'An investigation into young males understanding of masculinity and youth work's response – a short case study.'

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Abstract

There is so much pressure on young people to conform to societal views and gender norms. One of these examples being the concept of masculinity and how men and boys must behave. This practice inquiry project aims to discover what young males understand masculinity to mean and how youth work can respond to this. Specifically, this project is focused within the East End of Dundee, exploring the views around masculinity of young males in primary 7 and third year at high school. It also investigates how youth work can respond to these perceptions and understandings. This was conducted through a series of informal conversations and discussions with young males and a focus group with youth workers.

One of the key findings from the research was that young males understand there is a stigma around masculinity and of the need to behave in a certain way. It also identifies that from these stigmas, there is a pressure they feel from family, friends, and schools to conform to the gender stereotypes as they attempt to 'fit in'. Based on these understandings, the response from youth work is one that can offer support to young males, so they can achieve their full potential and be who they are. This project concludes that there must be more done with young males to embrace their true self by re-evaluating the term 'masculinity' and shape it to have a positive impact on society.

"Males are suffering a lost sense of identity" (Munroe, 2001, p. 10)

Introduction

Masculinity is a topic that has been in discussion a lot in recent years. This is because men do not understand what role they should be playing in life and what it means with the term of 'being a man' (Munroe, 2001). Munroe suggests that this is due to society's ever-changing view of what a man should be and not considering who they actually are. Feminism has had such a positive impact on social and political change, but is there a chance for this same push for masculinity in achieving gender equality? (Reeves, 2022). For this practice inquiry project, I will be exploring if and how ideas of toxic masculinity impact on young males' understanding of what it means to be masculine and if they feel there are any pressures for men and boys to be masculine. I will also be looking at if there is a place for youth work to respond to these assumptions and understandings of masculinity.

My fourth-year internship was within Dundee City Council's Community Learning Development (CLD) East Youth Team. The East Youth Team (EYT) work collaboratively with schools and other partners to deliver a range of learning and other opportunities to young people aged 11-18 years old (Dundee City Council, 2023). I have been involved in a variety of these groups ranging from transition P7 drop-ins to an S3 boys' health and wellbeing groups. This Practice Inquiry Project (PIP) focuses on investigating what young males understand masculinity to be and how youth work can respond to this. It will include young males from both the S3 health and wellbeing group, as well as the diversionary Primary 7 drop-in provision.

This research project highlights the pressures that come with attempting to be 'masculine' and the ramifications that can come from this. It also looks at what young people are being exposed to through media about masculinity and how this impacts perceptions around how men and boys behave. From this, there are some organisations that have conducted research around what young males think it is to be a man as well. Young males were asked questions around their own understanding of masculinity and what their perceptions are. Youth workers were

also spoken to about their understanding too and additionally asked how they can respond to the young people's views.

Literature Review

Firstly, to define youth work, Batsleer and Davies state that it is working in partnership with young people to promote equal opportunities and achieve a set goal (Batsleer & Davies, 2010), with the purpose of it being to enable young people to develop their social, educational and personal ability through facilitation and working with them (Beck & Purcell, 2010). As such, the CLD values link into any kind of youth work as they seek to facilitate young people's empowerment and also promotion of self-determination (CLD Standards Council, 2015).

Masculinity is the 'social expectations' of what society would consider acceptable or appropriate behaviours or characteristics for 'boys and men' (National Democratic Institute, 2020). This can be something as easy as sports they are 'expected' to play, to jobs they should be doing because they are a male (No Knives Better Lives, 2022). As well as this, young people have access to social media and people like Andrew Tate at an early age. Tate has been labelled as a promoter of toxic masculinity (King-Hill & Russell, 2023). As a result of this, there has been a rise in concern about 'toxic masculinity' and its potential impact on all people within society. Toxic masculinity views men as strong, powerful, anti-femininity and unemotional beings where they are only 'worthy' if they have high status and are influential (Foss, 2022). This can have an influence on the mental health of both men and boys. There has also been a link between how young males understand 'what it means to be a man' and how they express their 'masculinity' to societal issues of violence and other risk-taking behaviour (Morgan & Harland, 2009).

There are certain expectations that come with the term 'masculinity' or to be masculine and as a result there is an immense pressure of 'looking good' and being a dominant male (Robb, 2017). Due to these pressures, it can lead to violence amongst men and boys and can also lead to gender-based violence. This is why Scottish Government created the "Equally Safe 2023 - preventing and eradicating

violence against women and girls" strategy (Scottish Government, 2023). From this report, we can see that 37% of girls and women have experienced unwanted attention when they have been out in the public (Scottish Government, 2023). This is primarily males displaying the kind of unwanted attention to these females, an example to use could be 'cat calling' or 'wolf whistling'. This kind of behaviour falls into the category of 'toxic masculinity' as men attempt to show derogatory behaviour towards girls and women (Foss, 2022). This strategy attempts to work in collaboration with different organisations in both public and private sectors to eradicate violence against girls and women (Scottish Government, 2023). We can compare this with another piece of policy from the Scottish Government the 'Youth justice and early and effective intervention' framework, which promotes early intervention with young people to reduce the effects of bigger problems arising in their future (Scottish Government, 2021). By working with young males, early in their life, in a way to help them understand masculinity, there is a chance to further reduce violence against women and girls.

