demonstrates how they are interconnected through relationships, dissolutions and continuity/discontinuity. In The Wild Duck the focus is on the family relationships, or the “family sorrows,” and more precisely, the family represented through the father-child relationship.

I can hardly think of a more pervasive motif in Ibsen’s works than fatherhood. However, fatherhood is not what most of us associate with Ibsen’s dramas. Fatherhood lies in the background, ahead of the drama and underlying the dramatic interactions and scenes. Fatherhood is pervasive, yet kept discreetly in the background.

Ibsen’s dramatizations of fatherhood are part of a contemporary social debate in which fathers and paternal authority are subjected to a sweeping critique. The spotlight is placed on the father, both on and off stage, and he must explain himself. The role of the father is not taken for granted.

The Wild Duck is especially effective at illustrating the significance that the various father roles may hold for the next generation. Almost as in a novel, we can read of the life connections between three generations in this tightly constructed drama.

The Patriarchal Father
Old Werle in The Wild Duck is a patriarch willing to do anything to save his own skin, including abandoning his own son. But in the end Werle emerges as the only one who seems capable of changing both his attitudes and perspective on life, and the only one capable of creating a relationship of truth and openness in his new marriage to Mrs. Sørby.

At the opening of the play, we become acquainted with Werle, both as a “stud” who has had erotic escapes and as a father who, in his instrumental reason, has not publicly acknowledged for the past 16 years that he actually has a son. His estrangement from his son is demonstrated in a number of ways. For example, Werle has not written one personal word to his son during their 16-years of separation; instead, their correspondence has been strictly businesslike.

Their family life has consisted of an ongoing battle between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, and the most important fight between the couple was for power over their son Gregers. In this fight we recognize gender-oriented positions. Mrs. Werle is emotional and long-suffering, “sickly” and “high-strung,” as Werle calls her. Werle is rational and authoritarian. The rationality emerges since the marriage was not based on love, but on economic motivation. Later it became apparent that Werle had miscalculated, and a large dowry did not accompany the marriage. The economic motivation is clear in Werle’s persistent hate, as expressed in the drama by Werle’s bitter comment:

Werle: [...] From being a child, you’ve always had a sickly conscience. It’s a heritage from your mother, Gregers... one thing she did leave you.

Gregers: (with a contemptuous smile). That must have been a bitter pill to swallow when you found you had miscalculated, after expecting her to bring you a fortune. (VI: 196)

In the same conversation between father and son at the end of the third act, the father’s authoritarian role also emerges. Gregers says: “I didn’t dare I was scared... too much of a coward. I can’t tell you how frightened of you I was then and for a long time after, too” (VI: 196). Because Gregers was so frightened of his father, he stayed away from him for 16 years. In the end, the loss of his son has cruel consequences for Werle, who loses...
his heir when Gregers rejects all his inheritance rights out of contempt for his father.

It is often overlooked that Werle loses even more than this. He also loses his other potential heir, his illegitimate child, Hedvig. When Hedvig dies, this opportunity is also lost, and Werle finds himself completely alone again. His loneliness is also expressed in particular passages when he touches upon his own suffering. In a conversation with Gregers, he says: “I’m a lonely man Gregers; I’ve always felt lonely, all my life; but especially now that I’m getting on a bit in years” (VI: 148). He also says later: “Laughter doesn’t come so easily to a lonely man, Gregers” (VI: 150).

Werle’s authoritarian and economic rationality has not achieved any results. On the contrary, he has failed miserably. The fight between Mr. and Mrs. Werle, or a family drama based on economics rather than love, leads to loss for both husband and wife, to the son’s blind, unrealistic idealism and, ultimately, to the death of the illegitimate child.

In 1884 The Norwegian National Assembly debated the issue of separate property rights for married women. In a petition dated 12 April 1884, Norway’s most acclaimed authors at that time, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland wrote to the Norwegian National Assembly, requesting that women be granted separate property rights. They also criticized the Assembly for its unwillingness to go all the way and make these rights automatic. In April of the same year Henrik Ibsen had begun writing The Wild Duck. Its theme was the consequences of a failed marriage, in which the issue of economics and love played a key role.

The Fallen Father

The other form of fatherhood in The Wild Duck consists of the relationship between old Ekdal and Hjalmar Ekdal.

The fallen father has received little attention although this form of fatherhood was probably not so unusual in the 1800s. This omission has a likely cause: The patriarch who does not master the task of building a masculinity that is solid, acceptable and strong of character, and who thus falls by the wayside, leaves little source material about his own demise. While bourgeois men write autobiographies about their masculine achievements, there are very few who write extensively about their own failures and unmanliness.

There is a much-discussed fallen father in the Norwegian material from the 1800s, though, namely Henrik Ibsen’s own family history. His father, Knud Ibsen, was a successful businessman in Skien, who married Marichen, the daughter of the well-to-do John Andreas Altenburg. When Knud Ibsen received an inheritance following the death of his father-in-law in 1830, the Ibsen family became one of the most prosperous in Skien. However, just a few years later in 1834-35, Knud Ibsen lost the entire fortune. Partly due to over-investment and poor management and partly due to an economic recession, the family was forced to give up all its property. The family had to move from their patrician villa in Skien to a smaller house in the country. The father never recovered from this fall from their economic and social class. He died a poor, lonely alcoholic in 1877.

Henrik Ibsen, who was the family’s eldest son, left his father immediately after his confirmation in 1843 and probably made a visit home in 1850 before leaving for Christiania. After this, father and son never saw each other again. Nor did Henrik ever send a letter or greetings directly to his father and this can be seen as evidence of the pain the father’s downfall inflicted on the son.

While historical documentation on Knud and Henrik Ibsen lacks reflections on the downfall, it nonetheless tells indirectly of the great emotional cost of such a downfall: social marginalization, loss of face and position, isolation and loneliness, cooling of family relationships (between mother and father, as well as between father and son), and finally alcoholism and abject poverty. In this context, the term unmanliness is relevant. Henrik Ibsen’s relationship to his father emerges, though, in the continuous problematizing of fatherhood throughout his works. The most amenable of the fallen fathers is possibly old Ekdal in The Wild Duck.

Old Ekdal experiences a greater fall than Knud Ibsen. He is prosecuted for illegal logging, imprisoned for several years, and returns a broken man. His punishment is even harder to bear because his partner and friend, Werle, lets him down by allowing him to take all the blame for the illegal logging. He has been both punished and betrayed, and upon his return he finds that the man who betrayed him has become one of the city’s most prominent men. He seeks isolation in the attic and drowns his sorrows in alcohol. Old Ekdal has lost his masculinity and tries to restore it metaphorically by putting on his old lieutenant’s uniform once in a while and going on an illusionary hunt in the attic.

His son, Hjalmar Ekdal, is also greatly affected by his father’s downfall. He withdrew behind the blinds when his father was imprisoned, he has since moved into the dark attic with his own family, and we come to know him as a person with amazingly little self-insight and inflated notions of his masculinity and of his own role as provider. Hjalmar’s self-absorption falls into a totally different category than old Werle’s authoritarian egoism. Therefore, it is not his striking egocentrism, but his comical way of taking himself too seriously that makes him a rather pathetic and wretched fellow.

This creates a strong ambivalence in the character: clearly comical, but utterly without self-insight into his own comic effect, and at the same time, clearly pathetic, but apparently with great self-confidence.

Hjalmar behaves exactly the opposite of what we saw in Henrik Ibsen’s relationship to his own father. While Henrik leaves his father at an early age and never sees or contacts him again, Hjalmar and his father seek out each other in their sorrow over the father’s downfall.

