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# Learning to Be a Man: Friendships, Positive Male Role Models, and Behavioural Health in a Sample of Young Men from Belfast

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## Introduction

Men in Northern Ireland die by suicide approximately three times more frequently than women<sup>1</sup> and psychiatric morbidity is 25% higher than the United Kingdom overall.<sup>2</sup> This geographic disparity is strongly associated with the Troubles, a 30-year ethno-nationalist conflict during which there were 34,000 shootings, 14,000 bombings, and 3,500 deaths,<sup>3</sup> which ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Prior studies suggest strong friendships and high collective efficacy in communities are protective against suicide and self-harm in adolescents through social integration and the availability of emotional support.<sup>4</sup> However, the demands of demonstrating masculine identity often impair men and boys from forming and maintaining close relationships<sup>5</sup> making the role of positive male role models an important feature of social and behavioural support for this demographic.

## Methods

Thirty adolescent boys aged 16-19 across Belfast were recruited using trusted community partners, primarily youth centres and youth work organisations focused on restorative justice or good relations, with interviews conducted between February and November 2023. The study used the Andrizo Integrated Conceptual Framework<sup>5</sup> to contextualise the interplay of masculinity,<sup>6</sup> the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide,<sup>7</sup> and the Prototype/Willingness Model.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, participants completed the Self-Harm Inventory<sup>9</sup> and a modified Collective Efficacy Scale adapted for the Belfast Youth Development Study.<sup>10,11</sup>

Interview transcripts were analysed using a deductive framework analysis in NVivo and supplemented with key informant interviews with youth work and men's behavioural health organisations. Questionnaire responses were analysed in R using descriptive statistics. Respondent validation was conducted via the presentation of findings back to study recruitment sites to solicit feedback from study participants, their peers, and organisational staff.

## Results

The sample was nearly balanced between Catholic (46.7%) and Protestant (53.3%) participants. However, younger participants were over-represented, with more than half (56.7%) being 16 and nearly a third (30.0%) being 17 years of age. Half of the participants lived in West Belfast (50.0%) and equal numbers in North (20.0%) and South Belfast (20.0%). Traumatic experiences were common among participants, including the serious substance use issues, deaths of parents, losses of friends and family to suicide, and homelessness. Two participants had made a suicide attempt and 25 (83.33%) reported ever engaging in self-harm.

This study yielded a number of findings related to the rich social lives of young men, the organisation of their communities, and the deep need for positive male role models in spaces associated with masculine strength.

### Theme 1: The importance of emotionally intimate friendships among male peers

- Most participants had someone (usually a close mate or a parent) with whom there was some level of emotional support.
- Although most participants felt that emotionally intimate friendships were important to promote good behavioural health and would welcome a friend coming to them, they frequently said that they would share their own troubles. This was often motivated by fears of burdensomeness and was more common among older participants.
- The length of a friendship was an important determinant of trustworthiness, and tests of loyalty were also common, often involving feeding small "secrets" to a friend to see if they would share them before entrusting personal or stigmatising concerns.

"It's just more like loyal friends, friends that I've had for a longer period of time, would be like the closer friends. And the ones that I speak to a lot more would be closer. And then the other ones would just be, you know, still be my good friends just not as close?"

"Probably just knowing that they'd have your back and that they'll always be there to just go to and just being out with them all the time and stuff. It just builds it up."

"I know, I think it's good for young men to have, you know, that sort of friendship with people, because then it just makes it easier for them, if they're going through a rough patch, or any tough times, then they can turn to their friends and you know, get help and support rather than bottling it up and making it worse for themselves."

"Well, for me, well, not for me, not anyone else, but I think everyone else's success for a man is money. But I think success for me would be having a wife, having kids. Providing for them."

### Theme 2: The pressures to perform High Traditional Masculinity to demonstrate adult manhood

- Participants had strong and well-defined beliefs about what it means to be a man, masculine success, and a man's roles in his family or community, including the need to be both a protector and provider for his (immediate or extended) family unit.
- The persona of a "hard man" who picks fights, drinks too much, uses drugs, and treats women badly was commonly contrasted with a more "sensitive man" who opens up about his feelings and helped others.
- For some participants, the pressure to be able to meet these obligations was a source of deep anxiety and that a man's inability to meet these expectations could lead to poor mental health. Several were already contributing to household expenses with wages from their part-time work.
- Participants expressed that men often feel pressure to not show their feelings and keep everything "bottled up," even though they knew this was unhealthy. Many said that they would like to be more open and sensitive to others but did not feel they could.

"Yeah, there's like, men like put on like a big masculinity like, like, a hard man. And then their some that are just floating their boat and then there are some that, like, shows their emotions as well."

"For me, a man is like he has to provide everything. So, a lot of stress go on men I think because they... men are sort of grown up to be keep your, don't ever, keep your feelings to yourself. All this here. Don't show emotion, all this here. Don't show emotion and all this here. Be big, strong... So, that's why it's a lot of men have so much stress and I would say that would be a main cause of suicide as well because of the stress among men to be this type of person that they've been told to grow up to be."

"The people. There's obviously a few grumpies but they're not that bad. And, like, there's everyone's dead on. Everyone knows everyone. That's like, it's just like home. Just a wee small area."

