

Beyond Male Role Models: gender identities and work with young men

An Open University research project working with Action for Children
Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No: ES/K005863/1)



REPORT



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Executive summary

'Beyond Male Role Models: gender identities and work with young men' is an Open University research project working with Action for Children, supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. ES/K005863/1). The research study, which ran from May 2013 to April 2015, set out to explore the role of gender in relationships between young men using support services and the adults who work with them. 93 people (50 young men, 14 young women, 12 male staff and 17 female staff) were interviewed at Action for Children and other services across the United Kingdom.

Key findings

- Young men 'at risk' have often experienced difficult family relationships, including negative relationships with their fathers, but some also have positive relationships with their mothers and strong female influences in their lives. The experience of becoming a father can provide a catalyst for making the transition to a more responsible masculine identity.
- Young men's masculine identities are strongly defined by locality. Young men 'at risk' tend to be embedded in local cultures of hypermasculinity, often with problematic consequences. Many aspire to a 'safer' and more responsible masculinity, with their aspirations again being largely shaped by local expectations.
- Support services provide a vital 'third space' in which young men can make the transition to safer and less risky adult masculine identities, with activities providing the gateway to practical advice, emotional support and the building of relationships.
- Young men using support services value the personal qualities and commitment of staff above their gender or other social identities.
- Young men value respect, trust, consistency, and a sense of care and commitment, in workers, and these qualities are key to developing effective helping relationships.
- A sense of shared experience and social background between young men and staff can be valuable in developing effective relationships, and in 'modelling' transitions to a more positive masculine identity.
- Although the term 'male role model' was used by some young men and staff, there was a lack of clarity about what was meant by it.
- Workers in support services act less as role models for young men to imitate, and more as mentors or guides with whom they are able to negotiate and co-construct new identities and futures.

Implications for policy and practice

- The research points to the importance of policy and practice taking account of the diverse and complex family relationships, local cultures and social inequalities that have shaped the lives of young men in contact with support services. At the same time, there is a need to recognise that many young men come to services because they are seeking to make the transition to a 'safer' adult masculine identity, and that their aspirations – for a job, family, home – are not very different from those of other young people.
- At a time when the funding and futures of support services are under threat, this research demonstrates the vital role that such services play in offering a safe, transitional space in which young men 'at risk' can begin to construct better futures for themselves. Within these services, the paramount importance of helping relationships based on care, trust and consistency has been demonstrated, pointing to a need to make relationship-building central to staff training, team development and performance agendas.
- The research also raises important questions about the relative importance of gender and other social identities in recruiting staff to work with vulnerable young men. Gender identities and relationships inform young men's lives in important and complex ways, and being able to identify with staff along the lines of gender, ethnicity or shared social background certainly plays a role and should not be overlooked. However, effective work with young men seems to depend above all on personal qualities and commitment, and on the ability to form relationships of mutual care and respect.

Background to the research

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work of the 'Beyond Male Role Models' research project, its key findings and conclusions. The aims of the study were to improve knowledge and understanding of the experiences and needs of vulnerable young men, to influence public policy, and to support and improve professional practice.

The objectives of the study were:

- To explore whether the gender identity of the worker makes a difference to developing good quality relationships between workers and young men
- To explore how gender interacts with other aspects of identity such as class and ethnicity
- To explore how professional relationships with boys and young men can be improved and the lessons for professional practice more generally
- To contribute to policy, practice and academic debates about the development of young masculinities and young men's transitions to adulthood.

The proposal for the research project developed out of a seminar on 'Questioning Masculinities', organised in Milton Keynes in May 2010 and funded by a small grant from The Open University's Research Development Fund. A crucial development, as the research proposal evolved over the next two years, was securing the support of Action for Children, a national charity working with vulnerable children and young people.

A funding proposal was submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2012 and approved in December of that year, with an agreed starting date of May 2013. The grant covered internal staff costs, the employment of a consultant and a research assistant, and the costs of data collection and analysis, as well as a range of impact and dissemination activities, including the production of a short video film to highlight the research findings.

Thinking behind the research

Boys and young men have become a key focus of public and political anxiety, and of policy and practice interventions, over the past few decades. Concerns have encompassed their apparent educational under-achievement relative to that of girls; high rates of suicide and mental health problems; and concern about offending and anti-social behaviour (Featherstone, Scourfield and Rivett, 2007; Robb, 2007; Roberts, 2014; Ruxton, 2009). Indeed, boys have increasingly been defined in media debate and public policy as 'at risk' and as a 'risk' to others (Syal, 2013).

A range of commentators has argued that the absence of fathers and the allied absence of male role models from the lives of many young men are key factors in their involvement in crime and in educational under-achievement (Murray 1990; Dennis and Erdos, 1992; Reach, 2007; Lammy, 2011). Concern about the lack of male role models has encompassed the private and the public sphere, the family and public services. In terms of public services, much of the analysis has focused on education, and in particular primary education (Harnett and Lee, 2003; Martino, 2008). Recent years have also witnessed campaigns to increase men's representation in services where

they have always been a minority, or else absent, in professions such as early years and childcare (Brannen *et al*, 2007). A discourse focused on the importance of 'male role models' has become the common currency of popular and policy discussion, consisting of a set of assumptions and rhetorical strategies that have come to be accepted as 'common sense' on the basis of limited evidence and with little challenge.

The dominance of this discourse is important because it has been used to justify a range of policy and practice interventions. These include seeking to increase the engagement of adult male workers with young men (particularly working-class and black young men). Under the last Labour government programmes included the 'Playing for Success' programme to promote footballers as role models for boys, and the REACH Programme using male role models to raise the attainment and achievement of black boys (Featherstone, 2009). This trend was continued by the Coalition government: it developed a 'Troops to Teachers' programme to recruit ex-Service personnel into teaching, aimed at engendering respect, particularly among young men (Burkhard, 2008; Dermott, 2012). Responses by government and opposition politicians to the riots of summer 2011 diagnosed an apparent lack of male role models for young men as a key factor behind the disturbances (Mahadevan, 2011; Lammy, 2011).

However, it is unclear what the meaning and function of 'male role models' might be, and how the process of modelling operates in practice. Certainly assumptions that boys need male role models to develop a 'correct' gender identity are open to theoretical challenge. There is evidence that women, including mothers, grandmothers and female friends, have a significant impact on boys' development (Robb, 2010), and that positive father and mother involvement includes common factors (O'Brien, 2005). Theorists such as Connell (1995) argue that individuals do not 'learn' their correct gender and sexual identity through internalising social expectations. Gender is not a property of the individual or something imposed but rather a complex set of practices and relations. It is always negotiated by active subjects within each and every social encounter, although these are subject to dominant notions of how men and women are supposed to be (Hicks, 2008).

Over the last few decades, research has been carried out exploring how young men engage as active subjects with each other, with girls, and with adults such as teachers, particularly in school settings (Willis, 1977; Mac an Ghail, 1994; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Martin and Marsh, 2005; Skelton, 2003). This research suggests the need for caution in simply asserting that having male role models in schools is 'good' for boys: the nature of the teaching seems more important than the gender of the teacher. The intersections with class and ethnicity have also emerged as of significance in understanding resistance, negotiation and a range of social practices (Frosh *et al*, 2002; Bricheno and Thornton, 2007; Ward, 2014). The role that homophobia, heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity play in limiting male teachers' professional identities and their pedagogical practices has also been highlighted (Martino, 2008).

