Men Who Care: The Residential Setting as an Opportunity for Male Gender Development

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Abstract

To say that the current climate of gender socialization for young men is a challenging one would be a gross understatement. Popular media, family expectations and even supportive and educational programming models deliver a primarily traditional set of ideals for young men to aspire to: the independent leader and breadwinner, tough, strong and masculine. Additionally, one attribute is consistently seen as necessary for complete male development: the influence of a positive, same gender, and ideally family, role model. For the male youth in residential care, this normative expectation of development may be inaccessible. The following is an account of some of my perceptions and experiences as a male youth worker providing direct-care in a residential care facility. Often assuming the role of primary male figure in the life of young men transitioning into adulthood, I am at once both distinctly challenged by Western developmental and patricentric informed residential care practices as well as uniquely positioned to help define what it means to be male to these youths. Through these experiences I have come to realize that a child and youth care worker is uniquely positioned to disrupt gender role expectations as well as model egalitarianism in the home. To further help explain the tensions between gendered expectations and the caring values of youth work I will briefly unpack various assumptions that contribute to society's pathological outlook on 'fatherless' male development, specifically as it relates to boys in the residential and foster care system. Additionally, I will explicate my personal view of the male carer as a non-traditional identity and employment choice. It is my perspective that the perceived gender roles that station men who care as an abnormality, simultaneously present a unique opportunity for these men to impart a balanced outlook of gender expectations towards the developing youth they care for.

Keywords
gender socialization, residential care, male youth workers

Part 1: The Lost Boys

Western developmental discourses inform the policies and practices that regulate state sanctioned, child apprehensions and placements. Tragically, these frameworks designed to support and empower youth, label young men living within the system as fundamentally broken. This imposed pathology begins with the dominant culture's expectations of fathering and paternal roles.

In her review of current literature on masculinity, Burman (2008) argues that there are three primary roles that are available to the modern father. Firstly, the inclusion model sees fathering as assimilated into mothering, thereby ignoring the countless possible unique differences in the roles such as biological differences and the opportunity for gender modeling. A second position proclaims the "equal but different complementary of maternal and paternal roles, an account which falls into biologically pre-given sexual divisions (Burman, 2008, p.166). A third approach is viewed as a role reversal, whereby the father stays at home while the mother works. Burman (2008) asserts that the very label of this variant of fatherhood as a so-called aberration reinforces the normative and accepted roles that it deviates from.

The negative impact a limited view of fathering has on boys in care can be sizable. Foremost, youth in care have been categorized. They are involved in a provision of the state designed to engage when – for a variety of reasons – they have not been able to meet the expectations of family care imposed by the dominant system. Whether involved in the circumstances or even consciously aware of them matters not. Involvement in any way is sure to create internalization of deviance or malfunction, followed by shame for not being part of any of the previously defined conceptualizations of father and son.

Secondly, because the 'father figure' is seen as the pinnacle of male gender knowledge in the patriarchal family, the absence of his presence in the life of a pubescent, "system boy" all but guarantees his developmental outcome to be abnormal.

It is my stance that the above challenges in male gender socialization for fatherless boys are especially problematic for young men in residential care. Yet, as I will elaborate in the second half of this article, they provide a unique opportunity for imparting egalitarian values while a greater understanding of gender role flexibility is simultaneously presented.

Taking a close look at some current media, recent literature and Western approaches to male gender socialization we can see that the expectations of what it takes to be a

man have changed little in recent decades. Rough and tumble images still abound in pop culture of all varieties and, of course, in the ever presence of athletic prowess. These versions of gender development can be traced to a Euro-centered and patriarchal based ideal; the provider, the breadwinner, the successful capitalist (Baxter & Shimoni, 2008). Although traditional notions of patriarchy have undergone considerable change with industrialization and post-industrialization, they are far from disappearing (Burman, 2008). A recent Canadian study by the development agency Plan International found that 45 percent of adolescents polled thought that "to be a man, you need to be tough" and that 31 percent of boys believed that a woman's most important role is feeding her family and taking care of the home (Van der Gaag, 2011).

Why does this generally unaltered Western image of the tough, strong, self-sufficient male continue to resonate with boys and young men? Why in a time of constant change, instant information and fluidity of previously concrete concepts do we see stagnation in male gender development? We need to look no further than the predominately supported notion of who men should be socialized by: other men.

An online search discovers that some male mentorship programs offered in Canada and the United States trumpet their "men teaching men" ideologies while simultaneously showing itemized deviant outcomes all but certain for "fatherless boys" ("Boys to Men", 2015). And while these are often scare tactics that discount or completely ignore the massive influence of structurally imposed hardships such as poverty, racism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and classism, it is understandable why these ideas may resonate considering that current popular discourse has created a binary and completely paradoxical concept of men as either caring father or social problem (Burman, 2008).

So where does this leave a young man in residential care? By definition lacking the former and internalizing and following the self-fulfilling prophecy of the latter. Yet, as mentioned, in this alternate and often pathologized framework of state-sanctioned child rearing lies the opportunity for growth and re-conceptualization of gender norms for young men.

Adolescence is a period of dramatic development and interpersonal change. It is a period of gender intensification when stereotyping attitudes and behaviors are explored and often a movement to more traditional gender identity occurs (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011).

Theories of adolescent development include various constructs that seek to explain gender identification. Gender intensification theory (Priess, Lindberg, Hyde, 2009) presents the understanding that family context, coupled with socialization during the period of adolescence, further intensifies gender role identities, attitudes and behaviors. Hess, Ittel, and Sisler, (2014) found that gender intensification theory was especially salient with boys. In their examination of gender specific parenting they found that heavily gender stereotyped messages in parenting affected children's gender role orientation. The study concluded that while both genders are influenced by the parents' gender views, boys more so than girls perceive parenting as more gender specific and are therefore more actively affected by paternal expressions of gender attitudes and expectations (Hess *et al*., 2014).