YouthLink Scotland state that they are pushing to develop a 'progressive society' and are driving for 'positive social change' in an attempt to transform the lives of young people (YouthLink Scotland, 2023). They are the voice of the youth work sector and are constantly attempting to change policies and to showcase the impact of the youth work sector. YouthLink work in collaboration with different organisations to change the lives of young people. From this, the CLD values of both inclusion, which focuses on equality, and empowerment, which promotes increasing a person's ability to influence issues affecting them (CLD Standards Council, 2015), can be seen first-hand within this sector of work.

Looking at the history of youth work, we can see that there was very much a divide, which saw 'boys' and 'girls' only groups where the young people were kept separate the whole time (Davies, 2010). The 'Lens Model' acknowledges that young men and women have "specific needs that can be best explored in a single gender setting" (Morgan & Harland, 2009). From this we can see that although as community education professionals we are constantly striving towards achieving equality, sometimes going back to the basics of having 'male only' groups does serve its purpose. It allows people to discuss and question aspects of their life, they perhaps

would not feel comfortable doing in a mixed-gender setting. Now, this is not to say that mixed groups have no place, as they too have their benefits. Research was carried out to see whether young people work best in mixed groups or in single-gendered groups. The study showed that males who were placed within mixed-gendered groups outperformed those within single-gendered groups in individual achievement and group performance (Zhan, et al., 2015). This does come with limitations, however, as due to this being a quantitative piece of research, we are unable to properly analyse why this has happened. It would therefore be beneficial to look at this through a qualitative means of analysis to understand why the results were as showed and get proper feedback about it.

Richard Reeves has stated how young males have been put at a disadvantage due to the way that the educational system is structured (Reeves, 2022). He states that in America, due to this disadvantage, young males are underperforming in schools and are getting into colleges at a much lower rate than females (Renn, 2022). If we consider this further, Martino suggests there has been a "feminization" of schools and, therefore, there is a lack of male role models within the education system (Martino, 2008). In doing so, we have created a society which views teaching and education as a 'female profession'. It is important to break down stigmas like these that can have damaging effects on young people's views around education, as they see this as a female environment. As a result of this, young males are not valuing education and begin to disengage with school due to 'school being for girls' (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, N.D.). From this, we must look at alternative ways of engaging young males in education, which is where youth work is able to play a part. However, this can be a difficult one, bringing an informal profession inside a formal setting. Youth workers, however, can have the opportunity of utilising collaborative advantage with school staff. Huxham and Vangen say that through collaboration we are able to tackle issues that would otherwise fall between gaps (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Therefore, through collaboration with the schools, youth workers can challenge and promote a more positive outlook on what it means to be a man and of masculinity, in general. Instances like masculinity can often be overlooked and not spoken about, so through collaborative advantage we can better address these issues together. It is important to note, though, that occasionally there

can be a breakdown of collaboration due not being able to agree on a common aim and the work style of both parties.

If we think about youth work and masculinity, it can play a crucial role in supporting young people to understand what it is, due to the nature of this line of work. In youth work it is vital to create inclusive, as well as supportive, environments for young people to thrive in and become more successful (Allen, et al., 2012). In youth work there is a chance to promote open conversations with young people as a way of encouraging them to think about the world around them. Freire says that "for the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of men" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). He suggests that through critical consciousness, we can support people to question things and take a step back from reality and look at what is affecting them. If youth workers can enable young males to think about masculinity through a critical lens, there is a chance to change what the expectations are of being 'masculine' and how this can define a person.

As previously mentioned, 'toxic masculinity' has become a more popular phrase in recent years, to describe the misogynistic, bad traits and views that men can display (Harrington, 2020). Andrew Tate shares his 'extreme masculine ideals' with his audience of viewers which is primarily boys and young men (Wescott, et al., 2023). This tweet taken from X in October of 2023:
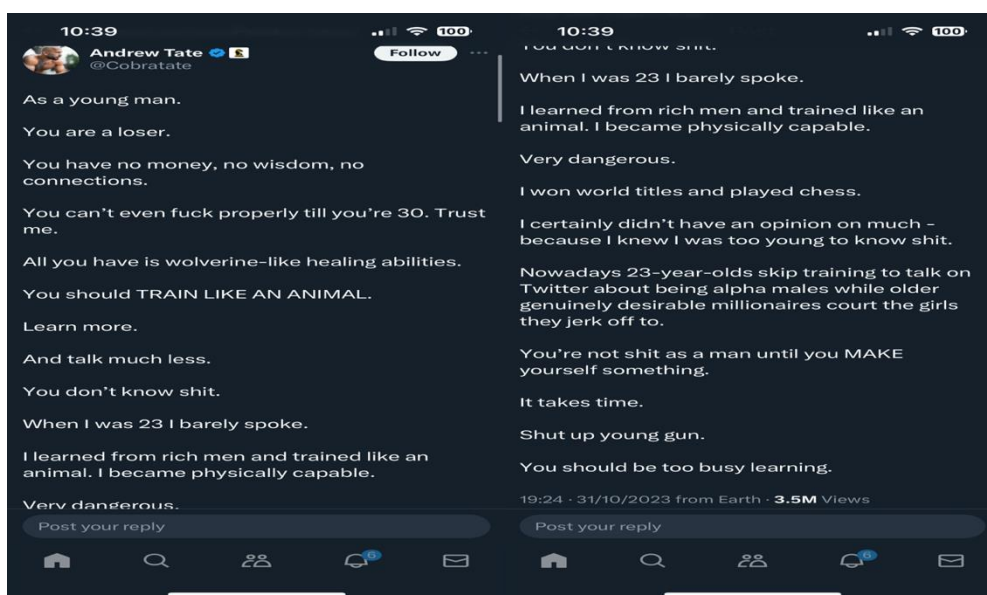
This is the kind of information young people in general are being exposed to online and has since been interacted by over 5.4 million people (Tate, 2023). This number does not in any way tell us how many times it has been shown to people or appeared on their X page. Also, there is a line in Zach Bryan's song 'I Remember Everything', that says "Blame it on the beach, grown men don't cry" (Bryan, 2023). This song proved popular within the charts and was also played across various radio stations all over the world. If we think about the kind of pressures this puts on young males seeing this and the impact it can have. Being told to "talk less" or you are a "loser" and "men don't cry", is damaging the kind of work that charities like Andys Man Club are trying to do. Where they attempt to break down stigma around men and boys to promote the idea that it's "okay to talk" (Andys Man Club, 2023). Groups like these, however, have a target audience of adult males, as opposed to younger males, meaning they do not quite fit in. There has been a push in recent years for more work to be done with young males around mental health and violence.

