

YOUNG MEN AS SYSTEMIC WHISTLEBLOWERS

Anthropological Gaze upon Failing Institutions and Transitional Spaces



Dirck van Bekkum

In the past decades, criminal, dangerous, violent, and radicalizing young men have drawn much attention in social sciences and public debates. Hardly any books can be found which show the beauty, strength, creativity, care and indispensability of boys and young men for the survival of our families and societies. This book of 20 articles wants to fill this omission. It was partly written together with fellow anthropologists, therapists and educators. The biologist, anthropologist and (eco) system thinker Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) grew up in British families of evolutionary thinkers and artists' habitats. From these histories and contexts, he developed a knowledge-seeking position that all biological ecosystems can derail, including those of humans. Consequently, in Bateson's view, all individuals, families, communities, as social systems entail solutions to recover from derailment and return to synchrony with how nature works as a macro-ecosystem. This cross-biological-cultural-comparison angle has served van Bekkum as a route planner to understand young men's hazardous transition into adult, multicultural Dutch male and female worlds for the last 35 years.

"Learning to Think How Nature Works"

This bundle (20 articles) was published in Dutch December 2017 and is planned to be published in English in 2019

SUMMARY

This book reveals some major blind spots in the functioning of educational, mental health & youth care and correctional state institutions. First: young men's cognitive talents and capacities spring from physical-sensory-motor experiences. Cognitive learning happens mainly by bodily action. Schools increasingly operate the other way around. Second: persisting conflicting loyalties between family/ethnic/religious/regional and national bonding are fertile grounds for all kinds of male adolescent deviant behavior and psychiatric syndromes. Third: specific liminal vulnerabilities due to the maturation gap between biological and social/cultural coming of age are largely unrecognized. Fourth: state institutions - schools, psychiatric, youth care and correctional centres - individualize young men to make them good citizens of the Dutch national system. An unseen, doxic, goal of the institutions is to reduce loyalties to their families and communities. The transgenerational, evolution rooted, interest of families and communities is to bound their (grand)sons to their social system of Family & Community Continuity.

For many decades there is an ongoing row, in public domains of Western(ized) societies, on stupid, criminal, dangerous, violent and radicalized young men. Hundreds of books and thousands of scientific articles have been written, over the past hundred years, on problematic behaviour of boys and young men. Hardly any non-fiction books can be found that visualized the beauty, strength, creativity, care and indispensability of boys and young men for the well-being and survival of our families and societies. Theories that view 'deviant young men' as whistleblowers of system errors in our families, communities and institutions are scarce and usually inaccessible.

The author fieldworked with, as a clinical anthropologist-group therapist from 1983 to 1993, about 500 young men included in psychiatry. His ambition was to learn from young men and their families, in deep trouble, to develop insights for prevention. This book is the result of this ambition. For the past 25 years he trained and co-educated hundreds of professionals in psychiatry, youth care and educational institutions. He, partly reflecting on his own experiences as an adolescent and families, discovered that young men longed for deep-safe situations in which they are able to mature smoothly and optimally.

These contexts, argues Van Bekkum, are disappearing step by step the last 50 years and ignite boys to resist and develop 'disorders'. Their 'deviant' behaviour can be read as signalling structural unsafe contexts in which they grow up. With them and numerous professionals, the author developed the

concept of transitional spaces in which young men flourish and become the men they long for, in their families and as full-fledged citizens of the nation-state The Netherlands.

This book, partly written with fellow caregivers, is unusually innovative in multiple ways and not easy to read. It offers a combined anthropological, cross-cultural-comparative, and systemic, group-minded, perspective on male coming of age in urbanized contexts. It leans heavily on the oeuvre of the biologist, anthropologist and ecosystem thinker Gregory Bateson (1904-1980). Bateson grew up in a British environment of artists and families of evolutionary thinkers. From that history and context he persistently followed an epistemological trail conceptualizing from observing, experiencing and reflecting biological ecosystems, including those of humans. His cybernetic, reflexive, thinking claims that any 'out of sync' system - an individual, family, community, institution - holds solutions to restore itself and can resynchronize with the cycles, transitions and transformations of Nature-Earth as a macro-ecosystem. This is also point of departure of the quest in this book.

