



LA CIRCULATION DES CONNAISSANCES
“BE A REAL MAN!” HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES
IN A SWISS VOCATIONAL SCHOOL: BOUNDARY
WORK BETWEEN GENDER AND SOCIAL
POSITION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract

Using ethnographic material, this article analyzes the processes at work in the construction of valued masculinity among young men in a Swiss vocational school. By adopting a theoretical boundary-making approach, we argue that double boundary work takes place in order to assert a specific form of hegemonic masculinity as the only legitimate way to be “a real man”. First, young men in the school draw symbolic boundaries between themselves as hard-working, tough, heterosexual, economically responsible men on one side, and effeminate, intellectual, lazy, despicable men on the other. A second boundary is drawn towards women, relying on a specifically constructed form of femininity and institutionalized gender boundaries, where women are depicted as dependant wives whose daily activities have little value. These processes are analyzed as a strategy used by these young men to counter a socially disadvantaged position on the labour market and in the society in general. Yet, the valorization of the masculine nature of their working identity has social consequences as they contribute to reproducing unequal gender hierarchies.

Keywords:

Masculinity
Boundary work
Work
Identity
Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

“Be a real man!” A study in a Swiss vocational school with students learning different qualified manual trades in the building industry highlights the constant pressure on young men to live up to this expectation. Masculinity is a social construction, it is neither a fixed identity nor a role, but rather a pattern of social practices corresponding to the valued and honoured way of being a “real man” at a particular time in a particular place (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This article examines how young men develop specific forms of valued masculinities that essentially revolve around occupational identity. It attempts to illustrate that the type of trades they are learning and their lower position in relation to the general labour market, are important components in the form of masculinities these youth perform.

Our contribution to the scientific debate on masculinities stems from the *boundary-making approach* (for a recent overview see Pachucki et al. 2007) we have opted for. Focusing on the interactional and relational nature of hegemonic masculinities, this approach allows for a deep understanding of the way young men produce (and reproduce) specific forms of masculinities they identify with, as well as the boundaries they create between themselves and those categorized as different. We argue that *double boundary work* takes place in order to assert a specific form of masculinity as the only legitimate way to be “a real man”. On the one hand, masculine identity is built in contrast to non-valued, “subordinated” forms of masculinities. Young men in the school draw symbolic boundaries between themselves as hard-working, tough, heterosexual, economically responsible men on the one hand, and effeminate, intellectual, lazy, despicable men on the other. Another boundary is drawn towards women and a specifically constructed form of femininity. Young men reassert their own superiority by relying on institutionalized gender boundaries, which depict women as dependant wives doing jobs worth little recognition.

In a first section, we introduce the theoretical background on which our analysis builds. Context and methodologies of the study in the school constitute a second section. We then describe our empirical findings, taking a path that goes from more general aspects of masculinity building to particularities and axes of differentiations among students in the different groups to show that different career paths lead to different forms of valorized masculinity, with varied strategies depending on the social location of one’s occupation in the labour market. Our results show that the type of masculinities that are valued and performed, and the boundary work that sustains them, are in close relation to the relative disadvantaged social position of these young men within the Swiss education system as well as in the labour market. We found out that the less their occupation is valued, the more young men need to counter the stigmatization they face by valorizing the masculine nature of their *working* identity. This accentuates in turn, the subordinated status of feminine work and of women in general, contributing to reproducing unequal gender hierarchies.

2. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES UNDER THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF BOUNDARY WORK

In this article, we propose to contribute to the debate on gender and hegemonic masculinities by adopting the specific theoretical perspective called *boundary work*. The idea of *boundary work* has come to play a key role in important new lines of scholarship across the social sciences (Gerson and Peiss 1985; Pachucki et al. 2007) and it opens up new theoretical insights into the social organization of “differences”. This theoretical approach allows understanding how “differences” – “real men” vs. “unmale men”/women - are historically and contextually constructed through boundary making producing hierarchies and systems of domination.

Beginning in the 1980s, there is a large body of literature on masculinity, a field in which R.W. Connell has been one of the most influential scholars (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The notion of hegemonic masculinity is important for our purposes, as it allows further exploration about how this contextual and interactional construction of “being a real man” happens. Hegemonic masculinity refers to a particular variety of masculinity on which some men build their leadership over other men and over women. It is a normative standard used to define what “real men” are supposed to be and how they are supposed to act in order to be “acceptably male” (Kimmel 2008; Jackson and Dempster 2009). In the words of Connell, it is “*the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken for guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*” (Connell 2005, 77).

