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'They are just good people....generally good people': Perspectives of young men on relationships with social care workers in the UK

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Abstract

The perspectives of marginalised young men on what they value in relationships with social care workers are under researched and have not received adequate attention within policy and practice literatures. Moreover, problematic assumptions about gender pervade much political and cultural commentary. Research findings from a study of 50 young men, aged between 16-25 attending a range of social care services, are highly significant in this context. They highlight young

men's investment in a language of care and respect and their rejection of categorical presumptions. However, the services were steeped in practices and understandings of their marginalisation and offered important opportunities for recognition.

‘They are just good people....generally good people’: Perspectives of young men on relationships with social care workers in the UK

Introduction

The perspectives of young men on what they value in relationships with workers in social care services have not been the subject of attention especially in recent decades (Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton and Ward, 2015). (The term social care is used here as shorthand for a wide variety of support services, in this case, located in the voluntary rather than the statutory sector). Moreover, little is known about whether the gender of the worker makes a difference to the quality and effectiveness of the relationship.

The research project, which is the subject of this article, emerged from a concern to address a gap in the evidence therefore. Developed by researchers with an interest in gender issues and with backgrounds in education, youth and social work, it was planned in conjunction with a large children’s charity, Action for Children, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No: ES/K005863/1) In the course of the project, a close working relationship was also developed with a smaller charity, Working with Men, in London with a particular focus on marginalised young men, particularly those from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds.

The objectives of the study were:

- To explore whether the gender identity of the worker makes a difference to developing good quality relationships between workers and young men
- To explore how gender interacts with other aspects of identity such as class and ethnicity

- To explore how professional relationships with boys and young men can be improved and the lessons for professional practice more generally
- To contribute to policy, practice and academic debates about the development of young masculinities and young men's transitions to adulthood

A range of associated research questions were developed of which the following are the focus of this article:

- What do boys and young men value in their relationships with workers?
- What do they identify as essential to developing good relationships?
- What are the implications of these findings for developing interventions with boys and young men who are perceived to be vulnerable or 'at risk'?

In what follows, we explore the background to the research, the methods used, key findings and discuss how these contribute to developing practice with young men.

Background

As indicated, the research project was developed in close association with a large children's charity. The charity offered services throughout the UK and had a long history of working with economically and socially deprived young people who had experienced multiple adversities and developing services to support them emotionally and in relation to education and employment. In the course of the research, a smaller charity (Working with Men) with a specific long-standing focus on working with marginalised men became engaged. Both charities saw the research as an opportunity to hear from young men themselves about what they valued in relationships with workers.

The research was planned against a backdrop of concerns about the debates that characterised the policy context. A coalition government came to power in 2010 and encountered widespread social disorder in 2011. The source of such disorder was often constructed as lying in the lack of fathers in young

men's lives and a consequent lack of 'male role models'. This was echoed by politicians across the political spectrum (Mahadevan, 2011, Lammy, 2011, Abbot 2013). Moreover, this was not new. For some time commentators had located the source of boys' and young men's varying troubles in both the private and public spheres; families where fathers were 'absent' and what were characterised as feminised public services (particularly education and social care). This 'male role model' discourse appeared to be one facet of a wider set of processes situating boys and or masculinity as 'in crisis' and problem-ridden.

We were concerned to interrogate such analyses for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were based on scant empirical evidence. Educational research on whether the gender of teachers made a difference to boys has suggested no such relationship exists (Martino 2008, Francis et al. 2008). There is no comparable research on social care services. There has been a limited amount of research into the issues for services in engaging fathers. This suggests that the gender identity of the worker makes little difference to whether fathers find the relationship of value or not (Featherstone, 2009). We also questioned whether isolating gender in this way was helpful. Research in education suggests gender has to be understood in the context of factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality when exploring how young men and teachers do or do not develop effective learning relationships (Barnes, 2012).

A key concern was that the calls for male role models was simplistic and ignored a body of research that has found that individuals do not simply 'learn' their gender identity from others (see, for example, Hicks, 2008). Gender is not a 'thing' but rather a set of practices and relations. It is negotiated and performed within an array of domains. For example, there is a body of research exploring how young men engage with each other, girls, teachers (male and female), in school settings. Such research suggests that their identities are developed in the context of multiple interactions and contexts.

