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# *Desistance and the Micro-Narrative Construction of Reformed Masculinities in a Danish Rehabilitation Centre*

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## **Abstract**

Juvenile justice systems and reformatory institutions hold the potential to help young offenders and drug abusers change their behaviours and life-courses. Driven by an ambition to pave new ways to examine the inner workings of reformatory institutions this study explores how young male offenders' gendered identities are engaged in a Danish reformatory programme. In recent years existing research on the gendered aspects of reformatory interventions has highlighted how reformatory institutions at times work to promote desistance by problematizing offenders' and drug-abusers performance of hyper-masculinity and by constructing therapeutic spaces where men can reformulate softer versions of masculinity. Contributing to this line of research, this study explores and discusses how reformatory programmes at times also utilize hyper-masculine symbolism and imaginaries to encourage young offenders and drug abusers to engage in narrative re-constructions of identities and to socialize these into new subject positions defined by agency, self-responsibility and behavioural changes.

**Keywords:** Desistance, Masculinity, Narratives, Crime, Drugs, Institutions

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## **Introduction**

Based on crime statistics showing that ethnic minority young people are more likely to be convicted of criminal offences than their ethnic peers (Asmusen, 2004), the Danish media has tended to describe marginalized ethnic minority men as violent, gang members, involved in drug related crime and inhabiting lawless ghetto areas (Andreassen, 2007). This has led to the discursive construction of the ‘irredeemable criminal ethnic minority man’; however, it somehow contrasts with both Danish (Andersen and Tranæs, 2011) and international studies (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2014) indicating that many young ethnic minority men tend to grow out of crime and drug abuse. In Scandinavia this point has a particular salience. While criminal youth in so-called ghetto areas in the US or the UK often face ‘advanced marginality’ (Wacquant, 2008), at times leaving them with the impression that they have little or no chance of success in mainstream society, Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) argue that the ‘generous welfare state’ in Nordic countries continues to offer assistance and opportunities for young marginalized minority men eager to reintegrate into mainstream society. Moreover, recently researchers have also turned their attention to how reformatory institutions can support individuals’ move away from criminal and drug careers by engaging their masculinity. In particular, this research has suggested that behavioural changes can be facilitated by problematizing male offenders’ performance of hyper-masculinity (see Adams et al., 2008; Karp, 2010; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Wilton et al., 2014), and by constructing therapeutic ‘safe spaces’ where they can learn to express vulnerabilities and reformulate softer and generally more acceptable versions of masculinity (see Adams et al., 2008; Karp, 2010; Deuchar et al., forthcoming). Against this background, this article reports on a qualitative study of the narratives (of both institution and clients) in one such ‘generous welfare state institution’ in Denmark aiming at reforming young criminal minority ethnic males who have also been involved in serious cannabis use. In particular, we explore how the young men’s gendered

desistance narratives were shaped by institutional discourses focusing on reformed masculinities, individual responsibility and agency. We argue that by applying an explicit focus on masculinity as a structured and structuring process, it is possible to highlight the gendered dynamics underlying reformatory interventions as well as to explore key aspects of the identity work inherent to young men's desistance from criminal and drug careers.

### **Theoretical background**

Research on desistance from crime and drugs has traditionally been dominated by life course perspectives and an interest in how changes in life stages such as entry into marriage, employment or parenthood can function as drivers in desistance processes (Laub and Sampson, 1993, Sampson and Laub, 2005). In fact, Sampson and Laub (1993, 2005) suggest that desistance most frequently occurs as a series of side effects to changing circumstances with only little reflection or meaningful intention involved. More recently, however, criminologists have convincingly argued that desistance is not just about transformations of offenders' circumstances. Desistance is best understood as a gradual process, a 'drifting', involving progression and relapse (Carlsson, 2012), as well as (inter)subjective processes such as willpower, cognitive transformations and (relevant for this article) desisters' narrative reconstructions of selves and identities (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Gadd and Farrell, 2004; King, 2013a). As an example of this Giordano et al. (2002) have argued that offenders' cognitive transformations are crucial to successful desistance and that such transformations involve an openness for change as well as the ability to envision a new identity or a 'replacement self' without a criminal lifestyle. Other researchers have noted that hope also plays a key role in sustaining desistance (see Farrall and Calverly, 2006). Importantly, such perspectives, at times referred to as 'a phenomenology of

desistance’, holds that while structural factors and life events can act as triggers for individuals’ decision to change, structural changes will only be influential if a person considers these meaningful and desirable. Consequently, desistance cannot occur without individual agency and the construction of events as meaningful (Liebregts et al., 2014).

