

**Living in the Gap: Perceptions of Masculinity and Criminality of Young Men in
Kanaleneiland**

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Master Thesis Youth Development and Social Change, Utrecht University

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July 1, 2024

Word count: 5983

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Abstract

Despite an overall decline in juvenile crime, certain forms are on the rise, prompting the government to make significant efforts to combat and prevent youth involvement in organised crime. Crime has emerged as an alternative employment opportunity for many young people, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where poverty more often drives boys to engage in criminal activities early and easily. While poverty alone is insufficient to explain criminal behaviour, existing research predominantly focuses on extrinsic factors and overlooks intrinsic factors, such as gender. This thesis addresses this gap by conducting semi-structured interviews with young men from Kanaleneiland, offering deeper insights into how experiences of poverty shape their perceptions of masculinity and attitudes towards criminal behaviour. Young men from low-income neighbourhoods are acutely aware of their financial position, while shaping their conception of masculine identity, which is based around traditional provider and breadwinner roles, lacking awareness of alternative forms. They often view criminality as a last resort to achieve these roles, recognising the crucial role of finances in attaining this identity. Engaging in crime, while having legal alternatives for achieving hegemonic masculinity, is stigmatised. Due to limited exposure to diverse masculinities and pathways to achieve them, they remain trapped in a cycle where criminal behaviour is perceived as sometimes necessary for their gender identity. An intervention has to be developed to prevent criminal behaviour among young men in Kanaleneiland. It is recommended to introduce diverse masculinities and positive role models, who demonstrate various paths achieving their ideal masculinity.

Keywords: masculinity, criminal behaviour, aspirations, gender appropriate behaviour, poverty

Living in the Gap: Perceptions of Masculinity and Criminality of young Men in Kanaleneiland

Organised crime has had a firm place on the Dutch political agenda since 1990, and interest in this topic has only increased over time (Ministerie van BZK, 2022; Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2022). Despite an overall decline in juvenile crime, some forms are increasing, therefore the government is making significant efforts to combat and prevent young people getting involved in organised crime. Calderoni et al. (2020) identified that the perception of adolescents often associates an organised criminal group with an attractive lifestyle and being able to earn money easily and quickly, as a risk factor to get involved. While they are on a continuing quest to establish an individual identity and one's place in society, they are seduced by the 'big money' and get sucked into organised crime (Kruisbergen and de Jonge, 2023; Arnett, 2000). In addition, youth are more subjected to peer pressure, desire for peer approval, associate money and other material things with status and have a greater tendency than adults to discount the future and weigh short-term consequences more heavily than long-term consequences (Martin-Storey, 2018; Ibrahim, 2011). These factors make them an easy target for exploitation and criminal recruitment. While organised crime has become an alternative employment opportunity for many youths, children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more vulnerable. Poverty is, according to Izugbara (2015), responsible for boys engaging in immoral practices, such as crime, early and easily. The concept of capacity to aspire, which emphasises individuals' ability to envision and pursue diverse futures, is a critical aspect in understanding how poverty shapes behaviours (Appadurai, 2004).

With the 'culture of poverty', Lewis (1959) introduced the thought that poverty is not marked by just economic destitution but a whole way of life. Though now

outdated, this idea started the thought that poverty is not the fault of the individual but of external circumstances. Currently, it is argued that poverty is maintained by the interaction between extrinsic circumstances, factors that originate from outside an individual, and intrinsic factors, which look at the internal motivator and personal values that drive an individual's behaviour and decisions (Dalton et al., 2010). While much research examines the link between residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and crime, limited attention is given to intrinsic factors (Ibrahim, 2011). Webster and Kingston (2014) suggest that poverty alone is unlikely to drive criminal behaviour, therefore, given masculinity's focus on achievement and breadwinning (McFarlane, 2013; Izugbara, 2015; Messerschmidt, 2000), exploring gender as an intrinsic factor and its complex relationship with poverty and crime is relevant. Moreover, although masculinity significantly influences adolescent development, there is a scarcity of studies on how individuals in poverty perceive masculinity and criminal behaviour during this crucial stage. Given the importance of these subjects, this thesis aims to shed light on this issue by addressing the following question: How are notions of masculinities influenced by experiences of poverty for young men living in Kanaleneiland, and how do these notions affect attitudes towards engaging in or resisting criminal behaviours?

By understanding the impact of poverty on notions of masculinity, this thesis can help in designing youth development programs that promote healthy, positive identities and behaviours, since gender norms are increasingly recognised as one of the most significant social forces influencing health throughout the life course (WHO, 2014; Mmari, et al., 2018). By acknowledging and addressing the specific pressures faced by young men in poverty-stricken areas, such programs can better support their emotional and social development. Further, this information can lead to the development of more targeted interventions aimed at preventing criminal behaviour, which will allow the government's money to be used more effectively.

Since recruitment occurs mainly within social networks or neighbourhoods in which the criminal organisation operates and targets economic vulnerable youth, the neighbourhood in Utrecht, Kanaleneiland, was chosen, due to its high concentration of poverty issues (van der Klein et al., 2011; Fried & Reppucci, 2001; Webster & Kingston, 2014). The main question will be addressed by first examining adolescents' perceptions and constructions of masculinity in Kanaleneiland, followed by their attitudes towards criminal activity. Before addressing the question, a literature review on masculinity and aspiration is provided.

Masculinity

The identity formation of adolescence is influenced by personal, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors (Quam et al., 2020). For male youths, this identity formation process is shaped by gender norms that define masculinity and manhood. According to the social-cognitive gender development theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), children discern gender-appropriate behaviour by observing and interacting with socialising agents. However, Watts and Borders (2005) mention that while boys receive strong messages about what it means to be a man from a young age, they are already struggling to understand themselves as males. As the gender role conflict explains, boys feel pressured to conform to traditional masculine ideals, even when these do not align with their personal values or sense of self.