Finally it is important to note the research was designed to offer young men a voice in a context where we considered the 'male role model' discourse was

one facet of a wider set of processes situating boys and or masculinity as 'in crisis' and uniquely problematic (Tarrant, Terry, Ward, Ruxton, Robb and Featherstone, 2015)). This construction glosses complexities and inequalities in young men's lives and experiences. For example, while the generic terms, boys and young men are mobilised, it has historically been young, working-class men living in stigmatised places who are most often associated with public fears of disorder, disrespect and delinquency (McDowell, 2012). Such concerns have become increasingly racialised over time with particular groups of black and minority ethnic boys deemed to demonstrate a moral, cultural, physical and social threat to an otherwise 'respectable' late modernity.

In such a climate of 'othering', the opportunity to offer voice to young men themselves was therefore an important motivator for the research.

The research

We were successful in interviewing either individually or in groups, 50 young men. We also considered it important, given our understanding of gender as relational and interactional, to get a sense of how women saw the needs of young men. Thus 14 young women alongside 12 male staff and 17 female staff took part in the research and their views are explored in forthcoming articles.

All the research team had experience of working with or researching boys and young men and contained a mixture of ages and gender although we were all white.

A flexible semi-structured interview schedule was used, in which participants were encouraged to talk about their past experiences and current lives, with a particular focus on their identities as young men (or in the case of young women, their opinions of young men), their experience of support services and their relationships with staff. All the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed (together with fieldwork notes kept by the researchers) using thematic analysis to identify key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

Between November 2013 and June 2014, the fieldwork was carried out across the UK in different support services for young people. These included services for offenders, care leavers, young carers, young fathers and young people with additional learning support, behavioural needs or mentoring support needs. The services employed workers from a range of backgrounds. While many had professional backgrounds in residential social work and youth work, some men were employed who had themselves experienced many of the same difficulties as the young men they worked with (eg, trying to construct a life post prison) and were from similar backgrounds to the young men. The services encompassed a range of facilities. While some were centre based, others were outreach services using youth work and community work approaches. They were located in the West of Scotland, North Wales, Cornwall, Dorset, North-West and South-East London.

Some of the details about the young men were as follows: twenty were from BME backgrounds. 17 were from an offenders' project in the West of Scotland and 17 from projects run by the small charity in London. Thus a third of the respondents lived in an area of the UK (the West of Scotland) that had been devastated by de-industrialisation and the majority of the young men lived in areas and/or families struggling with generational histories of loss and deprivation. A further third, the majority of whom were BME, lived in London, in a city experiencing enormous changes with swathes of the city becoming increasingly out of reach to all but the most wealthy.

In reflecting upon the research process, we noted that our previous experience had led us to question assumptions that young men do not want to talk to researchers (see also Frosh et al, 2002) and, indeed, the research produced a wealth of data. However, there were many difficulties. We were conducting the research during a period of severe cuts and this impacted upon the services that had agreed to work with us. Moreover, many of the young men had a range of social, emotional or educational difficulties that made accessing and interviewing sometimes very difficult. Staff had to put a lot of effort into supporting the research, placing strain on them at an already difficult time.

The findings

Our focus in this article is on young men's perspectives on working relationships. However, in order to contextualise these, we offer a brief overview of the overall findings (see also, Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton and Ward, 2015).

Firstly, the young men often reported difficult family relationships, including, for many, negative relationships with their fathers. Mothers and grandmothers were, however, frequently strong positive influences in their lives. An important finding related to loss as many had experiences of multiple losses (deaths of parents and grandparents) throughout their short lives. A number had been in care and/or prison and had experienced multiple changes of living situation and professionals.

Secondly, the young men's masculine identities seemed to be strongly defined by locality and place as other scholars have also noted. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that individual neighbourhoods, regions and nations shape the performance of young men's masculine identity, in the same way that other processes of identity formation, such as education and schooling do.

Over two thirds of our sample were, as indicated, from contrasting parts of the UK, the West of Scotland and South East and North West London. There were many similarities in terms of displays of 'hyper-masculinity' in the different communities. Such hyper-masculinity can be defined as acts of aggression, violence, risk-taking, substance misuse, drinking large amounts of alcohol and overt heterosexuality and homophobic language and behaviour (Ward 2014).

