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Are Male Role Models Really the Solution? Interrogating the 'War on Boys' Through the Lens of the 'Male Role Model' Discourse

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Are male role models really the solution? Interrogating the 'war on boys'

through the lens of the 'male role model' discourse

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Abstract

This paper considers the 'war on boys' through a critical examination of the way boys

and young men have been represented in what might be termed the 'male role model'

discourse in policy and media debates in the UK. Critical engagement with academic

literatures that explore the 'male role model' response to the 'problem of boys',

predominantly in education and in welfare settings, reveals that contemporary policy

solutions continue to be premised on outdated theoretical foundations that reflect

simplistic understandings of gender and gender relations. In this paper we advocate

policy solutions that acknowledge the complexity and diversity of boys' and young

men's experiences and that do not simplistically reduce their problems to a 'crisis in

masculinity'.

Keywords: Male role model discourse, education, welfare settings, men and

masculinities, boyhood, 'crisis in masculinity'

Introduction

This paper considers the 'war on boys' through a critical examination of the way boys

and young men have been represented through the lens of what might be termed the

'male role model' discourse that continues to be evident in policy and media debates

in the UK (Syal 2013). Policy debates and popular opinion reflect the premise that, if

boys are to grow into healthy and well-adjusted men and fathers, they need 'positive'

male role models. However, it is assumed that such role models are increasingly absent from home, from schools and childcare settings, and in the media. Recent social policy proposals and interventions continue to unquestioningly assume a causal relationship between these two perspectives. As a result, the apparent absence of positive male role models is often considered to be an explanation of the 'problem' of boys and young men. A raft of recent policy initiatives in the UK and further afield seeks to address this issue by increasing the number of male workers in a range of settings (see for example Cushman 2008; Lingard et al. 2009; Robb 2010).

It is evident however that the prevailing and dominant assumption, that male role models will have a positive influence on boys and young men, has rarely been subjected to sustained critical scrutiny in policy terms, despite an increasingly sophisticated literature from a range of disciplines that draws attention to the inequalities between boys and young men and the complexities of gendered practices across time and space.

We suggest that unpicking some of the assumptions upon which the discourse is premised might help to understand ongoing political and policy interventions directed at boys and young men. The authors are particularly interested in exploring these assumptions as members of the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC[1]) funded *Beyond Male Role Models? Gender Identities and work with young men* project, which seeks to explore the relationships that adolescent boys and young men have with male and female workers in a variety of welfare settings. Drawing upon our review of the literature, with a particular focus on education and welfare settings, we

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interrogate these questions and the identification of the 'male role model' discourse as one set of responses to the problems disadvantaged boys and young men might be seen to cause and experience. In particular, we explore competing arguments about the impact on boys and young men of having male teachers and male welfare workers. In so doing, we argue that the notion that identifying male role models as the solution to young men's troubles is not necessarily helpful when investigating these issues. A far more nuanced approach is required which takes account of a wider range of factors impacting on relationships between young men and those who work with them.

The problem of boys: a war?

In the UK context, boys and young men have continued to be the subject of public anxiety. Although the generic category 'boys' is often used in policy and cultural commentaries, in reality it is young, working-class men living in stigmatised places who are most often associated with this anxiety and with public fears of disorder, disrespect and delinquency (McDowell 2007: 2012). Their class backgrounds, their accents and their (often) aggressive performances of masculinity are considered 'redundant' (McDowell 2003) in a de-industrialised society (see Willis 1977; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Winlow 2001; Nayak 2006; Kenway et al. 2006; Ward 2014a). These more traditional performances of masculinity are particularly disadvantageous to working-class young men in terms of educational success and access to higher education. These young men are also less likely to move into professional occupations and instead find employment in lower-paid service sector work, as they lack the social and cultural attributes valued by such employers. As Goffman (1963: 9) argues, this results in individuals being "disqualified from full social acceptance". Current

