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MSc Social Justice and Community Action

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Community Engagement: Co-constructing  
Knowledge with Communities

*“Boys Don’t Cry’ and the other deleterious effects  
of Toxic Masculinity”*

Since 1997, New Labour and Conservative governments pushing an agenda for a 'big society' have continually fetishized the concept of community, with it being a convenient fig-leaf for the hollowed-out, decentralised state (Shaw, 2008, p. 34). This fetishization occurred through a recognition of neoliberal policies from the 1970s and as such was "*mobilized as a response to the Conservatives' overriding emphasis on the free play of market forces*" (Hancock, Mooney, & Neal, 2012, p. 346). However, the problem with this approach is that it is incognisant of the structural issues and inequalities caused by a neoliberal agenda. Brent (2004, p. 214) defines this as the 'illusion' of modern day communitarianism. Hancock et al. (2012, p. 359) support this claim by arguing that:

*"These depoliticized governance versions of community are declassed and deracialized in that they do not draw on or recognize how human collectivities or groupings use their own capacities and creative resources to cope and manage in contexts of poverty, racism and exclusion."*

In order to combat this 'depoliticization' of the notion of community it is necessary to reframe it and re-politicise it to our advantage as social justice practitioners. As such, I intend on devising a community engagement programme around toxic masculinity, in particular how we can affect change on young men and boys. The term 'Toxic Masculinity' is used to describe the harmful effects patriarchal norms have on society in general. This could be the effect such norms have on men, evidenced by the suicide rate of men being three times higher than that of women in the UK (Samaritans, 2012); or the effect it has on misrecognised groups in society such as violence towards women and committing hate crime towards LGBT communities (Kalish Blair, 2016).

In an increasingly globalised world, the consequences of Neoliberalism make "*getting to grips with the variegated effects on Men's lives and identities essential*" (Cornwall, 2016, p. 9). As men are traditionally characterised by attributes such as "*striving for power and dominance, aggressiveness, courage, independency, efficiency, rationality, competitiveness, success, activity, control and invulnerability*" (Möller-Leimkühler, 2003, p. 3), this model of 'inscription' outlined by Skeggs (2004) has deleterious consequences on the wellbeing of young men who are subject to a lack of emotional sensitivity and inexpressiveness. Indeed, The Samaritans (2012) suggest that this 'hegemonic masculinity' is a potential cause for the relative likelihood of male suicide and I would argue that these patriarchal norms inscribed upon men are evidenced in the most innocent of films such as Billy Elliot whereby the traditional working-class northern male identity is challenged by a ballet dancing boy and even Disney productions which reinforce traditional gender stereotypes- such as the princess needing saved and the prince being the heroic, strong saviour. Indeed, it is often the case that the gendered language used towards men is oppressive with such phrases such as 'boys don't cry' and 'man up' indicative of the idea that men should not be subservient to their emotions. In

fact, the only ways that men are permitted to be expressive or emotional often lead to particularly damaging effects for society. Anger, aggression and hostility are perversely seen as the *'acceptable face of male expressiveness'* (Möller-Leimkühler, 2003, p. 3) with the result having disastrous consequences. Gary Younge's (2018) Guardian article charts a path from toxic masculine culture through to terrorism and mass murder. It is very often the case that the media commentariat question whether there are links between Islam and Terrorism. It is therefore an entirely legitimate parallel that Younge draws between toxic masculine culture and terrorism given that almost all terrorists are men. Certainly, Younge's argument is compelling when he suggests that this is due to many men being *"Unable to take advantage of the male privileges they believe they are owed"* and compounded when the upsurge in so-called 'Incels' (Involuntarily Celebrates) has led to mass killings of women and LGBT communities. A particularly heinous example is that of the Pulse Nightclub killings in 2016 and whilst it is unclear as to what the shooter's primary motivations were around this incident such as gender, race and sexuality which *"do not emerge in isolation either of each other or of the political economic context in which they occur"* (Kalish Blair, 2016), it is reasonable to suggest that toxic masculinity is still able to produce these particular outcomes as imbrications within a larger framework of hegemonic capitalist social relations (Holloway, 2010). In order to address these relations it is necessary to use Fraser's (2005, p. 73) model of dismantling institutionalised obstacles so that men can be full partners in social interactions with regards to their expressive and emotional rights whilst not infringing on the rights of misrecognised groups.