However, what we propose in our article is to go beyond these well-known ideas and conceptualize hegemonic masculinities as a form of *boundary work*: In general, boundaries are understood as having both *social and symbolic* dimensions. Following Lamont and Molnar (2002, 168), symbolic boundaries have been defined as “*conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people and practices. [...] They] also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership*”. In addition, social boundaries are “*objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources and social opportunities*”. In daily interactions, actors are involved in struggles over social distinctions and categorizations¹ in which symbolic boundaries can shift. When symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon, however, they can take on a constraining character and they can become social boundaries (ibid, 168). Following this rationale, hegemonic masculinity is, in this article, understood as being the result of such social categorization and its institutionalization and therefore *boundary work*.

Boundary making is necessarily relational and dialectic, as in-groups and out-groups are the result of a twin process of group identification and external social categorization (Jenkins 1997). On the one hand, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of similarity and shared belonging within the in-group – for instance belonging to the group of “real men”. Such communality is a form of monopolistic social closure; it defines membership, eligibility and access. Boundary making refers to subjectively meaningful differences and similarities which do not signify real conformity, but which are central to communalization. On the other hand, external categorizations are intimately bound up with power relations and relate to the capacity of one group to successfully impose its categories of ascription upon another set of people, and to the resources which the categorized collectivity can draw upon to resist that imposition if need be. For our theoretical approach, it is crucial to understand the properties of boundaries: Through which mechanism, contents and *markers* are boundaries drawn by the young students, which are the specific hegemonic masculinities resulting out of this boundary work, and how is this boundary system linked to larger systems of domination and social inequalities?

Hegemonic masculinities are in this sense always *relational* and build upon two different types of *boundary work*: First, hegemonic masculinity can only exist by contrast with subordinated or marginalized masculinities (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The labelling of behaviour and attitudes as representing a “real man” while relying on a dichotomization against ‘unmale men’ – the second is at the same time devaluated - can be understood as boundary work. Second, hegemonic masculinities are also the result of a gendered boundary work and built by contrast with femininity (or femininities). Importantly, this construction of “differences” among men, and between men and women, and “communalities” among men or among women, is always related to systems of domination and social stratification. This is reflected in the gendered division of labour, in social

¹ Social categorization is understood following Berger and Luckmann (1996) and Tajfel (1981) as systems of orientations that help to create and define the individual's place in society.

representations, ascriptions, behavioural expectations and in general in the social status of (different groups of) men and women.

It reveals that for our case study, the experience of masculinity building is related to *occupation* and *social position* (in the sens of Bourdieu 1998, 2000 [1972]) in the labour market, pointing to the simultaneous and interacting effects of systems of oppression on the basis of different categories of “difference”. (for intersectionality see Crenshaw 1994; Anthias 2002; Winkler and Degele 2010). The intersection of *gender and class* in youth identity work has given rise to an important body of empirical studies focusing in particular on constructions of working-class (youth) masculinities. Willis’ innovative ethnographic study on white working-class “lads” in Great Britain (1977) has inspired many other scholars since the 1970s. One of Willis’ major contributions lies in its detailed analysis of how class structure and a lower positioning in this structure influences the construction, for these youth, of a sexist (and racist) enactment of masculinity, giving them “an axis of power over women” (Willis 2004). Our empirical data allow us to explore the ways in which, in a vocational school where mostly male students train to become qualified manual labourers, occupation and social position constitutes very important determinant in the masculinity building. The content of the *boundary work* operating within this school largely revolves around the specific trade learned, and its differences toward women’s traditional occupations on the one hand, and men in different occupational sectors, in particular those in non-manual occupations on the other, both of them being considered unworthy.

3. THE CASE STUDY: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Schools are important sites of masculinity construction and have attracted the attention of scholars (Mac an Ghail 1994; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 1996) who argue that school’s hierarchically organized knowledge strongly influences students’ “doing masculinity”. Switzerland has a dual-track-education system operating a distinction, as early as the age of 16, between an intellectual elite accessing tertiary degrees – who will most probably access the highest hierarchical positions in the labour market as well as the highest wages – and vocational students who will become qualified workers and will mostly remain on the lower segments of the labour market. According to national statistical data, two thirds of the pupils opt - like those youth in the study - for vocational education and training (VET) (Egloff and Caballero Liardet 2004). VET means a combination of practical training in a host company as apprentices, and study at a vocational school one or two days a week. The specific school we have chosen to include into the study is specialized for vocational training for workers in the *building industry*, such as builders, carpenters or painters. The specificity of this almost exclusively male school setting (97-98%) is that the unbalanced sex-ratio is linked to its curriculum, based on a traditional gender division of labour where men work (and learn to work) in manual and technical jobs such as those taught at this school.

Three groups of students were selected for the fieldwork. The first one is a class of “elementary education”: this special path has reduced expectations for students who cannot meet normal vocational curriculum’s criteria. The seven male students of this class will obtain a Federal VET Certificate, which has only little recognition on the labour market. These students are in their second year of school and work as painters, house or road builders, or carpenters. Except for one man who is over 40, they are between 17 and 21 years old. Two of them are foreigners, four are second-generation youth holding double-citizenship, and one is Swiss with both Swiss parents.

