



Being a Man Today

This report from a study recently completed at Sheffield University has been written for anyone who is working to support men undergoing stressful changes or transitions in their everyday lives. Its aim is to make our findings about the lives of firefighters, estate agents and hairdressing working in a large Northern city of more general use.



Men in Crisis?

The idea that masculinity is 'in crisis' has now become almost a cliché. It implies that men are responding in negative and destructive ways to insecurity about their 'role' in society. Men's behaviour has been criticised in relation to crime, parenting, working with children, sexuality and marriage. They are commonly seen as both the perpetrators of danger and disorder, as well as hapless victims facing greater disadvantages in society than women (Scourfield and Drakeford 2002: 621). The virtues which men once proudly aspired to have been recast as vices and men are now urged to get more in touch with their 'true feelings'.

Traditionally, being seen as masculine meant avoiding behaving in 'feminine' ways – and men monitored themselves and scrutinised others who might not be 'man enough'. Homophobia goes hand in hand with these attitudes and the dread of being unmasked as not a real man. That said, although men overall may occupy an overwhelmingly privileged position, individual men can feel powerless. The 'rules of manhood' seem to have been written in such a way that only the tiniest fraction of men can measure up to them. If masculinity has this kind of history, is there any solid evidence for a new kind of man in the 21st century? Or do some men, selectively, play the 'new man' *and* the 'new lad', depending upon which style of masculinity best fits the bill? And if we do meet the 'new man', is he likely to be white British and heterosexual?

Questions like this reveal an underlying scepticism about men's desire or capacity for change. Yet if men's roles and relationships, their styles of masculinity, have been under attack, perhaps this situation provides the much-needed impetus for finding new ways forward. Rather than a 'crisis of masculinity', have men come to a new and even

exciting cross-roads? Are the old images of 'straight' and 'gay' any longer of relevance, for example? Or has dance culture, fashion magazines and television opened up a whole new set of choices about 'being a man'?

Academic research is divided on these questions and some findings suggest that new attitudes and practices around gender and sexuality are fraught with anxiety and insecurity. What we offer here are our own findings. Some may echo the lives of men you have worked with. Some may suggest new ways of looking at longstanding problems.

Has life changed for men?



Since the 1980s many men have found that more is asked of them in the workplace. If they are in 'business' of some kind, they are likely to be measured against performance indicators and have monthly or even weekly targets to meet. If they work in the public sector, in schools or the health service, they may be facing the same kinds of demands.

In addition, the long-hours culture has taken over many men's lives - and at a time when family life is seen as more of a priority. This can cause problems for men who would like to spend more time with their children. If they have a female partner who is working, then they may feel more strongly still that they need to share in child care and housework.

These are practical problems which can create feelings of pressure. But there are other pressures too. Glamorised media images of men can be compelling – and confusing. From Russell Brand through to celebrity chefs and footballers, men are faced with a different role model whichever way they turn.

Traditionally it was men's work which gave them a clear sense of the kind of man they were. Yet work itself is changing in terms of gender. Firefighters are women as well as men. 'Feminine' skills of listening, negotiation and empathy are increasingly valued in business settings such as estate agency. Creative or service industries such as hairdressing, catering, nursing and care work are now career options which men's fathers and grandfathers would never have considered. And in the home, increasing numbers of men feel they either should, or want to be more involved with what is going on there. Yet childcare and housework are no longer so clearly divided into men's and women's jobs.

This is a potentially exciting world of new choices and identities. Jobs themselves, technologies, transport, employment policies have all changed. Men can be whoever they want in this new European world of work. Or so it seems. Yet for many men, traditional milestones remain important. Getting a job, a partner, a home, a car, a particular level of income, a family, maybe even their own business, can all be goals which men feel they must achieve by particular ages.

The men who spoke to us were of different ages and from three selected occupations: firefighting, hairdressing and estate agency. These were chosen to

represent traditionally male, traditionally female and more mixed work settings. We observed men in their workplaces. We interviewed them. And we talked to women who knew these men in their home lives.

This is what they said.

Will I fit in?

When men go into a particular line of work they may have expectations about the kind of man who does this job. These stereotypes of masculinity can be very different, depending upon the job. The firefighter is seen as someone proud to display traditional 'masculine' skills of strength and courage. Heroic physical work in dangerous situations distinguishes the firefighter from women – and from men employed in 'soft' or 'boring' jobs, like office work. By contrast, the hairdresser is a man who takes care of his appearance, who is creative and who has a way with female clients. Because of his interest in fashion and looking good (and because he spends a lot of time with women in salons) his sexuality may be scrutinised. However, nowadays it is far more common for all kinds of men to take care of their appearance and have female friends. The estate agent is different again. Coolly rational, he has a way with money and with words. You may not trust him, but he dresses well and drives something stylish.

