

Fields of Masculinity: Icelandic men in nursing

Lecture at the forum for “Kvinnor och män på den nordiska arbetsmarknaden” in Grand Hotel on the 11th of November 2004.

In this lecture I would like to introduce to you some of the findings of my research of men in nursing here in Iceland. A brief outline of the research: It's a part of my MA thesis in anthropology at the University of Iceland. It's mostly based on participant-observation and qualitative interviews with 11 male nurses and nurse students. In the data analysis I used among other things Robert Connell's idea of *hegemonic masculinity* and further Pierre Bourdieu's analytical framework with an emphasis on his notion of *social capital*.

That aside I would like to tell you a bit about a project that went under way during my research. The Association of Icelandic nurses lead a broad group of associates in an effort to get more people to take up nursing as a career. The University of Iceland participated in this project since there was an interest to introduce traditional women's work to men. There are few professions in Iceland that are as bound with gender as nursing. Men are only just over 1 % of the nursing population in Iceland (compared to 6% in Norway, 7% in Sweden, 3,5% in Denmark - 7% in Finland, 16,5% in Germany and 20% in Italy)¹. The project included visits to colleges where there was an emphasis to get male nurses to introduce their work. A webpage was made where about 90 different nurses had free hands in introducing their work and last but not least there was a big ad-campaign that emphasized the diversity of the nursing profession. Posters, postcards and ads in various locations asked “do you know anything about nursing?”².

I'm now going to show you these postcards as I think they correspond very well with what my respondents say about their position in nursing.

¹ WENR (2001) *Workgroup of European Nurse Researchers Country Report* http://www.wenr.org/view_categories.php?nCatId=34 accessed 04.05.2003.

² You can look at the webpage by following this link <http://aukavefir.hjukrun.is/veistu/>.



The first postcard has a picture of snowboards on it and on the back it says “endless opportunities after your studies”. This goes very well with the fact that my male nurses have all experienced that people around them haven’t got a clue what nursing is about. They feel that people in general have a

rather negative image of nursing, that the work is rather monotonous and that it requires very little education. In fact they feel that the popular image of nursing is that of geriatric- nursing. Most of my respondents talked about how much respect that kind of nursing deserved but not one of them was going to work in that kind of nursing. One of my younger respondents, Gunnar Karl, says that he thinks that what is needed to make nursing more appealing is to point out its diversities, that it includes more than “boring stuff”. He says that what is needed is to make people understand that “this is more than just helping old people and giving them their pills”.

My male nurses have found there to be a lot of misgivings about nursing and that people around them have been flabbergasted by the fact that they need to study at all for nursing. Hannes describes the reaction that he got when he said he was in the university studying nursing:

Do you need to go to the university to learn how to wipe people’s bottom? [...] I always thought nurses were just these girls that brought me some water and stuff when I went to the hospital and stuff.

My findings have been that men in nursing try and distance themselves from the typical nursing – the one which is very much associated with women. This coincides with Connell’s (1995) idea of hegemonic masculinity where different forms of masculinity have a different status in regard to one another. If a man forfeits his place within the hierarchy of masculinity, like he seems to do if he goes into nursing, he risks being thought of as a non-man or positioned in the lowest places in the pyramid of masculinities. My respondents have definitely felt these ideas.

Men that go into nursing are considered different to other men and in some ways flawed. To forfeit their right to a mans position in a world where most

management positions are in the hands of men and men have higher salaries than women and so on, then that must mean that they are in some way flawed. The prejudices that my male nurses have encountered can be summed up in the words of Stefán:

Yes, you know that there are two kinds of men that go into nursing: It's the homosexuals of course and men that wanted to become nurses but haven't got the brains for it. ----

So my men try and make themselves the atypical nurse- the masculine nurse. One of the ways they do that is by picking a field of nursing that they find particularly masculine.

All of my respondents have certain fields of nursing in mind that they think might suit men better than others. The fields they mention more than others are nursing in the emergency-room, intensive-ward, in anesthetic-nursing, operative-nursing and psychiatric-nursing. When I asked why these fields should be more suitable for men than others I usually got responses that these fields had some aspects that are usually more connected to men than women. They talked about technology and equipment, a lot of strain, management and “action and fun”.



The second post-card I want to show you is has a picture of a person wearing heavy boots with crampons and on the back it says “Would you like to travel?” and goes on to say that a nursing diploma is accepted internationally.

All of my male nurses have either gone abroad to work as nurses or are planning to. They talk about how nurses are treated differently in other countries and especially male-nurses. They talk about how certain prejudices that they encounter in Iceland are less apparent abroad and that there isn't as much of “stupid questions” that they have to endure.



The third post-card is a picture of a raising-flag being waved by masculine arms wearing a suit. On the back it says “you can become a master!” and refers to the fact that you can go into further studies in nursing in Iceland.

All of my male-nurses want to further their studies. None of them seem to want to be “just a nurse”. All of them have both gone through further studies and specialized in fore-mentioned fields or are planning to do so. Gunnar Karl has the word again as he says:

...I have rather little interest in these caring jobs. That's why I decided right away when I decide to become a nurse that I'd go into further studies and specialize in something: either surgical-nursing or emergency-nursing.

