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The car, the hammer and the cables under the tables: Intersecting masculinities and social class in a Swiss vocational school

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic material, this article explores how three groups of apprentices negotiate masculinities in the specific setting of a male-dominated vocational school in Switzerland dedicated to the building trades. We use an intersectional and relational perspective to highlight how the institutional setting of the school – mirroring wider social hierarchies – influences these young men's identity work. The apprentices use three discursive dichotomies: manual vs. mental work; proud heterosexuality vs. homosexuality; and adulthood vs. childhood. However, the three different groups employ the dichotomies differently depending on their position in the school's internal hierarchies, based on their educational path, the trade they are learning and the corresponding prestige. The article illuminates the micro-processes through which existing hierarchies are internalised within an institution. It further discusses how the school's internal differentiations and the staff's discourses and behaviours contribute to the (re)production of specific classed masculinities, critically assessing the role of the Swiss educational system in the reproduction of social inequalities.

Introduction

"You're a man!" This injunction was heard during a physics class in a Swiss vocational school that provides training in different building trades: it was addressed to an apprentice who was, in his peers' eyes, inadequately performing the type of manliness that was expected. In a context in which most apprentices and teachers were male, we observed a constant assessment of whether others' identities and behaviour were appropriately masculine, and strategies to assert one's own manliness in the face of these assessments. This article understands masculinity as a contextually constructed performance of valued and honoured ways of being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt

2005b, Connell 2005b). It further focuses on masculinity as a situated practice that develops through interactions, in this case between peers, but also between teachers and apprentices who are learning to become house builders or painters, tinsmiths or telematicians. We argue that, besides learning their trade, these apprentices, who are mostly in their late teens, also learn how to become (working) men. Their occupational status within and outside the school plays a crucial dimension in their identity work as they start to negotiate multiple gendered and classed boundaries. Rather than trying to understand their masculinity-making strategies as ways to adapt to some kind of (contemptible) hegemonic model (Moller 2007), we introduce a relational and intersectional perspective to understand the lived reality of these young men, who find themselves in lower social strata and might well remain there in their future lives.

The intersectional framework we have opted for makes it possible to not only investigate social actors' identity work, but also link it with the wider structures in which it takes place, in particular the organisational settings that frame masculinity-making practices (Holvino 2010, Choo and Ferree 2010, Boogaard and Roggeband 2010). The ethnographic fieldwork we undertook within the school gave us access to the ways in which institutional arrangements and teachers' behaviours and discourses reproduce the larger power configuration of the Swiss educational and labour market.

We find that both students and teachers rely on three main discursive resources in their everyday identity work. These gendered dichotomies have in part been studied for other men in unprivileged social positions (see for instance McDowell 2002, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Collinson and Hearn 1996, Pyke 1996): these divides are manual vs. mental work, heterosexuality vs. homosexuality, and adult manhood vs. childhood. The article, however, develops a refined analysis by showing how students in three classes within the school build differently on these discursive scripts, depending on their position in internal hierarchies.

This fine-grained study of the ways through which young men in a vocational school construct themselves as men contributes to the sociological literature in at least two ways. First, it illuminates the complexity of masculinity-making processes, and it demonstrates the need to understand how the institutional context, mirroring wider social hierarchies and the social-class landscape, shapes identity work. By showing that students positioned differently within the school build on different discursive scripts, we highlight the contextual and relational dimension of these processes as well as the

constraints placed on students' "options". The lower the students' social position, the more limited the alternatives at hand within the school to gain recognition for themselves as valued men.

Second, the article sheds light on how the Swiss educational system affects the reproduction of gendered and classed identities. There is some (mostly quantitative) work on the effects of young people's early channelling into academic vs. vocational education and of the gender-segregated labour market (Falcon 2016, Imdorf et al. 2014). This article highlights the micro-processes within institutions – here a vocational school – through which young people internalise hierarchies based on gender and social class in particular.

The article starts with the theoretical and conceptual approaches on which we develop our analysis of masculinity-making. The context of the vocational school is then described, followed by a discussion of our methodological approach. The empirical section is then devoted to the distinct ways in which the apprentices build on the available discursive scripts to develop a positive image of their masculine selves. We contend in the conclusion that these processes lead to the crystallisation of established systems of dominance, including, incidentally, those based on occupational prestige, by which these youths are themselves oppressed.

Using an intersectional framework to understand masculinity-making in a vocational school: Theoretical background

Masculinity can be defined as a social construction in which men (as well as women) engage in their daily lives within a system of gender relations embedded in a specific context (Connell 2005b, 1987). The idea of competing masculinit*ies* reflects the fact that, although some forms of masculinity are more highly valued than others (considered "hegemonic" by Connell 2005b, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005a), social actors do not simply comply with a pre-given model, but may negotiate, contest and challenge dominant versions of masculinity. In other words, there is "a marketplace of masculinities", but the "'choices' are structured by relations of power" (Connell 1989, 295). Masculinities emerge from situated and relational practices within a given context, in particular in the institutional settings from which they draw their meaning (Slutskaya et al. 2016, Martin 2003).

The processes through which gender in general and masculinities in particular are shaped and experienced cannot be understood without acknowledging the interaction with other social divisions, in particular social class, race and ethnicity, but also sexuality, disability and age (Hearn 2011, Bilge 2009). The idea of intersectionality was first developed by feminist scholars (Crenshaw 1991, Hill Collins 1990, hooks 1981) to highlight intra-group differences (for instance between Black and White women). Beyond the theoretical and methodological questions that have arisen over the concept (see for instance Nash 2008, McCall 2005, Choo and Ferree 2010), there is a consensus that multiple systems of categorisations and social hierarchies interact in the experiences of individuals. These debates have opened the way for a nuanced analysis that takes into account not only the experience of multiple categories of oppression, but also situations in which privilege and subordination intersect, creating tensions and ambiguities in the lived realities of actors (Bilge and Denis 2010, Nash 2008, Atewologun, Sealy, and Vinnicombe 2016). These ideas are important for our study because the young men are also confronted by an ambiguous situation. How do they negotiate their complex positioning as privileged actors within gender hierarchies while simultaneously occupying differentiated, yet generally low, occupational statuses?