However, there has been little research on the relationship between young men and care and support services and little examination of the impact (if any) of the gender of the worker, or of what a role model might be or do, and how this might be understood by boys and young men. Whilst there is important research on the importance of relationships, including those built up between professionals and boys who offend in supporting desistance from offending, there has been little exploration of the gender issues involved, particularly in recent years (McNeill, 2006). Generally, there is limited recent research on how boys and young men engage with workers in a range of care and support settings and what they value, including interrogating the importance of the gender of the worker. Our study aimed to address this gap.

Research questions

The research questions were designed to help gain a better understanding of the part played by gender in relationships between young male service users and the adults who work with them. The study set out to explore these specific questions:

- What discourses influence interventions with boys and young men and in particular what assumptions about gender inform current theory, policy and practice?
- How do boys and young men in contact with services talk about and construct their interactions and relationships with male and female professionals?
- What do they value in their relationships with workers? To what extent is this gendered?
- What do they identify as essential to developing good relationships?
- What do girls say about boys and their relationships with workers?
- How do male and female professionals working with boys and young men across a range of settings talk about and construct their interactions and relationships with service users?
- What do they identify as essential to developing good relationships?
- How does gender interact with other aspects of identity, such as class and ethnicity, in relationships between young men and professional workers?
- What are the implications of these findings for developing interventions with boys and young men who are perceived to be vulnerable or 'at risk'?

Working with Action for Children

The relationship between The Open University and Action for Children has been central to the success of the research project. Action for Children staff were involved in the development of the research proposal, supported the funding application, and have played a key role in the organisation of the project. Regular meetings have been held between the research team and central Action for Children staff, who have been core members of the project steering group.

The research team

The Open University research team consisted of:

Martin Robb Principal Investigator

Brigid Featherstone Co-Investigator

Sandy Ruxton Consultant

Michael Ward Research Assistant

In addition, the research team had the support of two Open University Research Associates, Gareth Terry and Anna Tarrant, for the first year of the project.

Project management

The research project was managed on a day-to-day basis by the research team, with team members taking responsibility for different aspects of the work. Financial and administrative management was the responsibility of the Open University Research Office, with day-to-day oversight by the Research Office in the Faculty of Health & Social Care.

A steering group was formed consisting of representatives from academic, policy and practice contexts, its purpose being to provide advice and support to the research team, and particularly to assist in the planning of activities that would ensure the research had an impact on academic debates and policy and practice development. The steering group met on three occasions during the life of the project (see Appendix B for a list of steering group members).

Research activities

Overview of research activities

The main focus of the research project was a series of individual and group interviews involving young service users and staff at a range of support services organised by Action for Children and Working With Men, an organisation providing a range of services for boys and men in London. These interviews are described in detail in the next section. However the research team also engaged in a number of related activities designed to meet the aims of the project.

Literature review

A comprehensive review of the academic and research literature was undertaken, exploring key themes of young masculinities and youth identities, with a particular focus on vulnerable or 'troubled' young men. The review, led by Gareth Terry and Michael Ward, involved an overview of studies published in English between January 2000 and July 2013. It is anticipated that elements of the literature review will inform a number of publications to be produced as a result of the study. It has already formed the basis of an article by the research team, to be published in the international journal *Boyhood Studies* (Tarrant *et al*, 2015).

Policy review

An initial analysis of policy issues relevant to the research topic was undertaken by Sandy Ruxton, drawing on policy documents, political speeches and media commentary. The review explored a number of themes in public discourse relating to the supposed impact of male role models on the lives of boys and young men, at the same time raising questions about the theoretical underpinning of 'male role model' discourse. There are plans to update the review in the light of recent policy developments and to publish it online.

Dissemination, engagement and impact

The 'impact' plan for the research project involved engaging from the start of the study with policy-makers, professionals and the wider public, as a means of involving key stakeholders in the research process. Key activities by the team so far have included:

- An official launch event in London in October 2013
- A project blog and website, with linked Twitter account
- An expert seminar in London in January 2015, with invited participants from academic, policy and practice backgrounds (see Appendix C)
- An end-of-award conference in Milton Keynes in March 2015.

Individual team members have also taken part in a number of conferences and other events at which they were able to share the work of the research project.

Video film

Part of the original project proposal was to produce a short video film, featuring young men and those who work with them, in order to share the findings of the research in a lively and accessible way, and to stimulate discussion about the implications for policy and practice. The video was produced by an independent media company and filming took place in January 2015 at an Action for Children project in the West of Scotland and at the premises of Working With Men. It is intended that the film will be used in staff development events and as the basis for discussion with groups of young people, as well as being accessible via the internet.

Interviews

Introduction

Individual and group interviews with young men and women using support services, and male and female staff who worked with them, were undertaken between November 2013 and June 2014. They were organised by the Research Assistant, Michael Ward, who conducted most of the interviews, with support from other team members.

Recruitment

Most of the interviews took place at Action for Children services across the United Kingdom, but some were organised at projects run by Working With Men in London. Central staff at Action for Children made initial contact with local service managers to assess their willingness to participate in the research. This was followed by direct contact from the research team, as a result of which a list of participating services was drawn up. Efforts were made to ensure that the services involved reflected diversity in terms of location, service type and the kinds of young people involved. The final list included Action for Children services in the West of Scotland, North Wales, Cornwall and Dorset, in addition to projects in London run by Working With Men. Although the main focus of the research was on the needs and experience of young men, some young women were interviewed in order to gain a comparative perspective.

The services where interviews took place included those working with the following groups:

- Young offenders
- Care leavers
- Young people with additional learning support or behavioural needs
- Young carers
- Young people involved in a local care council
- Young inspectors (a volunteer project reporting on local authority run services)
- Young fathers
- Young men on a mentoring project
- Disabled young people at a respite centre.

Initial visits were made to participating services by members of the research team, in order to explain the research to managers and staff, who then helped to recruit young service users for the study. At some research sites young people who had not originally been selected by staff became interested and agreed to be interviewed after seeing their friends take part. At some sites, other young people became involved after the researcher took part in activities with them. This was especially important in the case of young people with additional learning support or behavioural needs, who needed to feel comfortable around a new adult in their youth centre. Staff at the respite centre allowed the researcher to observe them over the period of an afternoon shift, which enabled the researcher to gain an insight into their role, even though it proved impossible to interview the young people in their care because of their physical and communication disabilities.

Participants

A total of 93 participants were interviewed either individually, in pairs or as part of group interviews. This can be broken down into the following categories:

Young men	50
Young women	14
Male staff	12
Female staff	17

Detailed information about those who participated is provided in the table overleaf.

N.B. BME = black and minority ethnic

Ethics

Ethical approval was gained from The Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the study followed ethical protocols used by the University and by Action for Children. Research participants, whether young people or staff, were provided with information sheets explaining the research process and confidentiality issues, and were invited to sign consent forms. A small reward in the form of a voucher was given to young people taking part in the research.

Details of participants

Location	Service type	Service users age	Staff interviewed male	Staff interviewed female	Staff ethnicity white	Staff ethnicity BME	Young men interviewed	Young women interviewed	Young people ethnicity white	Young people ethnicity BME
West of Scotland	Young offenders	16-25	6	2	8	0	17	0	17	0
Cornwall	Care leavers	18-23	3	8	11	0	4	2	6	0
	YP with additional needs	13-21	0	1	1	0	4	4	8	0
Devon	Young carers	16-18	0	1	1	0	1	2	2	1
	Care Council	16-21	0	2	2	0	3	3	6	0
	Young inspectors	16	1	0	1	0	0	3	3	0
North Wales	Respite	3-19	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	0
London	Young fathers	16-21	1	0	0	1	4	0	2	2
	Mentor scheme	16-26	0	1	0	1	17	0	0	17
Total			12	17	27	2	50	14	44	20

Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative methodology (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Denscombe 2008; Bryman 2012), which enabled participants' experiences and perspectives to be explored in an in-depth and open-ended way. A flexible semi-structured interview schedule was used, in which participants were encouraged to talk about their past experiences and current lives, with a particular focus on their identities as young men, their experience of support services and their relationships with staff (a sample interview schedule is provided at Appendix A).

