**Rough Justice: Considerations on the role of violence, masculinity, and the alienation of young men in communities and peacebuilding processes in Northern Ireland**

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**Abstract**

Statistics reveal that young men from working class communities are over-represented amongst victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles, suicides, crime, school suspensions, expulsions and academic underachievement. Despite a new political context of peacebuilding the relationship between violence and personal safety continues to be critical to marginalised young men’s everyday lives and experiences. Drawing upon primary research from a five year longitudinal study and previous studies carried out by the Centre for Young Men’s Studies, this paper provides a critical analysis of young men born after the 1994 ceasefires capturing their sense of alienation, perceived normality of violence, unwelcomed interactions with paramilitary members and restrictive notions of masculinity. These factors combined with attitudes of suspicion and distrust surrounding the role of the police leaves young men feeling confused about law and youth justice. This paper argues the need for a more relevant school curriculum informed by, and aimed specifically at, engaging young men through a youth work methodology addressing the themes of youth justice, violence and masculinity. The authors acknowledge that whilst addressing the behaviour of certain young men can be very challenging, there is a need for those working with young men to more proactively engage young men through a ‘Balanced Approach’ of collaborative working between formal, informal and non-formal education.

Key words: work with young men, violence, paramilitaries, masculinity, peacebuilding, youth work methodology

**Introduction**

Northern Ireland is a transitional society moving from a prolonged period of political conflict towards a more peaceful and shared future. To suggest however that Northern Ireland is a society at peace is to ignore continued high levels of political violence and paramilitary activity (Gormley-Heenan and Monaghan, 2012; Nolan, 2014), and the fact that many young people remain marginalised, vulnerable and undervalued (McAllister, et al, 2009; Haydon et al, 2012). While the conflict has impacted upon all members of society, being young and male in Northern Ireland, when looked at through the lens of key statistics relating to deaths from the Troubles, suicides, contact with the juvenile justice system, gender differences in academic under-achievement and suspension and expulsion from school, paints a depressing picture.

Smyth (1998) recorded that between 1969 – 1997, 35% of all deaths relating to the Troubles were under 24 year olds of which 90% were male. There was a highly localised distribution of these deaths in urban areas (i.e. Derry/Londonderry and West and North Belfast) which related to the areas with the highest levels of deprivation and family poverty. A Review of Health & Social Care in Northern Ireland (2011) revealed that levels of death by suicide increased by 64% between 1999 and 2008, mostly carried out amongst young men. In 2010, 77% of all suicides in Northern Ireland were males, with 40.5% of all suicides amongst those aged 15-34 (Scowcroft 2012).

Punishment beatings and shootings carried out by paramilitary groups, as a brutal form of justice, were directed almost entirely on young men under 20 with varying degrees of tariffs applied (Smith, 1998; Feenan, 2002). Twenty years after the ceasefires, paramilitaries continue to be a viable threat to peacebuilding and in particular susceptible young men (Harland, 2011) in what Topping and Byrne (2012: 1) term ‘new paramilitary policing’ in the post-Troubles era of Northern Ireland. Kilpatrick (2013)cites 2013 as *a year of brutality* listing a catalogue of paramilitary attacks across Northern Ireland carried out on young men:

*November 29th- 15 year old boy is shot in the leg in his own house in Belfast*

*November 18th - 15 year old boy is shot in both legs by a gang of three masked gunmen in Coleraine*

*November 12th – masked men shoot a 21 year old man in both legs in Portrush*

*October 19th – man is shot in both buttocks in broad daylight in west Belfast*

*September 10th – man is beaten in his home by three masked men in Ballymoney*

*July 9th – 20 year old man is shot twice in both legs in Newtownabbey*

*June 27th – three young men are shot in Belfast ‘by appointment’ having been told to go to the venue beforehand.*

*May 16th – 18 year old man is shot in both legs in north Belfast*

It is these extreme and random forms of personal violence that strikes fear into young men leaving them feeling vulnerable, ‘stuck’ somewhere between ceasefires and the ideals of peacebuilding (Lloyd, 2009) and perplexed about youth justice. In the media, young men are often depicted as part of a deviant youth culture that has lost all of its morals and values reinforcing the image of young men as a ‘social problem’ (Harland, 2001). Drug abuse, crime and high levels of youth unemployment also contribute to the negative stereotyping of young men in our society which further isolates young men from mainstream society and devalues their potential contribution within local communities.