One key way to explore the importance of agency and meaning in desistance processes has been to focus on (ex-) offenders or drug users’ narratives. In his study of criminal persisters and desisters, Maruna (2001) found that narratives were important both in helping would-be desisters to account for past criminal behaviour, but also in enabling cognitive transformations involving the envisioning of alternative future selves and desirable new pro-social roles (see also Giordano et al., 2002; Gadd and Farrall, 2004, Farrall, 2005). Maruna’s work on (ex-)offenders’ narratives has served as inspiration for much recent research eager to explore how individual agency and narrative constructions of possible selves, plans and possible future trajectories of action play into desistance processes (Byrne and Trew, 2008; Liem and Richardson, 2014). As a consequence, scholars have become increasingly attentive to the importance of elucidating the interrelationship between context-specific structural conditions (or discourses), agency and personal narratives which shape identities and guide behaviour (Maruna, 2001; Carlsson, 2012; Liem and Richardson, 2014). From this perspective, the process of identity construction is not merely understood as an inner journey. Rather it is also conditioned by interplay with wider social contexts of opportunities and constraints structuring the availability of new “pro-social” identities and roles (Farrall, Bottoms and Shapland, 2010). In this article we therefore follow King’s (2013) suggestion that agency is essential for desistance and that agency can be understood as comprising purposive intentions, the ability to envision and construct new social roles and identities and lastly the development of strategies necessary for change (see also Liebregts et al., 2014). Agency, furthermore, is not something which is possessed, rather it is ‘something that people achieve through their action, and it is the interplay

between structure and action which determines the orientation of agency that will dominate at any given point in time' (King, 2013a: 323).

While desistance researchers in recent years have elaborated on the importance of agency, identity changes, social structures and 'assisted desistance' (Rex, 1999; King, 2013b), less attention has been devoted to how desistance involves gendered processes and everyday negotiations of masculinity (Gadd and Farrell, 2004; Moloney et al., 2009; Carlsson, 2013). In line with this, Carlsson (2013) argues that while gender has long been a part of desistance research, either implicitly, in that the formation of alternative identities often take the form of the 'male provider', or as a variable in life-course studies, only recently have researchers begun to foreground masculinity as an important dynamic process in their analysis of desistance processes. According to Carlsson, focusing on the gendered nature of individuals' 'reformatory' involvement in work, family-life or treatment programmes adds to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of desistance processes, and can shed light on how different ways of successfully 'doing masculinity' (Messerschmidt, 1993), across social settings and life courses, can facilitate both continuity and change in criminal behaviour (Carlsson, 2013; 667). One should therefore focus on desistance narratives and particularly how these are used not only to construct new selves but new masculine selves and identities.

Following this line of interest, we apply a conception of gender and masculinity as a situational, interactional (and a narrative) accomplishment (see also West and Zimmerman, 1987; Messerschmidt, 1993), and as such a social practice that is both structured by contextual discourses and norms, but also structuring of social practices and behaviour. We furthermore suggest that a narrative approach can uncover the dynamics between reformatory interventions, agency and the young men's constructions of masculinity. The article is based on an ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish reformatory institution here referred to as 'New Start'. In the article we first briefly outline

how New Start, by utilizing masculinized ‘boxing transformation narratives’, tries to alter the young men’s cognitive imagining, and motivate them to become active and responsible partakers in their own reformation process. Secondly, we relate this institutional narrative to the young men’s multiple and overlapping micro-narrative reconstructions of reformed masculinities and possible selves in the early stages of the desistance process. While we demonstrate how institutional reformatory discourses or ‘master narratives’ influence the young men’s narration of their lives and masculine identities, we also suggest that this influence is only partial. Inspired by Piepmeier’s use of the concept ‘micro-political’ (2009: 1), we propose that the concept ‘micro-narrative’ is useful to highlight how clients’ narratives about self-transformation are social spaces where they try out, comply with but also negotiate (masculinized) institutional ‘master narratives’. As such, clients’ micro-narratives are not final solutions to social change and desistance efforts; rather they are small, incomplete endeavours involving both *negotiation*, processes of *distancing* from past (masculine) selves as well as attempts to construct reformed masculinity through *embracing* mainstream socially esteemed identities and positions.

### **Data and context**

New Start is located in a deprived neighbourhood on the fringe of Copenhagen. It was started in 2009 at the initiative of Patrick (all names are pseudonyms), a former Danish boxing champion, specialized in the re-socialization of young delinquents and gang members. New Start is organized around daily boxing training, weight lifting and makes wide use of boxing metaphors and symbolism.

At the time of field work, twelve young men officially participated in New Start’s programme. In addition, former clients and male friends of enrolled clients also regularly frequented New Start and participated in the activities. At New Start, no female clients were allowed, as the manager assumed

that the presence of young girls would only lead the young men to become more preoccupied with flirting and unproductive competitions for girls, rather than their reformatory process. The young men in our study, from now on referred to as (New Start) ‘participants’, were between 18-28 years of age and most had grown up in a local neighbourhood characterized by unemployment, high crime rates, gang violence, a larger number of families with social problems, and predominantly populated by people of ethnic minority background<sup>2</sup>. New Start constituted a multi-ethnic space frequented by young men self-identifying as being of Turkish, Palestinian, Iraqi, Tunisian, Albanian, Ghanaian, Roma and Danish cultural backgrounds. Most of these young men had lengthy histories in the criminal justice system. Offences ranged from drug trafficking, drug dealing, violent offences, burglaries, illegal possession of weapons, to kidnapping and manslaughter. Aside from this, many of the young men self-identified as having belonged or still belonging to the same local street gang and many also had a history of excessive consumption of cannabis.