The individual and group interviews took place in a wide variety of locations, including youth centres, meeting rooms, offices, cafés, and occasionally in private homes. Some interviews were undertaken individually, some in pairs, and some as part of group discussions. All the interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Names of participants were changed and the names and locations of services removed in order to protect the anonymity of those taking part.

Reflections

As the research findings reported in the next section demonstrate, the interview study produced a wealth of rich data, providing fresh insights into the lives of vulnerable young men and the ways in which support services and individual workers engage with them.

However, the research process was often difficult and challenging. Funding issues meant that some services were under threat of closure. While staff went to great lengths to recruit young men to take part in interviews, often 'phoning or texting many times, and even travelling to bring participants to the interviews in person, attendance was often unpredictable. Many of the young people interviewed had a range of social, behavioural, emotional or educational difficulties, which meant that formal interviewing was not always possible or as productive as we anticipated, even when using a flexible interview schedule.

Perhaps understandably, some young men had difficulty understanding the purpose of the research, or the role of the interviewer. At one location a member of staff reported that some young men had suspected that the researchers were undercover police officers. Ironically these difficulties reflect some of the issues emerging from the research, such as the need for those working with vulnerable young men to develop a relationship based on trust, respect and consistency over time. Unfortunately, the requirements of the study did not make it possible to establish this kind of longer-term relationship with participants, but the issue should be borne in mind when planning future research.

Analysis of interview data

Once all of the interviews had been transcribed, together with fieldwork notes kept by the researchers, the research team used a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012) to analyse the data. An initial coding framework was developed, using a CAQDAS package, and these codes were then reviewed against examples from the data by members of the research team.

Codes were grouped together under a number of headings, reflecting emerging themes as well as the original research questions. Individual team members undertook detailed qualitative analysis of particular themes, drawing on data from across the study. Discussion of emerging findings led to themes being revised and refined. The emerging findings were shared at the expert seminar in January 2015, which included a process of in-depth small group discussion, and the conclusions were used to further refine the findings, which are reported in the next section.

Findings

Introduction

This section provides an overview of the main findings from the research project, under five headings: family relationships; doing gender locally; a third space; good workers and positive relationships; and male role models. These headings reflect the principal themes that emerged from an analysis of the interview data.

1. Family relationships

Although family relationships were not the main focus of the research, many of the young men interviewed talked about their family backgrounds. The connection between family relationships and the young men's current lives, including their gender identities, was significant, but also complex and varied.

Family as a source of support

Some young men's families provided them with a dependable source of support. Young men often communicated a belief in the importance of blood ties even when their own experience of family life had been problematic.

Ralph: *All my family are my pals.*

Burt: *People who are gonna stick by ya, no matter what ye do.*

Johnson: *That's it man, I took my mam for granted, unbelievable.*

Ralph: *My wee brother and sister are like my bairns anyway.*

Burt: *That's still ya family, still ya blood.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

Family as a source of trouble

However, many young men had difficult relationships with parents and family troubles had been instrumental in the problems they faced.

Billy: *Often young people we take, their lives are very hectic and there's no structure to it. Often from broken families [...] just with mum or whatever or just with dad and hasn't got one of the other parents around or whatever. Or maybe mum's remarried and the man she's married has got children himself and then the young person we are working with almost feels like pushed out of the way, all that kind of stuff, so that's quite common.*

(Male worker, white, Dorset)

There was often a sense of problems being intergenerational, with young men inheriting and imitating their parents' troubles. In some instances there was the suggestion of a wider community culture of poverty and addiction.

Roy: *I think the whole West of Scotland suffers from the drink culture, and I would say the drugs culture is more prevalent than it used to be, but there is certainly a lot of look after yourself. I am one of three brothers and my dad had his dad die when he was nine, and his mum died when he was born, and he was the youngest of eleven kids, so at fifteen he ended up living in dosshouses, walking five miles to work and thing like this.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Families could act as a route into trouble, rather than as a protection against it: for example, if other family members were already involved in risky behaviour.

Int: Oh you were in a gang were you?

Adam: *Aye, looked up to them, never had any big brothers or that, did have an older brother, but he was a junkie ya know.*

Int: So with the gangs stuff then, how did you get involved in it?

Adam: *All my family was involved, brought up with it, my pals were in it.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Some young people, like this female care leaver, valued the alternative support provided by the care system:

Theresa: *Well yeah, of course, you know, if I could wave a wand I'd be back at home. I'd be with my mum and dad, do you know what I mean? But realistically it's never going to happen and I wouldn't be who I am now if I, if I could wave that, but you know if it wasn't in the social care system, oh God, who knows what would have happened to me.*

(Young woman, white, Dorset)

Relationships with mothers and grandmothers

Many of the young men spoke about having strong female influences in their lives. Mothers were often spoken of as providing a reliable source of support, and many of the young men lived with their mothers rather than their fathers.

Frankie: *I've stayed with my mum all my life no, me mam's brand new ,ya know [...] she's like sound, ya know, easy going, ah but I do stay with my dad now man, pain in the arse, but not much you can do, you know what I mean?*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Grandmothers were also important in the lives of some young men, and in cases where parents were themselves facing problems, could provide an alternative and more consistent source of support.

Relationships with fathers

Fathers were often absent from the lives of the young men who were interviewed. Even when fathers were present, relationships could be problematic and many young men expressed ambivalent feelings towards their fathers. On the one hand, some young men expressed respect for their fathers, especially if they did the 'right thing', such as providing for their families.

Int: Are there any guys you look up to then? Or people I should say?

Eddie: *Aye, me father.*

[...]

Int: Why do you look up to him then?

Eddie: *Just because he worked most days, he's got asbestosis now, because he used to do pipe covering years ago, work every f---ing day of his life, until I turned about sixteen or so, when he was f--ed, just got big respect for the guy, put food on the table, aye, big respect for him, man.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

However, despite persistent ties of affection, some young men were adamant that they had no respect for their fathers.

Harry: *I haven't chatted to him in, what is it, ten and a half years [...] And I will always love him, because he is my dad, but I don't have any physical, or any face to face contact with him, because you know, I don't respect him and don't like him and just love him based on the fact that he is my dad.*

(Young man, white, Cornwall)

Becoming a father

Some of the young men interviewed were fathers themselves, and saw the experience of fatherhood as a catalyst for moving away from a youthful, irresponsible masculinity to a more adult, responsible identity. While this new identity could provide the motivation for making a transition, it could also be a source of conflict with former friends and activities, and there was often a sense of the fragility of newly-acquired identities.

Burt: *Obviously I got bairns and that, so I've had to grow up [...] For me now my life's about getting a job, family, basically, in a nut shell it is family, that is like, very, very important [...] I'm trying to be a respectful person, I don't wanna walk down the street, and seeing all that stuff, because when I am walking down the street with my wee boy, if I've been doing that at the weekend, rolling about with people, then I am walking down the street and I might bump into these people you know.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Influence of family relationships on attitudes to staff

Young men's experience of family relationships influenced their attitudes to staff, and their gender identities, in complex ways. For some young men, problematic relationships with their fathers meant that they found it difficult to trust male workers and preferred to work with female staff. However, there were also examples of the opposite being true.