No Knives Better Lives is an early intervention and education programme within Scotland which seeks to empower young people who could potentially be at risk of violence and knife crime to choose a more positive path (No Knives Better Lives, 2023). It was created through a collaboration between the Scottish Government and YouthLink Scotland as an initiative to be delivered to local authorities across the country. They take informal approaches by bringing people together to share information and knowledge to understand the causes of violence amongst young people. From this a 'Positive Masculinity programme' was launched called 'Imagine A Man' which focused around bringing positive masculinity into youth work as a way of engaging with young males (YouthLink Scotland, 2023).

Research was carried out in three different areas across Scotland, Dundee, Glasgow, and the Shetlands (No Knives Better Lives, 2023). The research that was carried out in Dundee consisted of some group work with 5 young people. Also, an online survey was distributed to young people throughout Dundee and was completed by 137 of them. What made this research so interesting was that the focus was on positive masculinity due to the high levels of deprivation within Dundee (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2020). 'Positive masculinity' promotes the ideas of healthier gender norms and encourages males to show emotion, showing us

a realistic look at what males should be (Wilson, et al., 2022). Although this is interesting, the results showed that almost all of the young people had never heard of 'positive masculinity'. This was a completely new concept to them, but they showed an interest in learning more about it. From this work, the young men involved created their own group called MENding Mindsets which initially focused on the mental health of men and boys, but later delved deeper into understanding the impacts of stigma and what is expected of them. This is a great example of these young males feeling 'empowered' to take action against what is affecting them. They felt passionate enough to want to progress with this idea and have created their own group to address these issues. We can see further links to the CLD Values of empowerment as the young males have identified an issue themselves and gone to take collective action to address these issues.

This research does, however, have its limitations as the young people selected within Dundee were described as 'articulate' and 'role models'. It would have been beneficial to have included young males with different outlooks, who maybe do not engage as well in school, to get an understanding of their views and attitudes towards masculinity.

Method and Methodology

The purpose of the research was to discover what understanding young males had around masculinity and how youth work could respond to this. I figured that the best way to conduct this piece of research was to attempt a creative workshop for young males who were attending the primary 7 drop-in provision, in the evening, in the East End of Dundee and the boy's group, who I was working with, from one of the local high schools. I wanted to gather a variety of data and decided a creative approach may be best as this allows people to share their own original thoughts and expressions (Williams, 2015).

The groups consisted of six young males in high school, and six males who were in primary 7, both split into groups of three males. I ran into some difficulties when attempting to engage the young people with the idea behind the workshops, so I opted to conduct informal conversations with them, to reduce any stresses that they

may have, and to make them more comfortable throughout the process of gathering the data. Jeffs and Smith state that in order for conversations to work, "we have to trust in the others involved" (Jeffs & Smith, 2005, p. 30). I felt that these informal chats would work best due to the relationships that I had already built with the young people. I do, however, disagree with what Jeffs and Smith say about there being an agreement for conversation to work. I do not think this would be the case as the young people may not agree with one another, but they do have a level of respect for each other, therefore, I do not feel this would have caused an issue for the conversations we did have. I also wanted to give my full attention to the group, so I asked a youth worker to accompany me to take notes.

I then wanted to see what the youth workers' understanding of masculinity was and if they feel they can play a role in supporting young people with the ideas of masculinity. Powell et al, defines focus groups as individuals coming together to "discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research" (Powell & Single, 1996, p. 499). They also allow participants to share their own views, opinions, and beliefs to address the questions that are given (Gibbs, 1997). To gather this data, I decided to carry out a focus group with nine of the youth workers, and record their responses to my questions, to enable me to focus all my attention on the group. I felt this was the best fit for my research project as I wanted the youth workers to have an open discussion amongst themselves regarding their own perception of masculinity and as well as their opinions on how young males may feel.

The research report was influenced by my own life experiences and how I understand the world around me, which Foote and Bartell claim can have an impact on a person's positionality (Foote & Bartell, 2011). I had to ensure I remained impartial and did not allow my own preconceived judgements around masculinity to impact the project in any way. Being a male myself, I was already aware of some pressures there are to maintain a 'masculine' image to fit into society's standards. I was also aware that there have been changes in how people realise that males have emotions too and that it is okay to open-up and show weakness.