Hjalmar’s relationship to both his father and his illegitimate child Hedvig
is unusual. He is the only man in the drama, and one of the few in all of Ibsen's works, who openly expresses love. For this reason, this part must be taken seriously, and I will do just that in the next aspect of fatherhood brought forth in The Wild Duck.

The Loving, but Helpless Father

Many Ibsen critics have taken Gregers' plan in relation to the Ekdal family too literally. That is, a genuine idealism lies at the bottom of his play-acting, and he knows the truth about the Ekdal family's false foundation.

There are good reasons to doubt that Gregers' discourse is the truest one in this work. Everything suggests that Werle is Hedvig's biological father and that Werle has actively manipulated the situation so that Hjalmar is prepared to marry Gina. The other true narrative in this drama is in fact that Hjalmar clearly married Gina for love and that he has always regarded Hedvig as his own daughter, loving her more than anything else in the world. Hjalmar has achieved a good marriage based on love rather than economic motives, in contrast to the marriage of old Werle.

Similarly, the relationship between Gina, Hedvig and Hjalmar (and old Ekdal) is characterized by solidarity and a great deal of trust in and caring for each other. There is love within the Ekdal family, in contrast to the Werle family. In a conversation with Gregers in the fifth act, after Gregers has disclosed Werle's plot against the family, Hjalmar exclaims:

Hjalmar: I can't tell you how I loved that child. I can't tell you how happy I felt every time I came home to my modest room and she would come running across to me, with her poor sweet, strained little eyes. (VI: 235)

Hedvig's relationship to her father is also shown in a clearly positive light. She runs to meet him, sits on his lap, expresses love for her father and manifests purity and goodness, always seeking out love. As the others, however, Hedvig is a product of the family she grows up in, and her feelings of love are spawned from the Ekdal family and no other. While Gregers and Hjalmar are each in their own way negatively affected by their childhoods, Hedvig is the exact opposite. She has grown up with love and expresses love.

Gregers does not see this. He is so deprived of love that he is not able to see love when it is present. His admission of the truth is therefore based on blindness to the truth that is right in front of him, the Ekdal family's relative happiness. And it is in this context that we must understand the inversion of the stage rooms.

The Werle family is wealthy, but loveless, while the Ekdal family is poor, but filled with love and warmth. Werle is characterized by a patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love.

However, it should not be ignored that Hjalmar's ability to care is limited at times. He is self-pity makes it sometimes difficult for him to show real caring. He forgets to bring something tasty to Hedvig from the party at old Werle's as he promised, and asks her to be satisfied with a menu instead. He is not willing to take responsibility for her eyes when she takes over his job to earn money for the family, so that he can go up to the dark attic:

Hjalmar: But don't ruin your eyes! Do you hear? I'm not taking any responsibility; you have to take the responsibility yourself. Understand? (VI: 179)

Hjalmar is not a mature, responsible father. He likes to be seen as the father in the house, but he does not act with the authority, which would indicate that he in fact is the father. In many ways he is truly "a man with a childish disposition," as Relling points out within the patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love. Gregers does not see this. He is so deprived of love that he is not able to see love when it is present. His admission of the truth is therefore based on blindness to the truth that is right in front of him, the Ekdal family's relative happiness. And it is in this context that we must understand the inversion of the stage rooms.

The Werle family is wealthy, but loveless, while the Ekdal family is poor, but filled with love and warmth. Werle is characterized by a patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love.

However, it should not be ignored that Hjalmar's ability to care is limited at times. He is self-pity makes it sometimes difficult for him to show real caring. He forgets to bring something tasty to Hedvig from the party at old Werle's as he promised, and asks her to be satisfied with a menu instead. He is not willing to take responsibility for her eyes when she takes over his job to earn money for the family, so that he can go up to the dark attic:

Hjalmar: But don't ruin your eyes! Do you hear? I'm not taking any responsibility; you have to take the responsibility yourself. Understand? (VI: 179)

Hjalmar is not a mature, responsible father. He likes to be seen as the father in the house, but he does not act with the authority, which would indicate that he in fact is the father. In many ways he is truly "a man with a childish disposition," as Relling points out within the patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love. Gregers does not see this. He is so deprived of love that he is not able to see love when it is present. His admission of the truth is therefore based on blindness to the truth that is right in front of him, the Ekdal family's relative happiness. And it is in this context that we must understand the inversion of the stage rooms.

The Werle family is wealthy, but loveless, while the Ekdal family is poor, but filled with love and warmth. Werle is characterized by a patriarch's rationality and emotional absence, while Hjalmar is continually present, over-emotional and non-rational. Werle's choice of a spouse was based on economics, Hjalmar's on love.
TEXTS OF SCANDAL

Feelings and intimacy in literature

By ANNE BIRGITTE RICHARD
Lecturer at Roskilde University, Denmark
ab-richard@mail.tele.dk
Conflicts between the writings of female authors and the more elevated literary canon have been legion. I wish here to discuss a particular example of this that deals with the placement of feelings and of intimacy within the literary field.

Criteria for literary and artistic assessment have for many decades now relied upon modernism's understanding of a good piece of work as a text – or a picture – characterised by being a complex and self-contained entity, in which feelings and the private domain are expressed by means of a cool and reflected form. These are criteria that relate only with difficulty to a range of forms typical of women's literature, such as the letter or the personal confidence. Do these count as proper literature, or do they rather belong in a pre-aesthetic space? We recognise the debate from the 1970s, when poems and novels deriving from the female world of experience were lumped together, dismissed as functional literature and criticised for their naïve consciousness of social and psychological relations. The assessing eye had difficulty distinguishing between texts.

Karin Michaëlis: on the verges of canon

This is a blindness which I will illustrate by pinpointing two Danish writers, one from each end of the 20th century. Karin Michaëlis (1872-1950) was very widely read and translated in her own day and known especially for her novel Den farlige Alder (The Dangerous Age) (1910), which uses wit and a play of voices and diary notes alongside sensual and painterly imagery to present the female menopause as a fate that is regarded as being the product of gender and upbringing. The novel created a scandal in its outspoken statements about femininity, which are simultaneously undermined by the play between voices, images and narratives. Equally widely read and translated was Syv Søstre sad (Seven Sisters sat) (1923) (see Jørgensen 2005), an epistolary novel in which the only voices heard are those generated by the intersecting correspondence. Michaëlis was internationally well-informed and involved – in the fight against Nazism, for example – and had to flee to USA, returning to Denmark in 1950, where she had been forgotten. In the 1970s she came to the attention of the new school of female researchers, and her writings have in recent years been treated in a number of places (von Eyben 2003, Nielsen 2002, Jørgensen 2005). However, she remains on the verges of the canon.

Tove Ditlevsen: part of the canon

My second example is Tove Ditlevsen (1917-1976), who achieved considerable popularity with her poems, her novels taken from a working class street (Barndommens Gade (Childhood's Street), 1944), her children's books about Annaise (1959-69) and her memoirs (Barndom, Ungdom, Gift, (Childhood, Youth, Married), 1967-1971), but in a constantly unresolved conflict with the modernist Parnassus. Only during the last 10 years, more than 20 years after her death, has she really been taken seriously as a poet and become a part of the canon, even for the literary theorist.