The two other groups of students – tinsplate and telematician apprentices – are in their first year of vocational education and training, and they will obtain a Federal VET Diploma. The six male tinsplate workers learn how to protect and render impervious buildings’ roofs and walls, working mostly in workshops or on the building sites. Telematicians are responsible for the installation, maintenance and repairing of telecommunication networks and data transmission systems. They are responsible for manual tasks such as pulling cables and

installing technical material, but also for programming jobs. There are eight young men and one woman in this group. Tinplate and telematicians come together for the general education courses, but are separate for practical and technical classes. Both groups are a mix of Swiss students, second-generation youth with one or both parents with a foreign origin or foreigners themselves. They are between 16 and 20 years old.

The three groups under study differ in the social prestige associated with the career path they are in: while manual building work in general is not given much value, those students who will not hold a VET Diploma at the end of their education (elementary education path) are at the lower end of the perception scale. Telematicians, on the other hand, are often perceived (as well as they perceive themselves) at the top of this same scale, more prestige being associated with their professional activities. These differences, as we will see, set the ground for boundary work – in terms of masculinity – between the different groups, paralleling the boundaries set between students of this school in general and the intellectual university students.

With regard to methodology, the study followed an ethnographic approach (Crang and Cook 2007): Two researchers (a female and a male) spent three months of fieldwork in 2008/2009 with the three groups of students.² Observation was carried out one day a week in each class, from morning to the end of the teaching, including the breaks. Additionally, semi-directed interviews were done with students of the three groups, teachers and the director of the school. In total, 14 individual interviews have been carried out with students, and 6 with school staff. The sampling of the interviewees was done by trying to balance career path, age, ethnicity background, and peer group belonging within the classes. Data gathering and data analysis (of the observation protocols and interview transcripts) is qualitative and interpretative. Analysis was done using Atlas. TI software and in an iterative process the most important concepts and more abstract categories were developed. These have been regularly discussed in the research team.

4. HETERONORMATIVITY, DOMINATION OVER WOMEN AND ECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITY AS BOUNDARY MARKERS

On the most general level, symbolic boundaries between ‘real men’ and ‘unmale males’ are drawn by the young people by mobilizing heteronormativity, subordination of women and masculine economic responsibility. These markers are mobilized by the students out of all the three classes and give light to a common hegemonic masculinity.

With regards to *heteronormativity* the following quote impressively demonstrates the boundary work taking place:

Marc is a student in telematics: for a few weeks, he has been made fun of by his school peers because of his supposed homosexuality. One day he comes to school wearing skinny jeans (very tight jeans in fashion in some milieus), which opened the floor for more mocking, skinny jeans being – in his peers’ eyes – perceived as effeminate pants “real men” do not wear. After the morning break, Marc, Quentin and Diego are heading back to their classroom.

- Quentin: “No, for real, who told you to wear skinny jeans?”
- Marc: “My girlfriend.”
- Quentin: “Your girlfriend? It’s like Islamists: if you’re a martyr you’ll get virgins. Here you think that if you wear skinny jeans you’ll catch girls.”

² The study is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and was conducted by the three authors of the article with the help of five master students. This article is based on data from one school among the eight schools in two regions of Switzerland where fieldwork and interviews were carried out. The female researcher responsible for the fieldwork in this school is the first author of the article.

Quentin and Diego laugh, they do not seem to think it is a good way to “catch girls”.

- Diego, laughing: “After three years without a girl he will ask himself why!”

They walk past a security poster showing a worker carrying a ladder on his shoulder who is inadvertently knocking out two colleagues.

- Quentin, showing the poster: “Look, that’s Marc at work, with his skinny jeans. No, seriously, do you pull cables wearing skinny jeans?”

Later on the same day, Marc is asked by the physics teacher to assist him with an experiment about electric discharges. Marc is standing in front of the class, and is scared of touching the metal elements the teacher has prepared, fearing to get an electric shock.

- One of his peers shouts: “Hey, touch it, you’re a man!”
- Another says: “No, he’s not a man with such skinny jeans!”

Obviously, Marc belongs to the male “sex category” (West and Zimmermann 1987). However, to his peers, his wearing skinny jeans casts doubts about his appropriate performance of the gender attributes generally assigned to this sex category in this specific context. The doubts expressed by his peers go beyond his simple clothing choices. When mocking Marc about his clothes, students in this class delineate a clear boundary between a valued version of masculinity and a stigmatized way of being a man: by bringing to light with so much enthusiasm that which makes Marc’s masculinity “subordinated”, they create by contrast what kind of “hegemonic masculinities” are valued in the context of this building vocational school. Subordinated categories of masculinities are first of all characterized by other forms of sexuality, in particular homosexual men, but also men considered so effeminate that they are categorized as homosexuals, such as Marc wearing the “wrong” pants.