Based on the Imagine a Man research, which I analysed within my literature review, I was able to become more informed around how young males within Dundee understand masculinity and use this to my advantage as an emerging community education practitioner. I understood that my own research may come with different results, due to their research being focused on 'positive masculinity' and this project remaining neutral focusing entirely on masculinity in general. Another difference would be that the young people that took part in my project were part of the group due to the fact they did not engage well with school, therefore, it would give an entirely different perception to the 'articulate, role models' of the young people within the Imagine A Man research.

Ontology is the study of what actually exists and what this can mean (Jacquette, 2014), therefore my ontological perspective was that young males should be whoever they want to be. As a society, we are progressing in our judgements around masculinity and what it is to be a man, but I was unsure whether young males would feel the same way.

Epistemology is the understanding of facts and knowledge (Ejnavarzala, 2019). The epistemology of the project was that it was within the East End of Dundee which falls within the top 5% of the most deprived areas (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2020). As previously stated, the young people involved in the project have begun to disengage with school, so have therefore been put into the group to try to address these issues. The other young males are a part of a diversionary programme, so these participants were chosen due to the relationships I had built during my internship.

Ethics

There were a variety of points that I had to consider when planning my research project, especially as this work was going to be with young people under the age of 16 years old. Therefore, due to the age of the young males, I was required to obtain consent from parents/guardians to ensure the project was ethically right (Henn, et al., 2006). I issued consent forms (see Appendix 1) and participant information sheets (see Appendix 2) to the young males and explained, that for them to be able

to participate, these would need to be completed and handed back to myself. After a discussion with my supervisor, they confirmed that the Youth Work Young Learners Detail Form, which young people complete when they attend the drop-in sessions, includes the parental consent for a young person's participation in the workshop for this practice inquiry project. I also had to consider that this is a sensitive subject, so I took precautions before having the conversations with the young males. I reminded them about our group rules of respecting one another and that anything we discussed should not be taken out of the room. I ensured there was support on hand should any participant become distressed, as there was another youth worker present to offer additional help.

It was made clear to all participants that should they no longer wish to participate in the project they had until this report was submitted to withdraw, and anything they said would be erased from the project.

Consent was a little more straightforward for the youth workers as they could complete the forms themselves (see Appendix 3). They were also given participant information sheets (see Appendix 4) to complete. The difference was that I required their consent to record what they were saying. I ensured they understood that I would be the only person to hear and see what they said, and that the recording would be deleted after it had been transcribed. I device I used was one I had acquired from my internship as I felt this would be safer to keep participants confidentiality better than the use of my phone.

All participants were made aware that participation in this project was entirely voluntary and that there would be no repercussions if they did not wish to take part. Those involved in the project were told their responses would be completely anonymised so there would be no way to tell who they are and what they have said. I also explained to participants that any data collected would be stored in a locked drawer which only I had access to.

Data Findings/Analysis

I was able to successfully manage to get 2 groups of 3 young people from both the S3 Health and Wellbeing group and the Primary 7 drop-ins. The young males were asked questions, in these informal chats, and I opted to ask the additional youth worker to take notes on what was said (see Appendix 5). I decided to make all questions completely neutral, investigating both 'toxic' and 'positive' masculinity. The questions were:

Q1 "Do you know think you know what masculinity means?"

Q2 "Do you think that men and boys have to be masculine?"

Q3 "Do you think there is pressure for boys to be masculine?"

Q4 "Is it okay for men and boys to be emotional?"

Q5 "Do you think you might know what positive masculinity could mean?"

Q6 "Have you heard of toxic masculinity?"

The youth workers were asked similar questions, but as previously mentioned I was able to record what was being said this time, to which I was able to listen back to and then take notes on important parts of the discussion (see Appendix 6). The questions asked were:

Q1 "How would you describe masculinity?"

Q2 "Do you think men and boys have to be masculine?"

Q3 "Is there a pressure for men and boys to be masculine?"

Q4 "Do you know what positive masculinity is?"

Q5 "What is youth works role in promoting positive masculinity, and are there any examples or ideas of how youth workers can do this?"

I have decided to collate and analyse all the data together that I have collected around masculinity together. A thematical analysis is when there are patterns and themes which have been identified within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the nature of thematical analysis I have decided this would be the best way of analysing this data as there were common themes found throughout my conversations with the young males and the focus groups with the youth workers.

The themes I have identified are:

Theme 1: - Power and Strength (Social Expectation)

Theme 2: - Learned Behaviour

Theme 3: - Fear of Judgment and Peer/Family Pressures

Theme 4: - Challenging Behaviour and Youth Work

<u>Power and Strength (Social Expectations)</u>

There was a lot of discussion with the young people and the youth workers around what they think of when they hear masculinity. There was a huge focus on this idea of power and strength and that this is what it means to be a man. A young person said it was:

"strength, power, that's the expectancy of the world"

and another said:

"something to do with boys' strength, muscular and stuff".

From an early age young males feel the need to conform to the idea that in order to align yourself with the male gender identity there is a need to be 'strong' (Halim, et al., 2022). As previously mentioned, these pressures can have a detrimental impacts on a young male's development as they attempt to fit in with society's views and expectations of them as men and boys (Robb, 2017). If you are unable to be this version of masculinity, the young people told me that:

"you're gay if you're no basically, well no gay, but feminine or people think you're fruity".

Through youth work, there is a chance to address these negative connotations of masculinity by attempting to work with young males to understand why they think this way. By simply not giving into the norms set out by the world as to what masculinity looks like, you are labelled as 'gay' or 'feminine'. It is not difficult, therefore, to see why young males give into these norms and feel the need to abide by the 'rules' set out for their gender.