### Theme 3: Coexisting adaptive and maladaptive structures in communities

- Participants felt strongly connected to their communities. Mothers commonly watched each other's children and cultural events were celebrated as focal points through the year. However, some of the most important (e.g., the 12th of July, jubilees) included sectarianism or division between Catholic and Protestant communities.
- Paramilitaries were described as a present feature of community life by a third of participants. These groups threatened and destabilised communities through violence, the sale of illicit drugs, and blocking neighbourhood revitalisation projects (e.g., building new houses).
- Illicit drug use in the community was a concern across the sample, with many participants expressing that it left them feeling unsafe.
- Antisocial behaviours (either their own or in the community) including vandalism, public drug and alcohol use, and fighting at interface areas were a common feature in interviews. Their participation in these behaviours was the impetus for involvement with youth work organisations for many in the sample.

"But I love everything. Everything I need is here. My doctors, my tech, my college, my football team. The vast majority of my family. Some still live in Belfast, but in East Belfast... And I've grew up here my whole life. Know everyone. Everyone knows me. I don't whether that's a good thing or a bad thing like. But I just feel, it's just where I belong at the end of the day."

"Yeah, you can't really, you cannot open your mouth around the streets about that because you'll end up getting a wee knock at the door, meet me round here or something. So, that's why."

### Theme 4: Youth work as a mechanism to reduce both adverse behavioural health outcomes and community violence

- Almost all participants had positive or mixed feelings about Andrew Tate and even those less certain of him appreciated his financial advice or advocacy for men's mental health. They also valued his advocacy for "traditional" manhood and the classical idea of a 'strong mind in a strong body.'
- The closeness of paternal relationships did not seem to influence participants' feelings about Tate's misogyny. Rather, they contrasted it with the way they would like their mothers and sisters treated.
- Participants frequently referred to the positive, transformational nature of participating in youth work organisations and the mentoring they received from youth workers, boxing trainers, and football coaches.
- However, youth workers were unique in the confidentiality they offered for disclosing a problem or "secret," such as an emotional challenge.
- Participants commonly credited their youth workers for helping them feel more confident and make safer and healthier choices.
- Youth work organisations were places where participants felt "safe" and could be themselves without worrying about judgement or unsafe actors in the community.

"Like just, say, like the stuff [Tate] has to say like he just tells young man like he's helping so much young men like break out the main like nine-to-five what everyone goes through like make them so much money just to be financially free..."

"He's, like, when I see [Youth Worker], I would think he's a man because he's got, he's got, he's actually got his own football team. He's got a wife, he's got kids, the car. He's got everything he needs, he's successful. Just, [Name] would be good to look up to. Because that's a stable lifestyle."

"I agree with some of the stuff [Tate] says, but not everything he says. So, with some of the stuff he says about men's mental health, if you go to the gym, it can help, and eat well, that... all the stuff around men's mental health, I believe in. But just some of the stuff he says about women being property and stuff like that, I don't really properly agree with."

"Like, if like anyone was going to speak, [they would] probably be like a youth leader."

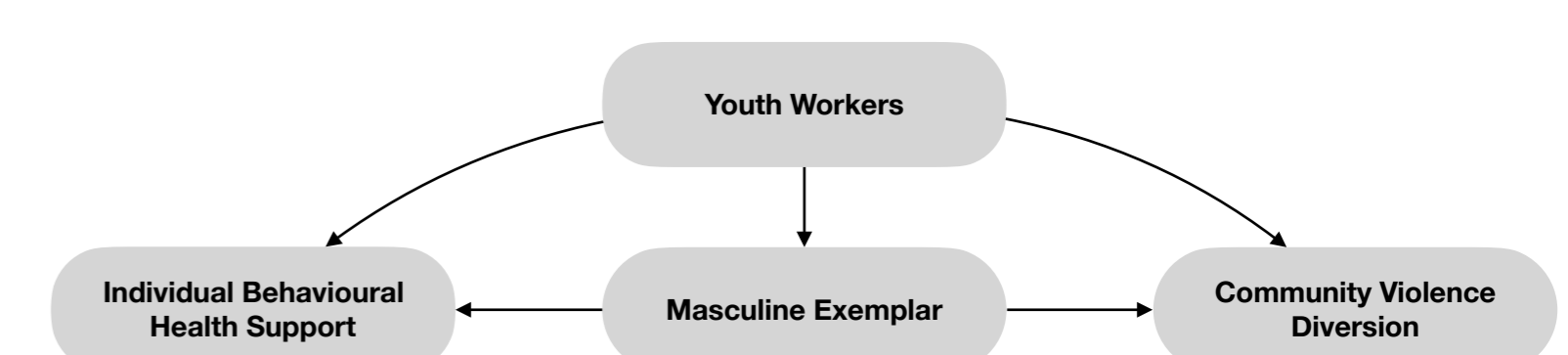
"Or there's at the other side, you could talk to maybe youth leader if you don't have parents and you don't have, like, youth leaders are confidential as well."

"My main sort of statement that I want to put across is to keep investing in the youth centres and in cross-community groups and just in any youth groups because it does help them. They go in to socialise and enjoy themselves and they also do get certain courses they'll do at the end. They'll get, like, a leaflet with all, like, the support services that they can turn to if they need it."

## Discussion

The study suggests a need for positive male role models for young men in spaces they associate with masculine strength and physical fitness, as well as support for the development of emotional literacy to identify and name feelings of emotional distress.

Significantly, youth workers emerged as some of the most central figures in young men's lives, providing both individual-level behavioural health support and acting as positive, interrupting forces to reduce sectarian and other antisocial behaviours in the community. Their ability to perform these functions was closely tied to their status as "masculine exemplars" who demonstrate a prototype of positive masculine behaviour. This positionality made them a powerful counter to the influence of online figures like Andrew Tate.



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## References and Contact Information

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