Hegemonic Masculinity

As an aspect of gender, masculine identity is an evolving concept shaped by unique social circumstances, rather than a static trait or result of passive socialisation (Izugbara, 2015; Messerschmidt, 2000). Achieving masculinity involves meeting societal expectations for male behaviour, positioning men in specific gender roles that gain significance through social interaction. In 1983 Connell introduced hegemonic

masculinity, which was revised by Connell and Messerschmidt in 2005, after criticism. In line with their theory, research consistently shows that certain masculinities hold more social prominence and authority than others, supported by cultural acceptance, narrative focus, institutionalisation, and the marginalisation or delegitimising of alternatives. It is also established that hegemonic masculinity is not the most common masculine identity among males, rather it becomes normative through the production of exemplars of masculinity that have authority, even though most men do not fully live up to them. According to McFarlane (2013), hegemonic masculinity aligns with sex role theory, linking men's roles to achievement, goal attainment, and breadwinning. Since this behaviour is reinforced by rewards and punishments, it becomes gender appropriate (Walklate 2004; Wharton 2005; Strier et al., 2014). Consequently, men are perceived to embody normative expressions of heterosexuality and an idealised socially dominant man as the breadwinner, which serves to legitimate male's maleness.

In contrast to hegemonic masculinities, subordinated masculinities are considered discredited or oppressed, and undermine or threaten the supremacy and essence of hegemonic masculinity (McFarlane, 2013). Strier et al. (2014) mention that poverty also represents an exclusion from the privileges of the dominant gender status, since it is a threat for the psychological well-being of men in many cultural contexts. (Sherman, 2005). For low-income and other non-hegemonic cultural groups, the construction of masculinity is ridden with conflicts and inner contradictions (Strier et al. 2014; Sasson-Levy, 2008; Sherman, 2005). This allows men to both acknowledge and partially reject specific masculine identities (Korobov, 2005). Izugbara (2015) and Messerschmidt (2000) found that marginalised men and boys reframe unconventional methods and even crime as evidence of masculinity to achieve dominant gender status through available resources.

Criminalisation of Masculinity

While gay masculinity is the most well-known example of subordinate masculinity, there are numerous other forms that are exploited or oppressed, like the deviancy of men (Connell, 2000). Here, men break with their legitimate masculinity by resorting to illegitimate means to be breadwinners. In marginalised neighbourhoods, manhood is defined by responsibility, providing, and living a clean life (Quam et al., 2020). However, McFarlane (2013) argues that lacking the resources to achieve this ideal, leads people to deviate from and contravene societal laws, which results in the marginalised. Men will be men in a legitimate and hegemonic sense, according to their access to power, resources and social capital within the social structure (Messerschmidt, 1994). Thus, the criminality of men can be explained by structural conditions in which men do not possess, or have access to, legitimate means to obtain money and resort to illegal ones. However, it is important to understand that most impoverished people never engage in criminal behaviour (Webster and Kingston, 2014).

In addition, criminal behaviour has emerged as a strategy for men and boys to strengthen their male identity and sense of masculinity as they are looking for alternative means by which to prove that they are men (Messerschmidt, 2000; McFarlane, 2013). Over the last decade, women have significantly progressed in various fields, expanding into roles traditionally reserved for men, becoming increasingly self-sufficient (Martinez & Merlino, 2009). These changes affect men's social value, masculine identity and self-esteem (Izugbara, 2015). To overcome this masculinity conflict, which is defined by Messerschmidt (2000) as a contextual interaction that resulted in masculine degradation, some men feel required to obtain cultural, societal, economic and symbolic capital through criminal behaviour.

Future Aspirations

Adolescence is a developmental period during which young people begin to think about and plan for their futures (Massey et al., 2008). Future orientation is the image individuals have about their future and provides the ground for setting goals, planning, and making commitments that guide the person's behaviour and developmental course (Nurmi, 1991; Moilanen, 2007). It is integral to our identity and daily experiences, and connected to norms, geographical context, and living conditions (Bryant & Knight, 2019; Verdugo et al., 2018). Two future orientations which represent different depths of time are expectation and aspiration, both important motivators for behaviour (Mahler et al., 2017).

Aspirations and Expectations

Aspirations, which can be defined as hopes or ambitions to achieve something in the future, are shaped by real hopes for the future and the immediate needs of the present (Ibrahim, 2011; Nurmi, 2004; Moulton et al., 2015; Clair & Benjamin, 2011). Appadurai (2004) views aspirations as complex and socially influenced, embedded in broader cultural ethics and ideas. They are influenced by structures and shaped by discourses about masculinity and femininity (Visser et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2017). Intrinsic aspirations, focused on fulfilling basic human needs like connection, community, fitness, and self-acceptance, foster personal growth and well-being (Beutler, 2012; Beutler et al., 2008). Conversely, extrinsic aspirations, targeting external rewards such as wealth and appearance, emphasise material success as a path to happiness (Zawadzka et al., 2021). Instead of valuing education and hard work for future stability, extrinsically oriented youth often desire an easy, financially worry-free life, viewing financial success as extrinsic self-validation.

While aspirations represent future goals, expectations are the perceived likelihood of achieving them and are based on what the past has taught us to expect (Mahler et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2016; Bryant & Knight 2019). Beliefs about the likelihood of an event affect

goal-setting, and thereby personal behaviour and development (Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2008; Bandura, 2011). The gap between aspirations and expectations, is a key building block of traditional strain (Knight et al., 2017; Moulton et al., 2015). The stress or pressure from inability to achieve culturally accepted goals through legitimate means predicts criminal behaviour.