From his family history, Bateson also inherited that science without art, humour, emotion, passion, irony, mocking, play and of course ritual is doomed to misunderstand Nature, the Earth and ourselves. Isolating science, as a discursive practice, from these non-discursive experiences is like a world of men without women, a cosmos of nights without days. And vice versa of course. That's why this bundle is also full of arts, disrupting and reassembling intermezzo's. It links scholarly concepts with sensations from poetry, artistic and visual art, mythological themes in pop songs, fictions books, films and rituals. It is in this combination, of entering science and art, a culture-comparing view of human signifying their worlds. The author learned to co-create - alone and with all kinds of groupings of young men and other people - beauty, grace, communitas, lightness in what became coined as transitional spaces.

The title and subtitle of this book expresses that point of departure. All adolescents sense the universal human need for deep-safe collective spaces to grow, become, heal and get whole again. In their 'deviant' patterns of communication they signal and signify what is wrong, unsafe, in the contexts in which they mature. They blow the whistle for system errors in their families, in the communities and institutions in which they grow up. They have an evolutionary urge to serve women, mothers, families and a better world. What we coin as psychiatric-learning disorders and as criminal behaviour in psychiatry, in our courts, our jails, at home, at school, in public spaces are often warnings to these systems. At the same time it is a cry for help from adults, especially from men and fathers.

PROFESSIONAL BIO

Dirck van Bekkum (1947) is a clinical-systemic anthropologist, grouptherapist, martial artist, an artisan and a grandfather. Dirck has three elder and two younger brothers and an older sister. He was born and raised in petty bourgeoisie families of self-employed blacksmiths, artisans, intellectuals, hidden artists and missionaries. He married twice into migrant/refugee, ex-colonial Eurasian, families, has a daughter and son and two grandsons. These 20 papers and chapters are the outcome of four decades of clinical/educational fieldwork among young men, their families and their professionals in vocational, educational, mental health & youth and correctional care institutions. These texts represent his quest into, his masculinities and, worlds of troubling/troubled young men coming of age in Dutch nationalizing multicultural contexts. Dirck van Bekkum is married to Theresia Bernet. They initiated and run their small-scale Bureau Moira CTT since 1993 in The Netherlands, www.ctt.nl; moira@ctt.nl. For more info see www.anthropo-gazing and at Academia.edu

CONTENTS

- 1) Dirck van Bekkum [Integrative Socialisation of Youth: an Intercultural Perspective from Cultural Anthropology](#), in: Interdisciplinariteit in jeugdhulpverlening en adolescentenzorg, P. v. d. Doef (ed), Acco, Amersfoort, 1992. (translated from Dutch)
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APPENDIXES

- 1) Cross-Cultural-Comparative Gazing at Ecosystems in Batesonian-Turnerian Thinking
- 2) Evolution Produces Similarities and Differences: Beyond European Dualising
- 2) Cosmic, Earthly and Human Cycles & Transitions: Learning How to
- 4) Balancing Mimetic and Ethnocentric Reflexes
- 5) Family and Community Continuities: Healing Subcultures by Transition Rituals
- 6) Balancing Complementary Gendered Worlds: Contextualizing Female & Male Patterning
- 7) Balancing Complementary Generational Worlds: Grandchildren, Children, Parents and Grandparents
- 8) Managing Gendered/Generational Kinship Positions in Family and Community Continuities
- 9) Managing Connecting Worlds of Unborns, Living and Ancestors in Rituals
- 10) Social Cohesion: organizing and revitalizing of dependencies within and between communities
- 11) First & Second Nations: Incompatibility Between Families and State Institutions ([van Bekkum 2015](#))
- 12) Co-creating Transitional -Deep Safe-Ritual - Spaces in Families & Organisations ([van Bekkum et al. 2010](#))
- 13) Double/Faulty/Incongruent & Single/Healthy/Congruent Binding Patterns of Communication:
- 14) Towers of Babel: Unseen Complexities in and between Youth , Mental & Incarceration Institutions
- 15) Politicizing Ecologies in Professional Thinking And Acting is Not a Bad Strategy to Come Home Again
- 16) Misconceptions in studies of Resistance and Deviance of Young Men
- 17) Doxic Patterns of Shame and Quilt in Unexplained Explosions of Male Violence
- 18) Systemic Congruencies and Systemic Wisdoms; Gates into Grace Collectives
- 19) Four Basic Patterns in Human Communication: Symmetric, Complementary, Reciprocal and Rhizomic
- 20) Beyond Human Language: Rhizoming Effervescence, Grace, Communitas, Flow, Zone, Tele and Kairos
- 21) Crafting the World as Humans: Live givers, Gatherers, Toolmakers, Hunters and Mythological Brioleurs