However, as recent studies conducted with young men have illustrated, young men's identities can be quite fluid and complex, and there are a range of possibilities for constructing alternative masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Roberts, 2013). We noted the role of services in this. Away from the street, and the 'hypermasculinity' that it seemed to foster, the young men engaged with workers in building alternative futures and what can be described as

'safer' masculine identities and we explore what that entails in our section on findings below.

However, it is important to note that successful transitions meant different things for young men in different localities. These differences were most stark when comparing a de-industrialised community in the West of Scotland and inner-city London. 'Place' seemed to impact not only on the formation of a masculine self, but also on the way education and employment choices and relationship opportunities were viewed. Contrary to assumptions that, in a globalized and media saturated world, young people draw on similar resources in constructing their sense of self, we found that local expectations of what it means to be a man were key to understanding identities and aspirations.

In our next section we explore the young men's perspectives on workers, including whether the gender of the worker was perceived by them as important and the value or otherwise of men as role models. We identified some overarching themes: a focus on the qualities and behaviour of individual workers, a reworking of concerns around structural inequality in a language of 'he's like us' or 'he comes from around here'. We also identified that services were experienced as playing vital roles in compensating for past or present deprivation and supporting transitions to 'safer' masculinities, transitions which were however often very precarious.

It's all about the individual?

The young men were asked a broad general question at the beginning of their interviews about what makes a good worker or, sometimes, if they were struggling to answer, they were asked about what makes a bad worker. They responded both in the abstract but also with reference to the workers in the projects being researched.

Someone who listens to you someone who helps you (Danny white, 19, Cornwall)

Well to be funny and to have a carry on, but to obviously still do their work, that's important, just someone who tries to understand you and people who are trying to help, you got to give them a chance (Wayne, White, 17, Scotland)

Responses stressed the importance of **care** in a number of senses: it referred to feeling cared for and also concrete experiences of being cared for. Furthermore, its absence was what characterised a bad worker. As James responded when asked:

Someone who don't care about you (James, White, 17, Dorset):

Yeah so although if you don't want to be a youth worker then you shouldn't be. Like it should never be about the money with youth workers or teachers, doctors, those kind of stuff. If that's what you want to do well then help like children or a youth person then I believe that that's ... you just be yourself and through that they will see that you do actually care. Sometimes some of them try too hard and sometimes some of them don't want to do the job. I feel those ones really take it away from the ones that do (Kellen, 25, Black, London)

Centre based services offered very concrete opportunities to demonstrate care

Yeah you'll come in and they'll say do you want a tea of coffee, they'll make you lunch, cos like if I haven't got money for food, they'll say do you want something to eat and they'll feed me

(Terry 17, White, Scotland):

The importance of being able to trust a worker was emphasised repeatedly. Occasionally, this was described as a feeling:

It's hard, but you just know you can trust them

(Burt, 25, White, Scotland)

However, more often this was linked to the demonstration of certain behaviours by the workers, of which reliability was key.

Throughout the accounts from the young men, there were explicit references to respect:

Aye, that's it, they have time for me, treat me with a lot of respect, always making sure I'm alright like, and I've quietened down a lot since I've started coming here

(Davey 21, White, Scotland)

There were also references to circumstances where the young men clearly felt they were not respected.

Um, well they are just good people man, generally good people man, good people, they don't treat you like scum like some other people do because I'm wearing trackies

(Eddie, 21, White, Scotland)

Repeatedly, the workers in the projects, all in the voluntary sector, were contrasted favourably particularly with social workers who were considered to be judgmental and focused on the young men's failings.

I think social workers are just a lot quicker to jump on the negative stuff, whereas in here the staff are like, you don't kinda try and forget about the negative stuff, but they try and get you to look at the positives, whereas social workers and them will concentrate on the negative and you'll try and work on them, you know what I mean

(Burt, 25, White, Scotland)

It is also important to note that the frequency of changes of social worker was mentioned and may have exacerbated the sense of loss many young men already felt.

Beyond the worker as an individual? So does gender matter?