The Gap

Merton's strain theory (1957) posits that societal pressure to achieve culturally valued goals, coupled with unequal access to legitimate means, drives individuals to resort to deviant or criminal behaviour as alternative paths to achieve them. The concepts of expectations and aspirations are therefore commonly associated with problem behaviour (Mahler et al., 2017). While having optimistic future expectations is correlated with lower rates of delinquency, suggesting that adolescents who perceive their future goals as possible and likely report less criminal behaviour, those with low expectations perceive fewer dangers associated with this risk taking (Knight et al., 2016; Iselin et al., 2012). Further, individuals who hold high aspirations for the future but acknowledge they are unlikely to achieve their goals are more likely to engage in crime, because of the frustration associated with this realisation (Agnew, 1985). Nevertheless, there is an ongoing debate regarding these factors predicting delinquent behaviour (Knight et al., 2016; Hirschi, 1969; Liska, 1971).

The lack of consensus on which factor is most influential is according to Mahler et al. (2017) attributed to the fact that aspirations may not be equally influential for all adolescents. Having optimistic aspirations for the future is associated with lower levels of offending only among youth with relatively higher impulse control. The general theory of crime (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 2002) highlights impulse control as a crucial factor in delinquency, since adolescents with poor impulse control may struggle to see their future aspirations to guide behaviour, particularly in spontaneous and emotionally charged situations where crime is

more likely to occur. Adolescents themselves, however, believe in their ability to control risky behaviour choices (Rodham et al., 2006). They understand the risk and complexities but remain confident in their decision-making after weighing up the advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, besides adolescents having a greater tendency than adults to weight short-term consequences more heavily than long-term consequences (Rodham et al., 2006), there is an increasingly widespread cultural trait of consciously accepting risk if it is associated with a quest for immediate gratification (Rinaldi & Bonanomi, 2011). Adhering to the "life is now" philosophy and lacking self-control leads to a discrepancy between values and actions (Verdugo et al., 2018).

Capacity to Aspire

Greater initial benefits increase an individuals' likelihood of setting higher aspirations and recognising the means to achieve them (Dalton et al., 2010). Therefore, it is said that social and economic disadvantages are directly related to low and failure of aspirations (Moulton et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2011; Vaisey, 2010). Appadurai (2004) argues that poverty and failure of aspirations may be reciprocally linked within a self-sustaining trap, which refers to a cyclical and reinforcing situation where poverty limits individuals' current circumstances and hinders their future opportunities and aspirations (Dalton et al., 2010). The term is framed by Appadurai's discussion on the 'capacity to aspire'. Those in poverty have fewer opportunities to practise and refine their capability to aspire, leading to a cycle where aspirations are not only limited by current conditions but also by the reduced ability to envision and work towards a better future. Appadurai argues that boosting aspirations breaks poverty cycles, enabling diverse future paths.

However, despite stereotypes of low aspirations among underprivileged youth, other studies show they often have higher educational and career ambitions than their peers. Visser et al. (2022) suggest this results from actively navigating their social environment.

Nevertheless, Abrams (2010) found that their aspirations differ from middle-income peers, being less specific and more influenced by material needs, aligning with Appadurai (2004) who further argues that these wants are usually tied to broader societal norms and perceptions of a good life.

Methods

Since the purpose of qualitative research is to describe and understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Boeije, 2010), a qualitative approach is used in this study to generate knowledge on how notions of masculinities are influenced by experiences of poverty for young men, and how this affect attitudes towards criminal behaviours.

Participants

This research used purposive sampling to select participants who can provide in-depth insight into the research themes (Boeije, 2010). Only male participants aged 16-25 who grew up in poverty in Kanaleneiland were included. While the entire sample consists of 19 people, as being part of a bigger project, this research focused on nine men, with pseudonyms assigned to four of them. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, distributing flyers and seeking participants at a community centre.

This study may have been influenced by social desirability bias, as participants, eager to help, might have given favourable responses due to unfamiliarity with the research setting. I minimised its effects by ensuring participant's comfort and using some indirect questions.

Procedure

Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews to ensure consistent topics while allowing interviewees to shape the content and flow of the conversation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). After obtaining participants' consent, I recorded the interviews using a recorder app on my phone, which I transcribed within the same week, omitting any information that could compromise anonymity. The recordings and transcripts were placed in a folder on my laptop, which was only accessible by me through a password. The interviews lasted for about 30-40 minutes and were conducted in a place chosen by the interviewee, maximising the comfort of the participant.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University (24-1268). To ensure informed consent, I introduced myself, clarified my role as a researcher, and explained the research purpose and data collection clearly to all participants (Boeije, 2010). I asked for verbal consent before conducting the interviews. To ensure privacy and anonymity, I handled the data confidentially and avoided using participants' names or unique identifiers. These measures ensured I protected participants as thoroughly as possible.

While good rapport is fundamental in qualitative research (Boeije, 2010), building trust was challenging with only one meeting in a low-trust context. This made it crucial to show respect, communicate clearly, and maintain openness and honesty during the interview. Since I recognised the participants' vulnerability, I tried to prevent talking about sensitive topics not related to my research. While I could not completely avoid sensitive subjects due to the focus on criminal behaviour, I never compelled them to speak about traumatic events, illegal activities or topics they were uncomfortable with. Since I asked open questions, I left

some amount of agency for the participants to control the conversation. I ensured that participants were aware of the freedom to pause or end the interview at any moment, or decline responding to certain questions. It was also possible to withdraw their data after the interview. After the interview, I held a brief debriefing to discuss it and confirm informed consent. Potential participant benefits include relief through conversation, validation of perspectives, amplification of marginalised voices, and insights for improving their circumstances (Boeije, 2010).