political and media discourses further support this representation by which young working-class men are routinely constructed as lazy, unwilling to work, 'feckless', violent and rampantly sexualised (McDowell 2012). As a result of these powerful representations, young working-class men are deemed to demonstrate a moral, cultural, physical and social threat to an otherwise 'respectable' late modernity. A current example of this 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) is symbolised in the UK through the derogatory figure of the 'chav' (see Nayak 2006, 2009 for a further discussion). Ultimately, these anxieties centre on a range of issues including for example, boys' educational 'underachievement' when compared to girls, high rates of suicide and poor mental health among young men, and boys' involvement in offending and anti-social behaviour. These problems have been framed as outcomes of a 'war' on boys (Hoff Sommers 2013), although we would suggest that it might be more fruitful to see what is happening as involving the mobilisation of a set of anxieties about boys and, indeed, about gender relations more generally. For example, as Kimmel (2006) notes, some commentators have argued that women's pursuit of gender equality and the feminisation of a number of social institutions, are at fault. Thus anxieties about boys carry unarticulated anxieties about changes in girls' lives and practices. Another facet of this process is an attempt to locate the 'problem' of boys (encompassing those problems they experience and those they are thought to cause), and the emergence of an apparent 'crisis of masculinity', in the absence of positive male role models, whether through an increase in the numbers of families without fathers or the supposed decline in the number of male teachers and other professionals in contact with children (Centre for Social Justice 2013).

More broadly, there are moves to name men explicitly as men in social policy (Hearn 2010), but this is an unusual approach (for a relative exception see Ruxton 2009) Exploring policy discourses over the last decades, some writers have identified tensions in how men and masculinities have been constructed in relation to the victim/perpetrator axis (McDowell 2000; Scourfield and Drakeford 2002). On the one hand men have been seen as a source of danger, benefitting from the privileges of masculinity, through antisocial and destructive behaviour. On the other, they have been considered to be more socially disadvantaged than women, victims of the costs of masculinity. According to Scourfield and Drakeford (2002) each discourse points to a 'crisis in masculinity' in which men and boys exhibit anti-social behaviour but do so because of increased role insecurity.

Morgan (2006) however, while accepting that there is some plausibility to the 'crisis' discourse, points to certain complicating issues. Men still dominate key institutions (such as the church, commerce and politics) and the issues they face are rarely interrogated as products of their gendered identities (Morgan 2006).

More recently, Robb (2010) has identified that such ambivalences around men's roles remain evident, particularly in childcare policy. Anxieties about men as a risk, particularly in relation to child sexual abuse, have run alongside calls for more male workers in children's services. Within campaigns to increase male involvement in work with children, two discourses, one progressive and one conservative in their stance on gender relations, also overlap but at the heart of these arguments is the assumption that children need strong male role models to develop into well-adjusted adults.

The following sections explore how male role modelling has been used and critically assessed within different contexts. We begin by examining the welfare literature and identifying the ways in which male role modelling has been posed as a solution to the problem of boys who require support from services. We then explore the more developed and more critical education literature to determine what lessons, if any, can be learnt from it.

Welfare settings and service intervention

Research about male role models in welfare settings is limited, although the discourse has been used to justify a range of policy and practice interventions relating to welfare provision. By welfare settings we mean the range of public and care settings and services that support the most vulnerable in society. Notable policy and practice interventions include seeking to increase the engagement of adult male workers with young men (particularly working-class and black young men). Under the New Labour government in the UK (1997 – 2010), initiatives included the REACH programme, which involved using male mentors to raise the attainment and achievement of black boys (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007; Featherstone 2009) and the 'Playing for Success' programme to promote footballers as role models for boys. A raft of other time-limited initiatives was also introduced under New Labour to encourage more fathers to engage with services and to strengthen their economic and psychological support for their sons (Featherstone 2003, 2006).