Walby, Armstrong, and Strid (2012) argue that while the mutual shaping of gender and race/ethnicity has received much attention, intersections of gender and social class have somehow been neglected in the past decade. While this imbalance may indeed exist, there is a large body of literature on how (often young) men from disadvantaged social backgrounds develop a sense of self through specific displays of masculinity. Beginning with Willis's (1977) seminal work, working-class masculinities, in particular in the British context, have been found to be embedded in rhetorics of physical work, inclinations for drinking and sports, celebrations of – often exaggerated – heterosexuality and resistance towards authority, middle-class representatives and teachers (see for instance Thiel 2007, Pyke 1996, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Collinson and Hearn 1996). Some of these authors have further highlighted more positive aspects, in particular how men with lower status construct themselves through independence, practicality, a strong sense of solidarity, for instance with co-workers, and their role as a hard-working economic provider for their family (see for instance Thiel 2007, McDowell 2002, Lamont 2000, Collinson and Hearn 1996).

As used in this study, “social class” does not refer to a group of people who share a strong sense of collective identity. Instead, it refers to the young men’s social location in local hierarchies, in particular related to the labour market (Oesch 2006). Therefore, we are interested in their occupational prestige or status, which can be defined as a combination of power, quality of work, education and income (Tracy and Scott 2006). Moreover, it would be wrong to consider the young men in the Swiss vocational school under study as part of a supposed “working class”. As in other European countries, the “tertiarisation” of the Swiss labour market has led to a social-class landscape more complex than the traditional homogeneous middle class vs. working class divide (Oesch 2006). The vocational training will mostly lead the young men to be part of the Swiss “skilled crafts”: according to Oesch’s (2006) new class schema, they will occupy lower social positions than people with upper secondary education, but they will remain more privileged than the growing class of – mostly feminine – routine service workers (for instance, home helpers or call-centre employees). However, our perspective goes beyond Oesch’s objective definition of social location or occupational category by also considering social class in its subjective, lived dimension. Slutskaya et al. (2016) contend that class “is also deeply embodied, permeating experiences, emotions and sense of self” (167-8). The young men in the study are aware of the rather negative general perception of the building trades and those who work in them. They are also conscious that their chances of accessing a higher social class are low. The classed or occupational prejudices experienced by these apprentices in the building industry, both within and outside the school, have an impact on the specific masculinities they value.

Our study further takes place in a specific institution, a vocational school training mostly young men to become (skilled) workers in different trades. We argue that this institutional framework plays a great part in supporting the types of classed masculinities that are played out by the young men. We thus adopt a stance on intersectionality that takes up an important challenge, that of linking micro-analyses of interactions and meaning-making with larger contextual structures (Choo and Ferree 2010, Holvino 2010). The latter dimension is often neglected in organisation studies, while individuals’ agency constitutes a more frequent analytical focus (Boogaard and Roggeband 2010). We follow these authors’ call to examine both these young men’s agency in identity work and the larger structures (those internal to the school and the larger societal hierarchies) that inform and are in turn (re)produced by their practices.

Identity work (here more specifically related to masculinity-making) refers to the everyday processes through which individuals make sense of their multiple social identities and maintain a sense of self-esteem (Atewologun, Sealy, and Vinnicombe 2016). These processes mostly involve the ways in which individuals simultaneously affirm that they are members of a social group and differentiate themselves from and consider themselves superior to those outside the group (Tajfel 1981). Other studies find that strategies of disadvantaged men to (re)gain recognition often involve disparaging other socially constructed categories of people, in particular women, homosexuals, "mental" workers, migrants, ethnic minorities and people who are unemployed or on state benefits (Slutskaya et al. 2016, Thiel 2007, Lucas 2011, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Collinson and Hearn 1996, Willis 1977). The young men in our study are involved in similar processes of social comparison. However, we find that, depending on their social location within the school as well as within the occupational hierarchies of the building trades, their identity work builds on different boundaries. This result demonstrates the contextual and relational nature of masculinity-making processes and the limited options available to those at the bottom of social hierarchies.

Crucially, our analysis focuses on the role of the institution in the production of those intersectional inequalities (Holvino 2010). As Boogaard and Roggeband (2010) argue, "an intersectional analysis helps to unravel the complex processes that (re)produce interlocking systems of oppression and inequality within specific organizational settings" (54). The vocational school under study is an organisation, with its norms, rules and internal hierarchies, in which specific masculinities are defined, (re)produced, maintained and contested (Lupton 2000, Collinson and Hearn 1996). Like other schools, it plays an important role in mediating how classed masculinities and femininities are constructed and experienced (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1996, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2011). Because of its close links with the labour market (see below), this school constitutes a particularly interesting laboratory to analyse how larger societal inequalities permeate the institution's dominant discursive and material scripts, and the effects of these scripts on the students' identity work.

The context: Occupational hierarchies in a Swiss vocational school specialising in the building trades

Switzerland is known for its dual-track educational system, which channels youths at the age of 16, after compulsory education, towards either general or academic educational training on the one hand or vocational education on the other. The latter attend vocational education and training (VET), which is often a combination of practical training in a host company as apprentices and study at a vocational school one or two days a week. In contrast to young people in the academic stream, those in VET are both students and workers, and they therefore already earn (mostly low) wages, spend time with adult colleagues and are partially immersed in the world of adult workers. Furthermore, at the end of their apprenticeship, they will be fully employable as (in most cases) qualified workers. Many careers are based on VET, and according to national statistical data two-thirds of pupils at the end of compulsory school opt for this educational path (Imdorf et al. 2014).