Instruments

Since the research serves as the primary instrument in conducting interviews (Boeije, 2010), I continuously reflected on my positionality, including my gender, throughout the research process. The research question was broken into topics (Appendix I), which were then turned into open, non-suggestive interview questions tailored to the participants' lifeworld.

Analysis Strategy

Analysing the data was an iterative process. After familiarising myself with the data, I disassembled it into elements and components, through manual open coding on paper, examining the data for patterns and relationships (Boeije, 2010). During axial coding I put the data back together in new ways by making connections between categories, determining which elements in the research were the dominant ones and which were less important. When this was done, I started with selective coding by looking for connections between the categories to make sense of what is happening in the field. The reassembled data provided an interpretation of the research question, which I connected to other ideas derived from literature and existing theories. Due to a lack of time, no data saturation was reached.

Results

Being a Man

Perceptions of manhood vary; while one participant considered biological features as a defining aspect of being a man, the majority mentioned only gender-related factors, connecting it with attained masculinity. In line with previous research on masculinity (Walklate 2004; Strier et al., 2014; McFarlane, 2013), the young men from Kanaleneiland see hegemonic masculinity as normative and appropriate behaviour for men, associating its role with self-sufficiency. A man should be able to take care of himself, pay his own bills, and have his life in order. Becoming a man involves thinking about the future by recognising the importance of education, stable employment, and financial independence. Quam et al. (2020) argue that these actions distinguish men from boys, emphasising the heightened expectations and responsibilities placed on men. Jessir, a lifelong resident of Kanaleneiland, represents how these young men experience manhood, saying:

You always have to be independent, because you can't just rely on someone else you know. Eventually, that person will get tired of it and leave you hanging. It's like, constantly depending on your parents, your parents take care of you, but at a certain age, like when you turn 18, they start thinking, 'Hey, you're already paying your own health insurance, you really need to start looking for your own place, your own shelter.' Your parents enjoy it when you visit, but it's also a lot of effort for them. They think to themselves, 'He's getting older, he really should start a family, do all those things. (Jessir)

This quote shows that a man can only trust himself and not depend on others. This corresponds with the literature as Watts and Border (2005) argue that this drive towards independence makes men more reluctant to ask for help, as seeking assistance is perceived as incongruent with traditional notions of masculinity. Consequently, these men preferred to deal

with their issues alone rather than admitting vulnerability or dependency on others. This is problematic as negative attitudes towards help seeking are further connected to gender role conflicts (Watts & Borders, 2005).

Being a Provider

The perception of masculinity is additionally linked to the role of provider (Quam et al., 2020). The participants view their identity as being fundamentally tied to their ability to provide for those around them, especially women, encompassing both financial support and broader responsibilities of care and protection. Seated on a bench, Ravi speaks with a tone of pride and seriousness as he articulates what being a man entails for him:

Someone who is simply there to ensure that they are safe. Making choices. One who dares to take action. Someone who provides necessities or yes, just someone who will be there for them when they need it. (Ravi)

As a middle child, Ravi tries to take care of others to the extent he can. He views masculinity as encompassing the courage to advocate for and support one's people, ensuring their welfare and safety. However, he also acknowledges that it may not be entirely unmanly to fall short in these areas, it is a man's task to at least strive to fulfil these responsibilities. Izugbara (2015) found similar results in his study, where being a man implied providing for your family and not giving up when you cannot. A man must bear this responsibility, whereas a boy, although capable of being entrusted with tasks and expectations, lacks the consistent development to uphold these responsibilities continuously. One participant even compared being a man to motherhood, highlighting that masculinity is not a transient or occasional role but an enduring commitment that persists throughout life.

For the boys, being a provider also means being the breadwinner, and is a fundamental responsibility inherent to their role as men and a key aspect of their identity. Zuo and Tang (2000) describe how a wife's earner status will not only reduce her domestic service to her husband but will also take away a major source of his male identity. In line with this, Jayden argues that when his future wife would be the breadwinner, he would feel he failed as a man: "Because I still feel a sense of responsibility about bills that need to be paid. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't feel comfortable if I were dependent on my wife." A good breadwinner is defined as a man whose wife does not need to work (Zuo and Tang, 2000). However, Mohammed does not mind if his future wife would earn more money than he, as long as she would recognise his efforts. For the young men the essence of men's role is not solely measured by financial success but by the continuous commitment to their duties and the willingness to strive for the well-being of their families.

Dependence and Independence

According to Messerschmidt and Tomsen (2016), the roles of provider and breadwinner are essential for establishing male dominance and constructing hegemonic masculinities over women in public and domestic contexts. This study also highlights perceptions of women as dependent on others:

If I look at women, yeah, if I look at some women, they rely on their parents and on their men, you know. They think, later I'll get married and then my husband will pay a lot, or we'll split everything or yeah, I'll see what I'll do. Driver's licence will come later. I'm still a woman and women don't drive. You would think that women..., but that's not really how it should be, because you really just have to be there for yourself. Because imagine if you have no one and at some point, your parents are not always there for you, your parents are always there for you, but they can't always support you. (Jessir)

While Jessir acknowledges it is problematic for certain women to be overly dependent, he also emphasises that when a man has a girlfriend, he should be able to provide in every aspect. Women's dependence on men influences the gender attitudes and perceptions of inequality (Zuo & Tang, 2000). This dynamic reinforces traditional gender roles and aligns with the social reproduction theory which explains how societal roles and structures are perpetuated over time (Weiss, 2021). The perception of women as dependent further amplifies men's sense of responsibility, reinforcing their role as independent caretakers. Invaluable to this process is the role of family and community members, who provide youths with a vision of the role as provider, potential paths to achieve it and a perception of women's roles (Quam et al., 2020). Through socialisation, boys in their neighbourhood learn that men are expected to work while women stay home and depend financially on men (Guerrero & Schober, 2021). While Zuo and Tang (2000) suggest that lower-earning men are increasingly egalitarian due to benefiting from their wives' income, the young men in this study identify strongly as breadwinners and feel threatened by women's employment, aligning with Watts and Border's (2015) argument linking gender role conflict to traditional attitudes about women.