The Youth Justice Review (Review of the Youth Justice System in Northern Ireland, 2011: 22-23) states that around 10,000 young people in Northern Ireland come into contact with the criminal justice system at some level during the course of a typical year which represents just 5% of the total population in this age group (under 18). Within this review we discover that offending patterns by gender have remained steady over a number of years and shows young males committing 77% of the 9,782 recorded offences in 2009 (note that some young people will appear on more than one occasion and have committed more than one offence).

Over the past 35 years there has been a growing body of literature examining masculinities and what it means to be a man (Kimmel, et al, 2005). Whilst Ashe (2012) argues that critical studies of men and masculinities provide a framework for engaging with masculinities during times of political transition, there has been a dearth of studies into masculinities in Northern Ireland and their role within violence has been under-theorised within critical analysis of the Troubles (Ashe and Harland, 2014).

According to Crawford (2003) while the topic of how boys become men features regularly in popular writings on masculinity, it is generally ignored in academic discourses. Subsequently, boys learn to become men through unguided and accidental processes whereby each individual boy has to find his own way to learn about gender and what it means to become a man (Harland and McCready, 2012). Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity[[1]](#footnote-1) has been instrumental in informing the practices, attitudes and meanings of both masculinities and men (Moller, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity helps explain why particular norms of masculinity become dominant and why specific contexts may encourage certain forms of behaviour (Lomas, 2014). Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes not only relationships of power relations between men and women, but also identifies a hierarchy of masculinities whereby hegemonic masculinity dominates over other subordinate or marginalised masculinities, such as Black and minority ethnic groups (Robertson, 2007) homosexual men or academic achievers (Lusher and Robins, 2010). The hegemonic ideals of young men in Harland’s (2011) study were reinforced by the attitudes and behaviours of older men in their communities, including their fathers (Harland, 2011). In striving to achieve hegemonic masculinity young men believed they were expected to refute any behaviour construed as feminine and felt compelled not only to check these unwelcome character traits in themselves, but also to actively police others (Harland, et al, 2005). Young men, particularly from working class communities, trapped in, and aspiring to, traditional, stereotypical male roles have become a defining feature of male identity formation in Northern Ireland (McAlister, et al, 2009), linked to *toughness* with historical connections to an accepted legitimacy of patriarchy and the perceived dominant position of men in society (Ashe, 2012).

**Methodology**

In an attempt to get closer insights into the world of young men a five-year longitudinal study funded by the Departments of Education and Justice (NI) was carried out by the Centre for Young Men’s Studies (Harland and McCready 2012). The study focussed on adolescent boys’ academic underachievement, their experiences of violence in a post-conflict society and wider concerns about their health and well-being. The study used a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative methods. Nine post-primary schools from across Northern Ireland participated in the study with five schools being within the top 80 out of 890 most deprived Social Output Areas of Multiple Deprivation. The participating schools represented a mix of urban and rural, secondary and grammar, controlled and maintained, integrated, all-boys and co-educational. A single cohort of 378 boys aged 11-16 contributed annually to six quantitative questionnaires over the duration of the study. This included the KIDSCREEN ‘Quality of Life’ questionnaire (Rajmil et al, 2004) and the ‘Strengths and Difficulties’ questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) which was used to assess emotional and behavioural issues. From the outset, the research team wanted the study to reflect boys’ experiences and focus on what they considered to be important.