What is work like in practice?

These stereotypes can be misleading or difficult to live with – but in different ways.



Firefighters

Clive, a 53 year-old retired firefighter, said that taking on the job at 16 was *'the best move I ever did'*. His girlfriend said it was *'the only thing that he's ever wanted to do with his life. I couldn't imagine him doing anything else'*. For many firefighters, the 'buzz' of a fire call could be addictive. They got job satisfaction from performing well as an individual and a team member in dangerous, extreme situations. Mastering their fear and excitement made men proud of themselves and their occupation.

But the stereotype of the daring firefighter with enormous physical strength – a sexual magnet for women – was not the whole story. Once men got into the service they found that fitting in with the team was very important. This meant recognising that 'it's not enough being macho and all muscle, you have to have it up here', as one experienced man told us. Observing everyday life in the fire station, we found that fire calls are now less frequent as new health and safety policies and regulations take effect. Men have to spend more and more time fitting fire alarms and promoting fire safety, as well as taking part in drill, maintaining equipment, and sitting around in the mess room. Many men missed the busy days and nights.

On top of this, the job itself is changing and the military discipline which men like Clive respected has been taken over by new management approaches and a commitment to more diversity among firefighters. These changes can be difficult to adjust to. Clive believed that employing female firefighters meant lowering standards. He said *'when you're a fireman, basically ... you're a mule, you've got to get equipment from one place to another to operate ... You know it's a physically demanding job ... you get dirty, you get cold, you get wet ... how many women do you know that really want to do that?'* He had also found it hard to adjust to new forms of management. He said:

In the late 1960s, early 1970s (firefighters) had all been in the Navy, the Army, so they all knew military discipline but you could still have a laugh and a joke but these guys [senior management] ... they've never been to a bloody fire ... they don't strike you as physical guys who've ever struggled in their lives to do anything ... they've never pulled anybody out.

The joking which went with the close-knit, military-style life is still very much a part of the job, despite changes in the style of management. For many men, the fire station can be a 'home away from home' where they cook, eat and sleep together, sharing difficult, hilarious, harrowing and boring times. For many of them the team brings feelings of stability and familiarity. But there can be other sides to it. The banter is constant and several men said they never let their colleagues 'see a *chink*', or the 'wind-ups' would be merciless. Some men cope better than others with the wind-ups. More positively though, younger firefighters stressed their appreciation of a good work/life balance, the four 'free' days between shifts giving them scope for sport and leisure, as well as future childcare. One young firefighter had left a good job in engineering for the physical and mental benefits of firefighting. He earned less, but was much happier with a fulfilling work-life balance.

Hairdressers



Peter (32), a senior stylist in a fashionable city centre salon, said that he had been the only man among a group of thirty women training to become hairdressers. For Peter, this had been an incentive. He said: *'I think it kind of made me work a bit harder. I've always got on with women better, but really, as soon as I got into hairdressing, I think I realized that yeah, okay, I've got to fight a little bit. It's predominantly a female environment ... I think you work a little bit harder'*. Even if the salon where he worked had employed as many male as female hairdressers he still felt that *'the women would be just slightly above us ... they can be quite strong characters'*. How did Peter conform to the stereotype of the good-looking hairdresser? He said that *'when you're obviously working with the public and you're trying to make people look good, you need self-esteem. Put a hundred percent in yourself'*.

For Peter, then, being outnumbered by women had made him work hard and

helped him get on. Other men had more mixed feelings. This kind of work could seem to threaten their masculinity and so they said things to us which gave them a special status. David, a hairdresser in his fifties, said, *'you spend your life working with women every day, you take on far more feminine characteristics, because you can relate to women, if you're working with women.'* Becoming more like a woman did have pay-offs. David related well to the women whose hair he cut and who were his colleagues and this brought him success. But clients sometimes thought he was gay and he was not happy with this. Nor did he want to identify with the stereotype of the hairdresser as a glamorous but uneducated woman. He said:

It's just funny that all the top hairdressers except for a few, are all men. I think that's because a man goes into most jobs, but especially into hairdressing, and it's going to be their career. A lot of women go in and they're going to do it for five, six years. Then go off and have a baby and it's a filler and the ones who've become very career minded do very well at it.