There has, however, been much less academic attention paid to the recruitment of men into welfare services. There has been some work on the importance of

relationships, including those between professionals and young men who offend, in supporting desistance from offending, but gender issues have rarely been interrogated, particularly in recent years (McNeill 2006). Notable exceptions include McElwee and Parslow's (2003) autobiographical reflections on their roles as male carers in child care settings in Ireland; Green's (2005) critical exploration of abuse in residential children's homes in which she emphasises the importance of examining gender; Abrams, Anderson-Nathe and Aguilar's (2008) consideration of constructions of masculinities in the context of juvenile correction: and Hicks' (2008) critical interrogation of the male role model discourse within social work practice.

Each of these articles emphasises the importance of considering gender in these different welfare settings. Seeking to contribute to this limited literature and to address the gap in existing knowledge, the *Beyond Male Role Models? Gender Identities and Work With Young Men*, research project, in which the authors are currently involved, is uniquely exploring gender relationships in a range of welfare settings run by the UK national charity, Action for Children. The project, a collaboration between The Open University and Action for Children, is funded by the ESRC and specifically examines the young men's experience of services (Popay et al. 1998) and the impact of the gender of the worker on relationships with young male service users. It explores key questions including 1) How do boys and young men in contact with services talk about and construct their interactions and relationships with male and female professionals? 2) What do they value in their relationships with workers and to what extent is this related to the gender of the worker? And 3) What do they identify as critical factors in developing good relationships? We are also

interviewing young women as well as male and female staff to understand their perspectives on gender relations in welfare settings.

While limited and now dated, existing research about male workers in welfare settings indicates that the recruitment and involvement of more men, as a solution to the 'problem' of boys, is often based on a confused and essentialist understanding of men and masculinity. Cameron et al. (1999) explored gender-related issues that emerged when male workers were introduced to nurseries. They found that confusion was apparent among service users and workers about what workers were supposed to do: simply 'be there', model 'different' types of masculinity, or adopt gender-neutral approaches. Hudson (1987) also indicated that social welfare values and practices among male youth justice workers often reinforced and colluded with perceptions of 'appropriate' youthful masculinity, and marginalised female youth workers in the process. Robb (2001) identified a similar ambivalence in the attitudes of male childcare workers. More recently, the notion that positive male role models are one way in which the complex needs of vulnerable and at risk young men might be addressed, has also been explored (Campbell et al. 2011). Based on a study of a mixed group of thirty-one members of staff from eighteen different agencies who provide services to vulnerable young men in Northern Ireland, Campbell et al. (2011) found that a number of practitioners appealed for more sensitive approaches to improve services. This included providing positive male role models in order to address destructive performances of masculinity.

Such claims reflect popular assumptions about the need for male role models, assumptions that filter into the language practitioners adopt when contemplating

service and practice improvements. However, turning to the critical literature on educational settings, where male role modelling is frequently posited as a solution to boys' 'underachievement', it is evident that such solutions are too simplistic and that it is far more urgent to explore how boys 'do' gender in social contexts that are marked by a range of inequalities and to locate working-class boys' underachievement in long-term processes of structural change.

The complexity of boys' educational 'underachievement'

It is within the education sphere, and in particular, the compulsory state sector, where concerns about boys have been most prominent. Here the 'problem' of boys has been linked to their educational 'underachievement' in comparison to girls. This assertion has been explored for many years within the critical education literature, indicating that boys' underachievement is a much more complex issue than girls simply outperforming boys. During the late 1990s, fears about boys' educational performance were thought to constitute a moral panic and a further example of a 'crisis of masculinity' (Weiner et al. 1997; Epstein et al. 1998), in which young (especially working-class and/or Black) men were represented as deviant, resistant and rebellious (Griffin 2000).

Over the past few years, there have been sporadic calls in the media to address this apparent 'underachievement'. Today, it remains a central concern, attributed to the lack of male teachers in schools and the 'feminisation' of schooling (Cushman 2008; Hoff Sommers 2013). It has been argued, for example, that the predominance of women teachers has led to schools favouring girls and female learning styles over those of boys (Martino and Frank 2006; Martino and Kehler 2006). Further,

compounding these claims, there is the suggestion that (traditional) male identities have been placed under pressure by socio-economic and political changes (as stated earlier, van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2006). Such arguments have been criticised for creating a false opposition between girls and boys, for assuming that reforms that help girls will necessarily hinder boys (Kimmel 2006), and for treating boys as a homogeneous group for whom failure is inevitable.

