**Young Men and Values**

**Introduction**

A cross sector of organisations recently came together to attend a half-day workshop session, led by Owen Thomas, on the theme of values in relation to work with young men.

The incentive for delivering the session was the recognition that there are times where our personal values are challenged in a professional environment or where our perceptions lead to the development of policies and practices that fail young men at a systemic level. For example, The [Children’s](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/) [Society](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/) recently published a report, [Boys](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/boys-and-trafficking-report-lowres-pcr059.pdf) [Don’t Cry,](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/boys-and-trafficking-report-lowres-pcr059.pdf) highlighting that the sexual exploitation of boys and young men often comes to the attention of services via the criminal justice system, this they argue, is in part because workers overlook the vulnerabilities of young men – assuming that perpetrators will be more likely to target girls and young womeni. Under the Gender Duty (April 2007) ‘…all public authorities are required to demonstrate they are promoting equality for women and men and are eliminating sexual discrimination and harassment’. (Working **With** Men, 2018)

In both instances there needs to be space, time and support to reflect on the challenges to values and navigate our way to a point of resolution.

Having our values challenged is a fundamental part of the process of working with young people. We recognised that in our increasingly target driven working lives it is difficult to find the time for reflection and that this practice is heavily reliant on working within a culture that promotes critical

reflection as a key aspect of its work ethos. This is reinforced with good practices such as regular supervision and, for those of us delivering face to face work, regular non-managerial supervision.

A colleague in the session talked about the value of just two minutes of time for regular reflection in staff meetings for each team member to check in with their peers. This space was literally to communicate with other staff how they were feeling. What they chose to share in this situation did not have to be related to work; the emphasis was on being transparent about one’s emotions and reinforcing connection within the team.

**Methodology**

We drew on aspects of two key practices within the session; the concept of lived expertise where we learn from those who have direct experience of a situation and place them in the role of the expert. Their personal testimonies are fundamental to steering policy and practice on a given issue. The other method used was self-reflection. Participants were invited to provide case studies from their work where they had been presented with a situation that challenged their values. Collectively we examined the actions that could be taken in response to the challenge, the change we were striving to achieve and the subsequent impact both on the members of staff involved and the young men.

We looked at some of the challenges men and women face delivering gender-based work and established that, although there maybe advantages to having shared the same experience as a young person you are working with, this alone is not necessarily a pre-requisite for being able to work effectively with them – the key is being good not necessarily ‘the same’. This message was echoed by young men in a video called Beyond [Male Role Models](http://www.open.ac.uk/health-and-social-care/research/beyond-male-role-models/).



**What Needs to be in place to be able to Challenge Values Effectively?**

Addressing the competing needs of young people impact our emotions at varying points in our working lives. We should generally be striving to maintain a sense of equilibrium in terms of our emotions when working face to face - or what Owen referred to as the ‘Dove Scale’ (maintaining the ‘PH’ balance). However, there will be instances where emotions are highly charged, and our belief systems are tested. It is useful to be able to ‘check-in’ to your own intellectual, emotional and physical responses when you feel challenged in this way to foster/maintain a strong sense of self-awareness so that you can gauge how you are feeling in such a situation. This sounds straightforward, but people often struggle with tuning into emotions such as anger, sadness and grief because we are socialised to conceal how we feel. Westernised cultures constantly feed us messages to ‘feel good’…to ‘keep calm and carry on’.

A fundamental aspect of social work practice, that we can borrow, is to [‘lean into the](https://inspiredsocialwork.wordpress.com/category/coping/) [discomfort ’](https://inspiredsocialwork.wordpress.com/category/coping/) and familiarise ourselves with it. This is as opposed to denying emotions that disrupt our equilibrium or somehow trying to outwit them! The theory says that humans are not socialised to want to embrace the full spectrum of emotions we experience. But without doing so, we are unable to gain insight into a given situation and negotiate our way through it - at least to the point where we can sit with what is occurring or has occurred without feeling overwhelmed by it.

Researcher/Storyteller and Social Worker, Dr [Brené Brown](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability) has created a useful framework for ‘unpacking’ what happens in the moments where we are feeling anxiety, fear, unbalance because, for example, we are confronted with a situation we do not understand or profoundly conflicts with core values.