The boys did not refer to gender spontaneously and when we raised it as researchers we got the following quite mixed responses:

I think sometimes you can be intimidated by the opposite sex

(Baxter, 16, White, Dorset)

No, as long as they do their job

(Danny, 19, White, Cornwall)

Both, aye, well...maybe I'd go to one of the guys who would listen like, but I haven't got a problem with working with females, you know what I mean, females made us, you know (laughs), some people prefer to talk to someone over another, I know where ya coming from like

Aye, see, it depends whether you think you can trust the person

(Jack 19, White, Scotland)

Young men's experience of family relationships could influence their attitudes to staff, and their gender identities, in complex ways. For some young men, problematic relationships with their fathers meant that they found it difficult to trust male workers and preferred to work with female staff:

I have always got on with females more, and that's only because I grew up with a lot of females in my life, I never had a male role model in my life, so you know, it's also that as well

(Lewis, age not given, Mixed Race, Cornwall)

I don't know really, when it comes to that sort of thing, like the relationship I have with my dad, what I, I haven't had that sort of male sort of figure thing, so um, you know I find it more difficult to get on with men, because I find men more opinioned and more like, back-offish type thing, and with women, I find I

can get along with them better, because of their multi-tasking minds (laughs).

(Harry, 19, White, Cornwall)

Male role models?

The phrase role model, or male role model, was used by some of the young men but it was not in common usage. Moreover, there was much more emphasis placed on the practices of workers and on the workers as akin to 'mentors'- coaches, guides or confidants who had a more active and negotiated relationship with the young person than 'role model' would imply.

There was also no sense from the interviews that the notion of an influential 'role model' who was beyond the young men's immediate lives was helpful. Indeed, it seemed that the idea of celebrity role models, who might have a positive influence, was largely irrelevant to the young men in this study (Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton and Ward, 2015).

'Everyone just wants to be accepted': What about race/ethnicity?

Some of the young men made reference to racism being an aspect of a 'bad' worker but generally, they noted that the worker being from the same race/ethnicity was not relevant to building a good relationship. Moreover, they noted that workers being from different ethnicities could be helpful in challenging assumptions. The following quote also highlights a sentiment in relation to the need for acceptance that was echoed across many accounts:

No, I don't, like to me I don't give a f... I don't care about stuff like that, yeah. Like a lot of people they are like, I wouldn't say pet ... some people are petty but some people they're just maybe more comfortable with their ... like they see it like man to man or woman to woman or Muslim to Muslim, for example,

because they feel that they have that connection that ... And like I said earlier, look, everyone just wants to be accepted.

(Jonas, 25, Mixed race, London)

It depends really, it depends really 'cos for instance a black kid could grow up and get into loads of trouble with the police and they'd take that as a racial thing and they'd think that all those people are out to get him, you know what I mean? Or a white kid might grow up in a background where they're not supposed to like black kids or whatever and then that black guy's there and he's telling them what to do. It's all dependent really. The black guy might think 'Oh white guys don't like me' and then they got this white youth worker, this white youth worker he's actually taking time and actually trying to benefit.

(Kellen 25, Black, London)

'He's like us' or 'he's from around here': the eclipsing of a language of class?

As we noted, some projects employed workers who had been through similar experiences to the young men they worked with. This was valued by many of the young men in the different projects:

Aye, he's an ex con, he was in, he was in the jail, he's turned his life around

(Jack, 17, White, Scotland)

Jonas noted:

For someone to be a good youth worker, yeah, they'd have to have the experiences that not the same experiences as everyone they meet but they would have to have gone through the same things and then they have the knowledge to help people instead of just an idea of what could help, like someone with a bit of wisdom, someone who could drop some knowledge on

some people and then just help them see a path, like see the light, as long as ... that's the main thing, as long as they can get people to be on a positive outlook then job's done. That's why youth workers help people be positive.

(Jonas, 25, Mixed Race, London)

However, it could also be someone from the same area, which could perhaps be considered as proxy for class. A number of young men made reference to the importance of workers being from the same area in order that 'they could see how everything is round here'.

The young men met workers in a range of ways as indicated: in centres, on the streets and on home visits. We turn now to explore the differing roles they played in young men's lives.