Though New Start was a self-governing institution, it branded itself as being the last frontier of the welfare state, accepting individuals who were too unruly to be included in other rehabilitation programmes. The New Start programme did not require participants to break their connections to active criminals, drug abusers or gang members, as it was generally considered an unrealistic expectation to ask the young men, many of whom were socially isolated from mainstream society, to break with lifelong friends who were still involved in problematic activities. Instead, the measure of success at New Start was a combination of the young men’s desistance from crime and drug use and their (re-)entry into the labour market. The only requirements for programme entry was that participants had expressed a wish for change, and that they did not commit crime, acted abusively or consumed/dealt drugs on New Start’s property. As a consequence, some participants were occasionally arrested during our fieldwork period. However, with the exception of one official

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<sup>2</sup> Denmark is considered to be a rather ethnic homogeneous country with 88.4% of the population being of Danish origin (Statistics Denmark, 2015)

participant, who only attended the programme very sporadically, all of the young men we talked to, stated that they appreciated the programme and felt that it helped them change their life-style.

The research project was from the outset explorative, seeking a general understanding of ex-offenders' experiences in transformation processes. In this project, the researchers employed several research methods. During 35 full days of participant observation over a period of three months, two of the male researchers, and to a minor extent the female researcher, interacted informally with the young men as well as the staff at New Start. The male researchers took part in the daily programmes and observed morning- and afternoon meetings between staff and participants, therapeutic group sessions, and meals and free time used by the young men to relax and chat. Furthermore, the two researchers participated in the daily weight lifting and boxing together with the young men and the staff, and engaged in informal conversations with the young men. Lastly, the researchers observed staff meetings at which New Start's philosophy and the progress of individual participants were discussed. Field notes were recorded daily and included descriptions of activities, the overall environment, the daily physical training and interactions between the staff and the participants, and participants' interactions and verbal exchanges with each other.

In qualitative research, the position of the researcher inevitably influences the generation of data. In line with this, researchers have in recent years become increasingly attentive to how the (male) gender of the researcher influences fieldwork relations with male offenders (Jewkes, 2012). Unlike some researchers, investigating prison cultures (Crewe 2014; Ugelvik 2014), the male researchers did not, much to our surprise, experience aggressive tests of their masculinity. Though participants at times made use of aggressive language and intimidating behaviour in discussions with the staff, New Start was generally a milieu characterized more by humorous and joking interactions rather than by aggressive displays of masculine bravado and challenges. Masculinity, however did play into the male researchers' attempts to gain rapport with the young men. Not only were these

researchers conscious of suppressing any feelings of fear, as such displays might have led to a loss of respect. Moreover, the two male researchers also made use of their relative experience with weightlifting and boxing to engage in quasi-forms of male bonding with the young men. While several of the young men were surprised at the researchers' willingness to participate in the sparring, thereby revealing how they saw the researchers' 'white collar masculinity' as fundamentally different to theirs, we believe that our participation in the daily physical exercises served to build trust and level out relationships, as these provided situations where the young men's subordinate socio-economic status was levelled by their greater physical expertise, and ultimately their relatively higher masculine status.

In addition to observations, primarily the male researchers conducted five focus group interviews and 23 individual interviews with a total of 23 young men (12 enrolled clients, 8 former clients and mentors, and 3 'friends of the house'). Three of the young men here categorized as 'former clients' today work as mentors and boxing coaches at New Start. Furthermore, we conducted interviews with the project manager and six staff members. All interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes, were recorded and were carried out within the premises of New Start. The interviews were designed to provide informants with the opportunity to speak at length and covered the following topics: 'individual criminal and drug-histories', 'motivations for change', 'New Start, boxing and peer relationships', 'family relationships', 'religion' and 'education and labour market'. We thematically coded and analysed field notes and interviews, using established ethnographic iterative techniques of continuous comparison, grounded theory and triangulation of data (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

## **Analysis**

### **The institutional narratives of New Start**

In recent years, commentators have noted how neo-liberal philosophies of individual responsabilization are becoming increasingly dominant in reformatory programmes for youth, emphasizing individual self-care and self-regulation (Franzén, 2014). Such approaches often make use of different forms of cognitive therapy, to produce ‘free’ and ‘responsible’ subjects that willingly work on their own selves, internalize institutional norms and act accordingly (see Carr, 2011; Bjerge and Nielsen, 2014). In line with this, this section explores how New Start uses hyper-masculine symbolism, drawn from the world of boxing, to narrate offenders into subjects defined by agency and self-responsibility.

At New Start boxing was central to the programme. Regularly, the young men participated in boxing or weightlifting in the gym, which was equipped with a full sized boxing ring, sand bags, heavy weights, gloves and helmets. The centrality of boxing was also reflected in the fact that the walls were decorated with posters of Danish and international boxing champions, as well as fictional characters such as Rocky Balboa. Furthermore, verbal expressions and metaphors originating in the world of boxing were incorporated into the organizational and therapeutic language. At New Start’s official webpage the staff were presented as ‘the promoter’ (owner and manager), ‘the head coach’ (daily manager), ‘the cutman’ (psychologist), and ‘trainers’ (mentors and social workers). In the therapeutic counselling sessions, boxing metaphors such as ‘to be on the ropes’, ‘the fight zone’, ‘the comeback’ and ‘fight-strategies’ were drawn upon as a means of enabling the young men to discuss and think through their daily dilemmas, life’s challenges and practices (see also Deuchar et al., forthcoming).