A feature which the writings of these two authors have in common is their quality of confidentiality and scandal. This is a feature that can be related directly to revelations from biographical life, to stories of marriage, sexuality and drug misuse – or indirectly to truths from the world of women that transgress a limit of normality – and literariness – and that both appeal to and repel readers. That apart, these writers are stylistically different. Michaëlis writes with feelings and pathos overlaying her language, in a way that strikes the reader with a sense of ‘Too much!’ in relation to literary norms that place a considered and cool reproduction of feelings at the top of the agenda. Ditlevsen has a directness that vibrates between the grotesque, the ironic and the seriously private confidence. Their writer’s destiny might resemble that of the much maligned feminist functional literature, but their immodest surrender to not particularly politically correct fantasies also went against the grain of the feminist canon of the time.

By way of experiment I will apply another view of their texts inspired by the last 10 years’ discussion of avant-garde art and literature, which is characterised not less by the break with a modernist perception of autonomy and representation. Avant-garde works are often described as being heteronomous, working as they do on and with the boundaries between art, institution and reality. Furthermore by being willing to incorporate fragments of the private dimension with other quotations from art, the media and the surrounding reality as a whole into a work, using this to propose a discussion of the concept of art – and of the work itself, since it is
not always easy to see where the work finishes and reality begins. Neither Michaëlis nor Ditlevsen can be termed avant-garde artists, but the perspective of this discussion of art, which has faithfully followed modernism since World War I, can be used to illustrate one aspect of the collision between elements in women’s literature and the writing of literary history.

**The indescribable**

Karin Michaëlis’ novel Over al Forstand (Beyond all Understanding) of 1907 is a framed narrative, in which an unnamed narrator, along with a number of other people, is on a visit to a manor house. By day the guests are separated. In the evenings, in the magical atmosphere of night, they assemble and discuss even those things that cannot be explained. And in this setting a priest with a ‘nobly shaped face’ steps forward and tells his life story, which gravitates between the confidences of two women. One is the fiancée of the priest of the neighbouring parish, who is carrying with her a secret which could derail her coming marriage, and the priest speaks both to her and to her unknowing and principled fiancé. So far we have a relatively traditional Chinese-box structure, and we can probably work out that the confidence deals with premarital sexuality – as always with Michaëlis of the more demonic kind.

The other woman is the priest’s wife, and he describes her reactions. There is also another source for her thoughts, since she leaves behind a diary. What the title refers to in the first instance is her relations to her husband, which go beyond good sense in their jealous and anxiety-laden obsession with the man. It is not just that she wants to know everything – she does know everything, for her powerful feelings allow her to see even those things he cannot confide in her. The priest’s narrative concludes with the death of both women. His wife dies from a heart attack, and she makes use of an advertisement to get another man to move in. This involves him moving down from the floor above, where he has been lodging with a witch-like old woman, into her husband’s bed and into the part of her sexual partner.

Reflections about a marriage and its shipwreck that are by turns grotesque, demented and apparently more reflectively psychological break down until it no longer becomes possible to find a normal path out of the novel, one that avoids the catastrophic ending, which is death. Derangement not only belongs to the main character. It is reflected in her hospital friend, who regularly breaks down because of the demands of her immovable family that she should fulfil the normal function of a housewife, but beyond that it attatches itself to almost every character and is also turned around as a question about where normality is to be found. There are similarities here to Michaëlis’ gallery of off-beat women, who at the same time insist that their fantasies and feelings have their own justification and their own truth, which undermine more rational discourse. But in the place of Michaëlis’ unnamed framing narrator, a narrator enters here, who breaks down the boundaries both inwardly towards what is narrated and outwardly towards reality – and in the process engenders a serious breakdown of boundaries between biographical document and fiction. While Michaëlis in particular sets voices and the intimate diary in motion, there is in Ditlevsen an additional move out into the media and the entire literary institution in her fictional account of a breakdown in life and literature that is at once brutal and fragile.

**The fiction of derangement – the code cracks**

Tove Ditlevsen’s novel Vilhelms værelse (Vilhelm’s Room) (1975) also lets the reader into a strange space, while at the same time through its construction it makes itself and its own narrative framework collapse - inwardly and outwardly. In the narrative framework we have a first person narrator, who wants to tell the story of the author Lise Mundus’ last days before she took her own life after her divorce from Vilhelm. The name of the principal character is taken from the novel Ansigtne (Faces) (1968), while the remainder of the family is different in the two novels. Furthermore Vilhelms Værelse contains clear traces of Tove Ditlevsen’s own life, while at the same time prefiguring her suicide. In this way reality repeats the novel just as the novel repeats reality, by including, for example, the exact text of the advertisement that Tove Ditlevsen herself placed in the personal columns a couple of years earlier.

In the novel Lise’s own voice is heard in a series of articles for a magazine, in which she talks about her marriage, which is at the same time the author’s. These two voices are alternately kept at a distance and brought together, and, in a letter to Vilhelm, Lise can quote the author’s introductory considerations almost word for word. Lise – or perhaps in truth the entire novel – is, like Michaëlis’ priest’s wife, deranged. Lise is literally deranged, since we meet her during a confinement in a mental hospital, but the derangement spreads uncomfortably through the novel and its descriptions of people and spaces. In the outer narrative Vilhelm has left his wife and, with her, his room, and she makes use of an advertisement to get another man to move in. This involves him moving down from the floor above, where he has been lodging with a witch-like old woman, into her husband’s bed and into the part of her sexual partner.

Reflections about a marriage and its shipwreck that are by turns grotesque, demented and apparently more reflectively psychological break down until it no longer becomes possible to find a normal path out of the novel, one that avoids the catastrophic ending, which is death. Derangement not only belongs to the main character. It is reflected in her hospital friend, who regularly breaks down because of the demands of her immovable family that she should fulfil the normal function of a housewife, but beyond that it attaches itself to almost every character and is also turned around as a question about where normality is to be found. There are similarities here to Michaëlis’ gallery of off-beat women, who at the same time insist that their fantasies and feelings have their own justification and their own truth, which undermine more rational discourse. But in the place of Michaëlis’ unnamed framing narrator, a narrator enters here, who breaks down the boundaries both inwardly towards what is narrated and outwardly towards reality – and in the process engenders a serious breakdown of boundaries between biographical document and fiction. While Michaëlis in particular sets voices and the intimate diary in motion, there is in Ditlevsen an additional move out into the media and the entire literary institution in her fictional account of a breakdown in life and literature that is at once brutal and fragile.
The open text

In her discussion of the reader’s stance, Rita Felski (2003) proposes that women’s (post-)feminist reading should allow an interplay between readings that are aesthetic, those that are theoretically based and those that are grounded in involvement or feeling. Literary texts themselves also create one or more models for reading, and these two novels both create and provide opportunities for a number. The reader swallows them but is also repelled by them, incensed by their scandalous breaking of taboos, by Karin Michaëlis’ insistence on confidences from beyond the grave, by Tove Ditlevsen’s scandalous crossing and re-crossing of the threshold of the novel. Vilhelm’s Room presents in words the readers’ indignation at themselves and at their interest in a book that is familiar, as I have said, from the avant-garde tradition as a whole, right back to Marcel Duchamps’ now canonised installation of a pissing at an exhibition in New York in 1917 under the pseudonym of R. Mutt. And not least we are familiar with it from a range of modern performance and graphic artists, such as Elke Krystufek (b. 1970) who in her artwork Satisfaction in 1994 masturbated before an audience, and H. Anna Wilke (1940-1993), who in work created during her cancer illness portrayed herself and her sick body in postures that quoted her youthful works.