But heterosexuality needs to be performed not only by marking a boundary towards the “others”, homosexuals, but also by producing communalities within the in-group by proving one’s sexual exploits with women. Marc’s ability to “catch girls” is for instance heavily questioned by his peers making fun of his pants, but also (quite disturbingly) by his teacher. A week later, the physics teacher, remembering Marc’s fear of electric shocks, will pull an imitation of him, hands in sleeves, head down and shoulders drawn, and ask whether this is the way he also touches his girlfriend. This observation could not make more explicit the link between showing oneself to be tough and brave, and being able to sexually satisfy a woman.

The power imbalance between men and women, and the *domination* of the former over the latter, constitutes a second component in the construction of the hegemonic form of masculinity. In the situation described above, Marc’s peers laugh when he says he wears skinny jeans to please his girlfriend: they emphasize his “wrong” attitude in that respect and try to remind him what gender hierarchies are supposed to be. It becomes more eloquent a week later, when Quentin jokes again about that, telling Marc “*you’re like a Barbie doll to her. It’s a game for her to dress you!*” Marc’s behaviour is perceived by his peers as subordination to a woman’s desire and is not conceivable for a “real man”. Youth daily reproduce very specific gendered representations and have clear ideas about what a man and a woman should be, with a clearly demarcated boundary to differentiate them. Hegemonic masculinity therefore builds in contrast to specific forms of dependant and submissive femininity, naturalizing the differences between men and women and thus justifying their own superiority.

Third, *paid work and economic responsibility* become a “central source of masculine identity, status and power” (Collinson and Hearn 1996, 62) and an important boundary marker for being ‘a real man’. To build this responsible form of masculinity, they contrast it on the one hand with a version of femininity they assign to the domestic non-productive sphere, and on the other hand with immature and irresponsible young men who are not lucid (yet) about their duties in life.

Adult masculinity, in the eyes of the young people, comes not only with enjoyable superiority but also with responsibilities, in particular at the economic level and in relation to a family. Most young men have very traditional expectations of family life: they want to find a girlfriend, marry her, and have children. They contemplate these prospects with a sense of responsibility towards both their children and their wife, often feeling that their economic wellbeing is in their hands. As in McDowell's study (2002), young men are very serious about their future and show highly conventional domestic ambitions. However, what McDowell insufficiently highlights is how this masculine responsibility can only build in contrast to a definition of femininity where women are economically dependant, confined to the domestic sphere and do not "work", but have "activities". When asked what it means to him to be man, Jonathan, a 16-year-old tinplate apprentice, answers:

- *Jonathan: "It's a hard question. (...) But it is true that being a man means wearing the pants. I am not macho, but depending on where, depending on who you are with, if your wife is a housewife, and you are the man of the house, you are the one who brings money home... It is a quite difficult question... (...) You know, I talk a lot with girls, a lot with men, I talk with everyone. And it is true that girls think "either I want a job, a real one..."*
- *Female interviewer, interrupting him: "What is a real job?"*
- *Jonathan: "One where they do something else than just being at home, other than just looking after the kids. But others say 'no, I could imagine myself being at home, cooking for my man, things like that'. It depends on the women (...)"*
- *Interviewer: "And which one of those two types of woman do you imagine you will marry?"*
- *Jonathan: "Hum, I would say a woman who works 50%, or even 70%. Something that would still allow her to look after the kids, and all this, because it is true that women usually look more after the kids than men. So I could imagine a wife who looks after my kids while also having a job, but it should not tire her too much, at least I hope not. It depends on how she sees things (...). If she wants to work, that's good, I will support her, of course. But if she wants to stay a housewife, look after the children, look after the house, it's up to her, she is the one who feels it."*

Despite his desire to distance himself from a "macho" discourse, Jonathan (like many other young men) draws a picture where men are economically active in the productive sphere, while women's responsibilities are above all linked to the domestic sphere (see for an analysis Kergoat 2000). In these youths' eyes, and contrary to men, women can *choose* to access waged labour or to rely on their husband's salaried work. Furthermore, men are good with heavy, difficult and dangerous jobs requiring physical strength, bravery, toughness and technical skills. On the contrary, women are made for physically "easier" tasks such as gardening, housework, office work or studying. Jonathan distinguishes between having a "real job" and "just being at home". In this sense, men have "jobs" while women just have "activities" or hold a "status" such as "being" at home, or "being" a housewife.