As stated before 'masculinity' falls into a category the same as femininity where both are considered to be "socially constructed" and therefore defined by "social groups" (Sánchez, et al., 2009). It would be simple to suggest that this is an easy fix if everyone was able to change their perceptions that for men to be masculine, they must be powerful and strong, but it is not as easy as this. Youth work can respond to

this by having difficult conversations with young people, Tett states that we can "explore topics, to provide good information, and encourage young people's exploration of the issues that effect them" (Tett, 2006, p. 51). The youth work values promote the ideas of strong relationships and identities they can feel connected with, which is done through inclusivity (Beck & Purcell, 2010). There is a chance to address these pressures together and strive to change how masculinity is perceived going forward, by creating inclusive environments with young people.

Learned Behaviour

Secondly, there were findings around the young people's attitudes about masculinity being deeply shaped through learned behaviour, whether this be from family members, or that of people online. Learned behaviour is the idea of children and young people picking up on behaviours and attitudes displayed by adults and beginning to model these same beliefs (Rymanowicz, 2015). One of the youth workers told their own story about how they were watching their niece play football and one of the boys who was six years old on the opposite team said to her:

"girls can't play football".

They said:

"that is learned behaviour, that is someone saying to that little boy, girls can't play football".

By sharing their own personal views around females and football this potential adult has allowed the child to pick up potentially harmful attitudes towards females and has begun to show 'toxic masculinity' traits.

Looking at this from another perspective of learned behaviour, one of the young males stated how he grew up:

"in a man type household, dad went out to work, mum stayed at home".

Research carried out in America showed that of the families that took part, 26% still followed the traditional values of this way of life, where the father works full time, and the mother stays at home (Pew Research Center, 2015). Being a male, you can often look at your own family values and replicate this into your own. Now there is nothing to say that it is wrong to have this traditional mindset, but as you grow up it then becomes difficult should you attempt to push this same agenda onto others.

There is a point to suggest that there are more ways for young males to lead their life than feeling like they must be the provider of the family.

Fear of Judgement and Peer/Family Pressures

We further discussed what they view masculinity as and a lot of the feedback was that men and boys must act in a certain way due to the fear of being judged by their peers or others around them. Peer pressure is defined by Brown et al, to be the "conformity to peers" and should also be considered one of the "hallmarks of adolescent behaviour" (Brown, et al., 1986, p. 521). From this definition, we can see that peers play a huge role in the development of young people's actions and attitudes. When asked whether there was pressure for boys to be masculine, one of the young males in the S3 group said:

"well yeah, if I walked in school like a lassie I would get slaughtered, probably battered".

This is where the early intervention framework, that I discussed in the literature review (Scottish Government, 2021), could be used to address these ideas. There is a chance to eradicate this worrying and violent mentality by critiquing these attitudes and mindsets with young people. Having such a strong value of your peers' opinions can be detrimental to your own personal development as you tend to "conform to the values and behaviours of the peer group" even if they are different to your own (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013). One of the youth workers said they had a:

"male young person who is good at drama, immediately questioned as it goes against the norm"

with another adding:

"easy decision to walk away from that".

Young people just want to be socially accepted, therefore will tend to not pursue personal interests due to trying to fit in (McElhaney, et al., 2008).

Moving onto general pressure or rather 'general conformity' which is the pressures from parents or other adults which makes young people behave in a specific way (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013). One of the young males stated:

"I know my dad wants me to like football"

emphasising how they felt the need to conform to this idea in order to meet the expectations his dad has for him. There is also the underlying issue of schools falling into the trap of pushing male pupils into apprenticeships. A youth worker said:

"school staff 'boys you doing an apprenticeship', all girls pigeonholed to childcare, it is almost like an automatic response to this".

Fuller, et al (2005) suggests that there is little to no crossover of "occupation gender" swaps among males and females (Fuller, et al., 2005). This is a reasonably dated response, but from speaking with the youth workers themselves, not much has changed in terms of this. Through youth work, it is important to promote ideals that may go against the norm so that young people can feel confident to do what interests them. We can challenge these stereotypes by encouraging young people to do what interests them, regardless of what gender is linked to it.

I had a conversation with the youth workers about pressures they have had from family members to get for their children to fit into the 'standards' of masculinity. One of them said their son was:

"strongminded and doesn't care, element of me that does care, don't want to be masculine as he is masculine in his own way, but worry what the backlash is for him".

They spoke about feeling pressures from family as their child did not fit into their ideas of 'masculinity'. It is difficult to challenge a parent's or family's attitude to this, but youth work can play a part by providing a place where young people can be who they want in a safe and non-judgemental place (Allen, et al., 2012).

Challenging Behaviour and Youth Work

Now to look at the role youth work can play to respond to these views of masculinity. The youth workers all responded in similar ways which was the need to challenge the kind of toxic masculinity traits young people sometimes display. Opinions about toxic masculinity were split among the young people, with some of them saying:

"girls can be whoever they want to be"

to one of the boys saying:

"I quite like Andrew Tate, some of the things he says can be motivational".

Now this is not to say the young male was wrong for having this opinion, but conversations like these are fundamental in getting young people to open up and

discuss amongst themselves. We were then able to discuss everyone's views of Andrew Tate with another young person saying:

"I don't really respect him to be honest".

