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# **Acting Tough: Young Men, Masculinity and the Development of Practice in Northern Ireland**

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### **Introduction**

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from a prolonged period of community and political conflict. Since 1969, there have been over 3,600 deaths as a result of the 'Troubles'. Civilians accounted for more than half of the fatalities. Catholics represented 43% of those killed, as opposed to approximately 30% Protestants. Most of the fatalities, 59%, were inflicted by Republican paramilitaries; 28% were killed by Loyalist paramilitaries; and 11% by the security forces. 53% of deaths occurred amongst people under 30 years of age. Throughout the Troubles, 91% of deaths were male, with 32% of deaths being young males aged 17-24 years (Muldoon et al., 2008; Smyth, 1998; Smyth and Hamilton, 2003). Young males have been the primary perpetrators and victims of sectarian violence, community violence, paramilitary punishment beatings and killings. From 1973 to 2004, there have been almost 3,000 victims of shootings by paramilitaries (primarily on young males) and more than 2,200 recorded victims of vigilante style beatings (Kennedy, 2004). Complicating this further, is the fact that in many communities throughout Northern Ireland the police are not formally recognised as a legitimate authority, and paramilitaries have become the 'informal police' - enforcing their own brutal forms of justice (Feenan, 2002).

### **The Construction of Masculine Identity**

Thirty five years of conflict has also had a significant effect upon the construction of masculine identity in Northern Ireland. For example, the young men in Harland's (2000) inner city Belfast study (aged 14-16 years) clung desperately to narrow and contradictory interpretations of masculinity, believing that men should be powerful, strong, brave, intelligent, healthy, sexy, mature, and in control of every aspect of their lives. In reality, however, their lives were full of 'contradictions' as most young men felt powerless; feared the threat of daily violence; were labelled 'stupid' in school; did not pay attention to their health needs - particularly their mental health; had limited sexual education; rarely asked for support; and felt they were perceived by adults as being 'immature.' Appreciating these 'contradictions' is important to understanding internal pressures that many young males feel in regard to how they construct their masculine identity and what it means to be a man. Contradictions between young men's perceived power and their sense of powerlessness capture what Connell (1995) calls 'protest masculinity' - whereby boys make claims to power when there are no real resources for doing so. In Harland's (2000) study, the young men's perceptions of masculinity resulted in them being dismissive of their pain and separated from their internal world of feelings and emotions - often to the extent that they appeared 'unemotional'.

Male gender roles force boys to reject, as feminine, a wide range of characteristics that are simply part of normal human behaviour. Pleck (1981) developed the idea of gender role strain, arguing that gender role norms are contradictory and inconsistent, and violating these

norms leads to condemnation and negative psychological consequences. The suppression and rejection of certain emotions left the young men in Harland's study isolated from others and reluctant to talk about the way they truly feel. Fear of appearing unmanly has, traditionally, contributed to young men displaying aggressive masculinity as a defence mechanism against the threat of perceived humiliation from others. The fact that young men feel they cannot, indeed dare not, show their feelings, has been a recurring theme in youth work practice for many years (Harland, 1997; Harland and Morgan, 2003; Lloyd, 1996; 1997; 2000; 2003; YouthAction Northern Ireland, 2002). Homophobic attitudes are common in contemporary male youth culture in Northern Ireland (Beattie, 2004), as young males believe they are expected to refute any behaviour construed as feminine or that which contravenes traditional masculine stereotypes. In Harland's (2000) study the young men poured scorn on the thought of other males displaying traits they perceived as feminine. This association was always linked directly to derogatory remarks such as "*fruits*" and "*queers*". Such comments reveal the extent of repulsion and prejudice that many young men hold towards effeminate behaviour, and why they feel so much pressure to be perceived by others as matching up to the masculine ideal.

Young males appear to learn from an early age that association with the feminine and, therefore, with the world of emotions, is to be avoided at all costs. Many men believe that by publicly displaying certain emotions, i.e. crying, vulnerability will result in them being perceived by others as inadequate or weak. Consequently, men may believe they are affirming their masculine identity by avoiding intimacy or refusing to seek support from others. This is central to why men keep intimate feelings to themselves and are more likely to display typically masculine emotions such as anger and aggression. This does not mean, however, that males do not experience emotions. McCreight's (2004) study with male experiences of pregnancy loss with their partners, clearly demonstrated the extent to which male emotion was part of their experience. Importantly, this author posits that male emotion remains largely absent from academic research and gender equality policy.