As a further education lecturer and active member of my trade union branch, I find myself strategically placed to enact this kind of change and will be utilising a Participatory Action Research approach. I am greatly influenced by Swantz's ideas of PAR especially as it seems to be the best way *"to break the false objectivism of positivist social science."* (Swantz, 2008, p. 3). As I have already stated that I am of the firm belief that Toxic Masculinity is a symptom of neoliberal ideals and patriarchal norms, it would be remiss of me to engage in any other methodology. Indeed the very nature of PAR means that I can incorporate other ideas such as emancipatory action research (Ledwith, 2007) and contextual analysis (Gewirtz, 2013) to meet my pre-defined criteria of addressing the issue within the sphere of social justice

A key pillar of trade unionism is promoting equality and my trade union already has an excellent policy on gender issues entitled *"Get It Right For Girls"* (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2016). This policy contains some excellent strategies for challenging misogynistic behaviour endemic in our classrooms and is a good resource for confronting the damaging and potentially violent aspects of Toxic Masculinity. What is regrettably lacking is how we should support boys and young men who are affected and oppressed by the various components of Toxic Masculinity. As such my community

engagement project will focus on addressing the impacts on boys and young men who are subject to the outcomes of a toxic masculine culture. I have chosen two communities to engage with. Firstly, I shall engage trade union members in the project so that there is a united approach to tackling the problem. If I am to fully engage in action research in this domain, Ledwith's (2007, p. 608) suggestion that it needs to be "*strategic and collective*" means that both I and our members are perfectly placed to unlock its transformative potential by reclaiming this academic space for less powerful actors (Gaventa, 2006, p. 27). There is an enhanced level of citizenship on behalf of our union members here too whereby collectivist cultures are seen as having higher levels of civic participation (Bee & Pachi, 2014, p. 106) and this increased engagement will only serve to benefit the aims and objectives of the trade union in the future.

To engage union members, I have chosen to create a video which is designed to inform and influence their views on Toxic Masculinity. This video will rely heavily on creative common resources around the topic and be supplemented with facts from the Samaritans report and quotes from articles such as those written by Gary Younge and Kalish Blair. This will be done in a style mirroring that of Mark Thomas' Dispatches (Channel 4, 2011) report into weapons buying which shocked the viewer by highlighting the ease of which young people could buy weapons over the internet. The particularly useful approach that Thomas used was recruiting willing student participants to the project, so I envisage using this method by enlisting the help of already engaged social science students to research and write the material and utilise our film and TV students to produce the material in a documentary style. This creative licence given to the students initially will enhance their civic participation due to a transcendence of standard participatory processes (Bull, Petts, & Evans, 2008, p. 701). Following on from the creation and dissemination of this video, union members will be asked to complete relevant surveys to ascertain perspectives and gather some baseline data, then those who wish to participate will be involved in the next step of the process which involves engaging the students.

For context, I have chosen to work with male students within the college setting as the vast majority of my own students are male and I have first-hand experience of the effects on their mental wellbeing. I have been liaising with a representative of an organisation called The Good Lad Initiative who run a series of workshops designed to promote positive masculinity. Their workshops will be embedded into the students' timetabled personal development classes with the first task to complete a questionnaire/survey, again to ascertain baseline data around the issue. Indeed, their aims tie in with my own and fill the gaps in the EIS' "Get It Right For Girls" strategy by arguing that "*In most conversations about gender inequality and violence against women, men only hear about what not to do. It is time to do more.*" There is a paradox highlighted here where patriarchal norms

are not challenged by being reframed but used to punish men for being subject to these toxic masculine traits- ironically a paternalistic, authoritarian approach to managing the issue. Croft and Beresford (2011) suggest that to address this paradox of participation these groups need proper access and support to feel their full involvement, hence the use of the personal development time to give proper access and to have already engaged teaching staff to give proper support. The workshops will provide a space for students to have a vital shared learning experience by co-creating an educational dialogue (Kazepides, 2012) with the objective being to generate a democratically decided policy or set of positive behaviour guidelines for men. This in fact goes some way to achieving Fraser's idealistic concept of *parity of participation* (Fraser, 2001, p. 6) by encouraging interaction on a purely peer based level, and whilst Fraser voices concerns that identity based models tend to reify group identities, I believe that this strategy of social learning will internalise a deeper learning and engagement with these students being involved in a "*community of practice*" (Bull et al., 2008, p. 702) which will in fact serve to create a new and positive identity for masculine culture.

