# And then there were the men: masculinity and the Youth Justice System in England and Wales

## Eric Baumgartner

*This snapshot of my ESRC-funded research project summarises how the absence of men in the discussion of social policy, in effect, contributes to the gendering of men as men. It highlights, on the example of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales, how an incorporation of concepts of masculinity can inform practice when working with men and stresses the need for the inclusion of lived experiences of men in the conceptualisation of masculinity.*

*Keywords: Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Youth Justice, Social Policy*

## The absence of masculinity

'Why the heck do we bother asking about their gender, if we then go on to do absolutely nothing with it?!' (Senior Practitioner, YJS, 2011)

Recent feminist and queer literature has offered us many an explanation as to the workings of masculinity and male identity (Connell 1987; Butler 1990; Ingraham 2002; Wittig 2002). The pendulum of theories of masculinity and male identity, however, appears to swing between hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) and hypermasculinity (Broude 1990) without offer-ing practical advice on how these theoretical constructs can inform and be applied to professional practices when working with men. Consequently, the absence of explicit discussion of masculinity in social, health and crime policies is not particularly surprising (Hearn 2010). This ESRC-funded PhD research project aims to explore the 'formation' of masculinity and male identity on the level of individual agency as service recipients and the potential gendering of men by service providers in the public sector (Hearn 2010). It investigates which role, if any, concepts of masculinity do or can play in Youth Justice Policy and will consider the wider implications

of the findings in relation to social policy. The overall objective is to put men back into the research and theory on masculinity and male identity (Hearn 2010).

## Masculinity and crime

'Crime […] is a male occupation' (Coote 1993).

This research is motivated by some of the academic literature on masculinity and offending, which makes strong connections between criminal behaviour and codes of masculinity (Hobbs 1994; Jefferson 1994), the way masculinity has been socially defined (Hatty 2000), and the theoretical link between male gendered identity and crime (Collier 1998; Winlow 2002). Particular attention here is paid to 'the bottom of the social hierarchy', where men utilise their gendered behaviour and coping strategies to achieve their aims (Holter 2005), especially if 'access to male identity as moral and economic categories is denied' (Morgan 2005: 169). Theoretically embedded in ideas of 'hetero-normativity' (Ingraham 2002; Wittig 2002) in relation to the formation of gendered identities, the assumption is that learned gendered behaviours lay the foundations of future responses to non-conforming and discrepant experiences (Boenisch and Winter 1993), and 'socially conditioned ideas of entitlement and aggression' (Hatty 2000: 70)

become determining factors when choosing 'deviant coping strategies' (Lui and Kapland 2004). The underlying assumption is that the experience of violence, physical, sexual and psychological abuse (Malamuth and Thornhill 1994), learned coping strategies, the function of male role models (Harris 1995) and the absence of alternative coping mechanisms (Spatz Widom 1994; Hatty 2000) potentially generate delinquent behaviour, 'which is not wholly different from the dominant male adult culture' (Hobbs 1994; Winlow 2002: 40). Despite theoretical links between masculinity and criminal behaviour made in the literature, little research has explored whether, and if so, how male identity is linked to the offending behaviour of boys and men, thereby ignoring long-standing calls for gender-focused approaches and understandings of masculinity in the work with boys and men and crime prevention and intervention (Dominelli 1992; Buckley 1996; Scourfield 1998).

## The setting

How, then, can theories of masculinity inform research with and on young males and why should this research take place in the arena of youth justice and crime? Approximately 80% of young people in contact with the Youth Justice System (YJS) are male and 85% of those males are 'white British' (Youth Justice Board (hereafter YJB) 2009). Although the 'gender gap' in pros-

ecution of crimes is shifting towards a more equal treatment (Steffenmeier and Schwartz 2009), boys and girls are still treated differently by the YJS (Feizler and Hood 2004). Whereas boys' criminal behaviour is commonly viewed as normative and is central to cultural codes of masculinity and male toughness (Muncie 1999), girls are not sanctioned simply for the crime committed, but also for the 'social crime of contravening normative expectations of appropriate female conduct' (Ashford et al 1997: 9). If the epitome of masculinity, in particular for males situated at the lower end of the social hierarchy (Holter 2005), is the expression of aggression and violence accessed when other subject categories as males are denied, then the demographic data of young people in the YJS lends itself to an appropriate research area to explore masculinity and the formation of male identity. As highlighted earlier, the contemporary literature on masculinities, and the development of male identity in itself, provides sufficient evidence for steering youth justice practices in a more gendered direction, accommodating theories of how male socialisation heavily influences the way a young person develops personal relationships, his lifestyle, physical health, emotional and mental health, and his perception of self and others. However, since the reformation of the YJS by New Labour in 1998, no attempt has been made to enquire

into masculinity and offending, or indeed explore gendered approaches in relation to men in order to inform crime prevention and intervention, although the most obvious common denominator of young people in the YJS is their gender. Linking masculinity and offending behaviour back to the literature and justifying the YJS as a research setting to explore masculinity, Oystein G. Holter (2005) suggests that men at the bottom of the social hierarchy in particular utilise their gendered behaviour and coping strategies to achieve their aims, especially 'if access to male identity as a moral and an economical category is denied' (Morgan 2005: 169) The child's experience of its gendered socialisation lays the foundation for future strategies to responses and behaviour (Boenisch and Winter 1993). Role expectations and structural inequalities add to the determining factors when choosing deviant coping strategies (Lui and Kapland 2004), which are tied to the socio-structural disadvantaged and 'generally enacted or inflicted upon the more marginalised groups of society' (Hatty 2000:6). This applies particularly if the subject in question has experienced physical and psychological abuse during his childhood (Egeland 1993; Spatz Widom 1994), which is the case for a high number of adult male prisoners (Morgan 2002). Hence, it appears entirely reasonable to understand men's higher involvement in the arena of criminal offences as