Introduction

Transcultural systemic approaches in educational and youth care institutions are highly marginal but urgently needed in Western multicultural societies. This book contains twenty papers, concerning male maturation in Dutch multicultural contexts, published between 1992 and 2018 by anthropologist-grouptherapist-teacher-artisan-martial artist Dirck van Bekkum. The articles reflect his 'great quest' into his own male coming of age and into his clinical fieldwork with about 500, psychiatric hospitalized, young men whom he guided as member of a multidisciplinary team. Because anthropologists study 'strange' others, we are inclined to discover how strange we are to our 'cultural ourselves'. During this reflexive life long quest the author revealed with the young men, their families and colleagues many unseen, doxic, issues in the coming of age transitions of the guided young men. These issues were taken as system errors of their families and of failing institutions including in his father's and mother's families, and in his Christian-local-petty bourgeois Dutch culture. In doing so he developed, being in deep communication with them, over the years innovative ways of understanding. He 'ploughed back' what he observed and conceptualized in his ways of guiding the young men as a creative grouptherapist. From this 'recursive ploughing back' of co-created findings in his artistic, therapeutic, educational and scientific practices unique procedures emerged of 'validating clinical knowledge' and forms of 'bodily active (sensory) knowing' for himself and youth and (forensic) psychiatry.

Major issues in this bundle and cultural selfreflection

Looking back on 35 years of observing, conceptualizing and writing these articles reflect and encompasses the author's retracing and restoring his 'learning failures' in schools and his 'fathering failures' as a widower. Only until twenty-seven Van Bekkum entered university repairing a series of failures in different primary, secondary and occupational educational institutions. When he lost his wife during his anthropological studies he had trouble raising his son and daughter. His daughter left at 15 to live with his family in law and his son at 12 was placed in a foster family under state professional pressure. Troubling and troubled young people, especially boys, in this text are taken as 'barometers' of 'congruent', fertile/deep-safe, states of their families and of the nationalizing institutions, such as educational, youth care, prisons and psychiatric institutions, in which they came of age. Van Bekkum follows a comparative, cultural reflexive, systemic, a-psychologizing, approach to understand young men's, and their families, problems. Their 'deviant symptoms' were taken as signals of system errors in their

families and in the national institutions in which they matured. Social and cultural anthropology turned out to be closest to fit the culture sensitive reflexive approach is in particular the work of Gregory Bateson, Norbert Elias, Victor & Edith Turner, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Edward T. Hall. In retrospect, this book is also the result of 40 years of studying himself, his families (in law) and the Dutch culture for what the author missed and found during his maturation as a young man, as an adult, a father and a professional. The most important red line in this book is the author's longing for deep-safe (transitional) spaces which he as a child and young man in his family, especially in schools lacked to grow optimally. Only after his 27th he was able to understand this lacking in starting an academic anthropological study in 1974. Between 1983-1993 the author guided, as a grouptherapist & fieldworking anthropologist about 500 troubled/troubling young men hospitalized in psychiatry (1994; 1999). During these 10 years of clinical fieldwork, in numerous trials and errors, the author facilitated co-creating deeply-safe - containing/holding - spaces in which the young men (and myself) learned to dis-integrate and re-integrate 'system errors' in our own and in our families histories. In the last 25 years he trained and co-educated, as a self-employed anthropologist, hundreds of professionals in youth and mental health care institutions in the Netherlands and Germany. The last decade co-educated, with senior family therapists/psychiatrists, transcultural system (family) therapists in Amsterdam. The co-creation of 'transitional spaces' and of [Family & Community Continuity](#) bound rituals became the main goal of research and learning (Van Bakkum et. al. 2010).