However, the recent tertiarisation of the educational and labour market has reinforced social inequalities: while youths with parents from higher social classes tend to opt for academic training, those with parents from popular classes concentrate in VET paths (Falcon 2016). One of the explanations resides in the young age at which children are tracked in specific educational paths (as early as 12 years old) and have to make a career choice (at the end of compulsory education) (Hupka-Brunner, Sacchi, and Stalder 2010). But the Swiss educational system also partly explains why the Swiss labour market is among the most gender-segregated in Europe: young people make occupational choices at an age at which they are "especially vulnerable to take gender-typical career decisions" (Imdorf et al. 2014, 191). A recent quantitative analysis shows that the tendency to opt for gender-specific vocational training is particularly strong for young men from popular social classes (Imdorf et al. 2014). Despite a recent interest in Switzerland in the impact of the VET system on classed and gendered social positions (see for instance Imdorf et al. 2010, Imdorf et al. 2014), little is known about the role that specific institutions – here a vocational school – play in those processes (Flamigni and Pfister-Giauque 2013). This article fills this gap by showing the effects of dominant discursive practices that are shared by staff and students alike.

The vocational school under study fits into the gender-segregated occupational system mentioned above, as about 98 per cent of the apprentices who attend it are men. It

specialises in vocational training for workers in the building trades, including road construction, carpentry, plumbing, electrical and painting.

Apprentices are confronted with a rather low occupational status. At a general level, vocational education is less valued than academic training, which later translates, as elsewhere, into blue-collar jobs being valued less than their white-collar counterparts. Jobs in the construction industry in particular are commonly perceived as dirty, unskilled and unsafe (Ness 2012, Thiel 2007). However, there is a hierarchy within the building trades themselves: the dirtiest, most physical jobs (such as bricklayer and painter) have a lower status, while cleaner, riskier and more technical jobs (for instance, electrician or scaffolding) are regarded more highly (Ness 2012, Thiel 2007). As this study will illuminate, these "internal" hierarchies operate within the school as well. Those hierarchies within the school stem not only from the trade learnt, but also from the different curricula and diplomas. While VET lasts three to four years depending on the trade, there is also a so-called "elementary education" path (recently renamed "certified VET"), which is aimed at apprentices who cannot meet the requirements of the normal vocational curriculum. Due to the lower expectations for the certified VET, the certificate these apprentices receive after two years is valued much less on the labour market than the standard Federal VET Diploma. These differing paths later lead to an important differentiation on the labour market and in the working sites, between formally skilled and low skilled workers (Oesch 2006).

Three classes were chosen for the study, reflecting some of the school's internal hierarchies with regard to curricula/diploma and occupational prestige. The first class consisted of seven male apprentices attending their second (and last) year in the elementary-education path. They were active in different trades – as painters, house or road builders or carpenters – but they attended common basic teaching at the school one day a week. All were between the ages of 16 and 23, except for one man in his forties. The second class consisted of tinplate apprentices in their first year (of three). The six male apprentices were learning to protect and waterproof buildings' roofs and walls, working mostly in workshops or on building sites. The third class was a group of telematics apprentices, also in their first year (of four). There were eight men and one woman in this group. Telematicians' job consists of installing, maintaining and repairing telecommunication networks and data-transmission systems. They must perform manual tasks such as pulling cables and installing technical material, but must also be

able to program. Tinplate workers and telematicians were grouped together for the general-education courses but attended separated practical and technical classes related to their trade. While tinsmiths attended the school one day each week, telematicians were there for two days. These two classes' apprentices were between 16 and 21 years of age. As will be shown, apprentices enrolled in the elementary-education path occupied the lowest rank in the school's hierarchy, while telematicians were often perceived – and perceived themselves – as those with the most prestigious educational path. Tinsmiths can roughly be considered as occupying a middle-ground status. We will show that these internal differentiations are widely accepted and explicitly referred to in the school's everyday life, influencing the youths' classed and gendered identity work.

Methodology

The study is based on three months of intensive fieldwork in the school, undertaken by a male and a female researcher. The latter is the first author of this article. An ethnographic approach (Crang and Cook 2007) was chosen, based on (partially participant) observation and semi-directed interviews. Ethnographic fieldwork aims to interact regularly with the people under study in their "natural" settings, and is particularly suited to producing "contextualised knowledge, taking stock of actors' point of view, ordinary representations and usual practices and their meanings" (Olivier de Sardan 1995, 35; personal translation). Our methodological choices allowed us to have access to both the young adults' discourses and their daily practices and interactions with their peers and teachers. The researchers spent two full days each week at the school: they attended all classes with the apprentices and took most of their breaks with them. They explained the aim of their presence in the school clearly and, despite the differences in age, gender and level of education between them and the apprentices, could easily engage in school life.

The researchers took extensive observation notes, which were transcribed after each day and complemented with memos and reflexive comments. The research team regularly debated codes, concepts and theoretical ideas (Flick 2006) and reflected on issues such as the positionality of the researchers and the possible influence of their presence in the field on the data collected. In particular, the presence of a(n academic) female researcher in the all-male elementary-education class triggered some changes in the students' behaviours, as both the teachers and the apprentices themselves acknowledged. A

comparison of the field notes further revealed that the male and female researchers accessed different types of data, during both observations and interviews. Apart from the observation, 14 semi-directed interviews were conducted with apprentices from the three classes, and six with school staff (five teachers and the school's director). The sampling of the interviewees aimed to balance career paths, age, ethnic background and peer-group belonging within the classes. Interviews were based on a flexible guideline and were carried out in the form of open conversations rather than rigid surveys: they allowed access to individual experiences and perspectives and a focus on our topics of interest (Olivier de Sardan 1995, Charmaz 2006).

Data gathering and analysis were qualitative and interpretative. Research questions and methods were constantly reassessed and adapted during the fieldwork and data analysis. An inductive, data-driven type of analysis was first carried out through open coding, which made it possible to explore the themes that emerged, and which were beyond the expectations and assumptions of the researchers. This analysis was followed by a more focused coding, with an eye to intersections of gender and class, as well as practices related to masculinity-making. In fact, the research project was not initially about masculinity. It was part of a larger project intended to explore boundary-making strategies with a focus on youths' relationship to religion, ethnicity and gender in eight different schools in Switzerland. The co-authors of this article were researchers on the larger project. Masculinity-making and its relationship to occupational status emerged as a strong issue from the data of this particular school, which prompted us to refine the codes and categories and later put them in perspective vis-à-vis the existing literature. While social class and gender emerged as the most significant categories, sexuality and maturity also emerged as important intersecting categories in processes of masculinity-making. Ethnicity, although present in many interactions and discourses, did not appear as a central category in processes of masculinity-making.[1] The extensive use of excerpts from observation notes and interviews in this article is not simply illustrative of the method of analysis: it also acts as evidence for the grounded character of the analysis.