Responsible masculinity and economic power is also the content of specific boundary work against other men. Although all apprentices receive similar salaries, there remain important differences in the economic power of these youth, some of them receiving additional (sometimes substantial) pocket money from their parents, others relying solely on their own earnings. Some young men of the latter group mark a clear distance with their economically more privileged peers within the school, who they describe as immature and dependent on their parents. They often highlight the fact that these youth's economic wellness comes from "mum-and-dad" giving them what they want, and contrast it with their own sense of responsibility emanating from having to make do with little. In addition to the fact they do not rely on their parents' support (which is not always totally true), they also draw boundaries between themselves who know the value of money by paying (some of) their bills themselves and these other young men whose parents take care of everything. In sum, these youth

emphasize the necessity to “learn what life is” (in the words of Romain, 18, elementary education path) to be able to be responsible adults later, and in particular responsible male adults.

Yet, the young men (and women) attending this school share the characteristic of learning and working in the building industry, as skilled labour workers. The nature of their jobs, and their positioning in relation to other kinds of professional activities, constitute an important part in the kind of masculinities young men develop at school, which is the topic of the next sections.

5. THE BUILDING TRADE: BOUNDARY WORK BETWEEN MANUAL AND MENTAL WORK AS AN ATTEMPT TO INVERSE SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Coming back to Marc’s peers commenting on his choice of clothing, we can observe that they explicitly link his supposed lack of appropriate masculinity to the type of professional activities these youths are learning: manual jobs done in specific (building) sites. When his two telematician peers associate him with the clumsy workers shown on a poster and ask him whether he works in such clothes, they challenge Marc’s place in such a (masculine) job site. Interestingly, they refer to a particularly manual aspect of their job (pulling cables) and not to other tasks telematicians are responsible of, such as computer or programming work. His lack of bravery and (in another moment of the physics experiment) physical strength are also mocked by the class – including the teacher: these are among the main qualities attributed to the building jobs the youth in this school are learning.

It follows that a specific idea and valorization of ‘work’ is concretely used by the young people to draw a boundary, mainly towards mental and not manual jobs which are at the same time devalorized. As mentioned before, youth of the study are involved in the “dual-track system”, doing practical training in a host company, and learning theoretical and technical knowledge at school. Students frequently use this distinction of “being at school” / “working” in their daily interactions on the school site. The terminology generally used shows the value given to each segment of this opposition: being at school denotes a status, not a proper activity, while working is doing something. School work is not taken seriously; it is something that is imposed on them while they greatly value their time on the building site with other workers and a boss.

Therefore, the widespread dominant ideology among school students, around which most hegemonic masculinities are built, is a negative and contemptuous perception of school, very similar to the one described in earlier studies on working-class masculinities (Willis 1977; Foley 1990). Many young men actively perform an anti-school attitude, where they ostensibly say they have not done their homework or have forgotten their books at home, do not listen to teachers and therefore cannot answer their questions when asked, and regularly make everyone know that they “understand nothing”. Observations from the back of the class point out the performing character of these behaviours since many have in fact done their homework and have all their school material, although they will only take them out of their bags later.

The “cross-valorization” (Willis 1977, 148) of the distinction studying/working with gender is quite clear: studying, as well as being good at school, is something young men strongly associate with femininity, at the same time as they constantly depreciate it for themselves, as men. This cool attitude of “effortless achievement” is contrasted to a picture where girls are focused on academic work and have nothing more interesting to do anyway (Jackson and Dempster 2009). Some of the young men in the study for instance strongly commit to their girlfriend’s studies, mentioning in the interview that they push them to do well at school while themselves performing the kind of laid-back attitude towards school they believe is associated with masculinity.

As this last example showed, the construction of a specific masculinity revolving around the *manual* character of the work done can only be done by contrasting it with specific types of femininity, but also by drawing boundaries with other forms of masculinity. On the one hand, the idealized version of femininity that comes out of the empirical data is one where women are good with mental work but also “easy” mostly unproductive and unpaid manual work (gardening, cooking, cleaning) done in comfortable and safe settings, that is indoor and often at home. When asked what type of women they would not want to date or marry later, while we expected answers referring to ethnicity or religion, a common response from these building apprentices was “a woman working in the building industry”. This points to the importance of their own occupation in the shaping of their masculinity.

On the other hand, there is an active construction of other – stigmatized – forms of masculinity that participates in their embodying “the real men”. At school, this shows in the making fun of male students showing positive attitude toward teaching. For instance, when Pierre points out a spelling mistake in the textbook, many of his peers take the opportunity to ridicule him, taking high-pitched voices that could refer either to women’s voices or to upper-class tone, as a kind of imitation of what he just said. Yet, boundary making goes beyond jokes about other students. Some young men actively construct a dichotomy between themselves, they perceive as being good with their hands – which they value – and “intellectuals”, considered insufficiently physical and therefore judged negatively. The depreciation of the work done by “bureaucrats” – as some young adults call the mental workers - and all non-manual workers in general is here quite clear and strongly put in contrast to the hard and valued type of work done by manual workers in the building industry. It goes with a critique of non-manual workers’ tendency to talk a lot, which is considered as useless on the one hand, and illegitimate on the other: the focus on those mental workers’ “knowing nothing” about life sheds light on their own down to earth quality, and their knowing what “real work” is, expanding to more generally knowing what “real life” is.