Analysis of attainment data, for example, disproves the myth that all boys underachieve and all girls now achieve well at school. In fact, a combination of other factors, including ethnicity and social class, has a greater bearing on educational achievement than gender alone (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009). It is specifically *working-class* young men in the UK that make up the largest number of those who leave school without any qualifications, or with the lowest levels of educational attainment, than almost any other group (Gillborn 2009; Gillborn and Mirza 2000). Neither is there any evidence to suggest that the gender of the teacher influences pupil outcomes on any attainment level for girls or boys. As recent research has shown, pupils tend to value the individual skills and abilities of the teacher, not their gender (Carrington et al. 2008; Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009; Francis et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, these concerns have been responded to in an equally simplistic fashion. One solution proposed in a number of countries, including the UK, the USA and Australia (Carrington 2002; Martino 2008; Weaver-Hightower 2009; Lingard et al. 2009), has been to increase the numbers of male teachers, particularly in primary schools, to improve both discipline and achievement and to provide positive male role

models for boys. For Martino (2008), this represents a backlash against a perceived threat from women who are considered to be making headway in terms of gender equality, and might be understood as part of a broader project of re-masculinisation. In the UK a number of initiatives have been introduced to increase the numbers of male teachers. A 'Primary experience programme' is now available to male graduates, giving men ten days of work experience in a school. The Teaching Agency is also putting male graduates in touch with other male primary teachers, so applicants can gain an insight into teachers' motivations, career choices, challenges and the rewards of day-to-day life in a classroom. A lesser-known set of initiatives established by the Coalition Government (comprised of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats), which emerged from the UK's 2010 general election, involves the promotion of what is termed a 'military ethos' in educational institutions. This includes: the expansion of school-based cadet forces to create around 100 more units by 2015; promoting 'alternative provision' with a military ethos; exploring how academies and free schools can foster a military ethos; and delivering a new 'Troops to Teachers' programme (Department for Education 2010).

Each of these initiatives is premised on the assumption by policy makers that boosting male recruitment is a solution to the educational difficulties facing boys. 'Matching' teachers and pupils by gender is considered a key solution to boys' 'underachievement' (Carrington and Skelton 2003). Skelton (2001) however notes that any consideration of the form of 'acceptable masculinity' that male teachers should perform remains absent from the policy literature. According to Francis (2008) the desirability of male teachers rests on stereotypes of male teachers as disciplinarians, with little consideration of the reasons why boys might identify with

this. Scourfield and Drakeford (2002) similarly argue that New Labour's policy approach had evident tensions in its conception of masculinity. They argue that, on the one hand, the attack on 'laddish' culture might be considered an attack on 'masculinity's privilege of irresponsibility' (Scourfield and Drakeford 2002: 628). On the other hand, interventions to boost boys' performance could be seen as shoring up male dominance, and have not always been matched by equivalent interventions in the interests of girls when imbalances have occurred (Cobbett and Younger 2012). In fact, research in the 1980s indicated that young women were not underperforming but were often succeeding *despite* institutional sexism across all areas of schooling (Walkerdine 1989). Further, as Ringrose (2007), among others, has argued, new testing regimes, teaching standards, and an emphasis on the marketability of education show little evidence of 'feminisation' (Ringrose 2007).