Quantitative data was supplemented by a number of qualitative approaches, including focus groups held every year within six of the nine participating schools. Youth work interventions with a sub-sample of pupils from two of the schools were also delivered by experienced youth workers employed by Youth Action Northern Ireland’s Work with Young Men’s Unit three times per year in classrooms. These typically lasted two hours. The purpose of these sessions was to elicit how the themes emanating from the quantitative questionnaires could be further explored through non-formal educational youth work approaches. Methods were adapted from approaches delivered and tested by YouthAction’s previous work with adolescent males. These sessions involved small group work, work in pairs, kinaesthetic approaches, artistic expression, story-telling and role playing. All sessions were designed to encourage discussion and increase participation through a methodology that encouraged safe risk taking, personal disclosure and experimentation. From the beginning of the study there was strong emphasis placed on a relational approach which encouraged honesty and trust building. This led to more in-depth issue based interventions in subsequent years focusing on increasingly complex aspects of adolescent development such as violence, conflict and safety issues and what it means to be a man. Interviews were also held with six experienced Year 10 Head Teachers. An in-depth case study was also conducted in an all-boys secondary school that was not participating in the longitudinal study. This school was chosen because it has been particularly successful in improving educational attainment amongst adolescent boys in an area where unemployment, poverty, educational underachievement and the Troubles had impacted for more than a generation.

**Rough Justice, Violence and Alienation**

The social context of these boys’ lives had a strong bearing upon their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes towards their communities, education and experiences of violence. Because this social context was seldom addressed in the classroom, boys perceived school as being disconnected from the reality of their everyday lives and experiences. Despite the changing political context of peacebuilding, boys voiced ongoing concerns about their personal safety and reported various forms of violence as simply “*just the way it is”.* As these boys progressed through adolescence their perceptions of violence, law and order became more complex and more considered thought was given to the place of violence in their lives. However they found nothing in school or their community that helped them cope with the threat of violence or conflict.

Boys, particularly those living in interface areas[[2]](#footnote-2), spoke of ongoing incidences of sectarianism and increased levels of racism. They also spoke of being in persistent conflict with the police while simultaneously being hassled by other men, young and old, presenting themselves as members of paramilitary organisations. Whether from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds, the presence and control of paramilitaries in working class communities was a recurring theme. Many of the boys recalled the injustice of paramilitaries inflicting punishment on them and their friends for so called anti-social behaviour, while those inflicting this punishment were not being held to account for their own actions in drug dealing and other crimes. They believed that while paramilitary members were often the main administrators of justice within their communities, they set double standards by carrying out the same types of anti-social behaviour for which other young men received punishment. Similar types of ‘rough justice’ that shape how young people in Northern Ireland construct their understanding of law and order has been argued by others (see McAlister, et al, 2009).

Young men spoke of *unwritten rules* whereby they cannot go to the police to report any crime for fear of being seen as a *“tout/grass”*. The fact that young men and other community members do not go to the police for fear of reprimand undoubtedly makes it much easier for paramilitaries to exert fear and control. Young people not reporting victimisation to the police confers with other research (e.g. Zaykowski, 2013). However unlike the young people who may not report to the police because they can seek help from others in authority roles such as parents, teachers, principals, and child protection services, the young men in this Northern Ireland study felt there was no one they could talk to about victimisation (for similar findings see Haydon, et al, 2012).

During early adolescence (age 11-13), of those who experienced being a victim of violence, 48.8% did not talk to anyone about it. This increased significantly to 68% during mid-adolescence (age 14-16) showing that as these boys got older they were less likely to report victimisation to the police or seek support from others. Zaykowski (2013:54) similarly found that ‘violent behaviour and witnessing violence were significant and negatively related to adolescents reporting to the police.’

There was a notable decrease in the number of boys getting into trouble as they progressed through adolescence (74.9% in early adolescence down to 42.6% in mid adolescence). However the fact that so many adolescent boys felt there was no one they would talk to about being a victim of violence, including paramilitary victimisation, is extremely concerning. Young men’s reluctance to seek emotional support has been a key and consistent finding in the Centre for Young Men’s research over the past ten years (Harland, 2000; McCready, et al., 2006; Lloyd, 2009; Harland, 2011; Harland and McCready, 2010; 2012).

10 per cent of boys spoke of how perpetrating acts of violence gave them a ‘buzz.’ These boys perceived violence as a legitimate way of dealing with issues and often spoke in a supportive way about paramilitary organisations. These young men spoke passionately about how their fathers, uncles and grandfathers had been imprisoned during the Troubles and recalled stories about *local heroes* who fought for their community. The same boys reported not liking education, learning and teachers. There was a strong association between these adolescent boys’ stereotypical masculine attitudes and greater levels of misbehaviour in school.These boys, in particular, typically spoke of displaying masculine traits that included *“acting tough, strong and powerful.”* Showing other feelings was perceived as a sign of weakness. Banter, bravado and various forms of pushing and shoving were considered the norm. However the boundaries between what these boys perceived as healthy male banter and acts of violence were unclear.