Services as compensatory and individually transformative: a 'third space'?

Many of the services were centred based. These offered opportunities to get a warm drink, food, practical help and socialise. It was very important for many to have somewhere to go and be occupied. For example, Jack who had come out of prison noted otherwise he would get bored and '*go on the drink or go get a bag of green and get stoned*'.

Moreover, activities seemed to help build relationships with workers and it did appear these were important to young men alongside a certain level of 'banter'. In our end-of award report we noted the thought put in by workers, male and female, to ensuring such banter was respectful and moreover the modelling of anti-sexist, anti-racist language and attitudes (Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton and Ward, 2015).

We noted that young men contrasted services with the difficult and dangerous environments they faced outside. Those dangers were linked to both private and public spaces. Many, as noted above, had very disrupted family

backgrounds: a warm, welcoming centre could provide an essential breathing space and relieve the loneliness of an empty flat. Coming to a centre was one way, especially in London, of avoiding the streets and getting stopped by the police. As Enzo, a young black man in London, noted, it helped relieve some of the stress of living in his area: *'Here it is calm, man, it's nice in here'*.

Centre based work offered specific opportunities for care and support. But irrespective of setting, a range of activities offered what we called 'a third space' for those seeking to navigate what could be a very difficult transition to adulthood. Work with literacy, computer skills, help with job applications and so on were important aspects of the services offered as well as coaching and mentoring from male workers who had troubled transitions themselves. There were constant reminders of the challenges involved for young men. A young man could resolve to stay out of trouble for example but away from the service on a Saturday night the culture of 'hypermasculinity' meant such resolutions could prove very precarious if not unsustainable.

An alternative model of masculinity was clearly being articulated by workers predicated on a deep understanding of the perils and seductions of 'hypermasculinity'. This model emphasised the importance of finding ways to stay safe such as keeping out of trouble with the law and/or developing strategies to desist from dangerous and risky behaviour to oneself.

An important feature of the work was that opportunities were developed for the young men to support each other and this ultimately could be considered central to building sustainable models of safer masculinity involving the young men developing friendships and support systems beyond services. When combined with workers who had had surmounted considerable difficulties themselves, the possibilities for young men of inhabiting positions of care and responsibility for others were reinforced.

In the next sections we locate our findings in a small literature on professional practice and recognition.

Discussion

The accounts from young men highlight the importance of feeling cared for and receiving care from workers. They were strongly invested in a discourse that stressed the importance of the individual and his or her qualities. They made no reference to a language of structural inequality in their accounts but valued opportunities to engage with workers who had been through similar experiences or came from the same kinds of area as they did. The services they were engaged with, however, were steeped in practices and understandings that certain groups of people (eg, marginalised men) or situations (eg, young men who had been in prison) needed reparative services and the opportunities to develop safer masculinities.

As we have indicated, a third of the young men lived in an area of the UK (the West of Scotland) that had been devastated by de-industrialisation and most lived in areas and/or families struggling with change, loss and deprivation. A further third who were BME lived in a city, London, that was experiencing enormous changes in terms of economic and social changes with swathes of the city becoming increasingly out of reach to all but the most wealthy.

Frost and Hoggett (2008) argue for the importance of grasping the relationship between individual biographies and the social processes attached to such huge social changes. They highlight the importance of attending to feelings of loss, grief and melancholia to understand the experiences of those whose communities are destroyed by processes of urban modernization, or those who are the powerless objects of economic and social restructuring.

A significant number of the young men we spoke to had experienced multiple losses within their own lives within such communities; mothers, fathers, grandparents as well as moves in care and prison. Such losses were linked to physical and mental health inequalities and thus to wider processes as Frost and Hoggett (2008) suggest in their analysis.

They note that experiences that have been forced upon us rather than those we freely choose, those we face as powerless objects rather than as active

agents, threaten to go beyond our capacity for thought and emotional processing. They argue that it is very damaging if we are not able to think about our experiences and make sense of them emotionally and intellectually. Indeed, in such circumstances, there are a number of very different possibilities for how we act/react. These include self-destructive behaviour (such as alcohol and substance misuse), behaviour that is damaging or harmful to places, and destructive and damaging behaviour towards others including those more vulnerable.