The woman artist presents herself here as that which she also is, namely an object in a culture that knows only one gender, the male, and one look of desire – that which is directed at the female. The artwork that plays with and against this figure arouses an unrest, which also involves spectators directing their gaze at their own spectating, like the reader chasing lustfully through Tove Ditlevsen’s text. In these two writers’ texts – as with H. Anna Wilke, for instance – we find a particular blend of coarseness and exposure, a narcissistic display of the so-called feminine, the body, desire, fantasy, and occasionally a black humour that underlines the porous boundaries between play and earnest in the artistic project. The break with good taste and the appeal to passion rather than reflection, often connected in fiction with a narrative set of events, collides with the canonised taste that discriminates and determines the hierarchy of the literary landscape. Both these writers’ work deals with a questioning of what good literature and good womanhood is, and for that reason demand a reading that is able to think about both taste and gender. The literary canon – in itself a special hybrid in the borderland between literature, politics and pedagogical thought – has had difficulties in accepting this particular mixture and the questions it poses to apparently generally accepted criteria of quality. Such an acceptance also demands an abandonment of the illusion that it is possible to write permanent lists of what constitutes good literature. In the meantime in Denmark Tove Ditlevsen has come in from the cold. Karin Michaëlis is still waiting.

REFERENCES:
Anne Birgitte Richard, doctorate in 2005 with the dissertation Køn og Kultur (Gender and Culture), is involved with literary history, editor of Nordisk Kvindelitteraturhistorie (Nordic Women’s Literary History). Currently working on a project about literature, feelings and affect (including expression, confession, performance. female positions in art and literature) and on, among others, Karin Michaëlis for a new Danish history of literature.
This article is based on a study of the parenting of Norwegian youth and uses some of the data collected for the study: stories about authority and love as narrated by 20 couples with a son or a daughter of about 15 years of age, and 20 interviews with teenagers (Hennum 2002). The analysis given describes the setting of limits in the private sphere and illustrates a power narrative: power as an element in the relations between generations. It shows that gender gains significance in these narratives.

The setting of limits; power and violence
The setting of limits proved to be a practice of authority that could activate the power present in relations between parents and teenagers. Power was understood by the parents to be something...
that they had to exercise or use in order to have their way in limit-setting situations: locking a door so that their son or daughter could not go out, for example.

Power was used when conflicts of interest aroused between the parents and their teenage child concerning a limit. The exercise of power was used with the intention of gaining a result in one's favour when negotiating a limit. That is, using means which could force the other person to act according to one's will. There were many means of exercising power and they were used by both the parents and the teenagers. Power was thus something that flowed between the mother, father and teenager. Use of violence was the ultimate form of exercise of power aiming at setting a limit.

Detailed descriptions of the exercise of power provided insights into the ways in which it can provoke violence when limits are set - both violence by the parents directed at the teenagers and violence by the teenagers against the parents. By using violence the teenagers destabilized the structure of the authority relation, while the violence-using parents (in general fathers), tried by these means to re-establish the conventional structure of authority. The teenagers' violent acts were triggered by negative responses to their requests to get money or go out. For example, a locked door could provoke a fight between father and daughter. In most cases, the fight ended when one of those involved was hurt and started bleeding. The parents also mentioned hitting, kicking, breaking furniture, throwing hard objects towards the mother or father, throttling and fighting as violent acts.

The violence enacted by the parents was often provoked by the father pulling the son or daughter away from the mother, usually into their bedroom, in order to avoid the mother being hit. In some cases the father considered it necessary to hold his son or daughter onto the floor since nothing else worked. Pulling away the teenager, or keeping him or her on the floor was not an easy task, since the teenagers clearly resisted these acts. The parents in the study described such situations as involving a
lot of screaming, anger, scuffle: sometimes the parties involved were physically hurt and quite often material damage to the home was done. Usually a limit-setting situation involving violence ended with the teenager getting his or her own way.

According to the data, violence between generations caused feelings of both guilt and shame in those involved in the action. Therefore such actions were kept as secrets within the family. "It’s not something one wants to talk about, since then both him and me get labelled", as one mother put it. However, the parents still used the concept "violence" and described an act as "violent" in relation to the setting of limits.

None of the teenagers mentioned that they used violence at home or that their parents used violence against them. To a very large extent, the teenagers gave an image of their family relations that was in line with cultural expectations pertaining to youth. They described themselves as challenging teenagers and their parents as responsible parents who set limits. In this way, they made themselves and their families seem ordinary, while the parents did the opposite in mentioning the teenagers’ use of violence. They talked about the extraordinary.

When was violence mentioned?
Not all actions involving open exercise of power were mentioned as violent actions. Narratives of violence show that the mothers and fathers described their son or daughter as violent, or defined the actions as violent on the basis of an overall evaluation of the situation.

There were a number of circumstances that must be present for an action to be described as violent or for a teenager to be regarded as violent. Firstly, it was only in connection with the setting of limits that the parents mentioned that their teenager became or was violent. Further, the teenager in the family had to have carried out actions that led (or could have led) to one of the adults getting injured and/or resulted in material damage. The actions also had to have occurred on more than one isolated occasion. Repeated actions made the mothers and fathers adopt the notion of violence. Finally, the actions had to create fear (i.e. fear of physical or material damage). The fear aroused by the actions had to be so strong that it resulted in the teenager getting his or her way – gaining power over the parents – by carrying out such actions.

In their narratives, the parents mentioned two persons exercising violence: the teenagers and mainly the fathers. But, as was mentioned earlier, the parents described their own actions as an exercise of power with the aim of setting limits, not as violent actions. Thus, they represented their own exercise of power as legitimate, while the teenagers’ exercise of power became illegitimate and stigmatizing. Mothers and fathers regarded extensive exercise of power as a sign of coercion in the relationship, and they dissociated themselves from it since it threatened the intimacy that they wished to have with their son or daughter. The fact that mothers and fathers chose not to set limits by using violent action in order to maintain their relations with their son or daughter, can be an explanation as to why they did not regard themselves as being violent. According to them, they did not overstep the mark that would result in disrupting their contact with their son or daughter.

The teenagers, on the other hand, did seem to overstep this mark; in some situations the parents had to protect themselves against a son or daughter who in that case was described as violent. Violent actions were depicted as actions carried out by teenagers lacking control, who “no longer knew what [they] were doing”. This stood in contrast to the mothers’ and fathers’ narratives of themselves as responsible adults who carried out well-considered actions.

Mothers’ challenges
The study of the use of authority in families with a 15-year-old child reveals that it is the mother who in practice instigates the use of power - which often led to violent responses. If the mother did not take the fights over schoolwork, or when to get home at night, no conflicts emerged and neither was there any requirement of use of power. Few fathers proved to actually take the initiative in setting limits.

The mothers were the ones who set the limits in the first instance, since the teenagers both turned to their mother with different issues and put up resistance against her. In cases where the mother was very patient or persistent, the father was not drawn into the situation. When the conflict between the mother and her son or daughter escalated, the father changed from a passive to an active participant in the conflict. Thus, the conflicts did not start with the fathers, but were resolved by the fathers exercising power and putting an end to the negotiations.
This did not mean, however, that the limit was respected, or that the authority was accepted. When the conflicts with the mother escalated and turned violent, the father had few opportunities to successfully exercise authority.

Authority is supposed to produce voluntary obedience without the exercise of power. According to Lincoln (1994), women often have to manifest the power of their authority in order to achieve obedience. But when they do so, they disqualify themselves as authorities. Thereby he notes that women can possess power and handle the symbols of power, but they do not have authority. When, for example, mothers decided that their teenager was not to go out in the evening, the authority should have consisted in the son or daughter voluntarily respecting the set limit about not going out. At the moment when a mother deems it necessary to lock the door and thus manifest the power that so far was implied by her authority, she is no longer a woman with authority, but a woman exercising power. The reaction to an exercise of power can, as mentioned above, be violent actions on the part of the teenager. A mother exercising power breaks the cultural expectations pertaining to how a mother should behave in relation to her child. These mothers were described in negatively loaded terms in some contexts, for example by child welfare authorities.