Boys spoke of other boys having reputations for *“being tough*.*”* Bullying was typically perpetrated by a small number of boys (10-13%) on a small number of boys (10%) – although boys spoke of their need to feel safe and be free from bullying in school. This was very important to boys. In describing violence in the school setting boys referred to *“being bullied”* whereas when discussing bullying outside of the school and in their community it was referred to as *“violence*.*”* This careful use of language in this case displays a hierarchy whereby in school bullying is perceived to be a lesser form than the violence experienced outside of school. The most severe forms of violence however were always perceived as happening outside of school and frequently connected to weekend incidences were drugs and alcohol were involved. *“Being out of their head”* was given as a key reason why boys resorted to violence.

Boys also spoke of feeling alienated and marginalised from their communities and decision making processes. In quantitative data boys further reported high levels of fidgeting, restlessness, being easily distracted and feeling nervous in new situations. This was underpinned by perceptions from boys that adults and the media increasingly viewed them with suspicion and distrust, particularly as they got older - a perception that was also apparent in their attitude towards young men from different communities. The *disconnect* between these boys’ lives and their relationships with adults who negatively stereotype them was stark. Not one of the boys in this study was able to articulate how things could possibly change in the future and were unaware of their potential role in the creation a new and peaceful society. There was no sense of role within a *Peace Process.* While it is important that adolescent boys are accepted and promoted as part of communities and family life, at present there appears to be little in place to facilitate this process.

**Youth Justice and Youth Work Methodologies**

Despite discourses of inclusion and child/ human rights, young people are regularly represented as *‘problems’* to their communities and to the peace process. In Northern Ireland there is a separate justice system for children (10-17 inclusive), underpinned by statutory aims to prevent offending, protect the public and secure the welfare of the child. The Review of Youth Justice in Northern Ireland (2011: 151-152) stated that young people, interviewed as part of the review, spoke of being motivated and inspired by youth workers who they described as *“supportive, non-judgemental and caring*.*”* Young people also stated that the Youth Justice system would work much better if there were more youth workers, and if other professionals adopted the same approach and way of working that they employ. The report specifically highlighted Youth Worker’s skills and persistence in engaging and building relationships with the most isolated, marginalised and hard to reach young people. The report also commended the way youth workers treated young people with respect but also checked and challenged negative behaviour and built support for law and order. A recommendation in the review stated: “*The success of youth and community work in Northern Ireland should be built upon by providing additional resources to support its expansion, allowing other agencies to draw on the skills and expertise of youth and community workers in engaging young people, especially those who offend.”*

Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in England, Kelly (2012:102 ) argues that targeted youth projects can benefit participants, but warns about over-stating their ability to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour. Like England, youth work in Northern Ireland is delivered through programmes of non-formal education. Historically, work with young men in Northern Ireland has seen a tendency to focus on recreational needs and diversionary responses to aggressive and anti-social young male behaviour with little concern for young men`s emotional, mental and sexual health (Harland and Morgan, 2003). Since the mid-1990’s programmes have been developed to help young men acquire new skills and confidence and more realistically prepare them for the future. There has been an awakening of the need to encourage young men to address a range of issues they rarely discuss elsewhere, such as self-esteem, relationships, risk-taking behaviour, mental health, transitions from boy to man and fatherhood.

