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TITLE: "I Would Never Start a Fight, but...". Young Masculinities and 'the Right Amount' of Violence

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Abstract:

This paper explores the 'symbolic boundary work' of young men discussing physical violence such as street fighting. Drawing on recent developments in narrative criminology and gender studies, I explore the boundaries for presenting oneself as a 'proper young man'. Empirically, the paper is based on a focus group study of risk-taking among upper secondary students in Denmark. While the interviewees initially distance themselves from using violence as a solution to conflicts, they also describe situations which have required or would require them to act violently. In the descriptions of such situations, notions of comradeship, pride and self-respect are central. What comes forward is a complex relation between violence and masculinity: accomplishing masculinity involves the ability to balance the fine line between being capable of acting violently if required, but without actively seeking out violence as such. Not being able to respond violently when encountering violence carries the risk of being viewed as unmanly. For the young interviewees then, performing the right amount of violence, in the focus groups as well as in their everyday life, is crucial to accomplishing an identity as a 'proper young man'.