The performance of this boundary between manual and mental work is, without a doubt, closely linked to the Swiss education system producing a clear and hierarchically organized boundary system in which the building trades are in a subordinated social position. The system operates very early in life, a sharp distinction between those who will become qualified workers, doing manual and practical apprenticeship from the age of 16, and the future university students whose training is intellectual and who will be the forthcoming elite. Youth in the building vocational school play with these existing boundaries, trying to reverse its hierarchical order by revalorizing their own occupation and skills. In other words, the young people attempt at *inverting* the boundary hierarchy by reassessing their position. Their lower position in relation to the general labour market is therefore an important component in the form of masculinity they construct.

6. DIFFERENTIATION AND HIERARCHICAL BOUNDARY MAKING BETWEEN THE BUILDING TRADES

Students in the school learn different jobs, and they draw boundaries between them in addition to the basic divisions discussed until now. Students, as well as teachers, are well aware that there is a general hierarchical ordering of the different jobs learnt at this school. The different positions in this hierarchy are the content of many interactions among students in the school and give rise to different nuanced forms of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ previously described.

Elementary education students: Attempts to regain recognition and power by drawing on a tough working identity

Youth in the elementary education path are confronted to a double stigmatization, putting them in the lowest position within the overall hierarchically organized boundary system: one

from the society in general, one within the school. On one hand, interviews show that they are aware of the negative image many people (and in particular women) have of builders. Nicolas is clear about it when interviewed:

“I think that a girl, when she sees a guy digging holes, all dirty... I don't know... If I was a girl, I'd say 'who are those pigs?’”

On the other hand, they know that they are in a path with reduced expectations and the VET Certificate they will obtain is worth very little on the labour market. Teachers and other school staff draw a formalized distinction between “apprentices” (those in the “normal” paths) and “elementary education students”, and the latter appropriate this division in their discourses and boundary work. Denied the defining term “apprentices”, they often look at those who are apprentices with envy: some of them had unsuccessfully started such a path and wish they had not dropped out or still hope they can try again.

The boundary strategy they apply to deal with this stigmatization and to construct their masculinity rarely revolves around distinctions within the school: the contrasts they would draw would too often be at their own expenses. Therefore, they heavily rely on the more basic manual / mental work division described above to construct a kind of tough and brave masculinity in comparison to the intellectual work they despise. They very often emphasize their ability to work hard as the following scene shows:

One day the general education course is about writing application letters to find employment. Some of the students question its utility.

- *Nicolas (18): I'd prefer to directly go and see the boss, and ask him for a job rather than write him a letter!*
- *Male teacher: Some bosses prefer to receive a letter and then ask you to come for a meeting if they are interested in your application.*
- *Lorenzo (19): Yes, but some people can't write, but they can work!*
- *Nicolas: I would ask my sister to write the letter for me. She can write well.*

It is also among these students that strong anti-school attitudes, as well as sexist (and racist discourses) can be observed the most often. It is not surprising that those at the bottom of the social ladder have to find other sources of power where they can claim superiority, in particular by activating this specific form of working masculinity.

Tinplate workers, embodying manual work

Tinplate workers and telematicians have joint general education courses, and spend three hours together each week. On those days, most of both classes' students spend their morning and lunch breaks together. Boundary work based on the specific jobs both groups are learning is important in the everyday interactions between the students. Tinplate apprentices are particularly keen on stressing the differences between both types of jobs, frequently highlighting the masculine dimensions of their own working situation and contrasting it with the feminized environment of telematics. In particular, they often refer to the difficult conditions in which tinplate work is done, mostly outdoor and often in dangerous settings such as on a roof, in comparison to work done by telematicians inside buildings rather than outside, and supposedly with shorter working days. Computer classes in particular are moments in which boundary-making processes are quite clear. Tinplate workers often take the opportunity to draw sharp contrasts between the two groups, distancing themselves with computers and office work and increasing their value as manual outdoor workers, as the following situation illustrates:

All students are doing a layout exercise, each on their own computer. Martin, a tinplate apprentice, says loudly: “Anyway, we will never use computers in our trade! We are good for being cold, and staying in the rain like dogs.” A moment later, the teacher remarks that students should take notes about what they are doing because they will be allowed to have

them for the exam that is planned in a few weeks. Some of them turn to Anne (telematician) and say: "Anne, you could make copies of your notes for us!" Quentin (a telematician), who is sitting next to me, comments for me: "You see, that is the macho nature of the class!" Anne says she will not give her notes and Martin answers: "But you are the telematicians, not us!" and Luca (also tinsplate worker) adds: "For us, it's the hammer, the hammer, the hammer..."