Counsellors, however, also used boxing metaphors to motivate the young men to imagine a better future for themselves and, importantly, to become agents in their own reformation process. The counsellors generally agreed that participants shared a history of school and labour market failures, ethnic discrimination, family neglect and general social marginalization. According to the

counsellors, such experiences, combined with excessive abuse of cannabis, had led many of the young men to believe that positive life changes were close to impossible for them, why they assumingly had resorted to an unproductive combination of enacting what can be described as ‘oppositional masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) and displaying an apathetic orientation toward their own reformation process. In order to facilitate individual moves away from criminal and drug careers, counsellors therefore saw it as pivotal to alter the young men’s cognitive imagining from seeing themselves as structural victims to fostering both an openness to change and a firm belief in the availability for change (see also Giordano et al., 2002). In this attempt, New Start made use of an institutionalized boxing narrative, conveying messages about personal responsibility, masculine struggle, transformation and success. The transformative potential of this narrative was expressed well by the New Start manager:

Boxing is the best narrative there is. You know, boxing has always been known to save those who were really down or far out and then turned them into winners. What I have done here is actually just to formalize that story and put it into a certain context. It’s all about the narrative, it’s the story...In a way, we sell hot air here. (*Patrick, New Start manager*)

Over the years the boxing mythology, telling the story of how marginalized men through boxing heroically struggle, change and succeed as self-made men in the most literal sense (Wacquant, 2001), has become popularized both through Hollywood productions such as *Rocky* and *Cinderella Man* and biographies about famous boxers such as Muhammad Ali. At New Start, this celebrated boxing mythology, reproducing western and especially American core values of individualism and the idealized self-made man (Kimmel 2006), has been institutionalized as a grand reformatory narrative advocating the importance of individual agency and the possibility of individual change and (masculine) success against all odds. At New Start, participants are persuaded to buy into this institutionalized transformation narrative in multiple ways.

This was for instance done through the vivid use of highly masculine images of fictional and real boxing champions hanging alongside images of New Start participants wearing boxing outfits thereby creating associative links between the ‘self-made’ boxing champions and the young men. Furthermore, participants were socialized into accepting the grand narrative through their active and bodily involvement in the physical training at New Start as well as through the small quotations decorating the official website and walls of the institution conveying messages such as ‘The test of success is not what you do when you are on top. Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom’ (George S. Patton). Additionally, participants were encouraged to imagine that a different and better future was possible for them through counsellors’ recurring use of the notion of ‘the comeback’ to describe the young men’s reformatory process. Similar to the boxer, who has been defeated but then musters personal will-power to make a heroic comeback in the ring, the young men were encourage to think of themselves as men, who have experienced much social hardship and little (masculine) success in life, but were now heroically struggling to make ‘a comeback to life’, as the manager Patrick put it in a conversation:

All of the boys here are trying to fight their way back to a normal life... and when they go out and try, they’ll get beatings from different people who will try to pull them back [into crime or drug use] or who will say no [when they ask for a job].... You know, when you enter the ring, the other guy will hit back at you. Boxing is a pretty good metaphor for how the world treats you. It’s not always fair, but if you continue fighting, fighting, fighting, which boxing is all about. It’s not always the one who is the best that wins. It’s the guy who wants it the most. It’s exactly the same thing with the boys here. (*Patrick, New Start Manager*)

At New Start, ‘the comeback’ was a key symbol (Ortner, 1973) condensing a reformatory and personal narrative that both recognized and naturalized structural constrains and the inequality of social circumstances, but importantly also refused excuse-giving and passivity, demanding self-sufficiency and individual agency instead. As such, the continuous praising of ‘the coming back’ from a position of disadvantage provides an interpretive framework through which the young men

could understand structural constraints and situational defeats inherent to their reformation process and labour market re-entry.

In the criminological literature it has often been asserted that to do crime – and illicit drugs – is to ‘do masculinity’ (Messerschmidt, 1993, for a more elaborate analysis see Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 2012). In the New Start programme this logic was reversed. New Start treatment narrative instead aimed at symbolically masculinizing the doing of desistance from crime and drug use. Importantly, underpinning this masculinized reformatory narrative was the assertion that desistance was first and foremost the result of individual (masculine) will-power, agency and self-responsibility. It should be noted, that New Start boxing narratives were not intended to orient participants towards professional boxing careers as counsellors agreed this would be unrealistic for most. As such, none of the young men we interviewed dreamed of making a career of boxing. Rather, institutionalized ‘boxing transformation narratives’ of individual empowerment and change instead seemed to function as drivers used to push the young men to engage in alternative forms of reconstructions of selves as reformed/reforming men. In the following, we explore how New Start participants narratively invested in institutional reformatory discourses, preaching personal responsibility and self-help, but also how their narratives gave voice to experiences of ambivalence and difficulties.

## **Participants’ micro-narratives**

### ***Past and Present Selves***

In interviews, many New Start participants expressed motivations for change. Though the young men highlighted negative experiences of violence, prison life, a stressful street-life and family concerns as motivating factors, their expressed motivations were also often linked to a sense of being ‘behind schedule’ (see also Harris, 2011): not having stable employment, built careers,

formed families, purchased houses or not behaved as felt appropriate for men their age. In this way, motivation for change seemed to be driven as much by aspirations toward adult male status as by fears of not being able to live up to masculine adulthood ideals (see also Carlsson, 2013).