Despite extensive academic criticism of the male role model discourse in the UK, current education policy continues to be developed around similar assumptions. According to Dermott (2012), advocates of the Troops to Teachers programme seem unclear about whether the solution to the 'problem' of boys is men or masculinity. She argues that there is an inherent confusion about whether the military masculinities being promoted refer to a set of values and attributes, or whether these can only be embodied and performed successfully by men (at the time of writing there is also some doubt as to whether sufficient recruits can be attracted to the programme: see Abrams 2014). Troops to Teachers reinforces a particular version of masculinity associated with being tough and 'macho', both physically and mentally, attributes that ironically seem to underpin a large part of the existing 'problem' of boys (see, for instance, Barnes 2012). Connell's (1995) notion of 'protest masculinity,' for example,

which has often been used to describe negative male behaviour, is associated with the worst excesses of masculinity, and attributed to young men with 'hard' or laddish identities (Mac an Ghaill 1994), and has been associated with educational failure. These negative attributes are also more likely to be applied to certain groups of working-class men than any other group (see Ward 2014a). Matching like with like in such instances therefore indicates that, in line with our arguments, the male role model approach is premised upon confused ideas about what an acceptable adult masculinity might look like, and a lack of questioning about the theoretical underpinnings of such an approach.

Over the last decades, research has been carried out exploring how young men engage as active subjects with each other, with girls, and with adults, particularly in school settings (Willis 1977; Mac an Ghaill 1994; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000; Martin and Marsh 2005; DfES 2007; Francis et al. 2012). Poststructuralist critiques of the male role model discourse in the education literature emphasise that gendered subjectivities are complex, fluid and intersected by a number of social divisions (Francis 2008). Consequently the assumption that male teachers alone can perform a singular, disciplinarian form of masculinity belies diversity in male teaching performances and among boys themselves. While educational settings are undoubtedly significant in the formation of masculinity and act as authority structures in sanctioning specific ways of being male (Connell 1989), the focus on solutions to the problem of 'underachievement', without questioning the nature of the problem itself, means that many of the underlying structures of 'difference' are not addressed (Cobbett and Younger 2012). Some academic commentators have highlighted the significance of the intersections of gender with class and ethnicity in understanding resistance,

negotiation and a range of social practices (Frosh et al. 2002; Bricheno and Thornton 2007). Further, factors other than gender impact on constructions of subjectivity available to male teachers (Francis 2008). The role that homophobia, heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity play in limiting male teachers' professional identities and their pedagogical practice has also been highlighted (Martino 2008). Given the current climate of expectation that male teachers act as appropriate male role models, men often resort to restricting their expressions of masculine identity to modes that may be a) unhelpful and b) not reflective of a man's preferred mode of performing masculinity (Martino and Kehler 2006).

According to Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2012), masculinity has become a catch-all term to explain all male behaviour, and problems with young men and boys are often prescribed as a consequence of their having the wrong 'type,' or wrong 'levels' of masculinity. In educational settings a consequence of this is that teachers put gendered expectations on young men to behave negatively (or more negatively) than girls. Lucey and Walkerdine (1999) warn that discussions of educational 'underachievement' are grounded in universalism, implying that all boys are failing, and all girls are succeeding, a point that Corbett and Younger (2012) expand, by highlighting the ways young men who 'underachieve' at school, often experience greater success than young women outside of school. Martin (2013) further argues that 'gender matching' or sex role socialisation between teachers and students provide limited and polarised ideas of masculinity and femininity that, if anything, exacerbate the potential for problems. As a consequence, gender differences between girls and boys have been inflated, and differences within groups under-recognised (Gorard et al. 2001), often at the expense of other social divisions. Griffin (2000), for example,

argues that the non-racialised and non-class-specific discursive form of the boys' 'underachievement' debate has used gender to obscure formations of race and class.

If role modelling is premised on the performance and embodiment of a particular, limited form of masculinity, there is the risk that the gender equality project becomes sidelined. Research exploring the experiences of men entering female-dominated occupations, for example (Simpson 2004), indicates that men adopt a variety of strategies to re-establish their masculinity, and to avoid their identity being undermined by the female nature of their work. Such performances may be more problematic for boys in that they exacerbate the 'laddish' cultures of schools. Jackson's (2010) research with teachers in six secondary schools in the North of England suggests that the strategies adopted by male teachers to tackle laddish behaviour, were complicit with this kind of behaviour by behaving 'laddishly' themselves. Where gender equality programmes exist in some schools, boys' resistance to them has involved drawing male (and female) teachers 'on side' through banter and laddish behaviour (Barnes 2012; Skelton 2001). Ruxton (2009) argues for a 'gender mainstreaming' framework to address boys' and men's needs whilst maintaining an overall focus on gender equality.

