

## Young men's attitudes to gender and work

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Relatively well-paid industrial jobs have been increasingly replaced by poorer paid service industry jobs which have often been targeted at women. Little is known about the impact that these changes are having on men and their attitudes towards themselves and the labour market. This study, carried out by Working With Men, talked to young men aged 18-20, about their experience of the workplace, and their attitudes and beliefs about 'women's work' and 'men's work'. The study found that:

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**f** Most of the young men said that they were poorly prepared at school for the workplace. Careers advice, family involvement and even work experience had been of limited value, combined with a reluctance on their part to accept any advice given.

**f** All of the young men made a distinction between 'crap jobs' and 'career jobs'. They saw these jobs as occupying two different labour markets, and viewed 'crap jobs' as temporary and as primarily a source of money.

**f** The majority of young men made very few distinctions between jobs for men and jobs for women. However, jobs were ruled out on the basis of pay and skills required and many of these jobs would be typically jobs done by women.

**f** Young men, while being very reluctant to listen to fathers, teachers and other adults, were able to listen to and accept criticism and advice from brothers and others they perceived as having experienced similar difficulties and indecision.

**f** For those young men who were in a circuit of 'crap jobs', college provided virtually the only route into a 'career job'. Many of the school underachievers saw college as a barrier, rather than a route to the job they wanted.

**f** The researcher concludes that perceptions of masculinity affected their views of the male role, career decision-making, attitudes towards school and teachers, and their reluctance to seek help and advice. These perceptions must be engaged with if schools and others are to better prepare young men for the transition into the labour market.

## Introduction

Up until the early 1970s there had been a 'natural progression' for most young men moving from school into work. Irrespective of educational achievement (and even brushes with the law), if young men stayed broadly within an acceptable framework of behaviour then work would be available to them.

Since the early 1970s the number of women employed has dramatically increased by over one-quarter while the number of men in employment has remained the same. This has reflected a shift in the type of jobs available, away from manufacturing towards service jobs. The sole male 'breadwinner' - keeping a family on one man's wage - is no longer the dominant family type. This loss of 'men's jobs' has not only affected men's involvement in the labour market, but also men's perceptions of what it means to be a man.

This project aimed to explore with young men, their experience, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about the current employment market, and their attitudes and beliefs towards 'men's work' and 'women's work'. This study concentrated on young men, in part, because they had emerged from other studies as those most reluctant to change their attitudes, while also being the most likely to lose out through the gender changes in the workplace. This study starts from the assumption that increased understanding of these young men's attitudes and experience could lead to interventions that both remove barriers for individuals as well as enabling wider attitude change.

## School and regret

One of the most common themes emerging from the interviews was the regrets that the young men felt about school. They felt they had played rather than worked, had had a laugh and had not thought about the future. They now saw school as a missed opportunity. Many of the young men gave the impression that school, exams and what teachers said were of little importance, and the school curriculum had little relevance to their lives.

Notions of masculinity appeared to play a significant part in the majority of these young men's poor use of school. Having a laugh, resisting teachers' influence, acting tough and the displacement of emotions away from appearing weak and vulnerable were recurrent themes.

## Preparation for work

The complexity of the transition from school to work makes information, knowledge and support essential for young people. Many of the young men had had a poor experience of this transition. They considered that they had left school poorly informed and with unrealistic views of the workplace. For many, work experience was extremely patchy and careers advice was regarded as unhelpful.

There was also often little involvement and help from their families. However, underlying these views was the fact that the young men themselves admitted that they thought they 'knew best' and were reluctant to take advice whilst at school.

## Career or 'crap' job?

All of the young men interviewed made a very strong distinction between a 'career job' and a 'crap job'. Motivations for taking a 'crap job' were always financial, and the commonly held view was that such jobs were very easy to get and to leave. They never paid well, and included retail (such as supermarkets, fast food restaurants), 'picking and packing', small factory and agency work, and cleaning.

Interestingly, 'crap jobs' were very often the strongest motivation for many of the young men to return to college or to pursue a 'career'. Concerns that they would be in 'crap jobs' for the rest of their lives - always earning a low wage, working in poor conditions and insecure work environments - stirred them to think about the future, and about what they would like to do.

For those who were living away from their family home, it was harder to break this 'crap job' cycle. Rent, food and other bills meant that they were occupied with their needs tomorrow, rather than for the rest of their lives. Those more able to reflect and think about a 'career' usually had the support (or sometimes the impatience and pressure) of their families.

## Asking for help

Emerging from these interviews was the lack of reflection, planning and help-seeking exhibited by the young men. There appeared to be a combination of: a reluctance to ask for help; an inability to find out in advance what a job or course would be like; an inability to take advice from others; an unwillingness to accept others' experience and a willingness only to learn from one's own experience. One exception to this was the young men's willingness to listen and

take advice from older brothers or others who had a similar experience to themselves.