Through these informal chats, the young males are respecting and understanding each other's opinions, and instead of arguing they are taking the time to learn from each other. Linking towards the idea of informal learning where people value "shared experiences and common understandings with others" (Tett, 2006, p. 42). As an informal profession, youth work can play a key role in encouraging these open discussions, as it aligns with the CLD Value of equality, where we value what everyone has to say (CLD Standards Council, 2015).

When discussing what the youth workers role is in terms of promoting positive masculinity to young people, the main theme they suggested was to challenge 'toxic masculinity behaviour'. One person said:

"challenge behaviours and language when people show toxic masculinity behaviour" and another added

"challenging the little things that will make changes".

It is important not to argue with young people displaying examples of 'toxic' behaviour, but to attempt to understand what they mean (Youth Scotland, 2024). Sometimes when young people are showing behaviours like these, the reason can be due to not fully understanding what they are saying or the effects that it can have on someone else. We discussed how this is not only the case for young people, but also for adults and other professional workers too. As we look back at the influence schools can play in adhering to the 'male' job role. It is the duty of the professional, in the CLD profession, to challenge any form of discriminatory practice due to the value placed on inclusion (CLD Standards Council, 2015). Collaborative advantage could work well as previously stated between schools and youth work in challenging these attitudes. If these two professions worked together, there is a chance for people to come together and learn from each other. Although schools are a formal environment, there is something to be said about them gaining understanding with informal professions like youth work (Smith, 2002;2009).

From the research I have conducted it is clear to see that the young males have an understanding as to what they perceive masculinity to mean, but this is not always a

positive way of thinking. There is a lot of pressure on young males to behave and act in a certain way to fit what is regarded as the social norms. There is a role youth work can play and that is to provide safe spaces for young people to come to and to encourage open conversations for which they will not be judged. The youth workers showed confidence in how they could respond towards these perceptions of masculinity as they looked at their overall role.

I can verify that most of the young males had either heard of or understood what 'toxic masculinity' was, but none of them had heard of 'positive masculinity'. My understanding is that this seemed to be because of the way males and masculinity are portrayed online. Through a promotion of 'positive masculinity', there is a chance we can allow young males to see for themselves a better and healthier outlook on what a 'realistic' man is.

Recommendations/Conclusion

To take this research further, I feel there is an opportunity to discuss this with both males and females to have an overall overview as to what young people understand masculinity to mean. Providing research on this will allow more open discussions around preconceived judgements about what it means to be a man and a woman and give opportunity to learn from both young males and females.

I would also encourage looking at how males from single parent households understand masculinity to mean and the impact this has on them. Growing up with only one parent present may impact how young males value the importance of masculinity, whether that be in a female or male dominant household.

Based on the research I conducted and the literature I have reviewed, I would say that there needs to be policy put in place to support young males to fully understand masculinity and how to deal with pressures of 'being a man'. I would also suggest that more should be done in the promotion of positive masculinity so that males are shown to understand masculinity in a realistic and healthier way.

In conclusion, young males' perceptions around what they believe masculinity to mean can cause a huge amount of stress and pressure, as they attempt to live up to the expectations society has attached to this word. It is not just pressure from society, but also from family and peers as they attempt to fit in socially and strive to be accepted. Even though society is changing in how they view men as emotional beings, I find the same cannot be said with people's understandings of masculinity. They seem to identify that males should be allowed to express their emotions, but state that they feel society does not understand that. We can understand there is a clear role of youth work to respond to this, through informal working, creating safe and inclusive spaces and having open discussions around these stigmas. Young males understand the unrealistic image that society has given to the term masculinity, however, going forward we need to work with young people to address this challenge openly, and a constructive way to respond is through youth work. We must work to embrace this 'positive masculinity' attitude so that young males understand that it is okay to be who they want to be, and not just be who society think they should be.

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Appendix 1

Consent Forms for Young People

		Yes	No
1. Taking part in the study			
I have read the Participant Information Sheet, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.		☐	☐
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time during data collection, without having to give a reason.		☐	☐
I understand that information I provide will be used for Aidan's research project about young people's understanding of masculinity.		☐	☐
I agree that anonymised direct quotes can be used in research outputs.		☐	☐
2. Use of information in this study			
I understand that information I provide will be used in a research project that be used to investigate young males understanding of masculinity and youth work's response.		☐	☐
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared with anyone.		☐	☐
I agree that anonymised direct quotes can be used in research outputs.		☐	☐

_____ _____ _____

Participant's Name   Participant's Signature   Date

_____ _____ _____

Parent/Guardian's Name   Parent/Guardian's Signature   Date

By signing above, you are indicating that you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet and that you agree to take part in this research study.

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher   Signature of Researcher   Date

Appendix 2

Information Sheet for Young People

You have been invited to participate in a research project around young people's understanding of masculinity. You do not have to take part in in this research project, so just let myself know if you do not wish to participate. You may also withdraw from the project, up until all data has been brought together and anonymised, then this will no longer be possible.

This project is completely anonymous, meaning no one will know your identity, but you are asked not to disclose any personal information about yourself during this activity. Anything you do tell me, will be stored in a secure and safe space and will remain completely confidential.

The activity will be done with other young people, and there will be pieces of paper with certain questions on them, for example 'do you know what masculinity means?'. You will then be asked to write down your answer and may also be asked why you have given that answer. Anything that is written down will not be discussed with anyone else and will remain completely confidential.