Privat vs. public sphere
Lincoln (1994) notes that the location where the acts of authority are carried out is important in order to understand the ways in which authority gains legitimacy. This point is relevant for exploring the exercise of authority within the home. In some narratives the mothers mentioned that they had searched the room of their son or daughter looking for proof to confirm suspected use of drugs. They wished to confront the teenager with what they had found so that he or she would understand why he or she could not go out, or why the mother could not give him or her the freedom requested. When some of the teenagers mentioned to the staff at a child welfare institution that their mothers had rummaged in their things, the mothers were described as dominant or controlling in the case documents. They had violated a space which is culturally regarded as private.

At institutions, the teenagers’ rooms are also searched regularly, sometimes without prior notice. The explanation for the searches at the institutions was that it is forbidden to keep and use drugs within institutions. The law has to be followed, and statutes were found in the legislation that enable such searches. It is, however, common knowledge that it is not allowed to keep and use drugs at home, either. There is a general prohibition against drugs in Norway. Nevertheless, the searches acquired a different meaning at the institutions than at home. It became an expression of positive authority and was regarded as legitimate. At home, on the other hand, the search was seen as an act of power by a mother against her son or daughter – something that is culturally seen as a violation. The mothers did something that mothers are not supposed to do: they mixed love and power.

Combining love and power
In scientific literature, the relations between mother and child are mostly described in terms of caring, where practices of love occupy a central position. Authority is implicitly regarded as a part of caring, and is seldom explored as a theme separate from that. The absence of studies on mother-child relations as an authority relation reveals a cultural understanding of what women symbolise or should symbolise in our culture, that is, love in the sense of caring and intimacy (Jamieson 1998, Seymour & Bergudey 1999).

In research on fatherhood, on the other hand, the notion of authority is strongly present. This is particularly clear in studies problematising connections between problematic behaviour in children and the absence of their father (Marsi 1993, Burman 1994, Shapiro et al. 1995). These studies see the father as wanted not primarily as a caring person, but as a clear symbol of authority and limits.

 Mothers and authority not being a theme in studies on motherhood does not mean that mothers do not exercise authority. But there are several indications that women will not be affirmed as mothers by being authorities. Women are accepted as mothers by mastering the cultural codes of love and intimacy. The lack of studies on authority and mothers can be interpreted as an expression of what writers on authority point out as being the eternal problem of authority: it must be legitimated constantly. Without legitimacy there is no authority.

Power does not provide authority with the necessary legitimacy when gender is made relevant. Love and power even prove to be contradictory, in some cases incompatible, when the focus is on motherhood. A combination of love and power contributed to the devaluation of women as mothers. A relevant question here is how women can become mothers exercising authority instead of mothers exercising power? In other words, how can mothers become legitimate authorities, not just legitimate providers of love?

References
Hennun Nicole (2002). Kjærlighetsøkonomier. Oslo: FORSPØRGET.

This article was first published in Norwegian in NIKK magasin 2-2005.
Speeding Boys and the Romantics of Destruction

By HELI VAARANEN
Dr.soc.sci, Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki, Finland
hvaarane@valt.helsinki.fi

Every year, thousands of young people, fresh driver’s license holders, join a variety of car cultures in Finland. Working class youths of the motorsports-loving nation embrace weekend lifestyles such as cruising, speeding and street racing. On Friday and Saturday Nights, these youths take to the streets to manifest their driving skills, to be with their peers, to meet girls and to encounter their enemies in “close combat” in traffic. Success in this car culture is a priority since the boys do not feel they can truly warrant sex unless they have achieved status in the subculture, which is judged by other men.
Frequently occurring, deadly accidents often involve aged “teen cars” such as a Ford Capri 1972 or a Toyota Corolla 1985. Teen cars are overloaded with passengers who drink and enjoy a joyride at high speed. Intoxicated males aged 18-20 and with lower education dominate the accident statistics for young people, thus confirming the myth of Finnish working-class, car-oriented, fast-driving, drink-loving masculinity. Between 1998 and 2000, 75 percent of young people killed in road accidents in Finland were young men.

**Speed and the desire to control**

“We drive bloody fast, that’s the emotion we got! That’s the emotion there is throughout this country!” Tom, 24 years, shouted an answer to my question about emotions and driving while recovering in his home from a severe speeding accident. Immersed in car cultures, young men give in to an elementary desire in Finnish masculinity: the desire to control horsepower. The cultural dream of mastering a machine can be found even in the ancient Finnish myths of Kalevala in which it was a great machine, the “Sampo”, that brought wealth and prosperity to people. In Finland a father shows his fidelity to this cultural value when he teaches his son to drive, often at the age of 6-8.

Controlling horse power on the streets is made into art at weekends. There are games and challenges: “Who gets there first?” On Friday and Saturday nights young men worship the car and the engine. But this worship is taken lightly.

Controlling horse power on the streets is imperative to reputation management. The gained reputation belongs to everybody at the club of the winner. But when drivers test their cars, competition is fierce. Friendships and responsibilities are forgotten. Winning a street race or a spontaneous speeding event in traffic is imperative to reputation management. The gained reputation belongs to everybody at the club of the winner.

**Car as a tool of sexual seduction**

The boys love their cars that are referred to as a “she,” “the babe,” and “the whore”. The completed car becomes “a Madonna in the kitchen and a hooker in bed”. Nothing else but a fast car can be this obedient and give the right kind of satisfaction. The boys caress their cars at the garage and speak of them gently. In public they drive their cars violently. The engines are tended to slowly, carefully, as if building a sacred cathedral. Yet the rest of the vehicle is decorated with stickers, animal-skin-imitation seat covers and furniture spray paint. Some teen cars are held together with package tape. Further, they are made erotically inviting with maximal music equipment, roaring engines and soft interiors.
inebriety. Rather men, women and young people set out to drink for a night or a few days in a row during weekends, holidays or trips. The experience is called a "putki;" an experience of a timeless flow in a "tunnel" of intoxication that may last for days or weeks. In principle, the cruising club boys try to avoid drinking and driving. This may be as much an economic as a moral choice, but even more so it celebrates Finnish masculinity that despises weakness.

At night, young car enthusiasts possess the symbolic capital of being real men, superior to any other social strata of the streets. But despite group solidarity and among friends, even these real men have to fight for their social order on the masculine ladder. Who is the king of the streets? Who's the coolest, the boldest and the most bad? The boys solve these questions through driving. Risk and skill intertwine in honorable masculinity. If one loses honor, somebody else gains it and celebrates it publicly.

**Speeding girls**

Having a steady girlfriend, a "babe" ready for a relationship, or a "loose chick," i.e., an available young woman riding in a car is regarded subordinate to the status of car ownership, yet almost equivalent to respect. Although sex is an important motivation for cruising, most lads favor long-term relationships. They are able to adjust to monogamy, motivated not only by shared rent and warm meals, but also affection. There is tenderness in the boy's voices when they talk about their girlfriends' driving.

Within this car culture, the position of a woman is traditional. Young women of the teen car scenes express timidity in their clothes and make-up. When riding in cars, girlfriends are silent. If a young woman is very outspoken, she is probably not dating anyone on the club, but a "loose chick," on her own. Often these "loose chicks" attract attention by acting boyish and by driving around with an attitude which often results in minor accidents.

