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Beyond Male Role Models? Gender identity in young men

Michael R.M. Ward, Brigid Featherstone, Martin Robb and Sandy Ruxton (The Open University)

There is increasing anxiety in the global north about the position of boys and young men, centred on a range of issues including boys' supposed educational '[underachievement](#)', when compared to girls, and their high rates of suicide, poor mental health, involvement in offending and anti-social behaviour. Since the late 1990s these problems have been framed as outcomes of a 'war' on boys or as the MP [Diane Abbot](#) summarised in March 2013 a '[crisis](#)' of masculinity.

But this discourse is far from a novel concern and has a much longer history than the current 'crisis' suggests, dating back to the [boy scouts movement](#) at the start of the 20th century that was set up to rescue men and build an empire. Also, as feminist and pro-feminist scholars have argued, men still tend to operate in all the key positions of authority and control throughout society – in religious institutions, finance, education, media, government and forms of [world power](#).

Therefore, although the generic category 'boys' is often used in policy and cultural commentaries, in reality not all young men are suffering this '[crisis](#)' in the same way, and it is those young men from [low-income backgrounds](#) who are most often associated with this 'crisis' anxiety and with [public fears](#) of disorder, disrespect and [delinquency](#).

One reason, for these problems often put forward by policy makers, the media and social commentators, is that young men are suffering a [lack of male role models](#), although there is often frustratingly little detail offered as to [what a role model is](#) or what a role model might offer young men. It is assumed that such role models are increasingly absent from home, from schools and childcare settings, and in the media. As a result, the apparent absence of male role models is often considered to be an explanation of the [crisis of masculinity thesis](#).

Research has explored some of the issues involved in education settings, suggesting the need for caution in simply asserting that having male role models in schools is beneficial – indeed the nature of the teaching seems more important than the gender of the teacher. But until now there had been little research on the relationships between young men and professionals in care and support services, and limited examination of the impact (if any) of the gender of the worker. Our [qualitative study](#) aimed to fill this gap and challenge and explore some of these [issues](#).

We carried out individual and group interviews with 93 people (50 young men, 14 young women, 12 male and 17 female staff) across different class and

ethnic groups at Action for Children projects throughout the UK, in the West of Scotland, North Wales, Cornwall, Dorset, and two projects in London run by another charity, Working with Men. The services provided support for young offenders, care leavers, a children in care support group, young carers, young fathers, and disabled young people.

Commitment above gender

The main findings were that young people using support and social care services value the personal qualities and commitment of staff above their gender, ethnicity or other social identities. They 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. One of the male workers rejected the term, and told us: *"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."*

In practice, we found that workers in support services – both male and female – act less as role models for young men to imitate, and more as mentors or guides with whom they are able to co-construct new identities and futures. In other words, we observed an active process of negotiation, rather than passive transmission, of values and behaviour between workers and young men.

Some young men did appear to gravitate towards those workers who came from comparable disadvantaged backgrounds, although this was not expressed as identification based on class. But the vast majority (including young women as well as young men) valued the personal qualities and commitment of staff above their gender or other social identities. As one young man said: *"You just know you can trust them...you can always rely on them"*.

Placing Masculinity

Another interesting finding was that young men's masculine identities are strongly defined by their locality, and that young men 'at risk' tend to be embedded in local cultures of 'hypermasculinity', often with problematic consequences. And whereas many young men aspire to a 'safer' and more responsible masculinity, their aspirations are largely shaped by local expectations. For example, young men in the West of Scotland prioritised traditional jobs and the ability to support a family, whereas young men in London emphasised the importance of education and well-paid work in the knowledge economy.

Finally, 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. As one young man graphically put it: *"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!"

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