Appendix 3

University of Dundee

Consent Forms for Youth Workers

	Yes	No
1. Taking part in the study		
I have read the Participant Information Sheet, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	☐	☐
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time during data collection, without having to give a reason.	☐	☐
I understand that information I provide will be used for Aidan's research project about young people's understanding of masculinity.	☐	☐
I consent to being recorded for the purpose of this research but understand that the recording is for the purpose of this research so will not be shared with anyone.	☐	☐
I agree that anonymised direct quotes can be used in research outputs.	☐	☐
2. Use of information in this study		
I understand that information I provide will be used in a research project that will be used to investigate young males understanding of masculinity and youth work's response.	☐	☐
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared with anyone.	☐	☐
I agree that anonymised direct quotes can be used in research outputs.	☐	☐

_____   _____   _____

Participant's Name   Participant's Signature   Date

By signing above, you are indicating that you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet and that you agree to take part in this research study.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Signature of Researcher   Date

Appendix 4

University of Dundee

Participant Information Sheet for Youth Workers

An investigation into young males understanding of masculinity and youth work's response – a short case study.

University of Dundee School Research Ethics Committee Application/Approval Number:

You are invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not you would like to participate it is important that you read the information provided below. This will help you to understand why and how the research is being carried out and what participation will involve. Please let the researcher who gave you this information know if anything is unclear or you have any questions.

Who is conducting the research?

Aidan Harper is conducting this research project as part of his BA Community Education course, and if you require to contact him for any questions or queries his email address is azharper@dundee.ac.uk .

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this research is to explore young male's understanding around masculinity, and how youth work can respond to this understanding and the impact of youth work with young people related to this topic.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a youth worker and therefore work with young people constantly, therefore it would be beneficial to hear your views around the topic of masculinity.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and if you do not wish to participate then you do not have to, and no negative consequence will come to you for not participating. You may withdraw from the research project at any time, up until the project has been written and submitted. After all of the data has been brough together and anonymised, it will then not be possible to withdraw. If you do change your mind a choose to withdraw then please get in contact with myself via email, where I will then seek to remove the data you have given me from my database and have it destroyed.

What will happen if I take part?

After reading the participant information sheet, you will be given a consent form to complete which will allow myself to begin setting up a focus group with other youth workers within the setting.

Are there any risks in taking part?

There are no known risks for your participation in this research project.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant for taking part in this research project.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Participants are asked not to disclose any personal or sensitive information throughout the duration of the focus group, and anything that is said within the group should remain confidential and not discussed after the group. The Practice Inquiry Project will not include any personal details of anyone involved and all participant contributions will be anonymous.

What will happen to the information I provide?

Any data collected, will be stored on a password protected laptop that only I will have access to, and any paper copies will be kept in a locked drawer with a key. The data collected will be kept until I finish my degree on a University of Dundee OneDrive, before being destroyed. The research project will not be published or shown out with the organisation or University of Dundee. Throughout this project when the data has been implemented into the project, participants will always be anonymised, and anonymous quotes will also be used. Once the project is finished, you may request to see what has been done.

Data Protection

The personal data that will be collected and processed in this study are your own opinions and feelings around the topic of this research project, so no personal information should be disclosed during the focus group, but should this be done, then it will be struck from the recording and the research itself.

The University asserts that it is lawful for it to process your personal data in this project as the processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller.

[If processing special category data] The University asserts that is lawful for it to process special categories of your personal data in this project as the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes in accordance with Article 89(1) of the General Data Protection Regulation *[see Appendix 1 for guidance on the requirements for processing special categories of personal data in your project].*

The University of Dundee is the data controller for the personal and/or special categories of personal data processed in this project *[Where projects are developed in partnership this section should be amended to reflect the relationships between the partners and their roles in respect of the personal data. This will normally be governed by the collaboration/partnership agreement and associated data sharing agreement].*

The University respects your rights and preferences in relation to your data and if you wish to update, access, erase, or limit the use of your information, please let us know by emailing *[insert contact details].* Please note that some of your rights may be limited where personal data is processed for research, but we are happy to discuss that with you. If you wish to complain about the use of your information please contact the University's Data Protection Officer in the first instance (email: dataprotection@dundee.ac.uk). You may also wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (https://ico.org.uk/).

You can find more information about the ways that personal data is used at the University at: https://www.dundee.ac.uk/information-governance/dataprotection/.

Is there someone else I can complain to?

If you wish to complain about the way the research has been conducted please contact the Convener of the University Research Ethics Committee (https://www.dundee.ac.uk/research/governance-policy/ethicsprocedures/ethics/contacts/). You have the option to email the Convener or leave a voicemail.

Appendix 5

Q1 "Do you know think you know what masculinity means?" Boys all said they knew what it meant and said it's about strength and power. This was a common theme with one saying it us what the world expects of boys
Group 1 all said yeah
Group 2 "it's like strong and muscular something to do with boys strength, muscular stuff"
Group 3 "jawline, strength, power that's the expectancy of the world though"
"Everyone has a different opinion on it though"
Group 4 "how to be man"

Q2 "Do you think that men and boys have to be masculine?" split between the P7's and S3's. P7's said that you do not have to be masculine, whereas S3's said if you are not there is a perception around you being gay, with one sharing he was brought up in a household where the man goes out to work and the women stays at home
Group 1 No "because it's your choice no one else has a choice but you"
Group 2 "No you could be like feminine" "it's your choice" "You can't be like gay when you are 8, fully out when you are like 15 or something. Not right to have a gay child at 10 years old, just imagine it's the mum and dad's choice"
Group 3 "you don't have to be, but you're gay if you're no basically" "Well no gay but feminine, or people think you're fruity".
Group 4 "yeah, brought up in a man type household, dad works mum stays home"