Combining informal discussions and ethnographic observation with formal interviews constituted a privileged way to access and reconstruct both the students' agency and the "discursive and material structures" (Boogaard and Roggeband 2010) that shape

[1] For this reason, and because we had to make choices, we have decided to leave this dimension out of our analysis.

masculinity-making processes. It allowed us to illuminate the complexities of the intersections of gender, social class, sexuality and maturity in these processes. Our grounded theory-inspired analytical methodology (Charmaz 2006) allowed us to let emerge specific hierarchies within the school and the dominant gendered discourses and representations – the “available scripts” (Lupton 2000) – on which male teachers and apprentices built to negotiate a valued image of themselves as “men”. The youths first contrasted “male” manual, physical work with “female” mental activities. Second, they contrasted active heterosexuality with homosexuality. And finally, they marked a boundary between adult behaviour and discourses on the one hand and students, associated with children, on the other. Clearly, the educational path (VET vs. elementary education) and the trade learnt (in this case tinplate vs. telematics) constitute boundaries that the youths and the staff mobilise in their relational identity work. For this reason, we discuss each of the groups in turn in the next sections. We then argue that, while all build on the same gendered dichotomies (manual vs. mental; heterosexual vs. homosexual; adult manhood vs. childhood), they do so in different ways and with different focuses: masculinity-making strategies depend heavily on the context in which they are undertaken (here the vocational school), but also on the larger social structures in which the youths and the institution are embedded.

Tinplate apprentices: Self-identifying with the building trade

Building trades are traditionally constructed as tough, dangerous, dirty, often involving working in difficult and uncomfortable conditions and requiring physical strength and bravery, but also technical skill (Ness 2012, Thiel 2007). Valorising the masculine dimension of these qualities is an important part of masculinity-making within the school, and it is done by contrasting them with other types of activities, presented as less deserving of recognition. On the one hand, physical work is contrasted with “women’s” activities, which are explicitly or implicitly considered less worthy. As in Willis’s (1977) study, “manual labour is associated with the social superiority of masculinity, and mental labour with the social inferiority of femininity” (148). On the other hand, physical, manual and technical jobs are contrasted with mental and intellectual jobs, disparaged as passive and useless, despite their general valorisation in terms of wages and social status. For instance, Jonathan, a tinplate apprentice, used the image of the “bureaucrat” during an interview to describe a kind

of man he considered in a negative light. When asked what he meant by that word, he answered:

"It's someone who spends 200 per cent of his time in an office, always babbling on, saying he knows everything about life when he knows nothing, and who has never spent a single day on a building site sweating like a pig, or anything else".

The dichotomy between manual work, where men "sweat like pigs", and mental work, where men "babble on" all day, is reinforced by differentiating the places where these jobs are done: the office *versus* the building site, an aspect to which we will return.

These dichotomies also appear among the school's staff, in particular between, on the one hand, teachers in practical and theory classes directly related to the trade being learnt and, on the other, teachers of general-education classes. On more than one occasion, we heard jokes and (slightly) unpleasant comments directed at these non-manual, non-practical teachers (among whom were the few women in the teaching staff), challenging the legitimacy of their presence and status in the school.

Within the school, students of all groups mobilised this dichotomy. However, the tinplate apprentices found themselves most comfortable with this type of occupational masculinity and relied heavily and more exclusively than others on this boundary. This is so because they were learning a trade that is valued because of its traditional dimension, the technical skills required, the danger of working on roofs and its nature as one of the cleaner construction trades (see Thiel 2007 on this aspect). Apprentices in this career path were keener than those in the two other groups to stress these aspects of their work and (re)produce forms of masculinity that build on the valorisation of physical work over mental work.

Tinplate apprentices spent half a day each week with their telematician peers for joint general-education courses, and most apprentices from both classes also spent their morning and lunch breaks together. The everyday interactions between the two groups often involved situations in which tinsmiths would stress the differences between their respective jobs. Most often in a mixture of jokes and provocation, they recurrently highlighted the masculine dimensions of their own working situation, contrasting it with the feminised environment of telematicians, who mostly work indoors, supposedly with shorter working days. The weekly computer lesson was particularly well suited to the tinplate apprentices' demonstration of masculinity based on manual

skills and contrasting it to working with computers in comfortable offices, with which telematicians' jobs are partially associated. The following description comes from our observation notes:

During the computer lesson in the morning, all apprentices work individually on an exercise consisting of laying out a page on a word processor. 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 (female) teacher tells the class that they should be taking notes since they will be allowed to use them for the coming exam. A few of them turn to Anne (a telematician, and the only woman in the class), and one says: "Anne, you could make copies of your notes for us!" Quentin (a telematician), who is sitting next to me, comments to me: "You see, that's the macho nature of the class!" Anne says that she will not share her notes, to which Martin replies, "But you are the telematicians, not us!" Luca (tinplate) adds: "For us, it's the hammer, the hammer, the hammer…".

Opposing the hammer to the computer, as symbols of the diverging working fields of the two trades, clearly marks the boundaries tinplates (rather than telematicians) drew in their masculinity-making practices and discourses. The relationship between the gender division and the manual/mental-labour division appears quite clearly in the fact that the apprentices asked the only woman in the class for her notes. Anne was known as the best student in the general-education course (she had undertaken academic-type training before starting an apprenticeship), which could be a sufficient reason to ask her for her notes. However, Quentin was most probably right in pointing out that men asked her for her notes primarily because she was a woman.[2] As the literature on "tokenism" (Kanter 1977) has shown, women may be pushed and "entrapped" in roles and tasks typically associated with women in institutional settings dominated by men. Studies highlight how tokenism tends to perpetuate stereotypes and limit women's opportunities to find jobs and access higher positions (see for instance Lewis and Simpson 2012, or Whittock 2002 for the case of the construction industry). Some apprentices in this school constructed their masculinity by casting the few women (Anne, but also the teacher) in roles based on a naturalised ability to produce mental work, but also to help others with their (non-manual) tasks.