In recent years, criminological research has noted how the narrative ‘knifing off’ of past criminal behaviour, lives and selves is central to ex-offenders construction of new identities (Maruna 2001; Gadd and Farrall, 2004). Similarly, the young men’s desistance narratives often highlighted significant differences between past and present selves in terms of agency and responsibility. In their narratives a certain degree of powerlessness and lack of responsibility over past actions and life-courses were often highlighted. This was evident in Siad’s account of how he, at an early age, had started smoking cannabis on a daily basis:

Well, it was the community I was part of then. Back then, it was almost normal to smoke weed. You were almost the exception if you didn’t smoke. Like we were allowed to sit and smoke in my friends’ home, in his room, his mother also smoked weed, she even fucking dealt. (*Siad*)

In the young men’s accounts, past offending and drug use were frequently constructed as part of the environment they had been embedded in, as the path of their friends, as a result of negative school experiences as caused by a lack of proper role-models, or as the result of a lack of reflexivity and moral responsibility believed to characterize youth generally:

When we were young we just didn’t care. I was young and stupid. Back then we didn’t think, didn’t care about other people. Now when we are older, we think more about stuff. (*Siad*)

While the young men’s accounts of past lives at times gave voice to experiences of social and structural marginalization, importantly, as desistance narratives their accounts conveyed the

message that they had been victims of circumstances and had had little power over past actions (see also Harris, 2011). However, the desistance narratives also suggested that the individual had somehow developed a new found clarity and a growing degree of agency and control over his life course. In line with this, interviews showed that many of the young men to a large extent accepted the masculine logic inherent in New Start's reformatory discourse. As an example of this, notions of masculinity and especially personal responsibility were often imbued in the young men's account of their decision to give up crime or the use of cannabis:

Many are like; "Yeah, yeah I can stop smoking if I want to", but they can't. I want to show to myself and my family. They see me as the black sheep in the family, but I want to show them that I got the will to do this, get a normal life, wife, job, kids, normal life. (*Nooh*)

In the interviews the young men often referred to ideals and values such as agency, fight, responsibility, self-control, independence and determinedness when describing how they saw their own process of desistance. Often desistance from crime and drug use was narrated as a road full of obstacles, trials and temptations, taking determination and will, and not something everybody could do (see also Deuchar et al., forthcoming). Thus, emphasizing the ability and will to desist had become a new way to 'do masculinity' for the young men (see also Carlsson, 2013). One likely reason why many of the young men accepted the masculine logic inherent in New Start's programme was that it seemed to reproduce (but also redirect the expression of) many of same masculine values, such as individual willpower, fight, autonomy and the ability to 'man up' to challenges, which had also been central to the young men's former street-cultures (see also: Bourgois, 2003; Jensen, 2010; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011; Bengtsson, 2012).

One particular aspect of this new sense of masculine empowerment was the developing sense of moral agency related to altered perspectives on criminality, drugs and ‘appropriate’ masculinity. This was for instance evident in the young men’s verbal dis-identification with a particularly male ethnic stereotype ‘the Jackal’<sup>3</sup>, associated with aggressive behaviour, lack of impulse control, craziness and indifference toward victims and authorities:

The Jackal, is this guy who... It was like me, when I was younger. Jackal, fucked up. Anybody who talked to you: “Fuck you! I’m doing it my way, you don’t tell me what I have to do” - Jackal, right. (*Siad*)

I know many people like that [Jackal], but I am not like that. A Jackal is someone who is really loud and about. Actually you can’t go into town with someone like that, because if a girl comes by he’ll start shouting all kind of stuff at her. (*Raatib*)

Existing research has documented how the performance of ‘oppositional masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) is key to how marginalized minority men try to resist and transcend inferior cultural categorizations and socio-economic marginalization in Denmark (see Jensen, 2010; Bengtsson, 2012). However, this type of masculinity is often demonized in mainstream Danish media discourses constructing marginalized minority men as dangerous and uncivilized ‘others’ (Jensen, 2010). While such media discourses can lead to further stigmatization and exclusion from mainstream society (Andreassen, 2007), our data shows that the young men at New Start also creatively used negative media discourses about the ethnic minority ‘gangster’ and ‘jackal’, in their attempt to re-position themselves as reforming adult men of moral agency. They did that, not by challenging the reality of these constructs, but by actively dis-identifying with the gangster and particularly the ‘jackal’. In the young men’s’ desistance narratives a hierarchy of masculinities

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<sup>3</sup> A stigmatized figure which originated from the so-called ‘Jackal Manifesto’ produced by Danish Hells Angels in 2009 as part of their attempt to publically demonize their ethnic minority gang rivals (Mørch et al., 2013).

(Connell 1995) was constructed: a de-valued 'jackal masculinity', associated with their adolescence, criminality and moral dubiousness, and an elevated notion of 'reformed masculinity' associated with maturity, self-control and (moral) agency.

### *Ambivalence and loyalty*

While accounts of dramatic turning points as well as relatively clear cut distinctions between jackals/non-jackals and past/present (masculine) selves figured centrally in the young men's desistance narratives, so, however, did also ambivalence and doubt. As an example of this, some of the young men's narratives indicated that they were caught between their desire to act as reforming and responsible men (implying both a concrete and associative distancing from criminal activities and past selves) on the one hand. On the other hand, they also had a strong commitment to perform as loyal friends and 'brothers', who were willing to physically 'back up' close friends or family members if these were in serious trouble. In line with this, Mesut, a former official participant but now mentor (see below) at New Start, emphasized that he would always prioritize helping his criminal cousins if these were in serious trouble even if this would compromise his own reformation and mean that he would lose his job as mentor:

They [New Start] could fucking offer me a million, family is the most important. My family is number one [priority], that's it. (*Mesut*)

As the above indicates, compliance with reformatory discourses seemed to become difficult when this implied prioritizing one's own reformation process over that of honouring street codes emphasizing the importance of demonstrating loyalty toward friends and family members in critical situations.