So the young men's losses must be understood within the contexts in which they lived and tried to survive. As Frost and Hoggett (2008: 455) point out with their concept of 'double suffering', many people subject to abuse, humiliation and hardship subsequently turn those experiences back on themselves to further harm themselves and vulnerable others and this 'double suffering' dominates professional practice in welfare work. They argue that this poses real dilemmas for workers who routinely struggle with working with people who are both victims and victimisers. Damaging constructions of masculinity fuel the issues for young men who have been constructed as risks to others and threats to the social order (Nayak, 2006). Evidence of men's self-harm, including their suicide rates, is commonly constructed through a language of risk. Thus it can be hard for young men to lay claim to a language of pain, vulnerability and hurt. In this research we noted they also did not lay claim to a language around structural inequality. Indeed a feature of their societal context was the lack of a language around structural inequality for them to access, growing up as they had in a highly unequal society with a neo-liberal emphasis on risks and opportunities as individually generated and dependent upon character or choice (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014).

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue shame is a central feature of unequal societies with chronic levels of anxiety and depression evident. Goffman's (1963) analysis is of value in such a context. He described the social hurt of stigma; the experience of the individual who cannot produce the 'normal' social identity required, who is aware that he/she does not come up to standard and of a personal failure to pass. The opinion formed by those making judgements does not stop at presentation, but encompasses moral

judgements and imputes certain characteristics, the discrediting of the person impacts on the whole identity. The stigmatized person shares the same belief system as the rest of the culture so the standards incorporated from the rest of society equip him/her to be aware of what others see as his/her failing, inevitably causing him/her to agree that they inevitably do fall short of what they really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility.

The practices by workers that were recounted by the young men are vital to celebrate and make visible in such a context. The young men spoke of their appreciation of the care they received, the respect they experienced and of the opportunity to trust. As one young man in the West of Scotland Frankie noted:

It's given me a lot broader thinking, just don't want to do daft stuff and end up back in jail'Well, like going mad, fightiing... snorting coke and whatever, just helped broaden my mind a bit, you know, because other people care about what happens to ye'.

Houston and Dolan (2008), using Honneth's (1995) work on recognition, argue that a framework for social support should involve the following elements: primary relationships of positive regard, legal rights, and acknowledgement by the community. Where any of these elements are lacking, as they often are in people's lives, they suggest social support programmes can play really crucial roles in identification and compensation.

In this research we found examples of identificatory and compensatory social support that were clearly valued by the young men. We also found possibilities to incorporate some of the insights from writers on recognition such as Fraser (2008) and Lister (2010) into work with such young men. For example, the smaller charity had a history of offering men the opportunity to have their voices heard in a variety of ways.

We suggest that this is work that could be developed further, linked into wider developments in welfare work. Fraser (2008) analyses the three dimensions of social injustice as institutionalised obstacles in the areas of distributive

injustice, status inequality or misrecognition and misrepresentation. Thus, people lack material resources, voice and parity of representation.

Lister (2010) has drawn on this to highlight the importance of poverty scholarship and activism being rooted in the voices of and the participation of those who experience such poverty. Gupta et al (2016) highlight a project based on Lister's work with families in poverty experiencing child protection processes. It offered families opportunities to exercise voice and engage social workers in dialogue about their constraints and capabilities and to make links with activists and researchers in relation to designing services that offered participatory possibilities. If such approaches were developed further with young men, this could counter deficit-laden narratives, harness the ethic of care in their relationships with each other and offer opportunities for co-producing services.

Conclusion

The views of 50 young men on what they valued in relationships with workers were explored with a particular focus on whether the gender of the worker made a difference to the quality of the relationship and the value, or otherwise, of male role models. The accounts from the young men suggest a rejection of categorical assumptions (about either gender or 'race') and their investment in individualised discourses of care, trust and respect. The services they were engaged with, however, were steeped in practices and understandings that certain groups (eg, marginalised men) or situations (eg, young men who had been in prison) needed identificatory and compensatory services crucially in order to develop safer masculinities. The young men's individual experiences of 'careful' practices were located in projects that can be understood as offering opportunities to the young men to be recognised in the sense of being offered resources, respect and, to some extent, voice.

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