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[2] His remark was intended for the female researcher and was not devoid of complicity: his tone implied at a critical distance towards "macho nature". Like Anne, Quentin had pursued a more academic educational path before and, because of this, was among the older students in the class.

The next scene further highlights the constant desire by tinplate apprentices to emphasise their commitment to work and the long working hours they endure, and to contrast them with the supposedly easier – and therefore less valuable – working life of telematicians. As well, they once again distanced themselves from the need to do intellectual work and assert a specific type of masculinity behaviour in their (limited) free time:

On another day, the same teacher reminds the students of both groups of the deadline for a personal project in the "general education" class. Samir, a tinplate apprentice, smiles and says: "But we don't have time to do that, because on weekends, we [emphasised] go out! And during the week, we work. We aren't like you [intended for the telematicians]: we don't finish work at 3.30 p.m.!" Martin [also a tinsmith] adds: "We can't have drinks after work every Friday!"

By emphasising their own value as committed manual workers, tinplate apprentices inverted dominant hierarchies between manual and mental work (Collinson and Hearn 1996, 69). They valorised manual work, which is considered tough, technical and masculine, and devalued mental work, which is depicted as feminine, less demanding and useless. Their weekly interactions with a group of apprentices who did not entirely fit these normative, and strongly classed, views on "men's work", offered them an opportunity to assert their superiority, all the more so as they took place within the safe environment of a school that actively promotes such views.

The next section shows, however, that male telematics apprentices found themselves in a position that allowed them to develop sophisticated strategies to challenge the "feminisation" of their work, illuminating how the hierarchy based on occupational status was more powerful than the one based on "masculine" labour.

Telematics apprentices: The "crème de la crème"?

Telematics apprentices found themselves in an ambiguous situation. They were integrated in a vocational school for building trades, but telematics is not a traditional building trade. In interviews, two of their teachers indicated that these apprentices were superior to others. The general-education teacher compared the two groups in her class and found the telematicians more "self-confident" than the tinsmiths. Another teacher referred to the nature of his own educational background: in contrast to the other technology teachers, those who teach telematicians are qualified engineers who

have undertaken proper tertiary education. Expressions such as “crème de la crème” and “elite of the school” are part of the common discourses about these apprentices, although some teachers challenged these stereotypes as much as they reproduced them. However, the telematics apprentices internalised this perception and behaved with the self-confidence appropriate to their superior position. In an interview, Nuno was asked about the kinds of women he would and would not be keen on dating:

- *(Female) interviewer: “And are there kinds of occupations that you would not want her to do?”*
- *Nuno: “Hmm, it depends. For instance, builder, I wouldn’t want that. That kind of job, that would bother me a little.*
- *Interviewer: “Jobs in the building trades?”*
- *Nuno: “Exactly. Well… I do one of those jobs. Well, if I may say so, because telematicians are not really [a building trade]”.*

Nuno’s last sentence reveals the ambivalence of telematics apprentices regarding whether they (want to) belong to the building trades. However, not wanting to date a woman who does “that kind of job” emphasises the masculinity with which the building trades are associated. These young men internalised the gendered scripts discussed above – according to which building trades offer typical men’s jobs – and drew some advantage from them. At the same time, their masculinity was challenged in school, as the tinplate apprentices’ comments above reveal, urging them to negotiate the accusations of doing light and comfortable work, associated here with women’s jobs and workplaces.

We observed that most of these apprentices were able to avoid and reverse the stigmatisation of doing what was described by others as “feminised” work by cleverly playing with different aspects of their jobs, creating a complex occupational identity that proved highly beneficial. Men find it particularly urgent to counter the stigmatisation of working in feminised environments when challenged by male peers (Simpson 2004). We found that, in the particular context of this school, these apprentices devised techniques similar to those developed by other men who need to reassert an endangered masculinity (Simpson 2004, Lupton 2000, Tracy and Scott 2006).

The first type of strategy aimed at “remasculinising” their jobs in ways that fit dominant versions of masculinity, in particular by emphasising the masculine aspects of their jobs and/or highlighting their differences from “women’s jobs” (see also Lupton 2000, Simpson 2004). For instance, in their discourses, they cleverly found a balance between the comfortable conditions in which they work and other, tougher and dangerous jobs they also do, sometimes outdoors. They also built an alternative, valorised masculinity by highlighting the high-tech nature of the skills they need to master. Furthermore, they emphasised that, in contrast to other apprentices at the school, they would not face difficulties in finding jobs in their sector, constructing themselves as (soon-to-be) economically successful adult males. This “remasculinisation” therefore also takes place through an emphasis of their present, and especially their future, privileged social status on the labour market and in society in general.

The second strategy consisted in “sexualising” the feminised work environments in which parts of their work took place. Similarly to Tracy and Scott (2006) in their study of firefighters, we observed instances in which heterosexuality was celebrated in order to construct valorised masculinities even in workplaces dominated by women. Within this vocational school as well as in other male-dominated educational or work environments, the “normal” way to be a man builds on a strong heteronormativity, complemented by the ability to sexually satisfy female partners. The learning of heterosexuality involves acquiring not only sexual techniques, but also repertoires and identities, and often goes along with the devaluation of homosexuality (Connell 2005a). At the school, daily jokes and insults about peers’ supposed homosexuality were accompanied by an emphasis on and celebration of personal (hetero)sexual prowess, a pattern often found in masculinity studies with lower-status men (Tracy and Scott 2006, Pyke 1996). While most students engaged in such discursive practices, the telematicians were particularly active in it. We interpret it as part of their strategies to negotiate the tensions they are confronted with. The following conversation between two telematics apprentices, transcribed from our observation notes, illuminates both strategies to counter accusations of “femininity”: remasculinisation and sexualisation:

One December day during the general-education class, Diego and Quentin, two telematician friends ostensibly bored by the class, discuss their coming workweek.