A key criticism I personally have of tertiary education is that, due to an agenda of austerity and the commodification of knowledge (Brackmann, 2015, p. 116), we have a culture of 'learning for the sake of earning' and forgo our primary objective of critical engagement. This perspective is supported by Hartley et al. (2010, p. 396) who argue that "*We need a movement that puts the question of the democratic purpose of higher education on the table*" and as such we need to find space in these workshops for critical engagement of how masculinity is sold and perceived. With the aim of enacting a type of critical literacy, I believe that the most appropriate model for accomplishing this is set out by Gewirtz (2013, p. 79) who suggests that that we need a contextualised approach by:

- a) looking at the multi-dimensional nature of justice;
- b) looking at the tensions between different dimensions of justice;
- c) being sensitive to the mediated nature of just practices; and
- d) being sensitive to differences in the contexts and levels within which justice is enacted.

This ultimately provides the framework within which I would expect our union members to work from and the idea would be that, upon liaising with the Good Lad representatives, we would identify areas where we could implement this contextualised approach as part of the workshop in order to garner a deeper understanding of the critical literacies required when addressing recognition issues. Undeniably, these emancipatory strategies are a necessary component of research practice when

trying to deal with issues of misrecognition (Ledwith, 2007) and only when the consequences of one's actions become the object of critical self-reflection do we achieve some sort of authentic praxis (Freire, 2017, p. 41).

I would further argue that by instigating this approach we are disrupting the neoliberal paradigms which have caused these issues but cannot now address them appropriately. This ultimately overt approach is influenced by Mark Fisher's idea of a 'Marxist Supernanny' (Fisher, 2007, p. 71) which suggests that children are "*unable to recognize their own interests, unable to apprehend either the causes of their actions or their (usually deleterious) effects*" and that this Supernanny would sort out socialisation problems which are structural in nature and reject the idea of individual troubleshooting. By bypassing curricula norms that have been created to support neoliberal ideals, we are in fact "*transferring executive power*" (Bee & Pachi, 2014, p. 114) back to the teaching staff and the students and out of the hands of those who seek to perpetuate and further normalise current gender stereotypes.

Evaluating these strategies will again rely on quantitative and qualitative feedback. Union members and students alike will be asked to feedback via surveys on how they felt the workshops went, what learning took place, and also how their own perspectives had changed due to the participation in this project. In order to move this forward to a college and trade union national level, I would share the findings with the union members and student participants who would then democratically co-create a Toxic Masculinity strategy to be distributed on a local level to the relevant stakeholders with a view to influencing national policy within colleges and trade unions. This co-creation of knowledge through Participatory Action Research is absolutely key to developing 'bottom-up-literacies' (Torres, 2010) and by holding a mirror up to current top-down, paternalistic norms we are in fact shifting education back from being in a state of commodification to one of knowledge for public good (Brackmann, 2015, p. 116). Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) shows that degrees of citizen control are achieved through higher levels of participation and a key metric of this project will be to understand whether we have achieved a high level of participation which will become obvious once the workshops are in place and staff and students alike are engaged in the project. High levels of engagement generate better decisions and benefits for citizens as laid out in the Brisbane Declaration (United Nations, 2005) so it is absolutely critical that we strive for a high level of civic participation.

On a purely idealistic level, the only true evaluation of the project will appear however when we see concrete proof of further pluralist approaches to power in public spaces (Gaventa, 2006, p. 29) or those less visible academic spaces reclaimed by fully engaged teachers and learners. Only then will

be able to realise that, if as Hanisch (2006) argues the personal is indeed political, the reclamation of these academic spaces to push back the destructive effects of neoliberal agendas and the re-politicisation of the notion of community is unconditionally critical.

### Project Evaluation

Regrettably, it proved impossible to find a mutually convenient time to get The Good Lad Initiative involved and finding time within my increasingly busy work schedule and taking on substantial local casework as a rep has meant that I have been personally unable to find time to create the aforementioned video either. The framework for the project still exists however and in hindsight, this project was always going to be time consuming. I feel that there is scope to develop it within a more ethnographic approach and the background research and theory stands me in good stead to develop this in the future. There is plenty of context within my background research as to what the issues are and why they exist and I have linked the aims of my research with the EIS' own strategies on gender equality, such as Get It Right For Girls.

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