Difficult working conditions are the object of a combination of complaining and pride, for tinsplate workers who often compare with telematicians. They constitute an important device of masculinity-making for those manual workers who constantly stress the toughness, the bravery and the technical skills needed to perform their jobs. The relation between the gender division and the manual/mental division appears quite clearly in the fact that students ask the only woman in the class for her written notes taken during the lesson. The explicit reference to the "macho nature" of the class further highlights these related divisions: Anne is known as the best student in the general education course (she has done higher studies before) which could be a sufficient reason to ask her for her notes. However, Quentin is probably right in pointing out that men ask her, as a woman, for her notes. Tinsplate workers thus actively draw boundaries between themselves, as embodying a type of hegemonic masculinity (in this school context) constructed around their tough working conditions, and telematicians, often presented in the "feminized" aspects of their work, often done indoors, with short working hours and including office work such as computers.

Telematicians: the "crème de la crème"?

Telematicians also draw boundaries between themselves and tinsplate workers (as well as other apprentices in the school). The difference is that the hierarchical ordering sustaining their boundary work is made much more explicit: telematicians are clear about their superior position with regards to all other careers taught within the school.

Interviews with teachers and students show that telematicians benefit from a special status within the school: they are not considered – as well as they do not consider themselves – as really part of the building industry. Expressions such as the "crème de la crème" or "elite of the school" are part of common discourses about those apprentices. Youths in this group have internalized this perception and behave with the self-confidence linked to such a position of superiority. As the tinsplate workers, they regularly comment on the differences between the two groups, but mostly behind the back of the other students. Boundaries are drawn around two main types of contents. The first is the position on the labour market: telematicians often refer to themselves as the most wanted skilled workers by employers, and contrast it with other manual workers who will need to fight to find a job when they finish their studies. The second marker of the boundary refers to the good versus bad working conditions, a difference that tinsplate workers also use. Interestingly, this does not match the types of masculinities that have been described as valued in this school until now: working in comfortable conditions rather stands on the "feminized" side of the work/gender division.

Yet, most of these students are in a position to successfully avoid and reverse the stigmatization of doing feminized work by cleverly playing with different aspects of their jobs, creating a complex occupational identity that proves highly beneficial. Telematicians highlight two facets of their trade: on one side they distance themselves from the building industry, for instance by saying they should not really be in this school and that, contrary to most other apprentices in the school, they do not work on building sites. By doing that, they reject the negative perception often linked to building workers. On the other hand, they selectively identify with the attributes linked to the building jobs from which they can benefit in terms of masculinity making. In particular, they focus attention on the technical skills needed to perform their jobs, and they cleverly situate themselves on the manual side of the manual/mental division, but hierarchically at the higher end of this side. Further, they balance what they could "lose" in terms of masculinity by mostly working in comfortable settings by cleverly emphasizing other aspects of their jobs that reinforce their masculinity, thus "remasculinizing" a feminized working environment (Kenway and Kraack 2004). The next

observation illustrates how these apprentices are able to reconcile different aspects of their job, using them to embody a specific type of masculinity:

One day during the general education course, Diego and Quentin, two telematician friends who appear to be ostensibly bored by the teaching, discuss their working week ahead.

- *Diego: "On Friday, I am going to install the Christmas decoration for a shop, I will need to go up in the cradle. If it rains, it's going to be shitty!"*
- *Quentin: "I will be thinking of you. I will be in an office full of girls..." He then mumbles something about women wearing suits in offices, visualizing himself pulling cables under the desks which would allow him to see under those women's skirts.*
- *Diego (coming back to his own job): "On Friday, I will be wearing three jumpers, they forecast two to four degrees Celsius..."*
- *Quentin: "And I will be bare-chested!"*

While Diego focuses on the toughness of his job, Quentin cleverly balances the fact that he's going to be comfortably indoors by highlighting how this setting will give him the opportunity to be with women. In his description, he is careful to draw a sharp distinction between office women sitting at their desks, and himself (as a manual male worker) being under the tables. Another way to reinforce his masculinity comes with the sexual allusion, drawing a new boundary between defenceless women and the predatory man he incarnates in his depiction of this imaginary scene. By emphasizing the advantages of (sometimes) working in a feminized environment and by making clear that working *with* women is not working *like* women, (some) telematicians draw boundaries among the category of manual workers, positioning themselves in superiority to other men in the building industry who work in exclusively male settings.

