



# CENTRE FOR YOUNG MEN'S STUDIES



## Young men and the squeeze of masculinity: the Inaugural Paper for the Centre for Young Men's Studies

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### Introduction

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 action research, innovative practice and training in regard to young men living in Northern Ireland.

In western post-industrial societies traditional routes to manhood have become increasingly prolonged, complex and ambiguous, leaving many young men confused about what it means to be a man (Seidler, 1994; Harland, 1997; Pattman, Frosh and Phoenix, 1998; Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2005). Central to this confusion are the contradictions young men experience as they strive towards restrictive notions of masculinity.

This is particularly evident in Northern Ireland - a society emerging from a period of prolonged conflict.

In many local communities young men are caught up in this transition but have not been equipped to manage or cope with this change. For example, in the past, many young men experienced a sense of place or significance as guardians of their community – either as Defenders against 'invasion' from other communities, or as Protectors from unwanted intrusion. In their role as Defender/Protector displays or threats of aggression often afforded status amongst peers and other community members. However, a post-conflict society has necessitated a significant role change. Some would argue that the Defender and/or Protector role has altered dramatically. Violent behaviour once lauded and feted is now a source of general criticism. This contradiction becomes more pronounced as the peace process evolves in Northern Ireland.

It is within this changing political and social context that paradoxes inherent in masculinity are addressed. This paper illustrates the complexities and contradictions faced by young men in Northern Ireland as they negate the transition to adulthood.

## Masculinities in Theory

It is generally acknowledged that previous sociological enquiry in the arena of masculinity focused heavily on the position of men relative to that of women, with much emphasis placed on the subordinated position of the latter (Connell, 1995). However, research into men and masculinities has developed and evolved in recent decades (Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2005). Rather than simply treating masculinity as a single one-dimensional entity, a complex multi-faceted concept of what it means to be 'male' has been developed. In contrast with previous thinking on the subject, theorists now argue a spectrum of masculinities exists, with multiple ways of 'doing male' (Connell, 1995; 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

Those examining contemporary masculinities differentiate between dominant and subordinated masculinities (Schauer, 2004), and as such, the term *hegemonic masculinity* has been coined – a concept describing the processes of masculinity and femininity embedded in and sustained by political, legal and social institutions. The hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current western culture has a number of well-defined characteristics, epitomising the white, rational, actively heterosexual and economically successful man (Connell, 1995; Lorber, 1998).

Connell (1995: 76) suggests the 'masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position on a given pattern of gender relations is always contested'. In contrast, working class masculinity, ethnic minority and homosexual masculinity are subordinated or marginalised. Indeed, whilst it is recognised that men in general benefit materially, socially and politically from their position as the dominant gender – advantages described as the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1997) – these benefits are not spread equitably amongst all males. As Connell (1997: 64) maintains, "Other groups of men pay part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order. Gay men are systematically made targets of prejudice and violence. Effeminate and wimpish men are constantly put down. Black men, in the United States (as in South Africa) suffer massively higher levels of lethal violence than white men."

Indeed, much research has been conducted into the way in which hegemonic masculinity seeks to reassert itself through the punishment and subsequent control of alternative masculine identities (Mac an Ghail, 1999; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Beattie, 2004). Patriarchy compels young men to act within a rigid set of boundaries or face a number of social sanctions. They are expected to refute any behaviour construed as feminine or that which contravenes traditional masculine stereotypes. Moreover, some sociologists would argue that in striving to achieve hegemonic masculinity young men are compelled not only to check these unwelcome character traits in themselves, but also to actively police others. One example of this is demonstrated by Herek (2000), who maintains that vociferous expressions of homophobia serve to disprove conclusively that one is homosexual, thus proving heterosexuality - one of the cultural expectations associated with the traditional male gender role. However, the effect of such demonstrations is two-fold: not only do displays of homophobia serve to reinforce group membership, but they also enforce the norms and values associated with hegemonic masculinity (Beattie, 2004). The threat of homophobic verbal or physical violence results in many individuals changing or attempting to change their behaviour or the way in which they present themselves in order to fit in with this rigidly constructed gender stereotype.

## Masculinities in Practice

Public expectations demand that families, schools and local communities are safe environments where young people are supported, encouraged, valued, mentored and loved. In reality however, these settings are often hostile environments that leave many young men feeling marginalised, worthless and threatened. Harland's detailed ethnographic study (2000) of young males aged 14-16 in inner city Belfast attempted to contextualise working class masculinity. Harland argues that we can identify a sub-population of young men living in inner-city and rural areas who exist without necessary support and direction. These young men left clinging to unattainable and unrealistic masculine aspirations are alienated from a world that has changed rapidly in the last 35 years. The young men in Harland's (2000) study believed men should be powerful, strong, and in control of every aspect of their lives. Above all they believed that men were responsible for their families and communities - understandable in a deeply divided society emerging from a period of prolonged conflict.