Lewis: *I have always got on with females more, and that's only because I grew up with a lot of females in my life, I never had a male role model in my life, so you know, it's also that as well.*

(Young man, mixed heritage, Cornwall)

Int: Now in your experience of care and foster care, do you find that you can get on better with men or women or...?

Harry: *I don't know really, when it comes to that sort of thing, like the relationship I have with my dad, what I, I haven't had that sort of male sort of figure thing, so um, you know I find it more difficult to get on with men, because I find men more opinioned and more like, back-offish type thing, and with women, I find I can get along with them better, because of their multi-tasking minds (laughs).*

(Young man, white, Cornwall)

2. Doing gender locally

Across all of the research locations we found that a culture of hypermasculinity operated in the background of the lives of many of the young men and acted as a default reference point. This was displayed through acts of violence, physicality, substance misuse, drinking large amounts of alcohol and aggressive heterosexuality. The services they attended, and the staff who worked with them, attempted to challenge these assumptions and to guide the young men towards a 'safer' masculinity, so that they could lead more 'successful' lives in the future.

However, a successful transition to adulthood meant different things for young men in different localities. These differences were most stark when comparing a de-industrialised community in the West of Scotland with inner-city London. 'Place' seemed to impact not only on the formation of a masculine self, but also on the way education and employment choices and relationship opportunities were viewed. Contrary to assumptions that, in a globalised and media-saturated world, young people draw on similar resources in constructing their sense of self, we found that local expectations of what it means to be a man were key to understanding young men's masculine identities.

Expectations of hypermasculinity

Young men and workers in both the West of Scotland and inner London were aware of local pressures to be a certain type of man.

Int: Do you think there is a certain pressure to be a certain type of man in this area?

Tom: *Ah definitely, some of the guys I was involved in were pretty heavy guys [...] drugs, money lending, all that kinda stuff, steroids, 'I'll shoot you' and all that, madness you know what I mean, quite bad guys.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Int: Do you feel pressure to be a certain type of person in this area?

Michael: *Yeah, act in a certain way and just try to impress people, try to stand up, don't be a pussy, kind of smoke more, you kind of get known, you kind of like, yeah, just kind of like, and make people like you, kind of like famous and that.*

(Young man, BME, London)

Acts of 'hardness', expressed through violence, substance misuse and involvement in illegal activities, all helped to create particular expectations of masculinity. Some of these expectations were fostered by stereotypical representations of black youth culture.

Kellen: *Yeah well, the stereotypical would be obviously black male, hoodie, like trainers, you know what I mean? But the actual people that are being bad could be anyone, you know what I mean? And that's the reality.*

(Young man, BME, London)

Gangs in both the West of Scotland and inner London were a major breeding ground for much of the behaviour described above and a cauldron of masculinity making, as well as providing a sense of belonging. Perhaps surprisingly, gangs were also an issue for young men in rural Cornwall.

Lewis: *And like within Cornwall, you got your gangs as such, like people in gangs are presumed as more hard and they can go around and beat up everyone, and everything like that, and whereas people who aren't in gangs as such, they are more kind of like, they won't want to fight.*

(Young man, mixed heritage, Cornwall)

Other young men reported that maintaining an aggressive form of masculinity was essential in order to survive on the streets where they lived:

Johnson: *So if you don't have that tough guy act on you, or a wee bit of confidence...*

Burt: *You are going to get chewed up, in ya, man.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

Reputations

Being from a particular place, and the associated displays of hypermasculinity, brought with it negative stereotypes. Joan, a youth worker in London, highlighted some of the reputations that the young black men she worked with had with the police:

Joan: *Every day. Every day they get thrust against the wall, every day they get harassed, you know it's getting more, it was worse before but because it's been more publicly that, I mean the media, that this disproportionate stoppage, you know, how many to one white person, you know, I mean to a black person and they have to deal with this. [...] Whatever, this is their reality and therefore they have to, this is what they deal with.*

(Female worker, BME, London)

For young men, maintaining respect was linked to these reputations.

Burt: *And with ya past, people think, oh he's like, he used to be a bit of a boy so...*

Jimmy: *...used to have a reputation....*

Burt: *Aye, reputation, aye.*

Johnson: *That's why one of the biggest things that happens in [name of town] and [name of town] is if you've got a reputation of being that person, then you've done things in your past, those folk who are just coming up, will try and make a reputation for themselves, so they just take a pop at you.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

Creating 'safe' masculinities and acceptable futures

Away from the street and the hypermasculinity that it seemed to foster, the young men who attended services were engaged with workers in building alternative futures and what can be described as 'safe' masculine identities. However, these successful transitions were built around different expectations of acceptable manhood, depending to a great extent on locality. For the young men who were interviewed in the West of Scotland, it was through waged labour, often described in traditional working-class terms and bringing with it the ability to support a family, that an acceptable masculinity could be created.

Jack: *Well....um....just want to stay out of jail, you know what I mean, stay with my bird, get a job, stay out of trouble like.*

Int: OK, so what would be your ideal job then?

Jack: *Well, go in the army and do the dog training.*

Wayne: *Hopefully have a decent job and me own house probably, try and start a family, see what happens.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

For the young men in London, by contrast, the route to an acceptable and 'safe' form of masculinity was often through education courses which would enable them to find work in a knowledge-driven economy, while others spoke of creating their own individual employment opportunities or setting up their own companies:

Int: Where do you see yourself going then? What's your, like, your future, where are you?

Cesar: *In college at the moment.*

Int: What are you doing in college?

Cesar: *Digital media...that's why I want to get in that industry. I created my own social media site, other things. Going into like movie graphics.*

Cortez: *I'm really serious about business and that, design my clothes, that's what I'm planning to do, and obviously, IT, so I'm good at computers and websites and that.*

Kellen: *Yeah I'm a qualified locksmith. I'm trying to build a company with my cousin at the moment.*

(Young men, BME, London)

In contrast to the young men in the West of Scotland, those from London could be seen to have embraced the post-industrial era. These young men also seemed less interested in traditional signs of working-class male respectability, such as starting a family or acquiring their own home, and influenced more by consumerism and a desire to acquire money, whether through work or other means.

3. A third space

The interviews with young men provided strong evidence that services acted as essential 'third spaces' in young people's lives, helping them to navigate often difficult transitions between adolescence and adulthood. They offered attractive activities, a safe environment to meet with their peers, and provided emotional support and practical advice.

Attractive activities

When asked what they liked about the services they attended, young men often said they valued the opportunity to meet, socialise and engage in activities with their friends. At a club for disabled young people in Cornwall, the group told the interviewer that they liked the opportunities provided by the centre to go on trips, see friends, play football, watch films, and play computer games. Interviews at a London youth club similarly emphasised the range of activities that it was possible to do there. Attendance among young people was fairly regular, around two to three times a week for most of them, demonstrating that the club was highly valued. For some young men, it was important to be 'occupied' – and going to a centre was, at least in part, a means to stay away from crime and other risky activities.

Jack: *When you come out of jail you want to keep yourself occupied, they give you a free gym pass, you can play pool on a Monday night, you can go to football on a Thursday, it's good you know [...] It passes the time, you know what I mean?'Cos during the week you certainly are bored and I might go on the drink, or go and get a bag of green and get stoned.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

For some, going to the centre provided a structure to their day that would otherwise be lacking (and maybe a sense of the discipline needed to hold down a job). As more than one young man put it: 'It gets you out of bed in the morning'.

