

# taking a look at male role model

thinking about whether women or men should work with young men

## introduction

A few years ago I was invited to join, on a part time basis, a service that provided counselling for children who had been sexually abused. The work involved outreach work for young men who had experienced sexual abuse and violence prevention work in schools.

As a man invited into in an all woman service, I couldn't but stumble across the question of whether women or men should work with young men as it seemed to have such currency. What was I to make of this issue?

As we journeyed along with the project, it seemed that the idea of male role model provided a backdrop to this question of whether women or men ought to work with young men. The idea of male role model caught my attention. The following brief discussion includes a broader discussion around this idea, not just as it applies to working with young men.

I have a personal story that shapes my interest in this theme of male role model. I am more alert to the idea of the importance of male role models for young men and boys, because of what it would mean to my life if I were to take up this idea. I have quite a number of concerns if I were to understand male role model as 'truth'. One of these concerns is how it would have me seeing my experience of being brought up by women as not enough, or invite me to lose sight of their love and care for me.

## the emerging question

The issue of the gender of the workers has had quite a presence in the various themes that run through the thinking, writing and practice of violence prevention work or work more generally with young men. For instance, the following is part of the concluding paragraph of the project report of Enough's Enough – Sexual Harassment and Violence by the Queensland Department of Education (1994);

*(These are only some of the issues concerning boys in schools;) doubtless others, such as whether female teachers can work effectively with boys to challenge dominant models of masculinity, are emerging and will continue to emerge from research and other projects.*

For me a few questions flow from the inquiry of whether women can effectively do this work:

- What are some of the effects on women and men of utilising the male role model construct when doing work with young men?
- What are the effects more generally of this idea of male role models on boys, young men, female carers or male carers?
- What can be acknowledged around women's participation in young men's lives?
- What can be acknowledged around men's participation in young men's lives?

## male role modelling

The central idea of role modelling, as it applies to violence prevention work in schools, is that young men learn respectful, non-violent ways through the modelling of these ways by older men. As it applies more generally, it includes a modelling of ways of being young men for which only older men have knowledge. Usually this position utilises an essentialist notion of masculinity; that there are traits or ideal ways at the core of being a man and men should attempt to live by these traits. What flows from this idea is that men are in a better position than women to teach or model these traits or ideal ways.

Male role modelling has become a popular idea. I will list below just three examples and, although they are from some years ago now, give a sense of what I think are both the effects of and the expression of this idea:

- In August 2002 The Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Sydney applied to The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for a temporary exemption under the Sex Discrimination Act to allow it to offer scholarships only for young male high school students to study to become primary school teachers.

- There is a story titled “Boys Without Men” in the bestselling US book *Mothers Who think: Tales of real life parenthood* (1999). The author writes about her relationship with her son and includes the following;

*But I'm not a father. And the older he gets the more I see the effects of that lack. I try my damnest to model for Will the way to be a good person. However, I cannot, by definition, tell him how to be a good man.*

- I recently saw the title of a book published in 2000 “On Their Own: - Boys Growing up Under Fathered” and was reminded of the power of these ideas. Within this idea boys are not just “on their own” when there is no father or male carer, but even when they are “under fathered” whatever that might mean.

I feel saddened to think that young men or older men may be encouraged to interpret being “on their own” as their dominant experience in the context of having less or no male carers as they were growing up. There are so many ways to understand this experience, “being on my own” included.

In their book “The Courage to Raise Good Men”, Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum include some intriguing ideas about the context that has contributed to the success of this idea of male role modelling. The context is those times that men have increasing distance from family life.

There have been a number of theories proposed over the last hundred or so years arising out of the context of those times when men have been more distant from family life. Olga and Beth say that Freud constructed theories that made “the father the central figure in both his son’s and daughter’s developmental dramas” (p 87). This brought the father back into the family in the context of men being away from the household as the industrial revolution gathered momentum. In more recent times, the increase in single parent (usually women) families, provides a backdrop for a renewed “need” in male role models for boys and young men. They describe the situation in the USA:

*Now that fathers are not just off in the workplace*

*but out of the family unit altogether, with over ten million households (out of a total of thirty-five million) headed by single parents, mainly woman, along comes the theory of the male role model to tell these women that their sons are doomed to mere humanity, as opposed to manliness, without the guiding influence of a man (p 87).*

Inspired by a post-structuralist understanding around this idea, I am interested in locating the idea of male role model in history and culture and questioning the truth it gets granted at times. Apart from examining the context of these ideas as mentioned above, I could ask some of the following questions to deconstruct male role model:

- If as an older man, I was to model how to be a man, which masculinity might I choose?
- How could I make sense of and coherently model the very different ways I express my gendered identity, year by year, day by day or even hour by hour?
- Which particular gendered expressions would I draw out as the ideal aspect to model that would have the job of encapsulating manliness?
- More generally, why put such emphasis on gender when understanding our identity? What about other themes that shape our identities such as culture, sexuality, age, class and so on?