Substantiation of an anthropological gaze

Anthropologists, for over a hundred years, studied small-scale societies outside Europe. We, anthropologists, can understand in new ways, by looking back through the eyes of these indigenous peoples to ourselves, how we (e.g.) raise our children. These small communities are not 'nation states' and have a marginal status in most nation-state societies. They are our exemplars because they manage a many generation-long cultural continuity, in synchrony with their environments. Their survival is seriously threatened by historical-younger-colonizing nation-states (territory = habitat = livelihood = survival). Since 2007 they, as indigenous peoples, have an official status in the United Nations. Many boys and their families he guided in clinical psychiatry came from the Randstad (dominant urbanized region The Netherlands). A number in our sample were from 'first nation' communities like Maluku-, Basks-, Roma-, Friesian- and Maroon-Dutch families with migration/refugee backgrounds.

Clinical-systemic anthropologist Van Bakkum offers in this volume a number of case vignettes of young men and their families, vulnerable and in trouble, coming of age in 'nationalizing' institutions. What constitutes the major flaws (systemic errors) in the efficacy of socializing these young men in these (schooling/rehabilitating/incarcerating) institutions? According to Van Bakkum educational, youth care & mental health institutions, and juvenile detention centres are, not only education, socializing and rehabilitating but also and, in particular 'nationalizing' (Dutch making) institutions without realizing and recognizing it. He discovered 'contextualized' incompatibilities between (collectivising) interests in young men, their families and community and the Dutch nation-state (individualising) interests (Van Bakkum & Filedt-Kok Weimar 2000; Scott 2009; Van Bakkum & Limahelu 2017).

Validated experiences and data from ten years of clinical and twenty-five years of educational practices led Van Bakkum into a process of intertwining conceptual Turnerian/Batesonian frames from anthropology with 'cultural self-reflective' Elysian, Bourdieuan and Foucauldian frames. This bundle of 22 longer and shorter texts are 'trial and error twinings' between Van Bakkum clinical & educational experiences, the research data and these conceptual frames. Main thesis is that the young men protest, resist, rebel and make trouble in their families, communities and in nationalizing institutions while there is a lack of deep-safe (transitional) spaces in which they can enter optimally adult (male) worlds (van Bakkum 2002; Van Bakkum et. al. 2010).

The evolutionary focus, in First Nations in families and communities, is unmistakably on the social system, on collectives and on communal values. Their evolutionary purpose is to (re)produce biologically new generations 'fertile' young women and young men and culturally 'Family & Community Continuity', in their specific very different habitats, over many generations (Deloria 1972; Some 1990; Van Bakkum 2015; Van Bakkum 2018).

While the main interest of state institutions is to (re)produce new generations of good functioning 'individualised' citizens. These processes of loosening (thing) of the familial and communal bonding in young men in favour of stronger national bonding are 'doxic' (hidden by power structures according to Bourdieu) and 'hegemonic' (pastoral, individualizing/making docile, power according to Foucault). Van Bakkum discovered in his research that these 'unseen/unacknowledged' incompatibilities are the main source of many tensions, 'mental and learning disorder', resistances and other troubles of young men and heir families. Many of the researched young men, their families and communities show similarities with first nation and indigenous peoples (Van Bakkum 1994).

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