Contemporary masculinity studies reveal that males typically report a lower frequency of verbally communicating their feelings than women (Kring, 2000), and are more inclined to express their anger vocally and through facial expression and behaviour (Brody and Hall, 2004). Seidler (2007) has argued that men have devalued the emotional and subjective - both in themselves and others - and have felt victim to culturally prescribed standards of masculinity, whereby men hide their emotions and vulnerabilities in order not to be 'shamed' in front of others. This internalised interpretation of masculinity makes it difficult for males to acknowledge their emotional needs and perpetuates the stereotypical myth that it is only acceptable for women to possess and express emotions. This has meant that men have, historically, kept the pain they experience in their lives hidden within private spheres where they are free from the threat of being perceived as vulnerable or insecure. Collinson and Hearn (2001) posit that for too long there has been a 'silence' surrounding men. Whitehead (2007) argues that despite a history of dominance amongst men across most social spheres, it was not until the development of modern feminist thought that discussions of men and their practices became more visible.

This presents a huge challenge to modern men, as it fundamentally challenges deeply accepted, entrenched, stereotypical interpretations of men and masculinity. Men must learn to overcome their fear of intimacy, vulnerability and failure. Major difficulties lie, however, in

the fact that there is little in dominant masculine culture that will encourage or prepare young men to seek support or disclose appropriate feelings and emotions within public spheres. Whilst contemporary literature attempts to highlight the benefits to men if they can become more public with their emotions and more in touch with their 'feminine side,' there are, to date, no tangible mechanisms to facilitate this process.

## **Responding to the needs of Young Men: Development of Practice**

Since the early 1990s there has been increasing recognition of the need to provide a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the development of practice with young men. The backdrop to this was influenced by an ever-increasing amount of literature, research and scrutiny into what constitutes masculinity and what it means to be a man in contemporary societies. Much of this early thinking was generated by critical feminist studies that challenged the construction of gender and gender roles and the distribution of power, status and resources (e.g. Enloe, 2004). Many feminists were drawn into an analysis which blamed individual men for women's oppression, rather than one which explored how changing social systems, and their ideological articulations, institutionalise men's power (Segal, 1987; 2002). In addition, serious concerns about increasing statistical data, and 'moral panic' by adults in regard to men's ill-health, risk taking activities, anti-social behaviour and trends in male suicide, were fuelled by the media and social commentators.

There have been several initiatives that have specifically responded to the needs of young men. In 1996, YouthAction Northern Ireland received funding through EU Peace and Reconciliation monies to work directly with young men in communities most acutely affected by the Troubles. This led to the establishment of a 'Work with Young Men Unit' in 2000. This work evolved into specific programmes that incorporated an appreciation of masculinity as a central theme. This led to the development of programmes addressing issues such as mental and emotional health, sexual health, fatherhood and action research on the theme of Young Men and Violence. This particular piece of practice captured the voice of young men aged 14-25 years living in interface areas of Northern Ireland, and attempted to find more effective ways to support young men around violence and related issues. This resulted in the publication of 'Everyday Life' (2002) an exploration into young men's lives and experiences of violence.

There are many challenging and concerning themes that emerge from this study. For example, despite the fact that the majority of young men spoke of living with the fear and expectation of violence on a daily basis, they reported never having the opportunity to talk about violence and violence related issues. The approach and delivery methods used in the programmes were key to the impact they had upon the young men's attitudes, behaviour and ability to express themselves and discuss sensitive and controversial issues. To date, youth work agencies have not proactively addressed violence-related issues with young men. Crucially, however, for this to be effective it was acknowledged that practitioners must be equipped with the skills necessary to engage effectively with young men. This resulted in YouthAction Northern Ireland providing training for youth workers across Northern Ireland who had contacted the agency seeking support to work with particular young men. "*We just don't know what to do with them*" was a common concern.