- *Diego: "On Friday, I'm going to install the Christmas decorations for a shop. I'll need to go up in the cradle. If it rains, it's going to be shitty!"*
- *Quentin: "I'll be thinking of you. I'll be in an office full of girls…". He then mumbled something about women wearing suits in offices, visualising himself pulling cables under the desks which could allow him to see under their skirts.*
- *Diego (bringing back the discussion to his own job): "On Friday, I'll be wearing three jumpers. They forecast two to four degrees Celsius…".*
- *Quentin: "And I will be bare-chested!"*

While Diego focused on the difficult conditions of his job, Quentin cleverly balanced the fact that he would be comfortably indoors by highlighting how this setting would give him the opportunity to be with women. In his description, he was careful to draw a sharp distinction between office women sitting at their desks and himself (as a manual male worker) being *under* the tables. He also reinforced his masculinity through a sexual allusion that drew a new boundary between defenceless women and himself, the predatory man. He emphasised the advantages of (sometimes) working in a feminised environment and made clear that working *with* women is not working *like* women.

Another excerpt from our field notes illuminates how demonstrations of defiant heterosexuality were not only accepted at this school, but also encouraged within the classroom. The following scene took place in a context in which many apprentices in the telematics/tinplate class had been making fun of Marc (a student in telematics) for a few weeks, in particular for wearing tight jeans, perceived as "unmanly", and calling him a homosexual (using different derogatory words), although they all seemed to know that he had a girlfriend.

The telematics apprentices are in their physics and chemistry class. Marc is asked to join the (male) teacher at the front to assist him with an experiment. He needs to touch an electric element but looks scared, probably because he is afraid of getting zapped. His peers shout homophobic names at him, and the teacher lets them do so. He then asks Marc to detach two magnets that are stuck together. When Marc fails – possibly because it is impossible to do so – the teacher comments: "Well, I probably didn't choose the right guy; I need someone with more strength". One student shouts "Hey, do it, you're a man!" Another says: "No, he's not a man with such skinny jeans!" […] A week later, at the beginning of the physics and chemistry class, Marc asks the

teacher whether they will do the experiments again, and the teacher answers: "No, only theory today. And anyway, you're a chicken". He continues by mockingly imitating Marc: he slips his hands into his sleeves, bends his back a little, draws his shoulders forward and asks him if that is also the way he touches his girlfriend.

The comments by both the young men and the teacher made explicit reference to expectations about men's heterosexual gender performance. Wearing the appropriate clothes (which apparently does not include skinny jeans) is one aspect of these expectations. But the teacher's comments about Marc's girlfriend also illustrate the (often implicit) link between being brave, tough and strong and being able to sexually satisfy a woman, another important dimension of proving one's masculinity in this context.

While tinplate apprentices identified strongly with the school, things were different for telematicians, who considered their job to only partially belong to the building trades. Their implicitly admitted superior position within the school allowed them to "play" more freely with different facets of the gendered scripts that constitute the basis of masculinity-making in this context. In particular, this "status shield" (Tracy and Scott 2006) allowed them to counter accusations of working in feminised environments relatively easily by drawing on other scripts, in particular those presenting them as (hetero)sexual predators.

"Elementary education": Performing superior male adulthood

The youths in the elementary-education path are those whose occupational status is the lowest, within the school, on the work site and in society more generally. They will leave the school without a formal VET, which will position them as unqualified workers on the labour market. As students with limited requirements in the school, their choices for a career also remain restricted to those jobs in the building industry that are less valued, less technical and "dirtier" (Thiel 2007, Ness 2012). During our fieldwork, they appeared as particularly aware of the negative image people have of (hardly qualified) construction workers. Nicolas, a painter, illustrated this in an interview, using the most depreciating stereotypes of construction workers and emphasising the "dirty" and disgusting aspects of their job, in particular on how women perceive them:

"My job isn't really a good one. We're on building sites, aren't we? People look down on us. They say we're like people who can't write, who can't read. […] 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?'"

The recurring animalistic depictions used by the young men when describing their work point vividly to the low value given to their occupation, which they have incorporated into their discourse. This low status was further made evident by teachers' discourses and practices. While young people in other paths are generally called "apprentices", those in the elementary-education path are denied this term and generally referred to as "elementary education". Unlike in the other two classes we observed, the two teachers of the elementary-education class we followed addressed the students using the familiar "tu" (while the youths would respond with the polite "vous"). This special status was also hinted at when their general-education teacher reported during an interview that the school's director had specifically asked him to teach this class because of his background as a primary-school teacher.

This low status within and outside the school was too entrenched for these young people to be able to challenge it easily. Their status is the one that most resembles that of "working-class" men studied in other places (Ness 2012, Slutskaya et al. 2016, Tracy and Scott 2006), yet the particular context they are in limits their ability to build on traditional working masculinities. Sharing the school's premises with other youths in more qualified, more technical, more valued vocational training paths, they cannot rely on the masculine aspects of their work to make a difference. In this situation, we found that their identity work mostly consisted of distancing themselves from the hierarchies in which they were disadvantaged and emphasising instead alternative, more valorising dimensions of daily (working) life.

The most effective resource available when it came to constructing a differentiated, valorised form of masculinity was that of "adulthood". These apprentices mobilised the boundary between this category and "childhood" through various strategies intended to distance themselves from the school's demands (and from their status as students within it) and to contrast their own experiences and projects with those of the other apprentices, with their "kid-like" behaviour and interests.

First, some apprentices in this group had developed an ostentatiously "anti-school" attitude that other studies have also discussed (Willis 1977, Connell 1989, Mac an

Ghaill 1994, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2011). Arriving late or skipping classes, being kicked out of the lesson by the teacher, or defiantly refusing to do the exercises asked were behaviours we observed rather often in this particular class. The youths would also regularly disparage the (sometimes shockingly easy) exercises they were given in class by describing them as being "for poofters" or "useless for [their] jobs", but most often as being "for kids". Interestingly, these descriptions closely reproduced the three dominant dichotomies we found within the school, i.e. heterosexuality vs. homosexuality; physical labour vs. mental work; and adulthood vs. childhood.