While some may be sceptical about the value of providing spaces where young men can play pool or table tennis, such activities can provide an important focus for staff to engage with young men. Moreover, many young men don't find sitting quietly, talking and thinking about how they feel very easy, and engaging in activities can help young men to express and explore their feelings; for workers, activities can also provide a vehicle for building relationships with young men. This knock-on impact was evident in the projects visited for this research.

Emotional support and practical advice

At a deeper level, it was clear that young men also valued the emotional support and practical help they received from staff:

Eddie: *They get your head right out of ya arse! They help you anyway possible. If you're ever stuck for anything, or want advice for anything, they help you get things off ya back. If it wasn't for Action for Children, I wouldn't have f--- all.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Baxter: *Well, we're just left to get on with it but then we've always got that support if we need it. we're given freedom, without just sort of letting go, but there's always support.*

(Young man, white, Dorset)

Participants acknowledged the importance of feeling that other people really cared about them:

Frankie: *It's given me a lot broader thinking, just don't want to do daft stuff and end up back in jail like, you know what I mean?*

Int: So what would count as daft stuff?

Frankie: *Well like going mad, fighting, f---ng snorting coke and whatever, just helped broaden my mind a bit, you know, because other people care what happens to ye.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

One young man said that he had seen significant changes in other project attenders:

Enzo: *I do know other people that come here, that do have problems at home or elsewhere and they do speak to the workers here. And when you come here, you do see their personality like, they become happy.*

(Young man, BME, London)

Supporting transitions to adulthood

Once young men have 'stabilised' and spent some time in a project, a key issue is the mechanisms that exist for progressing to positive (and safe) futures, and how staff can support this transition. Conversely, there may be risks in young men staying too long on projects, becoming (too?) comfortable there, and as a result resisting opportunities to 'move on'. There was, however, some evidence that young men acknowledged the importance of working towards a different future, and that this was a gradual process:

Int: How long have you been here?

Wayne: *About four months.*

Int: OK, and has it helped?

Wayne: *Aye, it's great, man.*

Int: And has it helped you plan for the future?

Wayne: *Aye it has, I don't know what I want to do yet man, but step by step.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Safe spaces

An important element was feeling secure in the project environment. One young man, volunteering at a young carers project, described it as 'a safe haven':

James: *We are like one big family, here to look after each other [...] here, no matter where we come from, we instantly bond because we know we are all in similar situations, and can do with all the help we can get.*

(Young man, white, Dorset)

James also regarded the project as a place where he and other young carers could relieve their stress away from the pressures of caring at home. Without visits from staff members and help to attend the project, young carers could effectively become housebound.

In other cases, young men contrasted their project with the difficult and dangerous environments that they faced outside. For some, particularly those in the London projects from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, coming to the centre was one way of avoiding hanging around on the street and getting stopped by the police:

Enzo: *I come and play pool, I use the gym, my friends come here, it's better than being outside, where the police will stop you and harass you.*

(Young man, BME, London)

Enzo contrasted the less punitive approach taken by project staff with that of the police outside: 'If you get into trouble here it's not as bad as getting in trouble out there. If you get in trouble here you're not going to get arrested, you're not going to get sent home, you're not going to get police knocking at your door, raiding your house.' He concluded that the project helped to relieve some of the stress of living in the area: 'Here it's calm, man, it's nice in here.'

The service as transitional space

A female worker noted that, while the project provides a space for young men to meet, it is not representative of the environment outside and to some extent protects them from the 'real' world. Although it offers a vital breathing space for young men, it also reflects the fact that they are often under-confident about engaging with the wider world:

Sarah: *I feel it is a very powerful environment, but they are not mixing with normal people in society if you like, they are mixing with their own. [...] They are used to coming in here on a volunteer basis, whereas, I am trying to get them 'job ready,' so I am like, 'You need to be in here at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning, because that shows me that you can actually turn up and you can be there' - and that's kinda hard, I'm finding.*

(Female worker, white, Scotland)

A female staff member at a London youth club described how it acted as a support network for young men, especially those without stable family backgrounds. She believed it served as a substitute 'mother', and as a 'home' they could return to:

Joan: *I think it takes a village to raise a child. I think we are part of that support network for young people who do not have that stable family. They will get it from here [...] I've seen those who have been very vulnerable and very desperate in the need of that kind of parenting and that mentoring and it's like another substitute mother, just another mother for them. I find that when they 'become whole' they move on [...] They can come back. And they see that, you know, there's respect there [...] You know we can go back to our mother's house regardless of where we've been, with a beard, you know, married, divorced whatever. Home is home.*

(Female worker, BME, London)

4. Good workers and positive relationships

Participants in the study (young male and female service users, and male and female staff) were asked about what they thought made a 'good' worker and to reflect on whether gender made a difference to the working relationship.

What did young men say?

The young men interviewed were acutely attuned to the meanings of behaviours and context. Thus it was not just what was done (for example, a worker making them a cup of tea or helping them fill out a benefit form), although that was important and appreciated, but it was also how and why. The 'how' referred to the conveying of respect and this could be tangible or intangible. Tangibles included workers doing what they said they would do. As for intangibles, Burt, a young white man in one of the Scottish projects, said: 'It's hard, but you just know you can trust them'. The 'why' refers to the judgements the boys made about workers. There was a concern that good workers should care, and that they should not see what they were doing as 'just a job' (more of a vocation, though they did not use this word).

The boys privileged the individual characteristics of workers (although within a common framework of being listened to and respected) rather than categorical characteristics, such as that the workers belonged to a particular gender or class (indeed, an explicit language of class was completely absent). However, the focus in some accounts on workers having been through similar experiences could be seen as an individualised reworking in a contemporary context of older concerns with class.

Although there was a privileging of the individual and making decisions of trustworthiness based upon how they were treated, as with the young women, there was a generalised distrust of certain professions such as social workers and teachers. There were some limited references to racism being an aspect of a 'bad' worker, but again strong statements that the worker being from the same ethnicity was not relevant to building a good relationship: it is all down to the individual.

The young men in Scotland particularly considered the workers as 'pals' or 'friends'. It is important to contrast this with the views of the workers, who were clear on the need to develop strong personal relationships with the boys, but within an understanding of the importance of boundaries and an explicit rejection of the notion of being their friend. Also, while some young women's responses contained a reference to them being a woman worker's 'children', in a context of

multiple changes of professional workers and loss, no familial imagery was employed by the boys in relation to workers. The ‘friend’ notion could be explained by the fact that the service in question was largely run by ex-offenders, so differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’ were minimised.

What did young women say?

The young women’s responses did not differ much from those of the young men, in terms of the importance of respect and trust and how these might be conveyed. There was also a similar concern that it should be more than a ‘job’ to the workers. They also appreciated a strengths-based approach and contrasted this with the attitudes of teachers. The young women emphasised the keeping of confidentiality as key to trust, perhaps more so than the young men. There was a nuancing of the ‘shared experience’ theme from at least one girl, with a sense that workers should be able to engage with service users and hear their stories but not make assumptions that their experiences are the same.

Some young women appeared able to articulate contradiction and nuance in a way that was not often obvious in the interviews with young men. For example, Sally, a white female service user in Dorset, acknowledged the tightrope workers had to negotiate between supporting them and challenging their more ‘ridiculous’ ideas. Terri, a white female service user in Cornwall, articulated the complexities of relationships between girls (bitchiness and competitiveness) and the impact this can have on relationships between workers and girls.

The young women’s accounts echoed the focus in the young men’s interviews on the importance of individuals, and again there was a backdrop of a generalised distrust of certain professionals such as social workers. The young women acknowledged loss and multiple professional relationships and were able to talk of being like a worker’s ‘children’ in a context where they had experienced great instability with other relationships.

What did male workers say?