Men are in control of the noise, music, movement, safety and atmosphere of the night. Women watch the cars with a hypnotized gaze, desiring to be offered a ride. On the streets, young men display the domination they will continue to possess in society and in family, even when it means the localized, domestic power of the working class male. Many young women embrace an aggressive and possessive, sexy male who will make them satisfied and proud in front of other girls.

Sexual affairs are an important motivation for the out-of-town cruises of the club. After breaking up with a girl, a new companion is easy to find for a young driver with a car, status, and a cruising club membership. As the informant Nipe says, when he cruises to another town to race, like to the town of Lahti 100 kilometres north of Helsinki ("a street-racer's dream, no cops!"), he gets to spend the night with a girl every time. Even the most competent boys respect a fellow who knows his way around women.

**Payback time**

In Finland the media and the society define street racers by their lack of economic worth and future prospects. Indeed, respect is hard to gain for a man who is stigmatised, dangerous, economically ruined by speeding tickets at the age of 24, and if he lacks the executive look and education.

For such a young man, therefore, the weekend is the payback time. On the streets, the boys manifest their youth, desirability and subcultural capital. This performance is a necessity, a must for them to save their sanity, since their class location, age, occupational role and gender are constantly run over by dominant structures. At night, on the streets, the boys turn society's values upside down. They make economic security and education shameful and effeminate. They invest their bodies in risk. If they come out alive, they have a legend to tell.

The youths use their cultural performance to survive the feeling of lost opportunities. They want to reproduce their culture and to restore the pride taken from them by the police, by the social worker and by their parents. In their world what they know best is appreciated: risk, craftsmanship, driving skill and disregard of education. These men's relation to social expectations defines their masculine identity as oppositional and therefore, honorable. Ironically, this identity is due to class solidarity and it seals all exits out of this subculture.

The tragedy of the class solidarity is that it only accelerates the boys' way to self-destruction. It promotes the speeding crimes of passion, leaving behind death and injury; the human sacrifice of the modern age. As one informant says: "When you break a record, or get yourself a reputation driving out there, you've got a story to tell. That it was close, but you made it with minor injuries. Especially getting away from the cops will give you street credibility. That's what it's all about."

MANLY OR UNMANLY?

Fear of falling

By CLAES EKENSTAM
Researcher at the Department of History of Science and Ideas
Göteborg University
claes.ekenstam@idehist.gu.se

The concept of unmanliness contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional and personal costs that specific male ideals can cause individuals or groups of men. Seeing and exploring these circumstances does not necessarily mean ignoring those dimensions of power characterizing the relations between the sexes within a certain gender order.

Despite belonging to a superior gender in relation to women, many men feel powerless; this is a paradox often pointed out within men’s studies (Kaufman 1994, Seidler 1994, 1997, Faludi 1999). Even if men by their gender affiliation “automatically” have a better starting point than women in society, many fail to appreciate the feminist thesis that men as a collective group are privileged while women as a group are discriminated against. One explanation provided by feminists to clarify this paradox is that it is most difficult for the privileged themselves to see and admit their privileges.

Hegemonic masculinity and powerlessness
Another way of understanding men’s experience of power/powerlessness is implicit in R.W. Connell’s idea of the existence of various masculinities, where
a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity is superior to other masculinities (Connell 1999). In practice, most men are thus situated in a subordinate position in relation to a relatively small privileged group of powerful men with plentiful resources. At the same time, the gendered superiority is always true for Connell’s men in relation to women, and they are thus never totally powerless.

However, other researchers have underlined the dominant experience of subordination and powerlessness that a majority of men actually come up against in their lives because of class, lack of resources and other reasons, such as other people (bosses, politicians, teachers, superiors, parents) and social forces (the market, development, the economy) which seem to decide the fates of individual men (Holter 1998, Seidler 1997).

In his history of North American manhood, Michel Kimmel takes as the point of departure for his study the feminist notion that masculinity should be regarded as being linked to a struggle for power and control. Gradually, however, Kimmel found that for men themselves, masculinity seemed to be less about the drive to dominate than about their fear of others controlling them. Above all, he realized that men were stricken with a terror of failing. Kimmel associates this with the fact that modern manhood to a very large degree has come to mean an incessant struggle to live up to certain ideals. Masculinity has become something that must continuously be proven, something that must be achieved. Men who fail in this respect are seen as suspicious and quite often they are discarded and marginalized (Kimmel 1996).

The relations between various groups of men

Even if masculinity is mostly formulated in relation to women and femininity, many men's studies researchers have found that masculinity is also to a large extent defined between various groups of men. The relations between various groups of men are sometimes of a more direct relevance than the relation to women/the feminine. Masculinity is thus defined in relation to femininity, often in terms of contrasting or distancing, but also in relation to features regarded as unmanly in other men. The group of unmanly men is thus an important category in the definition of masculinity.

Historian George Mosse has used this relation as his starting point when noting that modern masculinity, or what he calls the masculine stereotype, needed a contrasting image or a counter-type for its own definition. Those positioned outside of the social norm or the marginalized ones, provided the characteristics that this contrasting stereotype was seen to represent. All those who through their lifestyle, ethnic origin, religion or language broke the accepted norms (for example Jews, vagabonds, criminals and those who
were mentally ill) were connected with the countertype. Attributes declared as typical for this category were instability, ugliness, cowardice, lack of emotional control and honesty. The countertype was assumed to be controlled by his passions, lecherous, wanting in strength of character and manliness. Significantly, those men who were regarded as unmanly created great anxiety. From the middle of the 19th century onwards this category was also often associated with homosexuality (Mosse 1996). Even if Mosse’s concept of the countertype has wider references than just unmanliness, this aspect seems to constitute an essential component of the definition and the upholding of masculinity.

Cultural differences
It is, however, above all the historian Jonas Liliequist who has demonstrated the relevance of the concept of unmanliness for men’s studies (Liliequist 1999, 2003). In the same way as masculinity has been constructed socially and culturally, notions of unmanliness have been created through history. Liliequist reveals, for example, interesting differences between an older, traditional South European male image and its Nordic counterparts during the Middle Ages and Early Modern times. In the Mediterranean region, masculinity has, ever since Antiquity, been strongly connected with sexual potency, virility and the power of initiative. Correspondingly, men who are not active and do not take initiatives in neither social nor sexual respects are regarded as unmanly. A real man must also control the sexuality of his wife in order not to fall into the category of the unmanly. Here, we clearly see the outlines of the so called macho ideal.

Liliequist notes that in a Scandinavian context, for its part, cowardice and physical or social weakness were the central characteristics of unmanliness. In the Viking Sagas, a man’s honour and masculinity seem to be more dependent on courage and strength than on sexual exploits and potency. Moving on to the 17th century, we find that lewdness and sexual excesses were repeated markers of unmanliness, in a clear contrast with perceptions of normative masculinity in the Mediterranean region.

Liliequist’s study into the connotations of the concept of unmanliness in various contexts thus points to essential differences in the notions of manliness and construction of gender in various cultural contexts.

Other Nordic researchers within the field of men and masculinity have, partly based on the work of Mosse and Liliequist, also underlined the relevance of the concept of unmanliness. For example, in his thesis on middle-class masculinities in 19th century Sweden, David Tjeder points out that focusing on countertypes brings the history of unmanliness to the foreground of his study (Tjeder 2003). Like Mosse, Tjeder finds that various kinds of male ideals are defined as opposites, counter-
types that appear as shifting versions of unmanliness. However, the construction of countertypes proves to be increasingly complex.