a product of socially learned and validated expressions of masculinity, internalised as legitimate parts of male identity and coupled with the absence of alternative coping strategies or models of behaviour (De Keseredy and Schwartz 2005). The literature highlights that lower income male youth are more likely to be 'pushed towards delinquency' (Hobbs 1994; Winlow 2002: 38), which justifies the YJS as the chosen research setting. Lastly, the YJS and the Criminal Justice System have repeatedly been accused of being designed around the needs of male offenders (Caulfield 2010) and on the basis of male values (Liebling 2004), so it lends itself as the ideal research setting for research on masculinity and young males.

## Issues with current debates on masculinity

However, there are several conceptual issues with theories on masculinity in general and masculinity in the context of the YJS. Prominent ideas of masculinity are strongly embedded in feminist theory of patriarchy and analysed as relations of power and control, on one hand, and consequently, as oppression and dependency on the other (Connell 1987, 2005; Hearn 2010). Theoretically speaking, this approach generates polarised constructs of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine' and thereby paves the way for the rather ominous concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Demekratis

2001; Connell 2005). This concept, in turn, is utilised to explain, research, and understand masculinity and logically reinforces its roots in the conceptual framework of the patriarchy (Fuss 1990). Therefore, the very dichotomy at the foundation of theories of the patriarchy allows no other conceptual understanding of masculinity and femininity than their contrariety to one another (Acker 1989). Although theories of the patriarchy lend themselves to perhaps understanding gender structurally, they assist little in comprehending the formation of gender identity on the level of agency and in any specific cultural and social context (Acker 1989). Furthermore, while queer theory (Ingraham 2002; Wittig 2002) underlines how concepts of masculinity (and femininity) are strongly tied into heteronormative subject positions of male and female and do not translate into terminology beyond this dichotomy, it does not offer any comprehensive theoretical framework to understanding the formation of male identity. Instead, the coherent and comprehensible concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' has been distraught into an almost in-cohesive and fragmented 'male identity' with its main feature being that it is different. At best, however, this approach to masculinity offers explanations for any expression and formation of male identity which is essentially deviant to 'hegemonic' masculinity, and thereby is equally 'relational' in terms of its position

within a theoretical dichotomy, but also assists little in establishing a more rounded idea of the formation of masculinity. In addition to these conceptual issues, there is a distinct lack of the actual lived experience of men in the research and theory on the formation of male identity and masculinity (Seidler 2006). While they embark on a theoretical exploration of masculinity and the formation of male identity on a mainly structural level, the actual performance of gender and the practical negotiation of masculinity as active agents are absent from the debate. Here, Judith Butler (1990) and Beverley Skeggs (1997) offer some very useful insights into how masculinity (and femininity) unfold in the actual social agent, but remain distant from research on masculinity, which includes men and their actual lived experiences as men. Lastly, a shift from masculinity to its plural, masculinities, to grant space to some heterogeneity within the discourse on masculinity does not fill the rifts conceptual issues of theories on masculinity have left, and again leave actual men out of the research and theory on masculinity (Fuss 1990).

## Men – essentially speaking

Acknowledging conceptual issues of theories on masculinity, for the purpose of the research it appears necessary in order to conduct research on men to return to an essentialist understanding of gender to identify research subjects and participants as 'male' and 'female' (Fuss 1990). The research itself has been designed to accommodate not only the lived experience of (young) men themselves, but also practitioners' ideas around masculinity in the YJS, on the Practice Level, and the incorporation of assessment forms of young males to explore how, if at all, masculinity does or can play a role in youth justice policy, on the Policy Level. The overall research question formulated in order to meet those objectives is: What, if any, role does masculinity play in the context of the Youth Justice System? Specific focus will be on potential links which can be made between concepts of masculinity and male youth offending, the experience of masculinity of young men themselves in the YJS, how the assessment of young males in the YJS is influenced, or not, by concepts of masculinity, and how, if at all, Youth Justice Policy incorporates concepts of masculinity. Research methods employed to investigate the role of concepts of masculinity in the YJS, or indeed their absence, are entirely qualitative and consist of focus groups and interviews with staff and young people, ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation as well as secondary analysis of assessment documents of the young people. This multi-methods approach aims to encompass not only the experience of the young males themselves, but also ideas of masculinity of the staff, and the relevance of such, as well

as an analysis of whether, and if so how, documents designed for the purpose of assessing young men in the YJS bear any notion of concepts of masculinity.

## The boy turn in Youth Justice

As such, the research aims to not only provoke a 'boy turn' (Hightower 2004) in Youth Justice Policy, but also hopes to be able to draw more far-reaching conclusions for social policy in general by uncovering how the absence of the discussion of men and masculinity itself is part of men's gendering (Hearn 2010). Its objective is to put men and boys back into the research and conceptualisation of masculinity by including their lived experiences of masculinity. Further, by highlighting its absence, this project underlines the lack of lived experience of women in policy also (Caulfield 2010), and aims to uncover the contribution social, crime, political and economic policies make to the gendering of individuals by conforming to 'hegemonic'(Connell 2005) and 'hetero-normative' (Ingraham 2002) ideas of men and women without taking lived experiences into account (Seidler 2006).

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