Men and Money

The men in the study defined manhood through being the provider and breadwinner, expectations they anticipated continuing in the future. The primary challenge identified was securing sufficient financial resources:

Yes, of course, in providing for others or providing things that others need or just being able to offer freedom to your beloved family and friends. You know, money is not so much the goal, it is, it is a means to that freedom, you know. We're not striving for money. We're striving for the freedom that comes with it. And if it can be achieved

in another way, then we'll do it in another way, but, there isn't. The cost of living is rising, making it ultimately more difficult to do such things. And that's why being a man is also, you know, getting more difficult or the task of being a man, so to speak.

(Ravi)

Ravi recognises money is needed to be independent, a provider and breadwinner. Not being able to do this is an emasculating process (McFarlane, 2013). Ravi's feeling that the rising cost of living makes it harder to become true men, is shared by the other boys. Money therefore becomes both the main challenge and central factor to young men's actualisation of themselves as real men (Izugbara, 2015). Hence, all have a desire for a life with no money worries, which is an extrinsic response (Beutler, 2012). However, they are willing to work hard for this since money is a tool to achieve their personal goals and aspirations, including attaining more freedom in their future. While the young men in Kanaleneiland acknowledge Strier et al.'s (2014) argument that the workplace offers a path to pursue aspirations and achieve independence, it is yet also a place where men can feel dependent and constrained, they are willing to sacrifice current independence for future autonomy. Rather than short-term pleasures, this highlights the tendency among the young men to invest in long-term aspirations. This is not in line with previous research (Rodham et al., 2006). However, in line with Abrams (2010), this study finds that although young men expressed a desire to use money for intrinsic aspirations, they are primarily influenced by material consideration and less specific.

Criminal Behaviour

While mentioning different forms of criminal behaviour, the participants underscored the influence of the nature and severity of actions in determining their classification as criminal behaviour, making the definition more objective compared to Webster and Kingston (2014). One participant differentiated between mischief and criminal behaviour, noting that

mischievous is easier to resolve, while criminal activities have lasting consequences. Similarly, Einat and Herzog (2011) argue that juveniles see violent and property crimes as more serious than victimless offences. Further, criminal behaviour is viewed as a conscious choice where an individual is aware that their actions are wrong yet chooses to engage in them repeatedly. This deliberate and knowing engagement in illegal activities defines true criminality. One argument posits that boys cannot be considered criminals because they do not sufficiently contemplate the consequences of their actions. Contrary, mature men, who "know well what the consequences are, but have more of an attitude of 'yeah, fuck it, I'm going to do it anyway,' and then I really see them as a criminal." (Jayden)

Normalisation

Criminal behaviour is often normalised by individuals who grow up in environments where such actions are commonplace. Fried and Reppucci (2001) noted that while all youth considered criminal offences to be very serious, minority youth generally perceived these offences as less serious and attributed less responsibility to the offenders. This study similarly suggests that youth growing up in Kanaleneiland may have a diminished sense of the wrongness of criminal behaviour due to their greater exposure to serious criminal activity in their environments, despite their positive perceptions of their neighbourhoods. Jayden explains how boys who grow up in Kanaleneiland are more likely to engage in criminal activities because these behaviours are learned through their social interactions and outdoor activities from a young age. He argues:

Yes, if you are involved in criminality yourself, you see it very differently than the outside world, because the outside world is quite shocked by it. And if that's your daily routine, then you don't really think about what you are actually doing at that moment

and what it can mean for others or how harmful it can be for someone else. I think for them it hasn't been taught any differently, yeah, I think that's it. Yeah, I think they haven't really learned to do it the right way. How do you do it right? You get kicked out of the house, like go to school, and then after school, you go play outside. If you spend the whole day playing outside with the wrong boys and find that more interesting than the schoolbooks. And at that moment you also learn something from what you do outside and not from your schoolbooks. Then the temptation to continue what you do outside is greater than hitting the books. (Jayden)

This observation aligns with Wainwright et al. (2018), who argue that a lack of positive role models and pro-social goals can prevent young people from contemplating alternative strategies to achieve success. The social environment strongly shapes people's perceptions of acceptable behaviour. Growing up surrounded by criminal activities embeds these behaviours into the community's social fabric, normalising actions that may be seen as criminal elsewhere, but are accepted within these environments due to their familiarity and societal norms.

Criminality as a Mean

Initially, the young men emphasised the negative aspects of criminality. However, as the conversation progressed, they acknowledged that deeper underlying factors often drive individuals to crime. Webster and Kingston (2014) argue that most people who grow up in poverty never engage in criminal activity, noting that the influence of poverty on crime is triggered by specific events and experiences. This shift in perspective reveals a more nuanced understanding of criminality, recognising the complex social, economic, and psychological factors involved. Jessir mentions about this:

Well look, I grew up in the neighbourhood Kanaleneiland and I know what criminality is, how it can happen. I've already said, if a man doesn't have his things in order and

has no more options, hasn't finished school, doesn't have a single company that will hire him, has no diploma, just a part-time job that pays €10 per hour which isn't enough to cover his expenses. Then comes stress, tension, all kinds of things going through his mind. And then there is only one option left, stealing, then someone will steal. And it doesn't matter what he has to do, as long as he can pay his bills. (Jessir)