Other men talked about their specialist, scientific approach to the job. They said that they were known for their cutting skills and had learnt new colouring techniques at college and brought these into the salon. They did not simply ask clients what they were doing that evening or on their holiday, but discussed topics like animal rights and politics. Media images of the hairdresser had worked for them, they said. TV programmes such as *Cutting It* and *The Salon* had raised the profile of their job. That said, young men entering the job said that a lot of hard work was required of them and that it was not immediately a glamorous job.

What these men told us suggests that fitting in – and becoming successful – may not be straightforward. But some men could define their jobs - and themselves - in their own terms. This was difficult for hairdressers who rent their chairs from a salon owner. When they are young, they enjoy the freedom of this arrangement, but as they get older they may feel insecure financially and worry that their skills and their looks are not up to it. Sometimes injuries, such as repetitive strain on the tendons resulting from a constant use of scissors, can add to feelings of job insecurity. A solution can be owning your own salon and defining the job in your own terms.

We observed one salon owner who clearly conformed to the 'camp' hairdresser style. This helped him get on well with the older women who made up his loyal client base. As well as the risqué gossip and teasing on offer, this man also provided care and support. In this way he had redefined the job. As well as camp banter as he cut and set clients' hair, he also carried out the traditionally female tasks of making clients' coffee, just as they liked it, and fetching their lottery tickets and cigarettes. His ability to switch between a camp, a feminised and a more traditionally masculine style was clearly a strength. So the 'care' he offered also included handy-man jobs in clients' homes. This owner was to some extent 'fitting in' with one of the stereotypes of the hairdresser, making it work to his advantage – but mixing it with other more straightforwardly 'feminine' and 'masculine' skills.

Estate Agents



Not only men's jobs, but also the stereotypes that go with those jobs, have changed since the Second World War. Estate agency got a bad press as a result of the 'sharp' practices that went with 1980s business culture. But before that it had a respected professional status. When Brett, a semi-retired estate agent, became a junior negotiator in a '*pretty upmarket*' firm in the 1960s, he felt he had escaped his working class roots. He got to drive the firm's car and remembered '*bumping into my old school mates... saying look at me I'm in a posh Triumph Herald, because if I could get in the Triumph Herald rather than the Morris Minor I was in heaven*'. For Brett, fitting in with his '*awfully nice*' public school-educated colleagues meant changing his accent and being careful not to drop his 'H's'.

Some men starting out in estate agency today still feel the need to drop their working class accents. More than this, though, they are trying to fit into a world where how you dress, where you live and the kind of lifestyle you have are part of what you are selling. Some young estate agents racked up debts in order to dress in the latest clothes. Expensive suits, cufflinks, scarves, watches and pens are all ways of showing that you fit in and can be important for men who want to get on. But this is not the whole story. Men were not just trying to conform to the stereotype of the stylish business man. It was also important to get on with the different clients that they had to deal with: families selling residential homes; landlords looking for investment properties; and property developers themselves, looking for an estate agent's advice. What we found was that men working in this field had to keep changing their approach. In meetings with investors and developers, they would sit with their legs crossed above the knee or lean back with their hands behind their heads. A strong handshake and steady eye contact were important if deals were to be clinched. But ordinary people trying to sell their homes were men's 'bread and butter work'. This meant showing respect to the client, admiring their gardens/cats/kitchen extensions/dado rails, but also impressing them with an air of professional confidence. One man said, '*you have to fit in... be an actor, morph yourself into whatever you think the client wants you to be*'.

Men – and their female partners – told us how demanding this kind of 'impression management' could be. When men finally got home, they would tear off their suits, '*a knee-jerk reaction*', they said. Their partners described them acting '*like children*', eager to play-fight with their real children, leaping round the house and doing '*daft stuff*'.

In terms of the pressure of masculine stereotypes, men in estate agency can find themselves labouring under their clients' negative assumptions that they are glib, untrustworthy salesmen. Their success depends upon getting a client's trust but they may not necessarily have much professional training behind them. Brett, the semi-retired estate agent, described the 1960s when he would go out with the Senior Negotiator, simply to '*hold the end of the tape and listen, and watch*'. Expertise was built up slowly, under supervision. Nowadays, in his view, newcomers '*have a week's training and they're a Branch Manager*'. For him, success and job

satisfaction had meant saying no to '*sharp practice [in a] cut throat world*' and his wife described the hard work that this had meant. Brett, she said, had often been '*uptight and frazzled*', in a working life which meant not being at home on Saturday for over thirty years. It was by interviewing women such as Brett's wife, that we found out the price - in terms of leisure, family life, health and well-being – that men paid for their success in this and other occupations.



Bringing it all back home?