The YouthAction programme identified a number of factors that contributed to the creation of a safe environment that was conducive to supporting young people to talk about important and controversial issues:

- ❑ An approach that was generally supportive of young people and appreciative of the full range of pressures in their lives.
- ❑ An approach that, primarily, encouraged young people to tell their stories and reflect upon these, rather than teach them anything.
- ❑ Sessional content that related directly to the issues that young people, themselves, had raised, and did not avoid controversial and sensitive issues.
- ❑ Using educative methods that involved reflection, listening, movement, activity and fun.

Another significant and influential practice development was the production of two educational resources by the Health Promotion Agency (2005) aimed at promoting positive mental and emotional wellbeing amongst adolescent males aged 11-16 years. These provided advice and information on how to achieve and maintain positive mental health. The process involved establishing a steering committee (with members experienced in issues affecting young men), and the commissioning an experienced youth worker and researcher to write the resources. The writer was invited to an initial meeting of the steering group, and was asked to present what he considered were the main mental health issues for adolescent males living in Northern Ireland and to identify concerns for practitioners working with young males. From this meeting, key themes were developed that were considered important to positive mental health amongst adolescent males. Themes included the journey from boy to man; male risk-taking; how to feel good about yourself; how to have less stress; facts about males; friendships; and asking for help. It was agreed that the language and content of the adolescent males' resource should reflect male culture and be appealing to young males. This resource evolved over a ten month period, with the writer receiving regular feedback on the drafts from the steering group. Early drafts of the resource were distributed to adolescent males known to the steering group, and their feedback helped to shape the overall content and language. This was particularly important as, in Northern Ireland, there are various dialects and distinct cultural emphasis in language. This meant that certain words might not have the same meaning in other parts of Northern Ireland. Drawing upon the skills, knowledge and expertise of the steering group and preliminary feedback from adolescent males, was an invaluable part of the process. This process helped to crystallize thinking and generate creative ideas, and assured the writer that he was meeting the agreed objectives.

The same process was established for the practitioners' resource. The steering group provided critical feedback on draft copies, and their feedback helped to shape the content. In addition to this, other practitioners - known to the steering group - were asked to comment on early drafts. The themes developed for the practitioners' resource included working with adolescent males; our own attitudes; valuing young men; masculinity; the public and private lives of young men; how to build effective relationships with young men; the creation of appropriate learning environments; barriers to the work; approaches to the work; outcomes for young men; and a practical model for engaging adolescent males. After a period of fourteen months, draft copies of both resources were completed, and the Health Promotion Agency began the process of visual design.

In order to disseminate the resources, it was considered vital that they would be accompanied by training. A two-day pilot residential course was attended by 20 workers from Education and Library Boards, the Youth Service, Health and Social Services Trusts and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The training was jointly facilitated by a female member of the steering group and the writer of the resources. This enabled participants to be involved in a variety of group and individual exercises including personal reflection, reflection on the lives of adolescent males, formal presentations on mental and emotional health, and masculinity and engaging adolescent males. A guest male speaker - who had successfully recovered from a period of poor mental health - gave a motivating presentation about the importance of significant others in his life.

The course sought to encourage personal reflection as well as to increase capacity to initiate, consolidate and expand work in support of adolescent male mental and emotional wellbeing. A further aim was to equip delegates with the insight, knowledge, skills, resources and ongoing support to make a difference in their own work environment. The establishment of a longer-term support network for those working with young men on mental health issues was another objective.

Evaluation of the course was carried out using informal feedback from participants at the end of Day One and evaluation questionnaires at the end of Day Two. Feedback was extremely positive, and revealed that the delegates were enthusiastic about the resource and found the associated training to have been extremely worthwhile. On completion of the course, participants were offered a facilitated peer support network as an opportunity to reflect on their use and development of the resources.

