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Chapter 5

Beyond Male Role Models

Gender Identities and Work with Young Men in the UK

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Project website

Abstract

‘Beyond Male Role Models: gender identities and work with young men’ was an Open University (UK) research project, working with national NGO Action for Children, supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council. The study explored the role of gender in relationships between young men using support services and the adults working with them. Fifty 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. The research found that vulnerable young men value the personal qualities of staff - respect, trust, consistency, care, and commitment - above their gender or other social identities, and that these qualities are key to developing effective helping relationships. A sense of shared experience between young men and staff can however be valuable in developing effective relationships, and in ‘modelling’ transitions to a more positive masculine identity. Workers in support services act less as role models, and more as mentors or guides with whom young men are able to negotiate and co-construct new identities and futures.

Keywords:

Young men
Masculinities
Role model
Relationships

Questioning the male role model discourse

In recent decades, boys and young men have become a key focus of public and political anxiety in many countries. These include Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America (Barker 2005; Cobbett and Younger 2012; Greig 2012), India (Osella and Osella, 2006), and Southern Africa (Ouzgane and Morrell 2005). Some analyses of these issues have focussed on a range of countries around the world (Seidler, 2006; Ruspini, Hearn, Pease, and Pringle 2011; Edström, Hassink, Shahrokh and Stern 2015).

In the UK, concerns have encompassed their apparent educational under-achievement relative to that of girls; high rates of suicide and mental health problems; detachment from the labour market (McDowell 2003); 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). These concerns have developed alongside a ‘crisis’ in masculinity discourse (Roberts 2014), which has overtaken other issues of poverty, racism and structural inequalities in young men’s lives; these factors have been neglected in recent public debate.

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 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, Statham, Mooney and Brockmann 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 and minority ethnic young men). In the UK context, under the last Labour government (1997-2010) 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 from 2010 onwards: 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).

Since the 1970s, 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 Ghaill, 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, Phoenix and Pattman 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 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 welfare settings and what they value, including interrogating the importance of the gender of the worker. Our study aimed to address this gap.

Research objectives and methodology

There were four main objectives of the study. First, it set out to explore whether the gender identity of the worker made a difference to developing good quality relationships between workers and young men. Second, it sought to explore how gender interacted with other aspects of identity such as class and ethnicity. Third, it aimed to explore how professional relationships with boys and young men could be improved, and the lessons for professional practice more generally. And finally, it sought to contribute to policy, practice and academic debates about the development of young masculinities and young men's transitions to adulthood.

The main focus of the research project¹ was a series of individual and group interviews involving young service users and staff at a range of Action for Children and other services across the United Kingdom. The research team also engaged in a number of related activities. A 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. An analysis of policy issues relevant to the research topic was undertaken, drawing on policy documents, political speeches and media commentary. And a short video film of the project was produced, 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 bulk of the interviews were carried out by a young male researcher, supported on occasion by both male and female members of the research team. The research team were aware that the presence of a male interviewer, particularly within a group, might engender a sense of shared male experience, even bonding, with male interviewees (Robb, 2004). There was a risk that this might encourage the kind of talk (joking or banter?) common in men-only contexts, and could make it more difficult to address sensitive subjects. In practice, however, this did not appear to be the case. Moreover, most male interviewees did 'open up' on an individual basis; contrary to stereotypes, most young men were keen to talk, and articulate about their experiences (Ward 2015).

For the project, a total of 93 participants were interviewed between November 2013 and June 2014, 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); and female staff (17). The majority of the young people were aged 16-25; 44 were white and 20 were from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. The services where interviews took place included those working with young offenders, care leavers, young carers, and disabled young people.

Most of the interviews took place at Action for Children services across the United Kingdom, but some were organised at projects run by another NGO, Working With Men, in London. 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.

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.

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. Limits to confidentiality – e.g. in case of a disclosure relating to serious harm, abuse and/or other safeguarding/child protection concerns - were made explicit. Participants were able to withdraw their consent at any time during the focus group or interview, or up to two weeks after the focus group or interview. A small reward in the form of a voucher was given to young people taking part in the research.

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. 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.