**Unmanliness within the middle-class man**

Firstly, Tjeder distinguishes a larger number of different male ideals in his material than the single masculine stereotype that Mosse explores. Thus, the number of countertypes is also larger and more varied than those in Mosse’s work. Secondly, Tjeder thinks that the concept of the countertype was not only used to strengthen a certain male ideal by pointing out other distinct groups as subordinate and unmanly. The threat of unmanliness also lurked within the individual middle-class man himself, either by him not managing to emerge from the unstable identity of the youngster phase and reach male maturity, or by later losing this maturity and becoming unmanly. This could happen, for example, by the man becoming addicted to alcohol or gambling, or through a promiscuous lifestyle. The threat of unmanliness lay, so to say, constantly in wait within the middle-class man; a threat that was all the larger since many men had quite an ambivalent attitude to the dominant ideals.

Even if these men in principle mainly embraced the same ideals, they could still also consider a condemned behaviour, such as heavy drinking, as manly. In practice, it was to no effect that moralists and others that moulded public opinion argued for the culpability and innate unmanliness of drinking, as men themselves thought that a real man both could and should drink alcohol!

**The significance of age categories**

One further aspect that emphasizes the complexity of the cultural notions of masculinity within the bourgeois middle-class is the significance of age categories. Those who wrote about masculinity in the 19th century paid particular attention to the youth stage. During these formative years, youngsters were regarded as being particularly inclined to being seduced by dangerous passions, such as abuse of alcohol and uncontrolled emotions. Therefore, every effort should be made to compel the young men to avoid such errors and instead control themselves in order to be able to develop stable male characters. At the same time, there was a kind of double account in relation to male youth. It was quite usual to tolerate young men drinking, gambling, swearing, fighting and running riot – behaviour that was not accepted in adult men. The middle-class male ideal comprised a notion of strong emotional control and respectability, but many thought that this was something that could be attained only after the passions had been given a free run during the years of youth. Men thus needed to run wild, at least to some degree, in their youth before the desired male character could be formed.
Ethnologist Ella Johansson has earlier revealed similar patterns in traditional Nordic peasant culture (Johansson 1996). Youngsters had a masculinity that was based on bodily attributes such as physical strength and spectacular dressing styles. This also includes a great deal of fighting and drinking bouts, ready wit, challenges and breaches of various taboos in peasant society. Totally different criteria pertained to the masculinity of married men in peasant society. As master of his own household, the focus was on a man's ability to take responsibility, provide for his family and take care of all everyday practical problems. Attributes expected of an autonomous house-owner was respectability, quietness and ability to negotiate.

Losing one's grip and becoming unmanly

Access and relation to power has evidently varied considerably between different groups of men. The strong hierarchy existing between various types of masculinity has often left many men more or less powerless in relation to numerically smaller groups of more powerful and wealthier men. However, it also seems that for many men, modern constructions of masculinity as such have created complex relations to their own male identity, as well as to power and authority. For the same reasons, the various social relations in which men participate have become more complicated. The strong emphasis on masculinity being something that must be attained, something that must be performed and continually accounted for, often in direct competition with rivaling masculinities, seems to have burdened modern masculinities with an inherent ontological insecurity. The fear of falling into unmanliness is thus present as a constantly accompanying shadow and as a hidden driving force underlying men's objective of upholding their male identity, at least in those dominant masculinities which have been created by modernity.

Seeing and exploring these circumstances does not necessarily mean disregarding or ignoring those dimensions of power characterizing the relations between the sexes within a certain gender order. On the contrary, this creates an opportunity to analyse the important but complex connection between, on the one hand, male aspiration for and exercise of power as an individual and structural phenomenon and, on the other, those patterns of socializing and disciplining that form the basis of such dispositions, as well as the personal consequences and existential costs that such processes cause many men. Thus, the concept of unmanliness opens for a more concrete phenomenological and processual understanding of masculinity than the Connellian paradigm now dominating research.

REFERENCES:


Liliequist, Jonas: "Omanlighetstester i 1800-talets Sverige (Norden)", unpublished draft/chapter for the anthology Män och modernitet (to be published 2006).


I chose to research news on murder-suicide for three reasons. First, the phenomenon of murder-suicide is a good example of gendered violence because these homicides often take place in families and between men and women. When these acts are explained, gender and gendered meanings are used explicitly. Secondly, these acts have sometimes been named “extended suicides”; as if those who are killed would be parts of perpetrators identity. Furthermore, theories of extended suicide seem to hint that it is the wife and children that are parts of men’s identities, and children are part of mother’s identities. According to the literature other kinds of murder-suicides do not fit in to the category of extended suicides. Thirdly, newspaper texts reveal how acts of lethal violence are understood in our culture.

Social and moral orders
How are the categories of fatherhood and motherhood related to violence in Finnish newspaper articles? Using a gender perspective, I am interested in the ways people make sense of events of social life. I focus on categorisations in order to find out the social orders that are created and moral orders that are mobilised. In the analysis I use “Membership Categorization Analysis”. In short, the idea is that people are categorised as representatives of certain groups (by gender, age, occupation etc.) and to be a member of the group means that you have certain rights, obligations and competences. The analysis in this
article is focused on family categorisations and moral orders of parent-child relationships; how fatherhood, motherhood and violence are connected in newspaper narration.

**Lethal violence and fatherhood**

In one typical example, about a case when a man had killed his three children, a neighbour's interview is presented to the readers. The extract tells about the perpetrator and focuses on his fatherhood:

A neighbour to the family of five, Matti Fors, pondered upon the same thing [why the man killed not only himself but also his children] as he was looking at the house from twenty metres distance. The police had isolated the house with yellow tape. He found it difficult to understand the act committed by his male neighbour. In contrast, the father of the family had seemed to care about his children a great deal.

In addition to the portrayal of the father as ordinary (or even as exemplary), family life is presented as an idyll. Though some problems are hinted at - the man was said to have some problems with alcohol and that “there had been some jealousy” - the things that contradict the act are emphasised in the newspaper texts and things that would explain it are presented as rumours. Generally, when “fathers” have (also) killed their children, ordinariness and unexpectedness are the material for the headlines. Problems - if mentioned - are either connected to the heterosexual relationship (the couple has had a quarrel) or manhood in general; they are not connected to the father-child relationship, nor to the “family” as a whole.

The rhetoric of idyll is on the one hand used to emphasise the news value: everyone is surprised, because the family was so “good”. On the other hand, this rhetoric creates the impression that the family is like any other family - and problems between spouses seem normal.

**Murderous mothers**

It is striking how idealised the image of fathers is - especially as regards their fatherhood: as men or as spouses they may have had some shortcomings. When mothers commit the same kind of murder-suicides, their motherhood is not praised, though their deed is sometimes interpreted against the backdrop of everyday knowledge of the closeness of mother-child relationships.

The next example is interesting because it is a very rare case. A woman killed not only her two children but also her spouse. Furthermore, the narration is exceptional because at first it was assumed that it was the father who was the perpetrator. The case was one of the biggest crime news cases of the summer of 2004. At the point when the media did not know who the killer actually was, the family idyll and the decency of the father was emphasised. An in-law of the man who was killed stated that “The man was friendly, open and loved” (HS 16.6.2004). “The neighbours were shocked because of the four deaths: THEY WERE A HAPPY FAMILY” (IS 16.6.2004 front page). The next day (IS 17.6.2004) the headlines continued: “The family idyll was quite unbreakable” and the lead article stated: “A workmate of the father has difficulties to find a reason for the tragedy”. The feature suggested that fathers are usually perpetrators of “family killings” (HS 16.6.2004). At this point, no one said anything about the mother as a person, either good or bad.