He goes on to say that he really just wants to be around patients that are unconscious.

Gunnar went into nursing from quite different grounds from what is thought of as the basis of modern nursing. Usually there is an emphasis on the professional caring part of the profession and that nurses need to interact with patients on an equality basis. Gunnar doesn't want to have anything to do with that aspect of nursing and has no interest in interaction with the patients. He wants to regard the patients as objects rather than persons – a view that many of my other respondents criticized doctors for having. Never the less they have little interest in working where the emphasis is the most on interaction with the patients like in geriatric nursing.



The fourth postcard has again those masculine hands but now they seem to be waving a bandmasters' sprig. On the back it says “do you like to be in charge?” and goes on to say that nurses often take up managing positions.

None of my respondents had management positions in mind when they

began their career in nursing but many of them had gotten into one at some point. Some of them thought that they had been pushed towards these management positions by their co-workers. Usually management positions are more connected to qualities that are thought to be more associated with men rather than women. They feel that in some ways this view has an effect on the way they are perceived in their work and that some of their co-workers have certain expectations that they, as men, should be in those positions³.



The fifth and last of these postcards has a picture of jeeps, marked with a red-cross logo, that seem to be driving in a hostile environment, perhaps somewhere in a war torn country. On the back it says “Would you like to help?” and goes on to say that nurses’ are very much sought after in war torn places or where there

have been massive natural disasters.

Nursing in war-torn parts of the world is undeniably very far from the image that we usually get of nurses and doesn’t seem to coincide very well with the image of a women’s profession.⁴

Quite a few Icelandic nurses have gone to war-torn countries on behalf of the Red-cross, the UN and other such organizations. This seems to be very appealing to my men. Three of them have already gone on such expeditions and more have a keen interest on going in the near future. Yngvi says that nursing in this sort of situation is something that fits men very well. He says:

Yes, this suits a male nurse quite well. A lot of action, blood, sweat and tears if you might say so. That kind of atmosphere:

³ My younger respondents that were under the age of 35, didn’t care for management positions one bit. They didn’t see them as desirable posts. They regarded nursing managers as “pencil-pushers” and that it is not “real nursing”. The older ones had a different view on the subject as Yngvi put it “I don’t see myself handling patients when I’m 55”.

⁴ We can trace the beginning of modern day nursing to the participation of women nurses in the Crimean war and they’ve played an important role in morale-boosting in wars through-out history. In the USA male-nurses were forbidden from working in war environments until the year 1965 (Donahue, 1985:426-429).

a lot of badly wounded and exploded and shot people; and a lot of long hours.

The image of nursing in war-torn places that Yngvi portrays here coincides in many ways to the elements that are associated to the fields of nursing that are supposed to be better suited to men than others, except here in Iceland we don't get much of wounds after bullets or explosions

Guðjón is the biggest advocate for men to go into this kind of experience. He sees this sort of army-nursing as an adventure which is highly suitable for young men. He describes this as an exciting option to travel to distant locations, experience some excitement and get a fat paycheck.

It can't be denied that the image of nursing in a war-torn place is very far from "helping old people and giving them their pills" like Gunnar Karl described it. Nursing in these circumstances is very much in rhythm with stereotypes of work fields for men and women. Men are in home territory in war-torn places. This seems to be the ultimate masculine nursing.

In the same way as men are expected to go into certain fields there are some fields that they are not readily expected to go into. There is one field in particular that they feel they have no commission to go into and that is the nativity ward. They feel somewhat unwelcome there.

They talk about it as a "women's world" and that men don't belong there. None the less this doesn't seem to apply to the male doctors there. The thing is that the professional image of nursing doesn't seem to cover or exceed the fact that they are men⁵. There seem to be no tasks in the maternity ward that can be associated especially with men. Therefore they have no claim to being there.

Now I'd like to return to the campaign and the post-cards. To make a long story short this campaign was a huge success. There was a record turnout to study nursing at the University of Iceland that following fall and in regard to getting men to join the success was enormous as 22 men signed up compared to the one that signed

⁵ This is also apparent when they are dealing with young female patients. They either excuse themselves from nursing them get reassigned by their supervisor if the nursing entails things like cleaning their private parts.

up the year before⁶. Unfortunately these 22 men didn't stay too long. Some of them never showed up for classes and after the first semester only two remained and just one of them passed his exams and got to go to the next year.

The emphasis of the whole campaign with these post-cards seem to coincide with what my men in nursing emphasize as something that men might like to do in nursing. It makes one wonder why there isn't one postcard that shows any nurturing or care-giving or what one would normally associate with nursing. This is a very interesting turn of events that nurses seem to be distancing themselves from the feminine image of nursing and striving to make it masculine. There seems to be a lack of interest in the typical nursing as the a-typical is held to high regards. My male nurses both seek to become these a-typical nurses and feel that they are expected to go into these fields and use these masculine traits that men are supposed to encompass.

Men in nursing do break up the stereotype of nursing as a female profession nevertheless they are placed within nursing as men in what are thought of as suitably masculine tasks. Therefore they seem to reproduce gender-relations as they are in other fields of society.

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⁶ From the first time an Icelandic man got accepted into the School for Nurses in 1965 there have been only one or two who have applied to study nursing every year (if that).