In reality however, their lives were a maze of contradictions. For example, the threat of daily violence rendered most young men powerless. Taught to be strong and attractive yet they neglected their physical, mental and sexual health. They believed men should be intelligent but were labelled 'stupid' in school. Young men also believed that it would be extremely difficult for them to gain meaningful employment due to their lack of educational qualifications. This latter point illustrates yet another conflicting ideal associated with hegemonic masculinity - that of economic independence. A number of studies have revealed the emphasis young men place not only the necessity of being employed, but also on the *type* of work men are expected to do (Harland, 2000; Connell, 1995). One of the main expectations of hegemonic masculinity is that, not only should 'real men' be in work, but they should also hold a 'good' job. However, as outlined above, structural changes in the labour market and the types of employment now available have closed many of the routes once available to young men, and therefore do not coincide with hegemonic standards of financial independence.

## 'Protest' Masculinities

Appreciating these 'contradictions' is pivotal to understanding the internal pressures that many young males feel regarding the construction of their own 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. Having few resources by which they can achieve hegemonic masculinity and thus 'manhood', young men utilise the resources that *are* available to them. In their attempt to 'squeeze' into these increasingly tight gender roles ascribed to them, young men resort to excessively macho ways of proving their masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1994; Yates, 2003). In Harland's (2000) study, the young men's perceptions of hegemonic 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' and intimidating to others. The findings also revealed that these young men were

struggling at every level of their experience while feeling totally unprepared for the future. They felt frustrated and powerless and disconnected from their communities. Sectarianism and the fear of paramilitary violence reinforced and perpetuated ethnic and community division.

The young men in Harland's inner city Belfast study believed they must deny or conceal their fears or vulnerabilities perceiving these as 'signs of male weakness'. By withholding certain feelings and emotions these young men believed they were expressing an important aspect of masculinity – self reliance and the refusal to seek help from others.

In Harland's study, the young males poured scorn on other males displaying what they perceived 'feminine traits' such as being tender or gentle, typically branding such men as 'gay'. As described earlier, the need for young men to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity resulted in the repulsion of femininity and the constant portrayal of aggressive and often extreme forms of

masculinity. Through their positive association with hegemonic masculinity and the subsequent forced rejection of femininity, these young men consciously form and accept extreme homophobic attitudes and beliefs. This narrow interpretation of masculinity also necessitates that many young men must frequently deny, or conceal, important aspects of their personality in order to fulfil the masculine ideal. One consequence of this is that violence and violence related behaviour are not only perceived as normal, but are accepted as a necessary and important aspect of hegemonic male youth culture.

Clinging to hegemonic notions of masculinity these young men were compelled to jeopardise their health by engaging in high-risk activities. Central to such behaviour was the need to prove their masculinity to others. Proving was a fundamental aspect of their daily lives. The need to 'act tough' outweighed their fears or concerns and therefore these young men exist within a complex and contradictory web of masculine thoughts and beliefs.

## Conclusion

Young people, in particular young men, have historically been the subject of 'adult moral panic' (Fine and Harris, 2002). Indeed, Pearson (1983) maintains the depiction of 'young people as bereft of morals and values' and 'deviant youth culture' stretches as far back as the Victorian era. These alarmist notions have persisted to the present day, where certain young people, primarily young men, continue to be demonised. Crime, drug abuse, drunken fracas in city centres, sectarianism and community division, coupled with paramilitary influence, punishment beatings, random shootings and anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO's) all contribute to the negative stereotyping of young men in our society.

It is important to appreciate the context and complexity of young men's lives. It is evident that hegemonic principals associated with being a 'real man' underpin and in turn are reinforced by ideological and repressive methods, including violence and subjugation.

While it cannot be denied that certain young men have a negative influence upon our society, this paper has

## Conclusion

attempted to outline the rationale behind displays of machoism. Young men's disempowering experiences, resulting from their attempts to adhere to impossible masculine standards have also been illustrated.

The Centre for Young Men's Studies aims to establish a body of knowledge that will increase our understanding of the pressures experienced by young men, as well as their attitudes, thoughts and behaviours. The overall focus of the Centre will address issues such as violence, crime, education, mental health, youth transitions and methodology in research with young men. The initial phase will concentrate on violence in the context of a society emerging from a period of prolonged conflict. The Centre for Young Men's Studies will adopt an approach that supports the needs, interests and importantly, the *contribution* of young men. The Centre will also develop approaches that unlock the creativity, energy and untapped potential that many young men undoubtedly possess.

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*Future papers will focus on crime and violence; young men's physical, mental and sexual health; education; and employment, and are available to download from our website [www.incore.ulster.ac.uk/cyms](http://www.incore.ulster.ac.uk/cyms) Comments regarding any of the CYMS Research Update series are welcomed, and can be directed to Karen Beattie ([ke.beattie@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:ke.beattie@ulster.ac.uk)) or telephone 028 70323270.*



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