After it was discovered that the mother was the killer, the tone changed. The idyll was now said to be only a façade: things were looking good only outside (IS 19.6.2004). The mother was now characterised as follows: she had once been “a happy schoolgirl” but was now “an uncommunicative 36 year old mother”. Neighbours did not have a good word to say about her. In addition, even though the “happy schoolgirl” on one hand emphasizes change - perhaps mental problems - the category was not quite innocent: “happiness” meant that she liked boys and was popular among them.

**“Killer mom”**

[She] practised shooting the day before MOTHER KNEW GUNS

Mother who killed her family mastered the guns. “A pump shotgun is a killing tool for everyone”

CO-WORKER: FEELS BAD

- It feels bad, says chimney sweep Juhani Nykänen who knew the killed father of the family because of his profession. He commented on the latest news about the family-killing at Porvoo and the lethal gun-shots fired by the mother.

(...) The fact that the victims were anaesthetised does not comfort him.

- Anyway, these were murders. (IS 23.6.2004)

Though the deed was partly portrayed as understandable, because the woman had brought her family into debt and the financial future was bleak, it was not understood as “extended suicide” or a “dead end” (i.e. the only solution). This was partly because it was not her own business that brought them down (she was only helping her hus-
Pathological mothers and ordinary men

When a woman kills her family the texts focus on the killing of children, even when she has killed her spouse as well. In contrast, a man is said to have killed his family, even when he has only killed his children. Men's violence is connected to the family and its cause is hatred towards the wife, or external circumstances, such as culture or societal pressures. Violent men are constructed as representatives of the male species or spouses. Women's violence is seen as motherly or feminine violence, or as pure transgression. MOTHERING is portrayed as vulnerable to mental damage. Mothers are pathological - men are influenced by society. Men's agency is also presented as weak while women's agency is made clearer, even though mental problems may mitigate the acts. Men are presented as finding themselves at a dead end, having no other choice, and as acting because they are coerced by circumstances. Women are portrayed as motivated by their own delusional thoughts - contrary to common sense.

Furthermore, everyday reasoning seems to go as follows: a normal and nice man can kill his children and himself, when the external conditions force him to do so. It is even more likely in Finland, since culture affects men in this way - at least if they have used alcohol. The violence of men is thus normalised and violence towards children is not connected with fatherhood but with (Finnish) manhood.

When women kill their children, violence becomes abnormal since they are categorised as 'women'. When they are categorised as 'mothers' the newspapers either ask: "How can a mother do a thing like that?" - anti-motherly - or see it as maternal pathology. Mothers may become too attached to their children. If they are mentally unstable they may perceive their children as parts of themselves. Either way, the reason for action is portrayed as internal: it is the woman who kills, not culture, alcohol or social pressures.

Violent fathers?

Recent studies have shown that it is culturally difficult to connect fatherhood with violence. This has become especially clear in studies of family professionals (Eriksson 2002, Keskinen 2005). The discourse of "new fatherhood" and a powerful discourse of developmental psychology emphasizing the importance of two complementary parents, has influenced those who work with women and children who have suffered from a partner's/father's violence, directly or indirectly.

The newspapers also reveal uneasiness and difficulty in addressing the question of violent fatherhood. Mothers who kill may be "killer-moms" - a kind of monster - or altruistic moms who express their motherhood, albeit in a very pathological way. Explanations of maternal violence are thus available. I argue that violence by fathers towards children should not be a blank spot in our society, a silenced topic. We need to handle these issues for the sake of the safety of children in risk situations, such as divorce.

Cultural narratives

Cultural knowledge directs our interpretations and narration. Explanations for the exceptional are based on our everyday knowledge about the ordinary. We make sense of events by making social orders: relationships between different people are perceived as ordered in certain ways. The family consists of a man, his wife and their children. Hidden in that sentence is a moral order: a man has a wife and children; he is entitled to ownership. Moral order means that human beings ordered in different ways have different rights, responsibilities and competences. They are expected to behave in certain ways and to have certain characteristics. In this article I focus on social and moral orders of motherhood and fatherhood in relation to violence to children. In short: a father has the right and competence to make decisions on behalf of other family members; a mother's right is more restricted and extends only to her children. Men are male before they are fathers, and as males they react to circumstances. Women are mothers before women, and they can be pathological or transgressive in their motherhood. Fatherhood may be left untouched by the violence a 'man' has committed, while motherhood is stained by violent acts. Women are seen as more able to control their actions than are men - thus they are held more responsible for their actions.

REFERENCES:


The article is based on Minna Nikunen's doctoral thesis in social psychology and women's studies. Surman jälkeen itsenurha. Kulttuuriset luokitukset rikoslukuista [Murder-suicide: Cultural Categorizations in the Crime News]. The data consists of 155 news articles from the four biggest newspapers in Finland: Aamulehti (AL), Helsingin Sanomat (HS), Ilta-Sanomat (IS) and Ilta-Sanomat (IL). In addition, major papers in the place where murder-suicide happened were included. The period was 1996–2000 with two exceptions, one from year 2001 and other from 2004.
NIKK is the Nordic Institute for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, serving as a platform for cooperation in Women’s Studies and Gender Research in the Nordic Countries. It promotes, initiates, and coordinates Women’s Studies and Gender Research in the five Nordic countries and internationally. It strengthens the flow of information about women’s studies and gender research within the Nordic countries and internationally and conducts research projects.

NIKK is located at the University of Oslo together with the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research.

NATIONAL CO-ORDINATION IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

DENMARK
The Co-ordination of Women’s and Gender Studies in Denmark
Hilda Rømer Christensen
Sociologisk Institut
Københavns Universitet
Linnégade 22
DK-1361 Copenhagen K
Tel: +45 35 32 35 01
Fax: +45 35 32 39 40
kkf@sociology.ku.dk
http://www.sociology.ku.dk/
sochr/index.html

ICELAND
Centre for Women’s Studies
Asalbygging
Háskóli Islands
IS-101 Reykjavík
Tel: +354 525 4595
Fax: +354 552 1331
fem@rhi.hi.is

NORWAY
KILDEN Norwegian Information and Documentation Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research
Grensen 5
NO-0159 Oslo
Tel: +47 22 24 09 35
Fax: +47 22 24 95 21
Post@kilden forskningsradet.no
http://kilden.forskningsradet.no

SWEDEN
Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research
Göteborg University
P.O. Box 200
SE-405 30 Göteborg
Tel: +46 31 773 5600
Fax: +46 31 773 5604
sekretariat@genus.gu.se
http://www.genus.gu.se

FINLAND
SUNS – Suomen Naistutkimuksen Sura
Association for Women’s Studies in Finland
Institutet för kvinnoforskning/Institute of Women’s Studies
Åbo Akademi.
FI-20500 Åbo
Tel: +358 2 215 4869, Fax: +358 2 215 4668
kvinnoforsk@abo.fi
http://www.abo.fi/instut/kvinnis/ifkvhems.htm

I would like to order NIKK magasin!

☐ Please, send me the English issue of NIKK magasin.
Free of charge.

☐ Please, send me the Scandinavian issues of NIKK magasin.
Free of charge.

Name:________________________________________
Address:_______________________________________
Send to: NIKK
P.O. Box 1156 Blindern
N O-0317 Oslo, Norway

Country:__________________________________________