Fundamentally youth work is about a critical, relational-driven encounter with young people characterised by a specific value system relating to social justice which helps to distinguish it from other approaches to learning(see Spence, 2006; Blacker, 2010; Harland and McCready, 2013). It aims to meet young people on their own terms viewing them as an asset and not a problem. This is supported by Ledwith (2011) who suggests youth work is founded on a process of empowerment and participation and a form of critical education that encourages young people to question their reality. This is the youth worker`s distinctive commitment to working with young people. Youth work is an approach that helps young people extract knowledge and meaning from their own experiences and ideas and is concerned about how young people feel (Young, 2006). It is about creating a safe space where, through conversations, young people can explore their fears and aspirations (Smith, 2010). This is the youth work methodology (Harland and Morgan, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2010)

**Insights into Practice**

At the heart of Youth Justice provision is meaningful relationships between young people and practitioners (Drake, et al, 2014) with increasing recognition of the need for young peoples’ voices to be heard (Harris and Allen, 2011). What is less apparent is how such relationships and methods of working with young people can be established. Creating environments where young men can talk openly, think, reflect, explore values and consider other viewpoints crucially depends on ensuring young men feel valued and safe from threat or judgement. The youth work sessions in the longitudinal study were designed to do just that and demonstrated the value of taking time to build relationships with boys. Addressing topics and issues that were more connected to their everyday lives encouraged boys to share feelings and emotions and engage with subjects at a deeper level. Boys who reported *“not being good* at *school work*” often displayed other qualities during sessions which made them feel good about themselves. On occasions when this did happen youth workers reinforced the value of the boy’s input. While masculinity was addressed as a specific theme in year one of the study, this was an underpinning theme throughout subsequent years. This was important as quantitative data had highlighted shifting complexities within the formation of masculine identities throughout early to mid-adolescence. The sessions enabled boys to reflect upon male attitudes and behaviour and challenge their hegemonic notions of men and masculinity. Themes addressed in sessions included: Masculinity and Becoming a Man; Emotions; Conflict; Violence; Personal Safety & Anger; Risk Taking; Education and Learning; Health; Male transitions and Life skills – none of which had previously been addressed in school.

Feedback from participants and teachers showed that boys looked forward to the sessions. They remembered the names of the youth workers and researchers and asked about those who were not attending on that particular day. The interventions took cognisance of the fact that boys were often restless and nervous in new situations. Boys were highly motivated by interventions that combined energy, activity, creativity and fun to address important and potentially sensitive issues. They believed the interactive style broke up the intensity of sessions and liked the fact that icebreaker games were used to orientate them to the subject matter. They also enjoyed learning by visualising situations rather than memorising information, which gave them a strong sense of personal achievement in contrast to learning solely through intellectual capabilities.

Boys reported learning new skills and thinking more about situations rather than just reacting. Story telling about ‘other boys’ was adopted to make controversial issues (e.g. violence against the person, alcohol misuse) less personal, yet nevertheless one with which they could readily identify. The boys very quickly connected this to their own lives and experiences and were able to add their personal story to each scenario. This gave participants a sense of control over content and increased their confidence to participate in class discussions. What was particularly striking was the way in which boys listened attentively to the stories. For example, there was total silence as the story teller outlined a scenario where young men were confronted with potentially violent situations. Each time the story reached a possible threatening situation, the story was paused and boys broke out into small groups and asked what they would do in that situation. This methodology fully captured the imagination and creative thinking of the boys and led to intense class discussions. Boys were then encouraged to think of the types of skills and strategies they could use to try and alleviate potentially violent situations.

Evaluations were carried out at the beginning and end of each year as well as after each session in an attempt to measure how boys assessed themselves in relation to their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. This highlighted the benefits of addressing contextual issues that impact upon young men’s lives – an emphasis that typically was not covered in school curriculum. It is important to note that the issues raised by boys in the schools were often different and therefore it should not be pre-empted what issues boys will raise. The interventions demonstrated however that by addressing issues, including controversial and sensitive subjects, school was perceived as connecting more directly to their learning and everyday lives and experiences. They appreciated being asked about what they think and being encouraged to share their experiences and feelings. Boys reported that developing trust and mutual respect with youth workers were key reasons why they enjoyed the sessions and would share their feelings openly. They spoke of feeling *“listened to and their opinions being valued”*. Boys said the interventions also helped them rehearse new skills and prepare in practical ways for the future.

The adolescent boys in this study believed that school was the preferred and safest place to reflect upon difficult and controversial issues such as violence. They perceived this would be much more difficult outside of school and were concerned as to who would deliver the sessions. Other boys believed it was useful to talk to youth workers as they would have found it difficult to discuss certain issues in front of a teacher, particularly with someone they may have had some previous conflict. This was the view of the majority of boys, although there was a small minority who initially resisted getting involved in some of the exercises. While no boy was forced to participate, all were encouraged to get involved.