These may not appear to be overly unexpected findings, but when coupled with both developmental timing and the common practice in residential homes to match youth with workers of the same gender, one can see the importance of appropriate gender role modeling in this setting. It is my view that to develop a healthy and respectful outlook towards the inherent value in all people, the developing male must be exposed to the wide variety of roles and characteristics available to everyone, regardless of gender. I believe that male youth workers have the opportunity to utilize the gendered residential environment as well as their personal ethics of care for others to positively impact the views, values and outlooks boys in care have towards people of all genders.

Part 2: An Opportunity for Egalitarianism

The three years I spent as a residential care worker in the southern interior of British Columbia were exhausting and frustrating, as well as an incredibly rich learning experience. The locations and requirements of the position were, by definition, remote and isolating: multiple day, 24-hour, one-on-one shifts with little or no support. The youth ranged in age from 12 up to 19 years of age at which point most 'aged out of care' unless they were placed with an adoptive family prior to this threshold. Most had been through several foster care homes, ultimately leading them to this specialized form of housing and care. Workers and youth were always gender matched for reasons that were never fully articulated to either party. In my experience this resulted in youth having limited interactions with adults of the opposite gender within the home environment.

The therapeutic use of self was central to my practice in those experiential learning times. They provided, and necessitated, the opportunity to internally explore parts of my being as I never had before. I began to deconstruct the various parts of my identity; the physical and social person, including my gender and place in the community I worked and lived. The academic and privileged white male; I was housed, educated and employed. The familial self: a son, brother and supportive friend. But mostly in those moments I was a professional carer, a man trying to, as Krueger (2007) so aptly states, "bring self to the moment and learn from these feelings and insights as I interacted with and learned from youth" (p.40).

In this role of a male carer I also saw myself as somewhat of an anomaly. Not because I was a man who cared but because I was a male carer. Educated and employed to care for the some of the most marginalized people and employed in a field primarily connected with the maternal role of women (Hoagland, 1991). Further, I had intentionally chosen a "pink collar" career path and dove in head first; education, employment, personal identity and all.

In line with research into men who care and make non-traditional career choices, I have usually seen myself as different (Cavanagh & Cree, 1996; Chusmir, 1990). I have always recognized and embraced the characteristics in my personality that would be considered feminine. I was raised in a primarily matriarchal milieu and had a strained relationship with my father. It is with this knowledge of my family history, ethics and parts of self that I navigate the world of a male carer.

In my experience this self-composition of the male carer is communal to men who choose this role. Both those employed as carers and those still being educated in the practice often demonstrate "attitudes and beliefs about themselves which have routinely been associated with female attributes, including a concern for friendships, intimacy and responsibility" (Cavanagh & Cree, 1996, p. 83). At the same time, male carers have often not given up those qualities that make them distinctly male. It is this combination of gender dynamics that can greatly increase the scope of their work and their impact on the lives of those they care for. I believe that by embracing traits and qualities traditionally designated as gender specific, male childcare workers are simultaneously challenging a patriarchal legacy of gender expectations as well as demonstrating a greater spectrum of possibilities available for youth of all genders.

The positive benefits of the presence of a male carer with the above mentioned characteristics and view of self in the life of a boy in the residential care system are numerous. The very image of men doing care work and other domestic tasks that generally accompany employment in a residential setting helps to model gender fluidity in the cultural and economic sphere that these young men are about to enter.

At the very least this could result in a more egalitarian outlook in current or upcoming intimate partnerships these young men engage in. Further, because they are being directly impacted by these men of non-traditional profession it is possible that they may develop a more positive outlook of, and greater participation in, previously female defined tasks such as childcare and house work.

Additional impacts that men employed in traditionally feminine roles can have on male socialization is the cultivation of an attitude of respect for women as a preventative measure against future acts of abuse or violence. The use of a peer leadership model, such as employed by bystander prevention programs, have shown promising findings in changing community and peer attitudes to sexual violence. Students exposed to the programs have shown attitudinal change; they are more likely to recognize and speak out against violence (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011). This framework of community prevention highlights that violence against women is a men's issue and that gender attitudes are often among the critical factors leading to an assault (Katz, 2006). Therefore, authentic changes in how men see and treat women can come from men who model behaviors that support gender equality.

Redefining care even simply within the mindset of male workers and youth could also have positive effects for the very definition and cultural understanding of care and the industry of care. Some of the strongest criticisms against the social understanding and ethics of care point at the narrow definitions of those that make up the caring field. Critics observe that ethics of care can reinforce gender stereotypes by offering a maternal care based dyadic model of a (care-giving) mother and a (care-receiving) child that overly emphasizes motherhood and does not represent a majority of experiences (Hoagland, 1991).

Considering the generally dated and problematic current state of male gender socialization, whether occurring in nuclear, blended or foster home care settings, I now see male youth workers as uniquely positioned to impress balanced and non-oppressive gender expectations upon young men. This can occur through both direct learning

opportunities such as discussions and modeling as well as the indirect examples that occur when the traditional caring context and roles are altered. Finally, male youth workers would be well informed to openly embrace their non-traditional gender characteristics as well as their career choice. Doing so not only represents freedom in vocational choice and emotional expression, but also promotes value in what are traditionally seen as female qualities such as communication, responsibility and caring for others.

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