Here he suggests that individuals who feel trapped, have nothing to lose, lack support, are burdened with debts, and struggle to afford necessities or enjoy life may resort to desperate measures. In such situations, crime is triggered, and they may turn to theft or other illicit activities to survive, even at great personal risk for minimal financial gain. This aligns with Rodham et al. (2006), who argue that adolescents often believe they can make appropriate decisions by weighing the pros and cons of certain behaviours. The young men acknowledge the risks of criminal activities yet understand that someone might engage when the benefits outweigh these risks. However, Rodham et al. (2006) also note that adolescents' lack of life experience and knowledge can lead to poor judgement regarding risky behaviours. Boys growing up in Kanaleneiland may be unaware of alternative ways to solve problems and earn money due to a lack of exposure to other possibilities. As a result, criminal men are perceived by the participants as men who are primarily motivated by the desire to earn money, consequently viewing criminal behaviour as a pragmatic response to economic pressures and limited opportunities, which is in line with the study of Izugbara (2015), rather than stemming from inherently malicious intentions:

They're not really trying to hurt anyone, I think, but they're really trying to get money. Most of them don't have money and often go in that direction when they can't earn any money. I think that's the quickest way for them to get money. (Mohammed)

While Mohammed argues that he would never engage in criminality himself, he recognises that some men lack financial resources and resort to such actions. Further, the boys believe that men in their community aspire to work hard, nevertheless, they acknowledge that finding stable legal employment is challenging, leading them to view criminality as a necessary option rather than a choice. In addition, the young men deemed criminal behaviour acceptable or understandable in situations where an individual desires to help someone but lacks the means to do so. Similarly, engaging in criminal acts to extricate someone from trouble can be rationalised as a form of loyalty or protection. This shows that these men perceive criminality as a tool to attain hegemonic masculinity, as argued by the strain-theory (Merton, 1957). However, by resorting to criminal behaviour, they fall into another form of subordinated masculinity, namely the criminal man, where men violate traditional masculine norms by resorting to illegitimate means to fulfil their roles (McFarlane, 2013). Nevertheless, the young men did not perceive the criminal man as discredited or oppressed. One participant even mentioned that he finds criminal men to be cool, considering their actions and lifestyle to be particularly interesting.

It becomes even clearer that men view engaging in criminality as a necessity rather than a choice by examining their perceptions of women who engage in similar behaviour. Jessir argues about this:

The woman, yeah, how can I say it, a woman should really just finish her school and do her own things. Women are really different, just makeup. They just go on TikTok or they go dancing. They just do something. Nowadays, you can easily become an influencer, so just become an influencer or do something where you can make money. For women, it's really easy to make money. Like, if a woman applies for a job, she gets hired more quickly than a man. (Jessir)

The young men perceive women as having more earning options, viewing those who turn to crime as making a deliberate choice rather than out of necessity. They believe women are similarly motivated by incentives but see their involvement as unnecessary, given traditional views of breadwinning as a masculine duty. Consequently, these young men perceive some men as reliant on crime to assert their masculinity, while women are perceived as having more freedom in this respect.

Discussion & Conclusion

Since crime is seen by some youth as an alternative employment opportunity, this study aims to explore how poverty shapes young men's perceptions of masculinity and attitudes towards criminal behaviour. Masculinity for young men in Kanaleneiland involves being independent, a breadwinner, and provider. However, financial constraints pose a significant barrier, hindering their ability to fulfil these roles amid rising costs, making money the primary barrier and critical factor to achieve masculinity. Furthermore, these young men define criminals as those who consciously repeatedly engage in wrongdoing and emphasise the nature and severity of actions in classifying behaviour as criminal. However, their exposure to criminal environments normalises and accepts such behaviour, portraying it as a necessary means to achieve hegemonic masculinity when other resources are lacking. Therefore, to answer the research question, it can be concluded that young men in Kanaleneiland form their notions of masculinity under the influence of poverty, which heightens their awareness of financial constraints. They further recognise only one form of masculinity and money as essential to embody this identity, leading some to consider criminality as a last resort to achieve their goals, while disapproving such actions while alternatives options exist.

This paper explores the intersection of poverty, masculinity, and criminality, arguing that gender dynamics play a crucial role in driving people towards criminal behaviour (McFarlane, 2013; Messerschmidt, 2000). To elucidate why young men in Kanaleneiland perceive crime as a path to masculinity, the concept of the self-sustaining trap can be used, thereby enhancing our understanding of the link between poverty, masculinity, and crime. Advantaged individuals set higher aspirations and identify pathways to achieve them, while poverty limits opportunities to develop these capabilities, perpetuating a cycle of reduced future prospects (Dalton et al., 2010; Appadurai, 2004). Young men in Kanaleneiland have grown up witnessing men aspire to and work towards achieving hegemonic masculinity, which has become the standard masculine identity. As a result, they have fewer aspirations to pursue different forms and, due to experiencing gender role conflicts, feel pressure to conform to these traditional masculine ideals. According to strain theory, criminal behaviour is viewed as essential for acquiring the money required to achieve hegemonic masculinity when no other options are available (Merton, 1957). However, these young men may be unaware of alternative pathways and strategies due to limited exposure to other possibilities. Consequently, these young men may turn to crime more quickly, as they see fewer legitimate options. Appadurai (2004) argues that enhancing the capacity to aspire disrupts the cycle of constrained aspirations, enabling individuals to envision diverse futures. Here, this involves young men recognising non-hegemonic masculinities and exploring alternative strategies, reducing the perceived need for criminal behaviour (McFarlane, 2013).