Teenage boys and young men are often regarded as difficult subjects to engage in the research process, although there are examples of studies that have been successful in engaging them (see, for example, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002; McDowell, 2001; Ward 2015). The research process for this study was often difficult and challenging. 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.

The researchers had anticipated that the young men would be likely to act differently in group interviews and individual interviews. In particular, the impact of peer pressure in groups can lead young men to 'perform', sparking off each other, 'having a laugh', and generally displaying livelier, louder and more assertive behaviour than they would do on their own. Whilst individual interviews provided the opportunity to discuss issues and experiences on a more personal, even intimate, basis, the researchers found there was nevertheless value in engaging with young men on a collective basis. Public 'performance' reflects the ways that masculinities are actively produced, negotiated and policed by young men, and the combination of group and individual interviews revealed a complex interplay in the ways masculinities played out in different contexts.

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, 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. The emerging findings were shared with leading practitioners during an expert seminar in London during January 2015, and the conclusions were used to further refine the findings, which are reported in the next section.

Findings

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.

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.

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

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. 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.

Interviewer: 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.

Interviewer: 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)

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. 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.

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. 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)

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)

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 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.

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.

Interviewer: 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)

Some 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)

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.

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.

Interviewer: 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:

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.

(Young man, 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.

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.

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. 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.

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)

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.

An important element was feeling secure in the project environment. The young men often 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)

4. Good workers and positive relationships

Participants in the study were asked about what they thought made a 'good' worker and to reflect on whether gender made a difference to the working relationship.

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 young men 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 the young men made decisions about the trustworthiness of workers based on 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 young men, but within an understanding of the importance of boundaries and an explicit rejection of the notion of being their friend. 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.

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 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 young woman, 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, a white female service user in Dorset

acknowledged the tightrope workers had to negotiate between supporting them and challenging their more 'ridiculous' ideas.

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 talked of being like a worker's 'children' in a context where they had experienced great instability with other relationships.

The male workers also emphasised the importance of focusing on the individual project user and their story, on the respect they deserve, and on a strengths-based approach to the work.

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 what's happened in their previous sixteen years or whatever to get them to here. So I think, yeah, bearing that in mind, not being judgemental, being understanding.

(Male worker, white, Dorset)

There was no consensus among male 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 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 build rapport and to engage productively.

The views of female workers were very similar to those of the male workers. Building and sustaining relations were central activities. Care was the thread running through the work, trumping differences of all kinds, including qualifications, and gender and ethnicity.

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. 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.

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.

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

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.

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 is going to help you out,

Interviewer: So gender doesn’t matter then? The sex of the worker?

Eddie No, no.

(Young man, white, Scotland)

There were hints here (and elsewhere) 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.’

In contrast to their communications with female workers, young men tended to have more ‘jokey’, relationships with male workers, especially within groups. 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 sexist or racist banter where necessary. Demonstrating (modelling?) positive ways for young men to express themselves can be a delicate balance.

One notable feature of the interview data is the blurring of boundaries between the experiences and attitudes of male workers and young men. There was certainly a view among some that the worker needs to have similar experiences to the young men to engage with them effectively, but no consensus on this. In the Scottish projects, some of the male workers came from similar backgrounds to the young men they worked with, and had faced similar challenges in their lives. There was an element of what could be called ‘role modelling’ here, with some young men gravitating towards those who came from comparable disadvantaged backgrounds. This aspect was also confirmed by some male workers:

Lee: So for me, I see myself as them, 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...

(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.

Key messages

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.

The researchers found that 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. For some, the experience of becoming a father can provide a catalyst for making the transition to a more responsible masculine identity.

It was also evident that 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. Having said this, many aspire to a 'safer' and more responsible masculinity, with their aspirations again being largely shaped by local expectations.

Another important finding was that 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.

In relation to young men using support services, it was clear they valued the personal qualities and commitment of staff above their gender or other social identities. In other words, 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. The study also found that 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.

Finally, 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. In practice, it appears that 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.

Policy and practice implications

This research suggests a number of possible implications for policy and practice affecting vulnerable and 'at risk' young men.

The findings point 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 they 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.

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¹ Project website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/health-and-social-care/research/beyond-male-role-models/> (last accessed on 27th April 2018)