Willie: *Well, I could list you off the usual list you get when you go for a job, that says you must have all these qualities, but I think definitely, and this might sound like a cliché, but you need to care, you actually need to care, these boys are, whatever has gone on in their life, one of the phrases I like is, ah be kind, everyone you meet is fighting a great battle, so you should just be nice to people.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Billy: *Everyone’s got a story and that’s something that I always keep with me. You might walk past someone in the street, you might think: ‘Oh, they look a bit rough,’ or whatever, but everyone’s got a story. And I tend, when we get referrals, sometimes young people sound quite chaotic or quite high risk or a bit of a nightmare. And I always try and think there’s a, what’s happened in their previous sixteen years or whatever to make, to get them to here. So I think, yeah, bearing that in mind, not being judgemental, being understanding.*

(Male worker, white, Dorset)

These quotations illustrate the focus on the individual and their story, the respect they deserve and a strengths-based approach to the work. There was no consensus among workers on the qualifications issue. Some thought they were necessary, but there was a great deal of emphasis on being ‘real’, not putting on a false facade, caring and having a passion for the work. A minority of workers stressed intellectual capacity and the importance of not confusing care in a professional

sense with the kind of care you would have for family members. But this was more a question of emphasis than an alternative and oppositional discourse to that which stresses the importance of being able to have rapport and to engage productively. The relationship was seen as both a means to an end and also an end in itself.

There was certainly a view among some that the worker needs to have similar experiences to the boys to engage with them effectively, but no consensus on this:

Billy: *Some would say: 'I want someone who knows what it feels like, kind of like someone who's been inside or has offended or whatever'. And some people would say: 'I want someone who's lived a stand-up life who has got a good job, good career, lovely family because that's what I aspire to, that's what I want so I want to know how to get there'. So I think it depends on the young people that you work with would have a different view on that. So I think for some young people it would be an advantage and for some young people it would probably be a disadvantage.*

(Male worker, white, Dorset)

In the Scottish projects, a number of staff had made the transition from service user to project worker. They argued that the correspondences between the experiences of service users and workers was important:

Lee: *You don't go to school for that expertise, you don't go college for that, you do go to prison (laughs) and you learn the street skills that are involved...if someone else can say 'Do you know two years ago I was sitting in that same seat, and somebody else told me this and I've been in prison and I've done that and look where I am now', there's that credibility.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

But it was also pointed out by one staff member that, although coming from a similar background to the young men was helpful, it was more important to be a caring human being:

Rex: *You do have to have some form of an idea, or a wee bit of experience of some of the things the boys have gone through, but I think more importantly you need to be a caring and organised, decent person first and foremost [...] There is quite a bit of emphasis on employing former service users and I think it's great, but on the other hand [...] it's still important to have people who have certain qualifications. If they have that as well as a bit of experience, then great.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Links between the experiences of male service users and workers can be beneficial, enabling the development of mutuality and reciprocity. However there is a fine line here between on the one hand emphasising the commonalities between men, and on the other potential collusion with harmful attitudes and behaviours, and it is important that male workers take steps to avoid the latter. Tom explained how he communicated this to young men:

Tom: *Sometimes lads can forget I'm a worker [...] they know there is a line and if they disclose something to me that is going to cause them potential harm, then I have to report it, go through my protocol and my policies. You know where to draw the line and you get to have that rapport with people, you know where you stand.*

Int: So rapport is important then?

Tom: *Massive, biggest thing I would say right now that the rapport with the young people is the biggest thing.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

What did female workers say?

Joan: *Some people, you can have a degree in youth work, you can have a Masters in youth work, but it doesn't mean that you're a youth worker that children are going to actually gel with you, do you see. Because it's more about care. It's about the love aspect, you know, it's about relationship, about respecting them as individuals. So I'm dealing with, you've come into my youth project. I tried, though I was busy, to accommodate you. [...] You know it's without sexuality, it's without gender preference, it's just listen to the facts. And when they are wrong they are wrong and if they're right they're right and they just know that's very important. And that's where I am and they know and they are comfortable with that because they know well, if we'd done it we will get in trouble and if they haven't done it we are going to negotiate with her and explain my part. Because that's: 'Tell me your story.'*

(Female worker, BME, London)

The male and female workers were actually very similar in their responses. The workers were engaged in a care-full project in supporting young people to life plan. Building and sustaining relations were central activities. Care is the thread running through the work and trumps differences of all kinds, including gender and ethnicity. The work involves a mix of complex activities, challenging, signposting without dictating: it is authoritative but cannot be authoritarian, for example. 'You are not their friend' is code for the need for focused purposeful work, where you also give of yourself in order to sustain rapport which is essential to making change happen.

There was some concern to compensate for the discriminatory behaviour of others. But generally, there was a denial of difference deriving from gender, ethnicity and so on, and a celebration of individual differences. There was no recourse to a language of structural inequality. For example, misogyny towards women workers from young men was explained in terms of the young men's experiences of poor care from women. There was an emphasis on understanding why young men might get frustrated and swear at them. While the language of risk was present, it was subordinated to an emphasis on understanding individuals and their difficulties. For example, an account of false allegations against workers segues into the terrible consequences for a young boy growing up without physical affection.

There was a rejection of authoritarian masculinity as useful in their work, which is about 'care', but a view that it might be necessary in a more 'harsh' occupation like social work. We found that supervision and reflecting on one's work were only mentioned by female staff. The effect on self of dealing with trauma was also emphasised more by women than male workers. For example a female worker in North Wales commented on how trauma from a previous post continued with her into her current role with severely disabled children:

Emma: *Well, yeah I'm thinking about my last job, in 2008 I cut a young person down who tried to hang herself, that took, and I don't know if I have even got there, but it took a long time to get over, I still went back to work and I still, but she's one young person I constantly think about.*

(Female worker, white, Wales)

5. Male role models?

Although the terms ‘role model’ and ‘male role model’ were used spontaneously by some young men and workers, there was a lack of clarity about what these terms actually meant. If understood as a simple process of transmission of masculine values from workers to young men, then role modelling does not seem like a useful concept to apply to the relationships described by participants in this research. On the other hand, if role modelling is understood as ‘an active process of negotiation, rather than a passive process of transmission’ (Cameron *et al*, 1999), then it may have more value. Viewed in this way, role modelling is about workers and young men co-constructing identities and relationships. This seems more akin to the practices observed in the research.

What is meant by ‘role model’?

There were differences in how male workers understood what being a ‘role model’ was about. For example, one argued that he didn’t see himself as a role model at all:

Rod: *I don’t have any aspirations to be anybody’s role model because I don’t want them to be like me. I want them to be far better than what I’ve ever been in life.*

(Male worker, BME, London)

However, another worker thought that he *was* a role model, understanding it in these terms:

Willie: *I feel that’s one of the things I bring to the table, being a strong role model, leading by example and being congruent. What I mean is, what you think, say and do are the same thing.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

But for the most part, what workers and young men described appeared to be more akin to a ‘mentor’ than a ‘role model’. In other words, someone who was more of a coach, guide or confidant, and who had a more active and negotiated relationship with the young person:

Tom: *Aye, Freddie, he was my mentor when I was 14. Freddie helped me with self-confidence issues, he helped me with absolutely everything [...] If wasn’t for the support I had from him when I was younger and growing up, there is no why I would have ended up in this situation.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

There was no sense from the interviews that the notion of an influential ‘role model’ who was beyond the young men’s immediate lives was helpful. Indeed, it seemed that the idea of celebrity role models, who might have a positive influence, was largely irrelevant to the young men in this study.