What insights do the lives of men in these three different occupations have for men in other circumstances? Because we talked to older as well as younger men, we got valuable information about the ways in which jobs are changing – and what this meant for them as individuals. Men about to retire could find themselves leaving a job which was very different to the one they first took on. This could involve either adjusting to a new way of valuing themselves – or hanging on to their own sense of self worth. Clive, the retired firefighter

in his fifties, was full of regrets about changes in the fire service but was able to say that '*I got my full time in, I can hold my head up and say I've done my duty*'. Brett, the estate agent, was different. He took pride in his refusal to go in for sharp practices but said that he had done well because he was willing to adapt to speedier business methods. Russell, a semi-retired hairdresser, had struggled with job insecurity and job-related ill health during his working life. However, when 1960s styles like the Tony Curtis had come in, Russell re-defined himself as a hairdresser with skills in techniques such as blow drying, previously only associated with female hairdressers. This had been the key to his ultimate success

What does all this mean for young men setting out in these kinds of jobs? John, a 26 year-old graduate firefighter, was one of the younger men who had really valued being young and independent. He said: '*... the whole living in the city with my mates ... I did it at university. I did three years and I did it well*'. Paul, a 28 year-old graduate estate agent, said the same thing: '*It was fantastic ... yeah, mates round on a Friday and a Saturday and not having to worry about anything, making a total mess of the place and not getting told off*'. When John thought about settling down he said he was scared.

And yet many men did feel the pressure of time passing and the need to prove themselves. Adam, a 23 year-old estate agent said: '*My worst fear is waking up and I'm thirty and I'm in the same job, you know, middle management*'. Quite commonly, young men felt confused. Joe, a 24 year-old estate agent, said that he had found that '*it's hard to grow up*'. Later on he said, '*now I've got a lot more drive and determination. I was so immature at college ... just couldn't be arsed with anything, didn't take life seriously ...*'. Now he wanted '*nice things and ... nice people around me*'. Hairdressing is a job which seems to go along with the glamorous sociability of youth culture. It is part of what a trendy salon is selling. Yet young men were aware that their 'youthfulness' was time-limited. This led to mixed feelings as the responsibility of managing finance and staff could seem like

an unwelcome contrast with their present youth-oriented life style.

Young men were also worried that achieving their goals could mean the trap of overworking and putting money before family and friends. This kind of uncertainty about getting it wrong went along with worry about slipping behind. If they had a woman in their lives, she was likely to feel her own uncertainties. For young women, making sure they had children while they were still fertile was important. For them, having time for their male partner to establish himself financially, for their own careers to be settled enough for them to have a break of their choice, and for the right house to be bought and furnished, were pressing needs.

What we found was that in the changing worlds of men's work, young women were likely to be taking control and making timetabled plans as to what had to be achieved by when. This again is something new. If young women are likely to have more of a stake in their own working lives, they are less likely to be simply a kind of back-up for a man making his way in the world. If being a woman is different in the twenty-first century, then inevitably being a man will change too.



The Future for Men?

These case studies from three different occupations point towards some of the general stereotypes which can lead to men feeling under pressure. They show that men can be faced with a variety of different role models, depending upon their choice of job. Part of the difficulty for men can be that these stereotypes and role models are changing. What a man's father aspired to might not be appropriate for him.

Our findings illustrate what these changing stereotypes meant for the everyday lives of men of different ages. Some were retiring from jobs which they felt had been changed out of all recognition and where old values had been thrown aside. Younger men coming in may have different expectations – or may still find some of the old values are in place. Some men were able to work with today's expectations and re-define their job – and themselves – in the process.

However men deal with their working lives, they are likely to find the old demarcations between men and women far less clear cut. Men may be working alongside women in what were once traditionally masculine jobs; they may be taking up jobs which only women used to work in; they may be switching back and forth between different kinds of masculinity, even in the course of a single working day.

And in the home, men can be faced with a confusing situation. While older women may have taken on traditional childcare and housework, they are now likely to expect more from their retired partners. And the younger women who spoke to us described taking a lead with their male partner, defining the milestones which needed to be achieved in order that family might take shape.

We hope that the range of experiences described here, and the voices of the men and women we spoke to, will provide useful case studies which throw light upon the experiences of men you are working to support. And for men themselves, we hope that this will feel like a creative process which opens up new ways of going about everyday life.

Project Details

The project, 'Masculinities in Transition: Identity, Home and Workplace', was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The investigators were Dr Alex Hall, Professor Jenny Hockey and Dr Victoria Robinson. The study was based at the University of Sheffield.

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