A further ambivalence related to the fact that for some of the young men, reformation and getting a 'normal life' did not necessarily imply a complete dispense from crime or excessive drug use. As an example of this, Mahmoud explained how he saw himself as both reforming and as a responsible father in that he had decided not to smoked cannabis in the house of his wife and baby child. In line with this, Erkan highlighted how his daily smoking of cannabis was both a problem, but also what enabled him to be non-aggressive and to keep his job as a carpenter.

I guess you can say that I have a problem which is smoking weed (...). But think about it. Try to imagine if I hadn't smoked, where would I be then? Maybe I would be in prison because some idiot bothered me in traffic and I punched him and got convicted. I don't know, but I know I got a temper, like if I was at work and I did some difficult job and then the boss just says: "tear it all down, it's shit"... If I hadn't smoked then maybe I would rip off his head, but I did smoke so I just thought; 'Fuck that, Erkan you only got one year left before you get your diploma'. (*Erkan*)

In sum, the young men's reformatory narratives buy into New Start's emphasis on personal responsibility, determination and will – the boxer. At the same time however, these narratives also seems to both reproduce and redirect street-culture values. Finally, we see that despite a narrative 'match', ambivalence is also very much part of the young men's everyday experience of desistance.

### **Becoming a working man: Employment and reformed masculinities**

A key objective of the New Start programme was to get the participants into stable and legitimate employment. Much of the talk in therapeutic sessions therefore often revolved around issues of work and employment. In the following we explore how New Start discourses about individual responsibility and masculine agency articulate in the young men's micro-narratives about

employment. While the former section focused on processes of *distancing* from past (masculine) selves, in this part we demonstrate how the young men narratively *embrace* socially esteemed positions and make use of extra-institutional cultural scripts about work to construct different forms of reformed masculinities (Connell 1995), all defined by responsibility and agency. We outline key patterns in the young men's constructions of reformed masculinities, but also demonstrate how inabilities to live up to gender norms about appropriate male work can lead to a sense of masculine failure that might make desistance more difficult.

### ***The working man***

For the young men we encountered getting a job and a steady income was assumed to be crucial to their reformatory process. For many, obtaining legitimate employment, however, proved difficult. Though some admitted that lack of commitment or excessive use of cannabis had obstructed their access to the labour market, the young men also expressed frustration over structural constraints such as ethnic discrimination and the stigma associated with incarceration (see also Calverley, 2013). Nevertheless, encouraged by the New Start staff, the young men did regularly try to apply for jobs or tried to get enrolled in educational programmes. Interviews also showed that many of the young men had started to re-orient their identity formation toward work even without having obtained any:

I started here because I wanted my life back on track.... I done a lot of shit, but I am 26 now and I haven't really achieved anything, no status in society. I don't have an education or... So some of the boys said this was a place where you could get your life back on track, workout, get in shape, more happy (..). I like to move on, I like to do something, get an educational diploma, a job, be a good father, I got kids so... (*Nooh*)

In general, from the perspective of our informants, employment seemed to offer both economic as well as symbolic benefits such as opportunities to achieve status and display to others that that they were making positive changes in their lives. Narratives about work-related experiences, hopes and

dreams were however also central to how the young men tried to construct reformed masculine identities.

At New Start the young men's narrative constructions of work-related reformed masculinities were shaped by the reformatory programme. While boxing symbolism was used to promote values of personal responsibility, the hope was also that the practical boxing training at New Start would teach the young men discipline and the value of "proper" work ethics believed to be essential both 'in the ring' and to labour market success. Although fieldwork showed that a key challenge of the New Start programme was actually to get the young men to participate in the daily training (see also Deuchar et al., forthcoming), the associative parallels, often drawn in therapeutic sessions, between the work ethics needed in boxing and in the legitimate labour market seemed to underpin the young men's constructions of a reformatory 'working man narrative'. As such, the young men's constructions of work-related reformed masculinities often drew on traditional working-class notions of 'the working man'. Erkan, for instance, explained that despite his excessive use of cannabis he had managed to stay employed as a carpenter for long periods of time. According to Erkan, the current economic crisis, however, had led to a situation where only sporadic work was available, why he now spent much time at New Start. In his narrative however, being a worker figured centrally:

I have smoked [cannabis] since I was 12 and now I am 28, but I'm not the unstable type. I always do my job well. I get up in the morning and all that...My bosses have always been really happy about my work... I just smoke because I got back problems. So I am the type, I never been on welfare, never... I am not like that, I don't like just to do nothing and get money. I like to work for my money, work and sweat for my money. (*Erkan*)

Like Erkan, Ahmed also aspired to the ideal of 'the working man'. This was made evident in his account of how he hoped to get a job, where he could 'work hard'. That is, a job that would comply with traditional working-class conventions of gender-appropriate work:

Theft, it's not cool. I rather like to graft. That's why I would like to get a job, so I can work hard. (*Ahmed*)

While the young men's accounts of their past experiences in the labour market involved contrasting stories of accomplishments and personal failures, in their narrative constructions of a reformed self they tended to highlight prior positive work experiences as well as a commitment toward hard work. In these narratives, the young men often drew out contrasts between 'easy money' made through crime and more honourable money made through hard work and 'sweat', which in turn replaced the criminal 'gangster' with the 'working man' as the cultural and masculine ideal aspired to. In consequence, for these young men, getting a 'proper' manual job was seen an important sign of mature 'manhood' and considered a prerequisite for becoming a responsible family provider.