Workers displaying (modelling?) particular qualities

As noted already, most young men said they valued particular qualities in workers, be they male or female. These included being friendly, trustworthy, and reliable:

Burt: *They are no like the workers, or they’re the workers and we are the....they are more like friends.*

Ralph: *They treat ya like pals.*

Burt: *That's kinda what I'm meaning, they're no like workers, they are friends, you know what I mean, so you can always rely on them.*

Int: And is that important with youth workers, so rely on them? I suppose if you can't rely on them, you can't tell them stuff?

Burt: *You cannae trust them, so aye, I mean trust's a big thing, for anybody, you know to form relationships or friendships, with anybody, trust is a big thing.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

Generally speaking, young men did not express a preference for male or female workers. Rather, the worker needed to be someone that a young man could trust and build a positive relationship with:

Eddie: *If I had an issue and I wanted to talk to Frankie and I couldn't, I talked to Sarah, if you're gonna speak to somebody, you pick someone who it going to help you out,*

Int: So gender doesn't matter then? The sex of the worker?

Eddie: *No, no.*

Int: Now when you are outside here, you obviously talk to Kristy about stuff.

Eddie: *Aye, obviously if we got a problem, aye we'll talk about it, I'll speak to her before anyone else, and if I don't feel comfortable talking to her, I'll go and speak to someone else, or my pals.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Whilst this is only one example, it may suggest that some young men feel more comfortable talking to women about 'serious' (emotional) issues, reflecting the stereotypical assumption that women are more 'caring' or 'understanding' or 'motherly'. As one male worker said: 'A lot of guys who come in here don't feel comfortable in speaking to other guys.' However, a female service user highlighted the complexities surrounding this issue:

Terri: *I was always around female workers, I always had female workers, but I always had a male manager, or a male person, that would come out and see me and I found that, I could talk to males, more openly about my drugs, my fighting, my sexual relationships, and um, I could be open to them, about things like that and it wouldn't bother me, because that's what I knew, but when it came to things like periods and stuff like that, I wasn't comfortable talking to a bloke.*

(Young woman, white, Cornwall)

Communication between young men and male workers

There were some common features in the communications between young men and male workers that did not appear to be so much part of their interactions with female workers. On the one hand, it may be useful for male workers to be able to communicate with young men through a particular kind of talk. On the other, male workers need to navigate through these conversations, whilst bearing in mind the importance of challenging young men's perceptions where necessary. Demonstrating (modelling?) positive ways for young men to express themselves can be a delicate balance.

The male workers were people with whom young men had a more 'jokey' relationship, especially within groups.

Ralph: *Have a bit of banter with them?*

Int: And is that important then, banter?

Charlie: *Aye.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

One of the workers noted, however, that it was important to address any sexist and racist banter, and to try and steer young men towards more acceptable ways of expressing themselves (again this could be seen as a kind of role modelling):

Willie: *What we'll try and do, is use the humour to try and steer their comments - sexualised comments or racist comments or whatever. I'll use the humour to steer it towards look, what you meant was, this, paraphrase it, that's my opening gambit, to try and kind of steer them, to you know try and role model almost, lead by example.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Male-male solidarity and the blurring of boundaries

One notable feature of the interview data is the blurring of boundaries between the experiences and attitudes of male workers and young men: indeed it is often difficult to tell whether the speaker is a worker or a service user. In the Scottish context, as noted above, some of the male workers came from similar backgrounds to the young men they worked with, and had faced similar challenges in their lives. So there was an element of what could be called 'role modelling' here, but on the basis of class as well as gender. Although young men did not specifically articulate 'class' as a reason why they engaged with particular workers, it was evident that some gravitated towards those who came from comparable disadvantaged backgrounds:

Int: Are there any particular workers you really get on well with then?

John: *Aye, Tom, know him for a long time see, he's from my area, see.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

Int: Does it make a difference if they [staff] have been through some of the stuff you've been through?

Wayne: *Aye, sometimes it does, 'cos people like Tom, he was in care and that, so he knows what it was like.*

Int: So you can see he's done it then?

Wayne: *Aye he's been there and done it, he's one of the boys basically, changed his life.*

(Young man, white, Scotland)

This aspect was also confirmed by male workers:

Lee: *So for me, I see myself as them, you know, and maybe someone gave me a wee opportunity and showed me a pathway and a right direction and I think, maybe I could do that for young people - and it kind of snowballed from there.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

There is some positive potential in these correspondences and identifications. In particular, it enables male workers to build effective relationships with the young men that they are working with. The workers are applauded for the ways in which they have dealt with adversity, ‘turned their lives around’, and negotiated a pathway from a ‘destructive’ to a ‘safe’ masculinity. There is some evidence that young men admire and look up to the achievement of these men, and want to some extent to emulate them. Although these adult men could therefore be seen in a sense as ‘role models’, their success is more in the ways that they have changed their behaviour, and in their interactions with young men; again, the relationship may be more akin to that of a mentor than a role model.

However, it is important to consider the possible unintended consequences of celebrating male bonding and bantering. It has been suggested, for example, that this can lead to women being excluded, and/or communications with women being undervalued. Our sample of women workers and young women was not large enough to give clear responses to these questions, but it is nevertheless important that they should be explored in future research.

Workers drawing a line

As already noted, young men repeatedly described workers – especially male workers – as friends or ‘pals’, and stressed the links between them and the workers. However, young men and male workers had slightly different perceptions of the relations between them:

Int: I suppose they can trust you because you have been through it?

Max: *Yes and you can be friends with them, but you need to know when to draw the lines, like the people who come in here, I am not pals with any of them. I see Tom as a friend, but he might not see me like it, he might just be friends with me in a professional level.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

James was one male member of staff working with a group of young people leaving care, who believed he needed to be tough at times in order that he wouldn’t get taken advantage of by his service users:

James: *Being a part of that role model is, yeah I will help you, but don’t, don’t take the piss.*

(Male worker, white, Cornwall)

This is a much more active notion of what a ‘role model’ is, someone who challenges as well as supports a young person. Another worker described a similar approach with a young man he was working with, noting the importance of explaining decisions, being honest and straight with young men, and getting them to take responsibility for their own decisions:

Roy: *I met him in the street and said, you realise you’re not, you cannae come in the project, because what you did was out of order and dangerous and there maybe repercussions and we don’t want the repercussions, so you can’t come in the project, because it wouldnae be safe for you, or other people and he understands that, it goes back to the honesty stuff, cannae just say you cannae come in here, he understand it and he gets it that, that’s a down the road kind of thing, I gave him my card, my number’s on it, give me a phone and I’ll come talk to you.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

These accounts were also corroborated by one of the female staff members interviewed, who also stressed the importance of boundaries:

Joan: *Yeah, you keep that boundary. Because people, if you don't value, I value myself, I value my time and I value what I do. So I'm not going to just be a doormat for them to walk over because that's not going to help them. That's not going to help them when they want to get a job if they go to, in a job if they're going to university or whatever. If they don't learn to respect people and value people their time and effort they make.*

(Female worker, BME, London)

Positive influence of peers: young men supporting each other

An important knock-on impact from the relationships between young men and workers, which the workers tried to foster, was encouraging young men to care for each other. One worker described an instance where this had occurred on his project:

Roy: *I'm worried about him, I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks, we've heard some wee stories that he's been dodging about with some characters, we are not happy about, but we cannae get him in to talk about this, leave it with me, he's coming in to talk to me tomorrow, I'll have a word, and he was there Monday morning, because he'd heard they were worried about him, so that's much more powerful, the guys helping each other and looking out for each other.*

(Male worker, white, Scotland)

Although there can be strong peer pressure on young men to get involved in antisocial activities, at the same time there were examples of young men supporting each other, and being boosted by the success of their peers in turning their lives around (e.g. by getting a job):

Burt: *You see such and such got a job like wee M---, he's away to the army, and he's lived a chaotic life, so I believe you look at people, or I look at people and say 'My God, man, how much he's changed, if he's done it then aye, I'll be able to do it.'*

Int: Do you feel like that though?