While some authors (Willis 1977 in particular) have described such anti-school behaviour as a cultural response from "working-class boys", Abraham (2008) notes that it can also be read as a reaction to internal institutional differentiations: the differential treatment aimed at this group of apprentices caused them to find other ways to create a positive image of themselves as men. Defying the school's authority and ostensibly marking their disinterest in the work they were asked to perform were ways through which these young men tried to gain some self-esteem within the school and regain control over their life.

Simultaneously, they strongly emphasised their identity as workers (rather than students), as well as their status as adult males with economic power. For instance, in contrast to most apprentices in the other groups, some youths in the elementary-education path did not eat their lunch at the school cafeteria, but drove to fast-food restaurants or pizzerias. Cars and restaurants (instead of public transportation and the school cafeteria) are elements of a masculinity built on economic power and adult-like behaviour. During a conversation initiated in class by the general-education teacher about household budgeting, a few of these young men indicated that they received more than the normal apprentice wages[3] and took pride in mentioning how their money was mostly spent on alcohol, branded clothes, cars and girls. As Connell (2005a) emphasises, adolescence is a time during which individuals encounter the consumer market and the seductive aspects of the adult world. The young men in the elementary-education path relied strongly on their ability to spend money, in particular on things that enhanced their status as economically successful and sexually attractive young males to promote a positive image of themselves.

[3] This fact highlights the ambiguous status of the elementary-education path: while some of these youths are treated like apprentices in the company they work for, others are already paid like (unqualified) workers.

However, masculine adulthood emerged not only through displays of economic power at the school, but also through discourses that valorised an identity based on gendered domestic respectability (see also Collinson and Hearn 1996, McDowell 2002). Some young men emphasised their wish to become responsible adults. During the discussion on household budgeting mentioned above, a few of the students distinguished themselves clearly on the basis of their consumption practices: they drew attention to their responsible lifestyle, paying their rent, insurance and taxes themselves and being informed about how to do these things. Romain, a 19-year-old road builder, showed pride in his voluntarily giving part of his salary to his mother, with whom he was living. In an interview, he further articulated his will to provide for his future family, spontaneously addressing the topic of relationships with women:

"I respect women a lot, of course without letting them walk all over me. When a woman is mine, I give her everything. I want her to be as happy as possible. If I die, I want her to take everything. I work for my kids and my wife. I don't care if my wife stays at home, looks after the kids, and I'm the one who works, who brings home food and money. But if she wants to work, that doesn't bother me. If she wants to work, she can work. But I give everything, to children and a woman".

These youths could only emphasise their role as male "breadwinners" effectively, however, if they simultaneously invoked the role of women as economically dependent homemakers. Like Romain, many would not mind if their future wife worked, but they remain clear that such a job would be part-time and would not drive their spouse away from domestic and child-rearing duties. Therefore, rather than focusing on a skilled, technical occupational masculinity, these young men highlighted how their physically strong body constitutes a source of status and income (Thiel 2007). Slutskaya et al. (2016) identify similar pragmatic displays of instrumentality and practicality as important aspects of low status men's identity work. In this sense, maturity becomes an important category, and it is not determined by how old the apprentices are, but by the degree to which they value responsible (masculine) adulthood, understood to consist of being an informed worker, an economically sufficient man and a responsible partner and father. Interestingly, this form of responsible adulthood is promoted within the school: the general-education curriculum includes discussions on household budgeting, apprentices' and workers' rights, social-insurance systems and marriage contracts, all of which were addressed at length by the

teachers. The schools' official curriculum further includes "equality between women and men": general education teachers need to address this topic transversally through various discussion themes. During an interview, the teacher in this class explained:

"I do that for instance when we talk about advertising. I bring ads where there are women. But it's very tough, because for them, it's really the total 'woman as an object' thing. And I don't have many arguments; all I can do is make my nice little speech. But I feel it's important to do it anyway".

In the same interview, the teacher added that other students sometimes felt uncomfortable and intervened when someone was saying things about women that were "too extreme", but only when there was a woman in the classroom. We also witnessed that kind of policing between peers (or by teachers) regarding racist and sexist comments, but none when it came to homophobic name-calling or jokes.

In summary, it was difficult for these young men at the bottom of the school's hierarchy to identify with the institution when they were constantly being reminded of their low status. Not being able to challenge this hierarchy, their strategies mostly involved emphasising other types of boundaries and finding other sources of power through which they could claim superiority, in particular by drawing boundaries along the lines of gendered "adulthood".

Conclusions

Schools are institutions in which masculinities and femininities are played out, negotiated and produced (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1996, Mac an Ghaill 1994). The Swiss vocational school under study, teaching young, mostly male, apprentices in the building trades, is no exception. We found that three dominant gendered "available scripts" (Lupton 2000) informed these young men's masculinity-making – as well as that of their teachers. These scripts were the central resources and cues on which the apprentices built in order to appear, to themselves and to others, as "real men". They were part of these young men's strategies to negotiate the complex social positions they occupied in different hierarchies, and in particular to deal with their rather low occupational status in the Swiss labour market. Each of these scripts involves a boundary, where one side is valued while the other is considered less worthy of recognition. The youths first highlighted the value of hard, dangerous and manual labour, contrasted to mental, feminised types of work. Second, active, defiant

heterosexuality was contrasted to passive sexuality and homosexuality. Finally, they marked a boundary between responsible adulthood and economic power on the one hand and kid-like behaviours and interests on the other. Apprentices and teachers alike participated in the daily reproduction of these versions of what it is to “be a man”.

While these gendered scripts have been found relevant for other (young) men occupying lower social classes, this study provides new insights into the relational and contextual character of these gendered and classed identity processes. While most apprentices drew on these three gendered, discursive and material scripts, their positions within the school’s occupational hierarchy (mirroring wider societal relations of power) influenced the ways in which they did so. The study demonstrates that there are several masculinity-making strategies, not a single hegemonic model – and that identity work related to masculinity is both facilitated and constrained by the power configuration in which individuals find themselves (see also Atewologun, Sealy, and Vinnicombe 2016). Our methodological choice to not only compare groups but also explore their daily interactions within the school offers unique insights into these processes by demonstrating how masculinities are regularly challenged, contested, negotiated and fought over, in particular by mobilising markers related to their and others’ occupational status.