Q3 "Do you think there is pressure for boys to be masculine?" Divided around this again some of the boys felt pressured at home to like activities deemed masculine because of their dads.
Group 1 "No"
Group 2 "I know my dad wants me to like football" "Can't like the colour pink" "yeah sometimes"
Group 3 "well yeah, if I walked in school like a lassie I would get slaughtered, probably battered"
Group 4 "nah but you canny just be a girl though"

Q4 "Is it okay for men and boys to be emotional?" Agreement around boys being emotionally, general theme around "girls" not understanding this and there being a lot of stigma around it.
Group 1 "Yeah, anyone can be emotional"
Group 2 "yeah it's okay, need to talk to someone, people do actually kill themselves. But if you cry you are a girl" "don't cry can turn to anger"
Group 3 "yeah, but girls don't understand that" "emotions like rage as well" "other day my mate was greeting" "there is a stigma men don't talk about feelings" "I hide my feelings, most boys do" "meant to be a man, man up"
Group 4 "yeah, definitely"

Q5 "Do you think you might know what positive masculinity could mean?" Not really understanding what this is, a lot of discussion around it being stronger men in getting "bigger muscles and a better jawline"
Group 1 "No"
Group 2 "Nah not really, is it like skinny"

Group 3 "is it like sticking up for yourself" "better jawline and bigger muscles"
Group 4 "nah, is it like what is good to be a boy, like strong and smart"

Q6 "Have you heard of toxic masculinity?" they had heard what toxic masculinity was about the boys saying "girls can't play football and boy's cant' do dancing"
Group 1 "Boys saying that girls can't play football and boys can't do dancing"
Group 2 "yeah ive heard of it, like women have to be in the kitchen boys play football." "I think women can do whatever they want its not up to us"
Group 3 "I like Andrew tate, sometime motivational some things he says is bad but" "I don't really respect him to be honest"
Group 4 "in some aspects yeah"

Appendix 6

Q1 How would you describe masculinity?
"It's about traits men have" "stereotypes of men" "society sees it as big strong men who aren't afraid to voice their opinion and be the centre of attention" "we need to break that stigma down, it's okay to be okay. Hear the term don't think about emotions" "dad tells you not to be a jesse, man up, toughen up" "labor, male dominant environment" "comments made can be derogatory, not involved then it's a problem" "Group chats can be quite derogatory too between men" "it's about challenging attitudes" "strong, strength muscles putting men in a box"

Q2 Do you think men and boys have to be masculine?"
"You don't have to be masculine but there is a pressure to be" "break down these barriers with the young people we work with what we see as masculine" "speaking to people about what is a man what is a woman?" "boys being open and having conversations about feelings but then being like 'oh god I'm crying'" "people portray job roles and characteristics as being 'gay'" "If a man's not this then you're a wet blanket" "very effeminate men and masculine women, like a spectrum" "you have to be a tradesman or play football" "school staff boys you doing an apprenticeship all girls pigeon holed to childcare, automatic response to this"

Q3 Is there a pressure for men and boys to be masculine?
"because of the stereotype of being labelled as 'gay' wouldn't want to do hairdressing if offered, ripped from their mates" "As men get older, realise it does not matter" "young people may say to us, might like to do it, but I would get ripped from my mates" "felt more comfortable in themselves" "son got a hard time for not liking football, had more girl pals so was labelled 'gay'" "even in CLD, 1:1's come in and it's a boy immediately handed to the males. Male groups = males girl groups = girls, breaking that down as well" "same sex groups has it's place and purpose, some conversations would happen if was not the same gender" "depending on the content has it's place" "need a male role model from the guidance staff" "nursery age, boy's go play with cars girls play with dolls" "Pressure from families, when you're having a boy it's blues and greens and trucks and cars, when it's a girl it's pinks and dolls" "Assumed when you have a girl they are going to go to dance and boys are going to football or rugby" "Stigma" "that's gotten better now, less stigma around it" "strongminded and doesn't care, element of me that does care, don't want to be masculine as he is masculine in his own way, but worry what the backlash is for him" "Peer pressure" "family members saying things, "stop crying like a little girl" "pressure on me when he was growing up" "given football up, should be ashamed of themselves" – often older generation making comments around situations like this "learned behaviour and generational thing" "there is a huge pressure to behave in a certain way" "male young person who is good at drama, immediately questioned as it goes against the norm" "easy decision to walk away from that" "that age you just want be accepted"

Q4 do you know what positive masculinity is?
"you can have emotions and feelings and can express these emotions and that is okay" "would be able to speak to the women of the team, but struggle with the males" "during lockdown not really checking in" "pressure on men socialising at the pub and around alcohol" "going back to going against the norm" "people asking how

you are, don't want to be a burden, why would I ruin your day if I am already having a bad day" "not about to

Q5 What is youth works role in promoting positive masculinity, and are there any examples or ideas of how youth workers can do this?
"supportive network, able to gage people well" "challenge behaviours and language when people show toxic masculinity behaviour" "challenging the little things that will make changes" "being a positive role model, day to day work of our life" "learned behaviour, that is someone saying to a 6 year old boy, girls can't play football" "up against society" "things are changing, slowly" "not just having male members of staff, female coaches coming through" "female sports coach in helps to challenge the norms" "not just about challenging the young people, but also challenging the staff"