Ralph: *Aye, as soon as one of us gets a job everybody's like excited for him, it's like pity for him like (laughs).*

Johnson: *It's because we're happy for him though, ken, even before I worked here, soon as I heard this man was working, I was like ah, proud, I love to see my pals doing well, ken, and even though I have only been here three weeks, seeing and hearing the boys getting out of trouble ken, getting their lives ahead, and I've only met them a couple of times, and I feel so proud of them and it makes me happy.*

(Young men, white, Scotland)

Summary of key findings

As the previous section has shown, it is difficult to generalise about the experiences and perspectives of vulnerable young men, living in different parts of the country, with very different life experiences, and with their expectations shaped to a large extent by locality, ethnicity, class and culture. However, some key messages emerge from the study, encouraging us to move beyond simplistic understandings of young men's needs, experiences and identities, and to take account of the diversity and complexities of their lives and aspirations. These key messages (which are also listed in the Executive summary) can be summarised as follows:

- Young men 'at risk' have often experienced difficult family relationships, including negative relationships with their fathers, but some also have positive relationships with their mothers and strong female influences in their lives. The experience of becoming a father can provide a catalyst for making the transition to a more responsible masculine identity.
- Young men's masculine identities are strongly defined by locality. Young men 'at risk' tended to be embedded in local cultures of hypermasculinity, often with problematic consequences. Many aspire to a 'safer' and more responsible masculinity, with their aspirations again being largely shaped by local expectations.
- Support services provide a vital 'third space' in which young men can make the transition to safer and less risky adult masculine identities, with activities providing the gateway to practical advice, emotional support and the building of relationships.
- Young men using support services value the personal qualities and commitment of staff above their gender or other social identities.
- Young men value respect, trust, consistency, and a sense of care and commitment, in workers, and these qualities are key to developing effective helping relationships.
- A sense of shared experience and social background between young men and staff can be valuable in developing effective relationships, and in 'modelling' transitions to a more positive masculine identity.
- Although the term 'male role models' was used by some young men and staff, there was a lack of clarity about what was meant by it.
- Workers in support services act less as role models for young men to imitate, and more as mentors or guides with whom they are able to negotiate and co-construct new identities and futures.

Implications

Without making specific recommendations at this stage, we would suggest that these research findings have the following implications for policy and practice affecting vulnerable and 'at risk' young men. (These are also included in the Executive summary.)

- The research points to the importance of policy and practice taking account of the diverse and complex family relationships, local cultures and social inequalities that have shaped the lives of young men in contact with support services. At the same time, there is a need to recognise that many young men come to services because they are seeking to make the transition to a 'safer' adult masculine identity, and that their aspirations – for a job, family, home – are not very different from those of other young people.
- At a time when the funding and futures of support services are under threat, this research demonstrates the vital role that such services play in offering a safe, transitional space in which young men 'at risk' can begin to construct better futures for themselves. Within these services, the paramount importance of helping relationships based on care, trust and consistency has been demonstrated, pointing to a need to make relationship-building central to staff training, team development and performance agendas.
- The research also raises important questions about the relative importance of gender and other social identities in recruiting staff to work with vulnerable young men. Gender identities and relationships inform young men's lives in important and complex ways, and being able to identify with staff along the lines of gender, ethnicity or shared social background certainly plays a role and should not be overlooked. However, effective work with young men seems to depend above all on personal qualities and commitment, and on the ability to form relationships of mutual care and respect.

Next steps

The research team is committed to ensuring that the findings from this study reach as wide an audience as possible, and that they have a significant impact on academic debates about young men and young masculinities, on policy development affecting young men, and on professional practice in support services. Plans for future activities include the following:

- A seminar for politicians and civil servants to be held in late 2015 or early 2016
- A conference for social work professionals and managers in partnership with Making Research Count in 2016
- A staff development event or webinar for Action for Children staff in late 2015 or early 2016
- Blog posts for *Community Care*, *Children and Young People Now*, *Social Work Matters* and other publications and websites for practitioners
- A number of articles in professional, policy and academic journals
- A full-length book discussing the research findings.

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APPENDIX A

Sample interview schedule (for interviews with young men)

General introduction

Outline of project and who interviewer is; discuss issues of confidentiality, recording, ground rules, vouchers for your time etc.

Opening/icebreaker questions

Tell me a bit about yourself...What's your name, how old are you? What do you do / like too do, What area of X do you live in?

How long have you been coming here? (To the project/club/etc.) What brought you here in the first place / why did you start coming?

Questions about the service

What kind of things do you do when you're here? What do you like about coming here?

What do you get out of it?

Questions about relationships with staff

Which members of staff / workers / volunteers do you have most to do with? Is there / are there particular worker (s) you get on well with / have helped you?

What is it about them that you like / have found helpful / means you get on well?

Generally, what do you think makes a 'good' member of staff/worker – what qualities do you look for?

Questions about gender and relationships

Do you prefer working with / dealing with male or female members of staff – or no preference? Why is that?

Do you think the gender of the worker – whether it's a man or a woman – is important, especially in working with young men – and if so, why is that?

Who would you say have been the most important people in your own life – outside the project/ service – in your family, community and so on?

Can you tell me a bit about your own family – parents, brothers and sisters, and so on – what have your relationships been like there – and who's been important to you as you as you've been growing up?

What kind of man would you describe yourself as – or would like to be? Anyone you see as the 'ideal' kind of man that you model yourself on?

Conclusion

Final few questions now, want to give you an opportunity to ask me something about the research, is there anything else you need/want to know?

APPENDIX B

Members of the steering group

Sue Butcher	Association of Directors of Children's Services
Richard Collier	Newcastle University
Hannah Dobbin	Action for Children (2013 – 2014)
Richard Essery	Brook
Stephen Hicks	Manchester University
Annie Hudson	College of Social Work
Jen Lexmond	Character Counts
Trefor Lloyd	Boys' Development Project
Kate Mulley	Action for Children
Colin Pettigrew	Association of Directors of Children's Services
Yvonne Roberts	The Observer
Louise Sheridan	Government Equalities Office
Emma Smale	Action for Children (2014 – 2015)
Owen Thomas	Working With Men
Charlie Weinberg	Safe Ground

APPENDIX C

Participants in the expert seminar (January 2015)

Rebecca Asher	Author and journalist
David Brockway	GREAT Men
Chris Green	White Ribbon Campaign
Anna Gupta	Royal Holloway College, London University
Stephen Hicks	Manchester University
Trefor Lloyd	Boys' Development Project
Emma Smale	Action for Children
Owen Thomas	Working With Men
Charlie Weinberg	Safe Ground

Acknowledgements

The research project team would like to thank staff at Action for Children for supporting the research, and for providing access to staff and service users. We would also like to thank Working With Men for providing access to their staff and service users. We are grateful to both organisations for enabling us to film at their premises.

Special thanks are due to all the young men and women, and all the male and female workers, who shared their experiences with us as part of the research, and during the making of the video film.

We would like to thank staff in the Research Office in the Faculty of Health & Social Care at The Open University for their work supporting the research team. Thanks are also due to members of the steering group for giving their time, energy and enthusiasm to support the research project.

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March 2015