Recent research (e.g. Anderson 2009; Roberts 2013) has identified increasing diversity in the kinds of masculine expression valued by some young men, which may provide a more useful avenue forward than the 'recuperative masculinity politics' of the last two decades (Martino and Kehler, 2006). Allegedly 'softer' forms of masculine expression that have enabled young working-class men to succeed in school and in service sectors (see Roberts 2012; Ward 2014b;), are often informed by

emotional labour and identification with traditionally feminine roles rather than the forms of masculinity being advocated by programmes such as Troops to Teachers. Further, many of the advances young women have made in education, and in other spheres, have involved increasing acceptance of characteristics that historically have been associated with masculinity (ambition, competitiveness, self-confidence etc.). It is balancing these in tension with so-called feminine characteristics that can make for complicated subjectivities that are difficult for young women adopt, but also to success in areas previously dominated by boys and men (Ringrose 2007). Perhaps the model for increased success for boys is not 'more masculinity,' or male role models, but rather greater acceptance of stereotypically 'feminine' characteristics, and negotiating the same difficult balance of gender fluidity that some young women seem to have achieved (Ringrose 2007; Pomerantz and Raby 2011; Raby and Pomerantz 2013).

It is apparent that, while research evidence indicates greater diversity in the subjectivities of young men in educational settings, an enduring, yet outdated model of gender continues to inform current practice and welfare provision. In the final section of this paper, we explore these enduring modes of gender in detail.

Theorising the 'male role model' discourse
The 'male role model' discourse might be viewed as a truth claim (Foucault 1977), undoubtedly popular and powerful, accepted as a common-sense solution to the problem of boys, but on the basis of little evidence and limited questioning of the assumptions and rhetorical strategies that underlie it (Martino 2008). Both the contribution of the critical education literature, and the absence of similar research on

the impact of male workers in welfare settings, suggest that the 'male role model' solution is based on very little empirical evidence. Furthermore, the assumption that reinforcing masculinity can provide the solution to problems that might actually be caused, at least in part, by certain kinds of masculinity, reveals that the male role model discourse is premised on outmoded and simplistic theoretical foundations. Commentators from a number of fields, including education (Francis et al. 2008) and social work (Hicks 2008) have identified that the assumptions of male role model discourse are underpinned by socialisation theory and sex role theory, both of which have been subject to extensive criticism, particularly by feminist scholars.

According to Hicks (2008) socialisation theory emerged as a way of explaining sex role differences between men and women, particularly in the context of the family. Premised on a behavioural model, sex role theorists argue that through socialisation, males and females are conditioned into appropriate and polarised behavioural roles (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003); masculinity and femininity are therefore understood to be the products of socialisation or social learning (for a critique, see Featherstone et al. 2007). In this tradition, masculinity is founded on essentialised conceptions of identity as fixed, unitary and replicable (Francis et al. 2008). Within socialisation theory, it is assumed that there are two natural but separate genders based on biological sex (Hicks 2008) and that the child learns to acquire the 'correct' role by imitating their parents. This approach, which emerged in the 1950s and was most prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s (see Hearn 2010), upholds traditional ideas about gender and sexuality, particularly of the man as the provider and the woman as carer, and assumes that gender is a fixed 'thing' that can only be passively learned by children within the family context. More recent research has shown

however, that boys and girls constantly renegotiate gender relations within a complex web of practices and relations including formal education, peer groups (Dalley-Trim 2007; Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994), and other adult-child relationships. The notion of 'role model' can also be interpreted in several different ways. There is often a lack of clarity in the discourse about what a 'role model' is, be it a 'mentor' (a coach, guide and confidant who has a personal relationship with the mentee), a 'hero' (someone who is admired, inspirational - imitated and aspired to, but often unrealistically) or a 'champion' (a person who helps and stands up for someone and who is looked up to and respected) (Bricheno and Thornton 2007).

