

## Abstract

Title: **Lack of male role models** Deconstruction of a conception and its practice

Author: Helena Johansson

Key words: Male role models, boys, teenagers, single mothers, absent fathers, deconstruction, social constructionism, discourse analysis, discourse, gender, masculinity, social work

Distribution: Göteborg University, Department of Social Work, Box 720, S-405 30 Göteborg

ISBN: 91-86796-60-7

ISSN: 1401-5781

The thesis takes its starting point in the conception that teenage boys living with a single mother lack male role models and that this lack is related to some of the boys' social problems. The overall aim of the thesis is to analyse and deconstruct the conception *lack of male role models* within the field of social work. Further to explicitly study how this conception and closely related discourses are reproduced and/or reshaped in the social work services for sons of single mothers.

Social constructionism, a "doing gender" -approach on how masculinities are constructed combined with discourse analysis and genealogy forms the theoretical and methodological framework for the thesis. It combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach and uses three empirical data sets to fulfil the aim. The first is an interview study with 11 informants working directly with teenage boys in open forms of social treatment. The second is a survey using questionnaires directed to key social workers and containing questions both on number of assessments, gendered differences, measures taken etc. *and* positions in relation to assertions concerning single mothers, their sons and the importance (or not) of male role models. 52 out of 98 social workers selected answered the questionnaire. The third is an analysis of texts published in *Socionomen*, the most influential journal for social workers in Sweden. The 217 texts studied span over a period of 42 years, 1958 to 2000.

The thesis concludes that the conception *lack of male role models* has a strong hold on social workers both in assessing and in carrying out care for teenage boys. The conception is understood as closely linked to a number of discourses that, in their turn, cooperate with social practice. Within a *gender equality discourse* with a strong political rhetoric two different discourses on gender can be seen: both *gender as difference* and *gender as sameness*. This ambivalence raises questions on the role of men in female dominated work places and as role models. Are they supposed to be models in a stereotypical and traditional masculinity construction *or* models for transgressing stereotypes?

The constructions of masculinity are multiple and complex. A *man of the body* is constructed from components such as courage, discipline, physical activity and a trimmed body. A *man of the head* is also constructed, consisting of verballity, sensitivity and care. In the constructions of fathers two main discourses can be identified: fatherhood defined as *biological kinship* and as *child oriented presence and care*. The construction of the lone mothers shows similar complexities and ambivalences. She is both strong and capable but at the same time morally disreputable and burdened under a dominating *mother centred discourse* influenced, in its turn, by psychoanalytical thinking. She is seen as *lacking* in relation to the son. Mothers and fathers are further measured as parents by different gauges. The father is often "good enough" by being the biological father whilst the mother is judged harder.

The discourses presented are interrelated, not least with a discourse where *society is viewed as fatherless* and where *childhood is seen dominated by women*. A fear of the wild teenage boy can be seen that leads to demands for discipline and a traditional form of masculinity within practical social work. *But* alternatives can also be seen and the ambivalences, competition and movements between discourses open a dynamic field. The thesis analyses these movements, different positions and competitions, within both discourses and social practice.

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# BRIST PÅ MANLIGA FÖREBILDER

Dekonstruktion av en föreställning och dess praktik

Av

Helena Johansson

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## **Akademisk avhandling**

Som med tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet för vinnande av doktorsexamen framläggs till offentlig granskning fredagen 16 juni 2006, kl 9.15 i hörsal Sappören, Institutionen för socialt arbete, Sprängkullsgatan 23, Göteborg

Opponent är docent Marie Sallnäs, Stockholms universitet, Institutionen för socialt arbete, 106 91 Stockholm

Göteborgs universitet, Institutionen för socialt arbete, Box 720, 405 30  
Göteborg