In Autumn 2004, the inaugural 'Centre for Young Men's Studies' was launched after funding was secured from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The Centre is a partnership between the Community Youth Work department at the University of Ulster and YouthAction Northern Ireland. The Centre resides within Incore - the International Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies at the University of Ulster. The aim of the Centre for Young Men's Studies is to promote a culture of learning, development and excellence through research, innovative practice and training in regard to young men living in Northern Ireland. In 2006, the Centre was funded by The Department of Education (DE) and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to carry out a five year longitudinal study with over 300 young males aged 11-16 years in ten schools throughout Northern Ireland. The Centre for Young Men's Studies adopts a methodology that supports the needs, interests and, importantly, the contribution of young males. The themes through which these are explored are masculinity, the journey from boy to man, young male experiences of violence (both as victims and as perpetrators) and educational experiences. These are investigated through factors that impact on the physical, psychological, emotional and social well-being of young males and their relationship to academic underachievement.

## **Learning from Practice**

The following statements capture learning from programmes across Northern Ireland that has proved successful in working with young men:

## **Considerations for engaging young men ...**

- ❑ Many young men believe that it is by 'acting tough' that they will gain status and respect.
- ❑ Young men report getting a 'buzz' from engaging in risk-taking activities and certain forms of violence, with little consideration for the consequences.
- ❑ The contradictory nature of masculinity, and its association with risk-taking behaviour, are key reasons why young men refuse to seek emotional support.
- ❑ Young men often report feeling enormous pressure to prove that they are 'real men' and not boys.
- ❑ Young men experience a combination of both power and powerlessness (what Connell (1995) terms protest masculinity - whereby young men claim they have power when, in reality, they have few resources for doing so).
- ❑ Young men report they are rarely given opportunities to reflect upon their behaviour.
- ❑ Young men report a lack of access to mentors / role models (gap between adult expectations and reality of young men's lives).
- ❑ Violence is a central aspect of young men's 'Everyday Life' and experiences.
- ❑ Young men believe there are no realistic coping mechanisms or alternatives to using violence - which suggest they would benefit from learning new skills.
- ❑ Young men report they are rarely given opportunities to talk about violence in a reflective way.
- ❑ Young men are reluctant to see themselves as perpetrators of violence.

## **Barriers to Developing Practice ...**

- ❑ Societal perceptions that young men do not have specific needs.
- ❑ Young men not actively seeking support.
- ❑ Practitioners believing they do not have the necessary skills to engage young men.
- ❑ Being asked to engage 'troublesome', 'difficult', 'underachieving' young men with focus on public behaviour.
- ❑ Paramilitary influences.
- ❑ Absence of focus on 'emotion' within male research / policy.

## Successful factors in work with young men ...

- ❑ A proactive approach that focuses on developing young men's self-confidence.
- ❑ An appreciation of masculinity and how this impacts upon young men's behaviour.
- ❑ Identification of issues affecting young men and using creative ways to address these.
- ❑ Programmes that offer a combination of reflection, activity and emotion.
- ❑ The practitioner's skills, knowledge and empathy towards young men.
- ❑ Appreciation of the qualities that young men look for in a practitioner - trust, genuineness, respect, humour, support, non-judgemental, acceptance.
- ❑ Acknowledging that strengths and resilience exist in individuals, families, peer groups and communities and multi agency / disciplinary partnerships - facilitated by a lead organisation / body.

## Conclusion

Over the past 35 years in Northern Ireland, 'the Troubles,' changes in employment trends, prolonged and uncertain youth transitions, and the way in which young males adhere to narrow and restrictive interpretations and expectations of men and masculinity, have created complex contradictions in the lives of young men. Understanding the impact of masculine contradictions is crucial to understanding how best to develop practice and policy.

While there has been a range of youth initiatives that have attempted to respond to the needs of young men, typically these have been sporadic, time bound, short-term funded, and delivered by grass root workers who have empathy for young men and their issues. While the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland (2006-2016) is a welcome and timely development, to date, there remains no overall strategy or clear policy direction for responding to the specific health needs of young men in Northern Ireland. Developing new and more creative methods of engaging young men will require courage, vision, research and investment. In particular, there is a need for more understanding and appreciation of male health issues and the damage caused to men and women through narrow, stereotypical and unrealistic cultural interpretations of what it means to be a man in a world that has changed rapidly in the past 30 years. Importantly, however, any strategy responding to young men's health should take cognisance of the lessons already learned from the innovative practice developed with young men at grass roots level.

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