We would argue that the complex and sophisticated ways in which gender is produced are better captured by social constructionist and psychoanalytic (and especially psychoanalytic feminist) theories than by theories of role modelling. These theories demonstrate that social identities are fluid, multiple and performed. Some commentators have also argued (Connell 1995; Halberstam 1998) that women can also be bearers of masculinity. At the same time, sex role theory has been criticised as 'power-blind' (Whitehead 2002), undervaluing the power relations that position women and men differently and constructing masculinity as the social expression of this difference (van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2006). Social interactionist and poststructuralist critiques offer alternative models of gender, as a 'doing' (West and Zimmerman 1987) and as a set of discursive practices (Butler 1999). These models challenge accounts of gender as an essence or an inherent characteristic, as well as the seemingly natural coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality.

Socialisation and sex role theories have also been criticised by a number of critical men's studies scholars for lacking sophistication in explaining the multiple ways of being and becoming 'male' (Carrigan et al. 1985). Highlighting the complexities of men's power, these writers have explored the plural nature of masculinities (Connell 1995; Hearn 2010). Elaborating on earlier work (Carrigan et al.1985; Connell 1983; 1989), Connell (1995) has argued that in the social hierarchy, groups of men embody various forms of masculinity within the wider gender order, termed *hegemonic*, *complicit*, *subordinated* and *marginalized*. The most visible bearers of *hegemonic masculinity* are not always the most powerful and Connell (1995: 76) stresses that hegemonic masculinity is 'not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same,' but that it is the 'culturally exalted form of masculinity'. This theory has influenced much of the critical writing on men and the construction of masculine identities in recent decades (Messerschmidt 2000; Wedgewood 2009). Arguably it offers the most developed (and certainly most frequently cited) account of masculine identity formation and male privilege available (Wedgewood 2009). The concept has remained ingrained within research on men, as it has powerfully identified the plurality of masculine identities, the intricacies of masculine identity formation, and the ways in which these relate to the balance of gendered power within society (Coles 2009). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity can be found in different forms at the local, national and global level through different "configurations of practice" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 847), rather than being a set of prescribed traits. The move towards more dynamic views of masculinity as culturally conditioned and capable of change has contributed to the development of alternative notions of what constitutes 'good' masculinity, for example emphasising men's capacity to care and express emotion (Robb 2004a, 2004b; Monaghan and Robertson 2012).

Despite these extensive and widely accepted critiques of social learning theory and sex role theory, upon which the male role model discourse appears to be premised, popular explanations and solutions still fail to encompass the notion that gender and masculinities are dynamic, relational and produced in diverse social contexts. For example, statistics demonstrating that suicide rates are higher among young men are often touted as evidence of a 'crisis' among boys and men (Cleary 2012) with little attention to the intersections that make *some* men more vulnerable than others. Many of these assumptions, like those applied to educational and welfare contexts, are premised on a singular, essentialised notion of masculinity, rather than recognising diversity and plurality across masculine identities, and other structural inequalities that intersect with gender relations (for a critical perspective on the intersection of masculinity and ethnicity in the experience of young black men, see Noguera 2003; 2014). Intersectionality must also take into account the impact of young men's transition from childhood to adult identities, an area that is often underexplored (Bartholomaeus 2012).

Finally we would suggest that the enduring significance of the male role model discourse signals the need to move beyond outlining its many limitations at a theoretical and practical level and obliges us to consider the role it plays in diverting attention away from urgent questions currently facing our society. These must include, as the research from educational settings suggests, addressing how boys and young men 'do' gender in lives marked by inequality and disadvantage, and what material and emotional supports are needed to ensure that they can achieve lives of dignity and worth in a context of equitable gender settlements.