There appeared to be a general reluctance to use job centres, careers officers and even the newspaper to find jobs. They were seen as unhelpful, only having the worst of jobs or staff too rude to be of any value.

### 'Men's work' and 'women's work'

A significant minority of young men in the study (about a third) had fairly traditional views of domestic responsibilities; not surprisingly those with traditional views of the home also had traditional views of the workplace. However, overall, young men made fewer distinctions about roles in the workplace than in relation to domestic responsibilities. For the majority of young men in the study, most jobs in the workplace were seen as appropriate for both men and women. The overwhelming message was "if it pays enough, and I could do it, I would".

It was pay, rather than gender, that appeared central. Of course, many of the poorly paid jobs mentioned were traditional areas for women. Some of the young men did rule out jobs on the basis of their lacking the skills or characteristics which were thought to be possessed by women - 'caring' jobs and jobs that demanded patience. Certainly, the majority of the young men aspired to traditional male jobs (such as car mechanic, electrician and other trades), but others also expressed a desire to work with children and do youth work. There was little concern over what their mates would say about these types of jobs, though the reaction of friends did emerge as a concern for some.

### Views on masculinity

When asked to identify the most important attributes and roles that defined a man, the young men were much more traditional in their thinking. Having a job, defending their family and being a good father were seen as central.

Ideas of masculinity ran through all the themes of the interview. Bravado, proving yourself a man, being 'cool', and showing how big a man you were through failure to do school work, were all recurrent themes, especially as the young men talked about the regrets they had about their school experience. Fear of failure was a common reason offered for not pursuing a career. Being patronised, talked down to, treated like a 'child' too often terminated careers interviews. Attitudes from others that suggested that

decisions were not theirs to make brought harsh reactions. These and other comments reflected traditional 'male' attitudes towards making life decisions and self-sufficiency, and highlighted the difficulties many of the young men had in showing their vulnerability and uncertainty.

### Conclusions

Transitions from school to work, from dependence to independence and childhood to adulthood, are complex. The experiences of the young men in this study suggest that more effective services and mechanisms to assist young men through these transitions need to be in place. Suggestions include:

- The careers curriculum could be extended to include better understanding of the changes within the workplace and opportunities to reflect on masculinity, gender and their impact on the workplace (to enable young men to understand the way they may make decisions and choices and to limit the negative impact of these factors). This implies associated training for careers officers and teachers that includes the impact of masculinity on decision-making processes and career choice.
- While schools have increasingly brought the workplace into the curriculum, this could be extended still further. Young men of 18-20 years, who had missed school opportunities, could be a very valuable resource for schools, providing a mixture of peer educator and mentoring for young men following a similar path.
- Supporting parents (and particularly fathers) could have a disproportionate impact on young men's preparation for the workplace. Evidence from other work has found that many fathers see a role for themselves in preparing and introducing their sons to the workplace, but feel ill-equipped for the task.
- Young men's reluctance to use services, and professionals generally, was in part because they thought that professionals were out of touch, but also male socialisation may have left many reluctant to ask for help and admit they were having difficulties. This would suggest that the role of professionals and of masculinity may need looking at as barriers to young men's use of services.
- For many of the young men interviewed, the last year of compulsory education involved waiting for

exams they did not think they would do well in. A 'school into work' programme, where young men could spend more of their last year in and learning about the workplace, could benefit them much more than the current arrangements.

- Many of the young men reported that they had been accepted onto courses with hardly any advice or help from college staff. Many found themselves on inappropriate courses, leaving in the college year, rarely transferring to more appropriate courses and often leaving with less confidence than they had arrived with. This implies that college staff need to engage with young men more actively to avoid poor use of college services.
- College-based youth service provision, youth services and careers services have an important role in maintaining contact with young men who have not found a career path. Recent Government suggestions that careers and youth services should be working in partnership, to target those young people at risk of social exclusion, could provide a structure to target and maintain contact with these young men.
- Agencies and mechanisms need to provide 'ladders' and assistance to young men who are trapped in 'crap job' workplaces. Early evidence from 'New Deal' is that Gateway may be providing a route for some young men into college courses and career path jobs. However, relying on 'New Deal' to carry out this alone would be a mistake, too many young men emerging from 'New Deal' are returning to the 'crap job' cycle. Other agencies (particularly other employment agencies and youth services may be well placed for this role) and they could target and support young men into college and careers path options.

### About the study

Sixty-three young men, living in Newham, East London, Salford, Greater Manchester and Leicester, aged 18-20 were interviewed. Most were school underachievers; while by far the majority still lived with their families, virtually all had worked, but had been in temporary, insecure and on the whole poorly paid jobs and work sectors. The majority were on the margins of social exclusion, but not alienated; their lives were unsettled, but not chaotic.

### How to get further information

Further information about the study can be obtained from Trefor Lloyd, Working With Men, 320 Commercial Way, London SE15 1QN, Tel: 0171 732 9409.

The full report, *Young men, the job market and gendered work* by Trefor Lloyd, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 14 8, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).



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