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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Place plays a vital role in how boys learn to become men

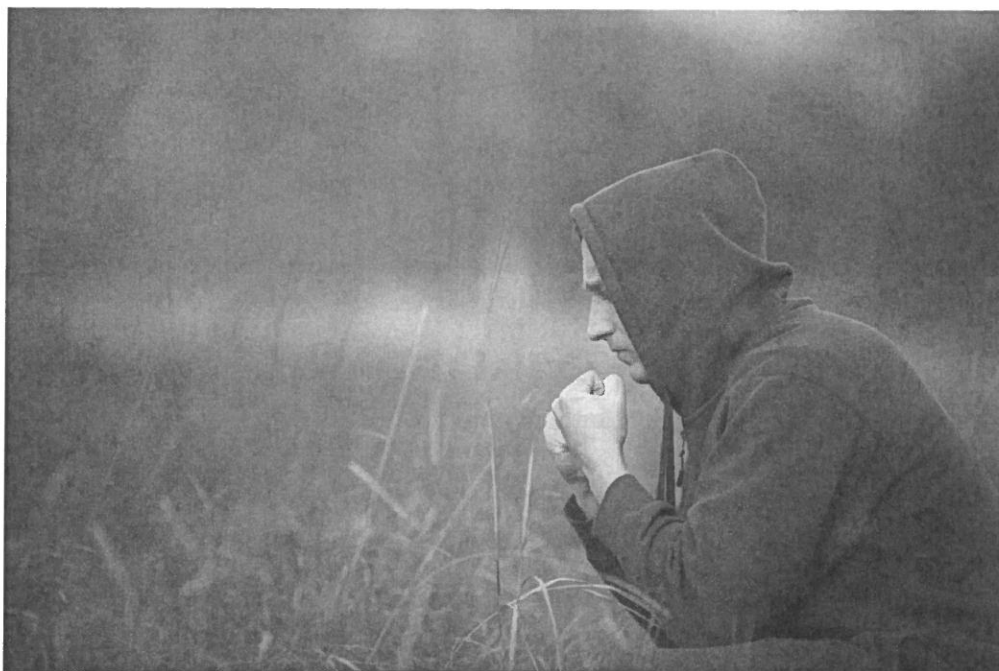
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Who you can become is shaped by the history of your home. luxorphoto/www.shutterstock.com

Since the late 1970s, how young people transition to adulthood has been shaped by changes in global industry. As job opportunities in the UK have moved away from industrial roles, young people have become more likely to remain in education than ever before, and increasingly strive to gain educational qualifications to enable them to compete in a shrinking labour market.

However, these changes have been accompanied by an increasing anxiety in the UK, the global north and elsewhere about the position of boys and young men. There is still concern that boys are undera-

chieving in school compared to girls, that they are suffering from high rates of suicide and poor mental health, and that boys are increasingly involved in offending and anti-social behaviour.

Policy makers, the media and social commentators have suggested that the problem is down to young men suffering from a lack of male role models – although there is often frustratingly little detail offered as to what a role model is or what a suitable candidate might offer to young men.



Industrial towns are still standing while their labouring legacy may be long gone. Krizek Vaclav/www.shutterstock.com

These problems are often framed as outcomes of a “war” on boys – or as MP Diane Abbott put it, a “crisis” of masculinity. But men still tend to hold the key positions of authority and control throughout society, and across the world, so how real is this problem?

“Boys” – and girls – are extremely diverse, and there are multiple ways of being a boy. What we really need to be thinking about when we talk about these issues, is which boys and which men are struggling.

In reality it is those boys and young men from working-class backgrounds who live in de-industrialised places who are most likely to be struggling. These men are the ones who are most often associated with the “crisis” and with public fears of disorder, disrespect and delinquency.

Due to economic restructuring over the past half century, working-class young men are no longer likely to be learning to labour, working in mines, factories or elsewhere like their fathers, but learning to “serve” in the growing service industry.

From labouring to learning

So how do young men from post-industrial communities adapt and change in insecure times and make sense of their position as they transition into adulthood? When young men are left with the legacy of industrial labour, do they perform and articulate masculinity in different ways or by different means? In terms of education, do academic or vocational pathways impact upon specific classed identities? What are the broader social and spatial networks within their communities that mediate the identities of these young men and how do space and place impact on who they are and who they can become?



Towns and villages like Llwynpia in south Wales grew up around industry. Everett Historical/www.shutterstock.com

To address some of these questions, I followed a group of about 30 young working-class men living in the de-industrialised south Wales valleys for two and a half years. I shadowed them from their last week of compulsory schooling, up until some of the young men started university. I spent time as an active participant in school lessons, playgrounds, assemblies, dinner halls and parents evenings in order to understand their school lives.

As the boys grew older, I also followed them beyond the school gates: hanging out in the cars they drove, the fast food places they ate in, the pubs and night-clubs they drank and danced in, at university open days, and their places of work. I attended sports events, went shopping, to the cinema and to 18th birthday parties. On one occasion we visited a lap dancing club. On another, I attended the funeral of a young man after a tragic car accident.

What I learnt is that life for these modern young men is not as simple as the media and policy portray it to be. They are seen as feckless, out of control and educational failures, lacking aspiration – but this is simply not true. In fact, for this group of young men in a community of social and economic deprivation, expectations and transitions to adulthood are shaped through the industrial legacy of the region. This legacy has an impact on class and gender codes and what it means to be a man – and what behaviour is deemed acceptable and what is not. This then plays a huge part in educational decision-making and future life chances.

We simply cannot classify young men's issues into neatly defined categories. Really we need to look at how their lives are shaped within **specific contexts and localised cultures**. It is these issues which need tackling if some of the concerns surrounding young men are to be resolved. Home life, street life, individual neighbourhoods, regions and nations all shape the performance of different masculine identities. And it is these local expectations of manhood that are a huge influence on who they are and the possibility of who they can be.

 **Male health** **Masculinity** **Young men**