Conclusion

In this paper we have reviewed some of the ways in which the 'male role model' discourse has been embodied in recent UK policy, with a particular focus on education and welfare settings, as a way of scrutinising the so-called 'war on boys'. While this has potentially raised more questions than it answers, the discussion has offered insights into the ways in which boys' issues continue to be framed and managed, as well as the part played by the dominant male role model discourse in constructions of young men and young masculinities. By examining the discourses that come into play when young men's issues are discussed, it is evident that various tensions and ambivalences surround the topic, particularly in relation to contemporary constructions of masculinities and expectations about how young men are assumed to behave.

Existing research in educational and welfare settings indicates that the 'commonsense' assumption that there is a need for more positive male role models does not capture the complexity and diversity of subjectivities and experiences of boys, and of those men that are expected to be role models. Often, concerns about poor outcomes among boys are implicitly about working-class boys and young men and there is a question here about whether the issues identified are as much about class, and other structural inequalities, as they are about gender. When the 'problem' is constructed as facing *all* boys it can create a class- and ethnicity-blind category that is not critiqued in the media and in some academic writing (Cobbett and Younger 2012). Empirical evidence has suggested that, in the UK and in other Western contexts, downward intergenerational mobility resulting from transformations in the

relationships between waged work, gender and class have been particularly problematic for *disadvantaged* young men and lifecourse outcomes (McDowell 2000). The 'male role model' approach tends to ignore the significance of other intersections and inequalities, is often poorly defined and lacks convincing theoretical underpinning. Indeed, structural explanations for the difficulties some young men experience are strategically avoided through this discourse, and the male role model discourse thus becomes an individualising and often blaming strategy that seems to serve interests quite removed from those of young men. Such an approach therefore ignores the agency of the individuals comprising the group considered to be experiencing problems. Evidence indicates that the experiences, perspectives and social contexts of young men are shaped by various forms of inequality that need to be taken more fully into account, particularly in the development of public policy (Ruxton 2009).

In turning the lens of inquiry on to the 'male role model' discourse itself, we have also shed light on the 'war on boys' discourse, a simplistic approach to what is happening to boys and young men, based on outdated theoretical foundations. In exploring the problem of boys and associated policy responses, the authors have begun to disentangle the complex, nuanced and intersectional nature of contemporary boyhood from more critical perspectives, in order to inform more effective policy responses and service provisions. This is no easy task and is one that has yet to be fully achieved, despite a decade of critique in the educational sphere. Importantly, there is a need to ensure that the same mistakes and assumptions are not made in welfare settings and that a simplistic approach to the problem of boys is not replicated in other public spheres. While we should continue to focus on the problems boys and

young men cause as well as the problems they experience, there is also a need to acknowledge the social contexts in which they grow up and to recognise that while constructed as disadvantaged in boyhood, men are also afforded privileges across the lifecourse, even when they have underachieved in education (Corbett and Young 2012). Learning from educational research, there is a need to acknowledge and understand how gender intersects with other structural inequalities in order to understand why *some* men are more vulnerable than others and to ensure that progress towards gender equality is not impeded. There is certainly a valid argument that men performing care for young children can be seen as promoting gender equality, even if the outcomes are not as wholeheartedly positive as they might sometimes be claimed to be. Nonetheless it is also important to be wary that campaigns to increase the numbers of men in childcare and education could have the unintended consequence of reinstating male power (Pringle 1993, 1995; Martino 2008).

Future research with young men, including research in welfare settings, should aim to avoid reproducing mistakes made in research with young women, and acknowledge diversity among boys and young men, and those who are expected to be role models. Such an approach will ensure the development of policies premised on 'gender mainstreaming' that encourages gender equality (Ruxton 2009) and respond to the 'war on boys' in a more holistic way that acknowledges intersectionality and diversity among young men. This will not only benefit scholars of young masculinities and boyhood, but those who experience policy interventions and services: young men themselves. A more progressive discourse of gender equality based on a model of gender that is fluid and malleable, will ensure a more gender aware workforce and

provide positive models of gender equality for the next generation of young men (Robb 2010).

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