To prevent criminal behaviour among young men in Kanaleneiland, it is essential to introduce them to diverse masculinities to expand their perspectives. Exposure to positive role models who exemplify different paths to masculinity is crucial, as it supports their aspirations for positive outcomes. Unlike negative role models that focus on avoiding consequences, positive influences reduce the perceived need for criminal activities (Hendriks & Stams,

2024). While masculinity significantly influences adolescent development and perceptions of criminality among young men, there is currently a lack of youth developmental programs promoting healthy, positive masculine identities and behaviours. In the Netherlands interventions aim to prevent juvenile delinquency or reduce recidivism through universal awareness and education programs. However, these are criticised in criminology for their perceived ineffectiveness and potential to worsen undesired behaviours due to inadequate concrete alternatives (Hendriks & Stams, 2024).

However, these findings should be considered in light of certain limitations. One limitation is the difficulty men face in reflecting on their masculine behaviours and the stigma and legal implications associated with criminal actions, which can discourage truthful disclosure. As a result, self-reported data may not accurately reflect actual behaviours. This issue can be mitigated through participant observation, which allows researchers to immerse themselves in the participants' environment. This method provides in-depth, nuanced insights into masculinity and criminality within their natural context (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). By building trust and understanding cultural norms and social dynamics, researchers can obtain more authentic and reliable data that might not be accessible through other research methods. In addition, time constraints limited additional interviews and achieving data saturation, potentially reducing the comprehensive understanding of diverse perspectives and experiences. Due to this small sample size and the specific features of the group, this data cannot be used generalisable. Further research, including studies among wealthier youth, could provide deeper insights into perceptions of masculinity and its link with criminality.

Despite limitations, this thesis uses qualitative data to explore how poverty influences young men's concepts of masculinity and their attitudes towards criminal

behaviour. These insights connect the debates on masculinity, criminality, and aspirations, while indicating that when there is a gap between aspirations and the perceived chances of achieving them, young men from low-income neighbourhoods perceive criminality as a necessity in order to achieve a masculine identity. Due to the gap in their knowledge of alternative ways, they quickly turn towards crime. Exposure to different masculinities and different strategies to achieve them is essential to overcome these gaps and help young men cross towards a healthy manhood.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the young men of Kanaleneiland who generously shared their experiences and perceptions, making this study possible. I am also thankful to the people of the community centre in Kanaleneiland for granting us access and facilitating interactions with the boys. I extend my appreciation to the team behind the "Minding the Gap" project for their financial and logistical support throughout this research endeavour. My heartfelt thanks go to my fellow students for their support and encouragement during this journey. Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor for his invaluable feedback, unwavering support, and expert guidance throughout the completion of this master's thesis. This thesis would not have been possible without the support, help and understanding of these people.

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Appendix I: Topic-list

The central concepts of this paper are criminal behaviour, poverty and masculinity, and will be explained shortly here. Criminal behaviour encompasses actions or conduct that contravene legal norms and are deemed harmful, threatening, or disruptive to individuals or society. It spans a spectrum of activities, ranging from minor transgressions like traffic violations or disorderly conduct to more severe offences such as assault, theft, or homicide. Poverty is the condition of lacking a customary or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Lastly, as an aspect of gender, masculinity is an evolving concept shaped by unique social circumstances achieved by meeting societal expectations for male behaviour. While these definitions are provided here, this paper focuses on the meanings that young men themselves attribute to these terms.

Topic	Sub-topics	(Potentiële) vragen
<i>Basic</i>	Leeftijd Duur wonen Mening over de buurt Omschrijving Plek in familie en maatschappij	Hoe oud ben je? Hoelang woon je hier al? Wat vind je van je buurt? Kun je je buurt voor mij beschrijven? Hoe zou jij jezelf omschrijven? Wat is de samenstelling van je gezin? Welke rol speel je in jouw familie?
<i>Masculinity</i>	Wat is een man Het zijn van een man Ideaalbeeld in NL Rolmodel Gedrag van een man ‘Niet’-mannelijk	Wat is een ‘ideale man’ voor jou? Wat vind je van het idee dat de man de kostwinner moet zijn? Wat is volgens jou het verschil tussen een jongen en een man? Hoe voel jij je als man? Wanneer voel jij je het meest/minst mannelijk Wanneer is het moeilijk/makkelijk om man te zijn?

		<p>Wat denk je dat het ideale beeld is van een man in Nederland?</p> <p>Ben je het daar mee eens?</p> <p>Wie is je mannelijke rolmodel? Waarom?</p> <p>Wat vind jij typisch mannelijk gedrag? Hoe wordt op dit gedrag gereageerd in je omgeving?</p> <p>Wat is niet mannelijk?</p> <p>Wat is vrouwelijk? Hoe kijk je naar vrouwen en hun rol in de maatschappij?</p>
<i>Toekomst & nu</i>	<p>Toekomst rol man</p> <p>Toekomstbeeld</p> <p>Doelen en ambities</p> <p>Verwachtingen van toekomst</p> <p>Controle en prioriteiten</p> <p>Levensstijl</p>	<p>Wat is je toekomstbeeld?</p> <p>Wat zijn je doelen/ambities in het leven?</p> <p>Wat doe je nu om die doelen te bereiken?</p> <p>Heb je het gevoel dat je je doelen kan halen? (Wat zou een barrière kunnen zijn?)</p> <p>Wat verwacht je in je toekomst? Waarom?</p> <p>Wanneer heb je het ‘gemaakt’ in het leven?</p> <p>Hoe belangrijk is geluk nu vs. geluk in de toekomst voor jou?</p> <p>YOLO-mentaliteit?</p> <p>Waar ligt je focus gedurende de dag? (Dagbesteding)</p> <p>Wat is je levensstijl nu? Wat voor levensstijl wil je in de toekomst?</p>
<i>Criminaliteit en geld</i>	<p>Definitie crimineel gedrag</p> <p>Wanneer geoorloofd</p> <p>Kijk naar criminaliteit en geld</p> <p>De plek van vrouwen in criminaliteit</p>	<p>Wat is crimineel gedrag voor jou?</p> <p>Wanneer is volgens jou crimineel gedrag geoorloofd? Wanneer niet?</p> <p>Hoe kijken je vrienden naar criminaliteit?</p> <p>Hoe kijk je naar criminele mannen?</p>