### **effects of the idea of the male role model**

#### **working with young men**

The emphasis given to male role models has many effects in working with young men. Some of these can include:

- If the objective is for older men to model to young men how to act, older people end up having even more to say about how young people should live their lives. This gives more space to adults power over young people.
- To have an idea of a right and wrong way to do the work (ie. that men ought to be doing this work) stifles a spirit of exploration, which can be limiting.
- In utilising the traditional one-way understanding of adult-young person relationships, and in particular that young men learn and should learn from older men, there is less room to acknowledge learning that adults experience from young people and children (White, 1994).
- Women workers doing work with young men without male workers can feel there is little credibility in their work.

- Collaborative work with young people is less likely, as workers will be less interested in young people guiding the direction of the work.
- Young men may interpret there is a lacking or has been a lacking if they are in an educational/therapeutic context where they do not have male workers.

### **more general effects**

I thought I would include just three of the possible broader effects:

- In the home context, female carers of young men may question the legitimacy of their place in young men's lives and/or bring some distance into their relationships with young men. Female carers' contributions can become invisible.
- Young men are encouraged to interpret there is a loneliness where they have been brought up in a home where there was no male carer or less of a male presence. This may not be a useful interpretation for some young men.
- If the legitimacy of the relationships between young men and women carers is being questioned, what limits are being introduced into young men's relationships with their aunts, sisters, mothers, grandmothers etc?

### **what can be acknowledged about women's participation in young men's lives?**

I believe there is much to be said about what can be acknowledged rather than questioned or mistrusted about women's participation in young men's lives. I will list just some of what I believe can be acknowledged.

### **the learning of caring, relationship skills and challenging violence**

In my experience, young men often speak of what they learnt about relationship skills and ways of caring from their female friends and family members. This acknowledgment is included in the following that was written by young men from Mount Druitt in the publication "Young Men: Our Sexuality, Our Image" (1985)

*When we are growing up, most of us are closer to our mother than our father. Even when we become a 'man', most of us say we are or were closest to our mother.*

Recently I was listening to a song called "Gun Shy" (10,000 Maniacs, 1987) and started noticing the lyrics. I was reminded of what I have often heard young men say in acknowledgment of female friends, sisters, mothers, aunts and grandmothers.

A few lines stood out for me in particular from this

song. It speaks of gentle or cheeky challenges from women of masculine expression in men's lives. It also speaks of some of the ways women challenge violence. In the song a sister speaks to her brother about his choosing to join the army;

*There is a world outside of this room and when you meet it promise me you won't meet it with a gun taking aim. I don't mean to argue, they've made a decent boy of you and I don't mean to spoil your homecoming but baby brother you should expect me to ... I don't mean to hurt you by saying this again, they're so good at making soldiers but they're not as good at making men.*

### **Choosing women to speak with**

I believe being sensitive to the likelihood that some young men have been at the receiving end of abuse or disrespect from an older man, means that we ought to question the assumption that men should always be included in the work.

A little story of the work reminds me of this. I was invited by two women workers to join them in doing anti-violence work with young people in a school in Western Sydney. Prior to my joining, one of the first questions asked by the young people was, "Is he going to yell at us?"

### **what can be acknowledged around men's participation in this work?**

#### **choice**

I think it is very important to offer choice to young men around whom they meet with in counselling or whom they have as teachers or group facilitators. I have had heard this as feedback regularly.

#### **similarities in gender training**

Having a male worker can contribute to young men having a sense that the worker knows where they are coming from, if the themes are about gender. Also as ways of talking and acting more generally are often gendered, it is sometimes more likely that there will be an ease between men and young men.

#### **ethical position**

I believe that if men address gender inequity and violence rather than leaving it to women, men are redressing the history of this effort being often taken up women. It can be an ethical position for men and young men to step into.

Also if men do more caring for young men who have been subject to sexual assault, they are redressing the issue of the imbalance of women often doing more care than men around these

issues as well as caring more generally.

### **conclusion**

My original intention in writing this article was in response to what I saw as the effects of these ideas on work that is done with young men. As I started to think about the idea of male role model, I thought about how it has swept into so many areas of life, especially family life. So I thought I would try and include some ideas about the effects more generally of this idea. Part of my desire to do this was an understanding that in my own life this notion would be such a limiting way to understand my past as well as my concern for what I saw as the influence of this idea.

This short paper does not include specific ideas about implications for practice. I know the questioning of this idea does shape my practice in many ways including who I am mindful could be audience to counselling meetings I have with young men and the kinds of enquiries I might make of young men, around the contributions of men and women in their lives. I certainly wonder about how other people engage with this idea and how it shapes other's practices.

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