### ***The masculine wounded healer***

Recently, LeBel and his colleagues (LeBel et al., 2015) have argued that a key reformatory strategy used by recovering offenders and drug users is to become a professional 'ex-' or a 'wounded healer' (Maruna 2001). In line with this, many of the young men at New Start either aspired to or were involved in forms of mentor work, and often times they drew on what we call a 'wounded healer narrative' in their attempt to construct reformed masculinity.

In order to provide opportunities for the young men to develop pro-social self-conceptions, the New Start programme involved the young men in different forms of responsibility work. Especially, New Start management selected senior official programme participants as 'New Start Consultants' who were given the task of providing crime-preventive talks and presentations at local schools and institutions. Aside from this, the former programme participants Mesut and Faarooq were recruited as boxing trainers and mentors. Interviews showed that this 'employment' involved a strong form of social control for Mesut and Faarooq that seemed to underpin their reformatory processes. This was

made evident in Mesut's account of how he avoided going out with other New Start participants on weekend nights, despite the fact that some of these were his childhood friends:

I don't go out with them in the weekend. Many of them are too up and about, fights and stuff. I need to be careful not to get involved in some mess, just because they're crazy. If the police come, that's not so good with this work, you know. I need to be careful, right. (*Mesut*)

Importantly, being employed as mentors also enabled Mesut and Faarooq to successfully do a form of masculinity, which they felt was appropriate for men their age. As such, Faarooq emphasized how his employment at New Start enabled him to be a provider for his wife and newborn child. Furthermore, by working as mentors, Mesut and Faarooq were also able to construct themselves as confident, responsible and knowledgeable men *vis a vis* their male peers. While Faarooq in his late adolescence had been a feared street-fighter and a respected member of the local street-gang, now other (and also the same) men seemed to look up to him for his capacity to use his crime-related experiences to help others. Similarly, Carlsson (2013) highlights how being employed as a mentor or role model can enable individuals to convert criminal or drug careers into a resource of experience, in the construction of alternative masculinity identities. At New Start, enrolled participants and even visitors also aspired to the mentor position and made active use of the 'wounded healer narrative' to construct new masculine identities. In interviews, 'clients', 'former clients' and 'visitors' often described themselves as a form of mentors for local marginalized youth, their younger brothers or (other) programme participants. Jamil, for instance, a regular 'visitor' at New Start who had been involved in gang activities and spent two years in a youth prison convicted of armed robbery, explained how he saw his role at New Start:

Well many of the guys here are criminals, frauds, drug abusers, socially deprived youth who don't have much control of their lives. Not that I was any better when I was young... Not that it's that much better now, but it is better because soon I am finished with my education as a social worker. When I come here, I don't want to brag, but

I often talk to the youngsters here, the younger generation, and they respect me because I don't hit them or scold them, but I try to make them remember; "pull yourself together", "get an education", "go to school", "get that, get that". (*Jamil*)

One way to understand the young men's construction as self-acclaimed mentors is that by so doing they were able to re-craft themselves in a positive light, reinforce their own sense of reforming, and to construct an identity as mature men involved in responsible nurturing and guidance of 'younger generations'.

In sum, the reformed masculinity constructed through the wounded-healer narrative symbolically draws on culturally idealized notions of 'the caring father' and the 'older brother' who keep vigilant watch over the well-being and path of his family or younger siblings. Furthermore, the masculine wounded healer narrative (as in Jamil's utterance) seemed to depend on the image of the irresponsible and deviant youngster or peer in need of reform. Though Jamil admitted that he was not that much better off than many of the other young men at New Start, importantly, he constructed himself as a mature and reforming man by placing other participants in a subordinated and infantilized position. Jackal masculinity and the category of the 'socially deprived youth' in this way were used to constitute reformed and mature masculinity.

### ***The achiever and the dilemmas of reforming working class offenders***

Since the struggling and successful champion boxer was a key figure at New Start, it is not surprising that the young men also drew on an 'achiever narrative' in their attempt to construct a reformed masculine identity. As an example of this Bilal, who had several convictions of violent assault, reported in an interview how he was a skilled car salesman currently working for a local car company. Bilal also emphasized how he made 'really good money' working as a car salesman. Later on however, we learned that Bilal's account had been somewhat exaggerated, since he was

currently not employed in the car company but very much hoping to be so in the nearest future. Bilal's account highlights the importance of the 'achiever narrative', emphasizing individual responsibility and the possession of skills and monetary successes, in the young men's attempt to construct a desired masculine self-identity as reformed and successful. Often the young men's use of achiever narratives was coupled with aspirations toward being independent, autonomous and in control. This was for instance made evident in Hassan's account of how he planned to open his own mobile fruit- and refreshment shop:

I don't feel that I'm the kind of guy, who care to work for someone else. I feel I got more to offer than that... So, I thought why not become an entrepreneur? Of course you have to fight for it, but I am used to challenges in life, so why not? Turn it into something positive, right? (*Hassan*)

Existing research has suggested that while male street cultures are often dominated by hegemonic masculine ideals such as autonomy and independence (Bourgois, 2003; Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011), successful re-entry into a legitimate labour market, structured by class-constraints and hierarchical relationships, is often premised on the offender subordinating himself to a foreman or an employer (Carlsson, 2013). For working-class offenders, re-entry into the contemporary post-industrial labour market can in this way result in loss of independence and a crisis of masculinity (Bourgois, 2003). While Hassan was eager to reform and to 'move on in life' he did not feel that he was the kind of man who 'care to work for someone else'. Rather, Hassan's plans of opening his own shop can be seen both as an aspiration toward reformation, but also as an attempt to maintain independence and masculine respect in the process of doing so.

Although several of the young men made use of the 'achiever narratives', interviews also revealed that some of the young men experienced great difficulties realizing this ideal. Often such experiences were linked to difficulties obtaining an educational diploma that could pave the way to a high status job or just stable employment. As an example of this, Nooh described how he some

years earlier had managed to find employment as an unskilled social worker at an elderly home. Nooh described how he had eventually quit this job because his wife constantly complained that he did not earn enough money for them to buy a house:

She doesn't understand how much pressure it is when she demands, demands and demands, and when I can't.... and I try my best, but I can't.... . (Nooh)

Furthermore, Nooh felt that his family mocked him both for having a low status job and because he had never managed to complete a post-compulsory education. In the interview, Nooh emphasized that acquiring an educational diploma was a big dream of his and a key motivating factor in his attempt to stay away from hard drugs and crime. In this project, Nooh had enrolled himself in several educational programmes hoping to obtain a diploma as a skilled painter and an electrician. So far, however, he had not succeeded which had led him to the conclusion that 'I am just too stupid for school'. Though Nooh frequently made use of New Start rhetoric such as; 'I just took a count, but I am trying to fight my way back', he also explained how his inability to 'get an education' and to live up to the expectations of his wife and parents led him to feel very depressed.

I really want to realize my dream, I don't want my family to point fingers at me: "You never accomplished anything. Look at your siblings or look at those people, you are just a loser"... But actually, I already more or less dropped out of the school for electricians, because I have to serve 60 days [in prison] for some old stuff. (Nooh)

Nooh's accounts reflected a desperate search for ways to achieve socially esteemed status mixed with a sense of hopelessness, self-blame and a loss of masculine self-esteem. The case of Nooh in this way provides insights into the potential downsides of the New Start programme promoting an ideology of individual responsibility mediated through hegemonic notions of masculinity. As such, when the young men at times experienced inabilities to reform and ensure upward mobility, the masculinization of reformation communicated by the New Start programme, might strengthen these young men's sense of not only being failures, but also masculine failures.

## **Concluding discussion and critical perspectives**

Juvenile justice systems and reformatory institutions hold the potential to help young offenders and drug abusers change their behaviours and life-courses. Driven by an ambition to pave new ways to examine the inner workings of reformatory institutions, this study has explored how young men's gendered identities were engaged by the New Start programme as well as the way these young men tried to alter their identities. Much existing research on the gendered aspects of reformatory interventions has highlighted how reformatory institutions at times work to promote desistance by problematizing offenders' and drug abusers performance of hyper-masculinity (see Karp, 2010; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Wilton et al., 2014). Contributing to this line of research, this study demonstrates how reformatory programmes at times also utilize hyper-masculine symbolism and imaginaries to encourage young offenders and drug abusers to engage in narrative reconstructions of identities and to socialize these into new subject positions defined by agency, self-responsibility and behavioural changes. Our findings suggest that one reason why many of the young men seemed to accept the New Start programme and its strategic masculinization of desistance was that it drew on but also redirected the expression of many of the same masculine values, such as individual willpower, autonomy and the ability to 'man up' to challenges, which had also been central to the young men's former street-cultures. In the analysis we demonstrated how institutional discourses conveying values of agency and individual responsibility both informed and were negotiated in the young men's narrative attempts to reformulate masculinity identities.

Though the main focus of this article has been to explore how masculinized institutional discourses articulate in young clients' micro-narrative constructions of reformed masculine identities, a few critical comments should also be raised. Firstly, while the institutional use of highly masculine

symbolism and grand narratives to masculinize desistance accomplishments might be useful to motivate young marginalized men into becoming active participants in their own reformation, the potential down-side to this strategy is that when young men experience inability to reform this might strengthen their sense of not only being failures, but also being masculine failures. In turn, this can lead individuals to engage in problematic and criminal behaviour to re-establish a masculine sense of self. Furthermore, the use of boxing practices and symbolism at New Start also seemed to reinforce very traditional notions of manhood and foster an environment that excluded female participants and where some of the young men openly expressed disgust toward homosexuals. While this study does not claim to be conclusive, our hope is that it will inspire other researchers to apply a gender sensitive approach to examine the inner workings of reformatory institutions and the entanglement of institutional discourses and young individuals' desistance narratives and identity constructions.

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