**Towards an Integrated Model of Practice**

Data from the longitudinal study highlighted the value of finding new and more creative ways to engage and work with boys and young men on real life situations that connect more directly with their everyday lives. It was one of the more concerning findings that participants felt so disconnected with adults and their communities and had little or no knowledge or involvement in decision making processes or the creation of a new society. In light of the above narrative we present the following ‘Balanced Approach’ model as a more co-ordinated way to address the perceived disconnect between young men and their communities.

**A ‘Balanced Approach’**

 **Non- formal education** e.g. Youth workers, Youth Justice workers

**Informal education (Community) -** including parents, other adults / community groups

 **Formal education (School)**

**Young**

**Person**

Our ecological model is informed by a youth work methodology underpinned by a critical, relational-driven encounter with young men characterised by a specific value system relating to principles of social justice, empowerment and participation that aim to bring about desired changes in individuals, communities and society. The model provides a balanced and inclusive approach that supports young men yet challenges broader societal structures such as patriarchy, inequality, injustice and oppression through an exploration of masculinities. The model positions the young person at the centre of the intervention and emphasises a more holistic approach to education and learning. It promotes stronger and more direct links between formal, informal and non-formal education. Illich (1971) has previously argued that *most learning is not the result of instruction but the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful society.* In a year young people, on average, spend just 16% of their time in school (Harland and McCready, 2012). The model acknowledges that much of a young person’s learning occurs beyond the school gates and therefore necessitates healthy partnerships and interdisciplinary working to harness and develop that learning. The model also takes cognisance of the importance of gender, class and ethnicity and a strengths-based approach (Barwick, 2004) whereby skills and knowledge are found in individuals, families, schools, peer groups, communities and local people in local contexts.

In addition to the model we offer the following practical considerations that we believe can be useful for practitioners working with young men within a Youth Justice context. In doing this we place emphasis on the practitioner’s skills, knowledge and self-awareness as opposed to their gender. These considerations are not meant to tell a practitioner what to do, or how to do it. Rather they are offered as part of an overall framework for supporting practitioners in their work with young men. The considerations are presented under four interconnected headings -**Relational; Contextual; Situational and Pedagogical.**

**Relational:**

Within a youth work methodology the practitioner is committed to building critical, meaningful *relationships* with young men and is aware of the qualities that young men look for in a practitioner/ educator – respect, trust, genuineness, humour, empathy, support and acceptance. The practitioner sees young men as an asset and not a problem and has a concern for how young men feel and express emotions. The practitioner`s focus is on developing young men`s confidence by helping them acquire new skills and confidence through promoting their voice and extracting knowledge and meaning from their experiences and ideas.

**Contextual:**

The social context of young men’s lives has a strong bearing upon their thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, yet this is rarely addressed within formal education. The practitioner will be aware that factors that impact upon boys and young men’s lives must be considered within a wider context of socio-economic issues such as poverty, class, race, ethnicity, social disadvantage and the decline in traditional industries. Practitioners do not see their work in isolation but understand that work with boys and young men necessitates a multi-agency approach involving schools, parents, youth justice, youth service, police, community safety initiatives and local community groups. The practitioner can facilitate young men in learning about how communities and societies work and encourage and promote their ideas to address the issues facing their community or wider society.

**Situational:**

The practitioner supports young men to evaluate the contexts and circumstances of their everyday life and to find creative ways to address the specific issues which affect them. This involves the exploration of young men’s sense of alienation within their communities and absence from decision making and peacebuilding processes. It also involves exploring how geographical areas can be made safer for young men, and others, and questions why certain adults can be suspicious and distrusting towards them. The practitioner will support young men to develop critiques of economic, political and cultural structures to help better match their expectations with reality. The practitioner also explores why certain boys and young men may not seek emotional support. This complex area of male development is integral to working effectively with boys and young men.