In her book, Rising Strong she outlines a framework that may assist in successfully walking though challenges to our values – the concepts are:

**The Reckoning** –to understand what goingon

**The Rumble** –to‘lean into thediscomfort’and experience the impact on you and take the time to ‘sit with it’; try to look at the situation from its varying perspectives

**The Resolution** –to identify what to do tomove forward.

Whether practising self-refection on a 1 to 1 basis or with a group of colleagues, find a safe space to review what is happening. Whoever you choose to talk to should act as a ‘critical friend’ i.e. someone who is empathetic and compassionate AND will negotiate some difficult questions with you to support you through the process. You may not arrive at a ‘tidy’ ending but it should be one that brings a greater level of understanding and balance to your emotions and the situation.



**Group Task – Lived Expertise**

We asked attendees to work in small groups and volunteer examples from their own practice where their core values have been tested by the young men that they were working with. The volunteers simply described what had happened; no further information was requested. The other group members were asked to collectively identify what the most appropriate forms of action could be and what they hoped the impact of their actions would be.

**The Outline of Challenges to Values**

**Case Study A**

A young person was found to have committed a criminal offence of a sexual nature. He had lied to a worker and the worker felt duped by the young person when they were told the truth. The worker’s perceptions of the young person were strongly challenged.

**Case Study B**

A young person was found to have committed acts of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) and exploitation. The worker was angry, saddened and disturbed by the young person’s behaviour.

**Case Study C**

Staff had a lack of understanding around race and diversity and failed to deal with an issue relating to race and equal opportunities effectively.

Once the case studies were shared collectively the group identified commonalities in terms of the actions taken. We shared strategies for follow up in relation to the specific issues and more general methods for support to those delivering the work.



**Responses to Case Studies A and B**

Risks need to be managed whilst addressing young people’s needs. Systems need to be acted on immediately as these are safeguarding issues.

More training is required to understand the nature of harmful sexual behaviours. For example, a greater insight into the vulnerabilities of perpetrators who may also have been the victims of HSB.

We need to accept that we may not be the worker or the service to meet the complex needs of some of the young men that we set out to support and that our role may be to safely signpost them to more specialist services.

We need to separate the personal from the professional, which generally requires support and self-care for workers as well as young people.

Training for workers can also be within the team and include tools to ‘check in’ with young people when there is a conflict of emotions – for example, listening and not asking too many questions. Tools to ground young people and workers following difficult discussions are vital resources as well as knowing how to successfully close relationships.

**Actions - Case Study C**

Issues around race, racism and equalities impact emotional and physical well-being/safety and therefore, require changes at a systemic level.

Equalities and diversity training should be multi-faceted and ongoing.

Recruitment processes should be reviewed to ensure that the personnel across all strata of organisations are representative of the world we live in. We need greater levels of accountability regarding issues of race and racism so that we have evidence-based frameworks to assist in reviewing behaviours such as stereotyping and unconscious bias. Applying an intersectional approach could offer support with this.

**Summary**

In closing we were asked to consider how effectively we are utilising current resources and implementing existing policies to help support us through some of the issues raised. We acknowledged that there is no ‘one size fits all’ model - human beings are complex and therefore, we need a range of approaches to address issues. But the common threads across all the conversations recognised key factors, such as the need to invest more quality time to be critically curious about our practice and the values we hold.

*Brown. B (2017)*

*Rising Strong, reprint edn.*

*Random House Trade*

*Leon.L and Raws P. (March 2015) ‘Boys Don’t Cry: Improving identification and disclosure of sexual exploitation among boys and young men trafficked in the UK’*

We talked about understanding and accepting that we will all encounter conflicting emotions during our work and have our belief systems challenged because of the nature of what we do, and we should seek support to navigate our way safely through those experiences.

Finally, we reminded that being self-aware requires an on-going commitment to keep working on oneself to be our most effective in the varying roles we hold as care-givers and service providers.

*Working* ***With*** *Men (2018) Handout ‘Is Gender Equality* *a Reality Within Your Organisation?’*

[*Beyond Male Role Models*](http://www.open.ac.uk/health-and-social-care/research/beyond-male-role-models/)

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