7. BOUNDARY WORK, SOCIAL POSITION AND THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER HIERARCHIES: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although plural, masculinities in this vocational school do rely on shared, highly valued and non-contested representations of what "being a man" means. Both students and school staff actively perform or support those specific forms of masculinity that can therefore be defined as hegemonic.

The context in which difference is "done" is highly relevant. The youth in the study belong to a specific segment of society, linked to their position in the Swiss education system and eventually in the labour market. Despite recent changes aimed at more permeability, the post-compulsory education system still draws a sharp distinction between practical vocational careers and academic tertiary education. On top of being on the less valorized side of this symbolic and social boundary, youth attending this school are trained in building occupations, a career with little recognition in the labour market and in the society in general. The specialization of the school in building trades and its attendance almost exclusively by male students have important effects on the forms of masculinities that are valued and performed. As the article shows, qualified manual workers identify with a masculinity characterized by proud (hetero)sexuality, constant domination over women, ability to work hard in rough and dangerous conditions and to be economically responsible also for their future wife and children.

We observed that hegemonic forms of masculinity in this vocational school in building trades are the result of a double – and interrelated – boundary work. Masculine identity emerges from a constant confrontation and contrasting with, on the one hand, women – or rather a specific construction of femininity – and on the other hand with other men considered "unmanly". Boundaries are not neutral, and boundary work involves an active hierarchical

ordering between the group one identifies with and the “outgroups” or the ones categorized as “others”. Boundaries serve to organize hierarchically the difference and to define one’s social position in the society: it is therefore important to understand along what lines they are built.

The social position of these young men is not much valorized and they, as a group, do not belong to a future economic or ruling elite. This compels them to find strategies in order to overcome this social stigmatization by “playing” with boundaries and their content. One of these strategies is to emphasize their own value and to link it with a hegemonic form of masculinity: real men are hard manual workers. The boundary between manual and mental work is not challenged as such, but the hierarchical ordering of its sides is inverted. Collinson and Hearn observed similar processes among working-class youth who “invert the values and meanings of class society” (1996: 69) through a performance of a tough masculinity.

However, these inverting strategies can only be done through a direct link with another set of boundaries, the gendered boundaries. Inverting the hierarchies occurs through a double process of valorization of masculine work and the corollary devaluation of women’s work depicted as not-demanding, easy and not economically important tasks. The working sites themselves are important devices of distinction for these youths: the “building” site appears as a central identity component and is often contrasted to “offices”. Office work and mental work are therefore attributed a feminine inferior value, which is then used to measure all non-manual jobs and to negatively assess non-manual workers, men in particular.

Inversion processes therefore go together with the development of strategies that aim at drawing other boundaries than those in which these youths are disadvantaged and to make sure that they are on the superior side of these boundaries. In the end, these young people are fighting for recognition and power when reinforcing domination over women. The reinforcement of traditional gender boundaries, and the reassessment of masculine superiority over women, constitute the central dimension of these youth’s strategies to counter the stigmatization they face in the labour market and more generally in society. The construction of masculinities specifically linked to one’s social position therefore needs also to be analyzed as a response to structural inequalities. This result fits well with other studies which brought to light similar processes in the construction of ethnicized masculinities: black British young men reassert some kind of control over their immediate environment by enacting “macho” identities (Alexander 1996), while second-generation youth from former Yugoslavia in Switzerland counter ethnic stigmatization by legitimizing through moral arguments or reference to tradition their domination over women (Duemmler et al. 2010).

What are the social consequences of this boundary work and making of masculinities? We can easily assume that the “intellectual” (and often economic) elite does not feel much threatened by the feminized image these vocational students construct of them. Inverting the hierarchies can only be effective when the environment is supportive of the strategies. The interactions and boundary work at play between tinplate workers and telematicians is quite eloquent in this regard. When the former challenge telematicians’ masculinity in the classroom, the latter do not seem to feel bothered or doubt their superiority. Thus, the type of masculinity we have observed is hegemonic within the context of this specific school, and it is only there that it can serve its purpose, that is a revalorization of oneself as an otherwise stigmatized group. The social effects of the inversion strategies are therefore limited to specific environments, and do not have the power to contest or modify boundaries and hierarchies at the level of the labour market or the boundary system of the society in general.

Yet, the social consequences of these forms of hegemonic masculinities on gender hierarchies have called for little attention in the scholarship. In order to counter their social disadvantage in the labour market, those young men reassess their masculinity by emphasizing and valuing unequal gendered hierarchies in which they, as men, dominate. Their representations of “a real man” are indistinguishable from a perception of what “real women” are supposed to be: wives and mothers, subordinate to men, in need of protection

and economically dependant on men, and mostly active in the reproductive and private sphere. As a consequence, these young men reproduce traditional gendered hierarchies and division of labour where “women will always be less” and men will continue to “wear the pants”. As long as these are not skinny pants.

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