It is important that the practitioner understands why violence (or the threat of violence) is perceived as part of young men’s everyday lives and experiences and finds creative ways for young men to respond to potential incidents of conflict. The practitioner can then explore the *blur* between violent acts, bravado and ‘messing around’ as part of male sub culture. This includes making perpetrators more aware of the effects and consequences of bullying and other acts of violence on others through restorative approaches. Benefits can also be found in organising opportunities for young men to meet and discuss violent related issues with those who respond to violence (i.e. police, fire brigade, army, bouncers) and those who were previously involved in violence (ex-paramilitary, ex-prisoners).

The practitioner will appreciate how adhering to traditional notions of masculinity can impact negatively upon male behaviour and attitudes. The practitioner encourages young men to examine hegemonic beliefs that emphasize men’s use of ‘power’ and ‘control’ over others, for example, gay and other marginalised men, and women. However the practitioner is aware that for things to change for young men hegemonic masculinity will also need to be dismantled at a societal level. This awareness helps lay a solid foundation for addressing other challenging work around young men’s attitudes and behaviour in regard to issues such as crime, sectarianism,sexism, racism, homophobia and recreational violence.

**Pedagogical:**

Youth work is educational. It is process driven and concerned with personal and social development through empowerment and participation that aims to bring about desired changes in individuals, communities and society. It supports young people to identify and accept their responsibilities as individuals, citizens and group members. Youth work respects and values young people for who they are (now) and views young people as a resource/asset for society. It is founded upon, and wedded to, establishing critical meaningful relationships built on respect, openness, trust and choice. It recognises boys’ different abilities and extracts knowledge and meaning from a young man’s experience and ideas. The youth work methodology is underpinned with a specific value system relating to social justice and participative democracy that includes young people in public decision making about institutions’ policies and programmes. The youth work methodology aims to create learning environments that engage, stimulate, excite and motivate young men. It provides a safe space for young men to explore issues, fears, behaviours and aspirations through a combination of reflective and participatory activity.

**Concluding thoughts**

While certain forms of victimisation may be found throughout the world, this paper reveals the extent to which the nature and threat of violence in Northern Ireland has become more complex and contradictory for many young men. Twenty years after the 1994 ceasefires, new and old threats continue to leave young men feeling anxious and contradictory about the type of future they can expect. The legacy of the Troubles alongside a stubborn context of economic and social disadvantage in many working class communities is further confounded by very real threat to peacebuilding coming from paramilitary groups. This is particularly pertinent in working class areas that bore the brunt of political violence and where typically it was young men who were, and continue to be, the victims of paramilitary punishment attacks and shootings administered as ‘community justice.’ In addition to this *‘rough justice’* the young men in this longitudinal study, all of whom were born after the ceasefires, felt disconnected from local initiatives and believed they were regularly perceived as ‘problems,’ as opposed to resources, by adults in their communities.

Despite the complexity of their lives, these young men did not seek or expect support from others. By not seeking support they believed they were demonstrating an important aspect of their masculinity - namely, that men do not need the support of others. This prevents young men from recognising and accepting that men can be sensitive, caring and at times vulnerable, without believing they are somehow compromising what it means to be a man.

Practitioners from different professions will know that work with young men can be extremely challenging, yet also extremely rewarding. Youth Justice agencies continue to play their part alongside partners in education, social services and other sectors, whether in addressing the risk that problems during adolescence may lead to offending behaviour in later life, or the role they can play in promoting and building a shared future. Drawing upon a youth work methodology, we have identified four key areas that we believe can be helpful to practitioners working with young men within a Youth Justice context.

We have presented a ‘Balanced Approach’ where the voice, needs and interests of young men are central to the process. It encourages expression of thoughts, feelings and expectations. The ecological model is underpinned by principles of empowerment, participation and accountability that aim to bring about desired changes in individuals, communities, institutions and wider society. As a final pint we would emphasize that youth policy and practice should be more directly informed by the reality of young peoples’ lives and experiences; neither should we underestimate the value of research for informing practice.

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1. For a more fuller discussion on understanding the formation, practices and meanings of hegemonic masculinity see Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An interface area is a [segregated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Segregation_in_Northern_Ireland) area where Catholics and Protestants live in close proximity in Northern Ireland [↑](#footnote-ref-2)