Among the three groups of apprentices studied, tinplate apprentices found themselves in the most comfortable situation because they could easily build on the job they were training for to lay claim to a tough, physical and brave masculinity. Their display of manliness was not challenged much in the school, where it seemed to be appropriate to establish one’s superiority by devaluing other types of work, in particular those done by women and mental work. In other words, tinplate apprentices mostly built on the first dominant script of the school. Other apprentices, however, had to find alternative sources to assert their masculinity, since they did not entirely fit the image of the physical yet skilled male construction worker. With their masculinity challenged (in different ways), their choice of alternative scripts was not random: to be effective, the scripts needed to find an echo in this particular context. Apprentices in the elementary-education path were challenged by the institutional perception of them as “school children” instead of as apprentices learning to master their trade. In order to create a distance with the school and the other apprentices, they relied strongly on the third available script, that of mature masculinity, associated with economic power and/or

domestic respectability. The apprentices in telematics, in contrast, could mobilise their supposedly superior occupational status within the school to brush off challenges to their masculinity on the grounds that they partially work indoors, in comfortable, feminised environments. They mostly did so by drawing boundaries between themselves and women, by both emphasising the value of their masculine skills and sexualising women as potential prey. Among telematics apprentices, the most general trend was to combine the first and the second scripts.

The intersectional lens of this study has made it possible to illuminate how multiple sets of unequal relations intersect in the lives of these young men trying their best to develop a positive image of their masculine selves. Occupational status – related to the trade they are learning and the educational path they are in – gender, sexuality and age constitute the most important social categories through which masculinity-making takes place in the context of this particular school. Apprentices have to deal with the ambiguities of their positions, occupying privileged statuses in certain hierarchies (in particular gender) and subordinate ones in others, in particular their occupational status in the wider society.

The intersectional framework we used has further allowed us to link these identity processes to the larger societal contexts in which they take place (Holvino 2010, Choo and Ferree 2010, Boogaard and Roggeband 2010). The vocational school appears as a particularly interesting laboratory through which to understand the wider structures in relation to which masculinities are played out. On the one hand, it is part of a specific educational system, which differentiates, early on, between those youth who will likely remain members of lower social classes (those who pursue vocational training) and those with an academic-oriented education who will occupy higher levels in various social hierarchies (Falcon 2016). On the other hand, the school reflects the occupational hierarchies and gendered boundaries of the labour market to which it has important connections (Imdorf et al. 2014). This ethnographic study shows how those larger power relations impregnate the ways these apprentices construct themselves as male young adult workers with a generally low occupational status (see also Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1996, Tracy and Scott 2006). Crucially, it highlights the role played by the institutional setting, mostly through its teachers, in the (re)production of gendered and classed hierarchies. In particular, we witnessed how the teaching staff contributed to the consolidation of the three gendered scripts identified above.

Through the formally established curriculum or through informal interactions with the youths, the staff were important actors in validating specific types of masculinities. Their own discourses and behaviours tended to promote manual labourers with strong bodies, proud and active heterosexuals and informed and economically responsible adults and workers.

Teachers also participated in reinforcing those boundaries through the different attitudes and discourses they had towards the students of the school. By elevating those with higher schooling requirements (apprentices in telematics) and devaluing those with reduced expectations (students in the elementary-education path in particular), they strengthened the social structures in which the youths needed to position themselves. There were also differentiation processes among the teachers themselves, based on the technical/general education divide, but also on the types of studies they had themselves undertaken (higher or vocational training). Differentiations occur not only through formal distinctive expectations towards different groups of students (curricula, number of years of training, type of diploma), but also through everyday practices and interactions. Streaming and institutional differentiation within the school constitute an important background against which the behaviours and identity work of the men, especially those in the lower ranks of social hierarchies, need to be read (Abraham 2008). In a context in which different versions of masculinity compete (Connell 1989), the apprentices in the study were confronted with limited options in the strategies they may opt for to construct themselves as men worthy of recognition. It appears that the lower their occupational status – within and outside the school – the more limited their options. An intersectional approach makes it possible to account for the contextual, situated and embodied character of these young men's performances of classed masculinities (Slutskaya et al. 2016).

But differentiated practices of masculinity-making, based on intersecting categories of social difference, in turn affect wider structures. The general picture is one in which these young men and the institution itself contribute to the reproduction of established social hierarchies, both those in which they are dominant and those in which they suffer themselves (see also Boogaard and Roggeband 2010, Collinson and Hearn 1996, Pyke 1996). In trying to construct positive male identities, these young men tend

to devalue other social categories, in particular women and sexual minorities.[4] Their search for recognition and positive self-images thus goes hand-in-hand with their reinforcement and confirmation of other established systems of dominance from which most of them seem to benefit.

Yet asserting such a version of dominant masculinity ultimately also has negative consequences for these young men because it contributes to the (unintended) reproduction of those same hierarchies that subordinate them. Self-valorisation through the feminisation and devaluation of mental and intellectual work has little destabilising effect on class relations outside the school or the building site, in particular in terms of the societal valuation of different types of male-dominated work. Because of their secure and privileged social positions, professionals who work in the comfort of offices will continue to constitute the administrative, political and economic elites in Switzerland. Indeed, the symbolic inversion of the values and meanings of class society (Collinson and Hearn 1996) performed by the young men in the school not only have little power to modify larger societal structures, but also contribute to their reinforcement. Working on building sites or even under office tables, these apprentices will continue to occupy the lower rungs of societal hierarchies.

Finally, these forms of masculinity also serve the interests of employers and managers in the construction industry, who benefit from a workforce that endorses masculinities based on endurance, courage and strength (Ness 2012). In this sense, the school itself needs to reflect on how its promotion of discursive scripts based on tough and physical masculinities contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities based on occupational status.

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[4] Masculinity-making based on maturity boundaries is only effective in identity work among teenagers and young adults: these boundaries have limited societal effects, which further illuminates the restricted options for those in lower positions.

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