	<p>Levensstijl criminaliteit</p> <p>Jeugdbendes en omgeving</p> <p>Hebben van een baan</p> <p>Economische positie</p>	<p>Horen vrouwen volgens jou thuis in de criminele wereld?</p> <p>Hoe zie jij de levensstijl voor je in de criminaliteit?</p> <p>Hoe zie jij criminaliteit terug in je leven? Zie je het veel om je heen?</p> <p>Heb je een baan? Hoe voelt dat?</p> <p>Waarom heb je wel/niet voor een baan gekozen?</p> <p>Hoe belangrijk is geld voor je?</p> <p>Ben je je bewust van de economische positie?</p>
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Appendix II: Reflection on Interdisciplinarity

Upon reflection, I consider my thesis to be interdisciplinary. The problem is the rise of juvenile crime, especially among young men in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, examining how poverty influences their perception of masculinity and attitudes towards criminal behaviour. The main themes of this research are poverty, masculinity and criminality, terms that are all not confined to a single discipline. They are complex and multifaceted issues that span multiple disciplines. The relationship between the themes is a complex task that benefits greatly from multiple scientific disciplines, giving it a holistic view and finding new insights.

Sociology is beneficial for this study as it examines how societal norms around masculinity shape identity and reinforce gender hierarchies, how social structures like class and race influence criminal behaviour and deviance, and how these structures contribute to poverty and varying experiences of poverty. The sociological theories of gender role theory and social strain theory, used in my thesis, connect poverty, masculinity and criminality together, creating a deeper understanding in how criminality is embedded in societal norms and expectations. The strain theory is also part of the discipline of criminology, which contributes insight in how societal expectations of masculinity contribute to higher rates of male criminality and the role of masculine identity in criminal behaviour, while also exploring various theories of crime and examining effective prevention strategies and policies. The concept of 'capacity to aspire' is a theory from the discipline of cultural anthropology and shows that aspirations are culturally constructed and context-dependent. This concept explains how the young men from my study see criminality as necessary sometimes in order to attain a masculine identity. The discipline further provides information about how different cultures construct and interpret masculinity and provide perspectives on male identity and criminality, and how masculinity intersects with economic roles and labour practices. The social learning theory, which is connected to psychology, offers insight into how early childhood experiences

and family dynamics shape an individual's understanding of masculinity and potentially lead to deviant behaviour. Psychology provides insights into how masculinity develops across the lifespan, influencing behaviour, mental health, coping strategies, and interpersonal relationships, while also exploring the psychological factors contributing to criminal behaviour.

Although a multidisciplinary approach is preferable, a monodisciplinary approach is still legitimate, allowing a researcher to delve deeply into the specific theories, methodologies, and concepts. The academic field and society would still benefit from a study which focuses on one theory, such as the strain theory. This approach would allow for in-depth exploration and detailed analysis of this theory, focusing exclusively on its specific components, applications, and empirical findings.

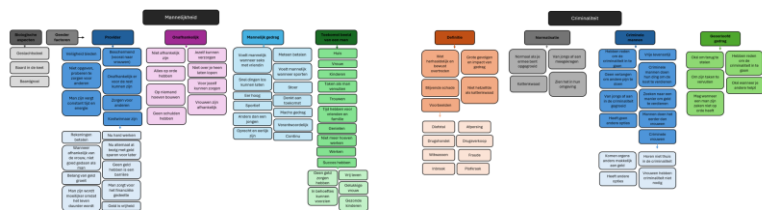
To better understand the problem of juvenile crime, it is important to understand the perspectives of the youth themselves, giving more insight into why they either engage in or abstain from criminal behaviour, what masculinity means for them, and how growing up in poverty influences that. Then, a better programme can be developed in order to prevent youth from engaging in criminality. Intervention specialists are therefore the stakeholders who are important in crossing boundaries between science and practice. By actively engaging youth in the intervention development process, specialists ensure that the interventions are informed by the lived realities and specific needs of the youth themselves, while at the same time, ensuring that these interventions are grounded in scientific research.

Using multiple scientific research methods from different disciplines enhances understanding by providing a comprehensive view. While integrating quantitative methods into this study would enable the generalisations of this study across young men, I believe that this study would benefit more from doing participant observation, a

research method commonly used in anthropology. This approach, which gathers rich data and provides an emic perspective on cultural practices, norms, beliefs, and values, offers firsthand experiences of young men in low-income neighbourhoods, shedding light on their daily lives, behaviours, and interactions, while also uncovering the cultural, social, and environmental factors influencing behaviours such as engagement in criminal activities. Conducted in naturalistic settings, participant observation reveals genuine behaviours in their real-life contexts.

Analytical levels offer researchers frameworks to explore diverse dimensions of phenomena, enabling nuanced insights and thorough understanding. Integrating multiple levels facilitates a holistic approach to addressing complex issues like youth involvement in criminal behaviour, revealing intricate relationships among poverty, masculinity, and criminality and yielding impactful research outcomes. A systems perspective offers a method to analyse complex phenomena by exploring interactions among system components, which is crucial for understanding the multifaceted issue of criminal behaviour influenced by poverty and masculinity. Using multiple perspectives, including those of young men, parents, families, friends, and schools, enhances comprehension of these complex issues. Additionally, conducting comparative analyses between men from low-income and high-income neighbourhoods regarding perceptions of masculinity and criminality can deepen insights into the impact of poverty on this problem.

Appendix III: Coding Scheme



Above is the complete coding scheme in a single image. Below, it is presented separately within the two themes, masculinity and criminality.

