Transitions to Adulthood of 'At Risk' Young Men: New Analysis from Two Norwegian Qualitative Longitudinal Studies

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This paper focuses on two cohorts of Norwegian young men whose behaviour in childhood and adolescence caused serious concern to their parents, teachers, social workers and, in some cases, the police, Despite having been identified as 'at risk', they made transitions to positive adult masculine identities in two different historical contexts; the 1980s and 2000s. The paper analyses the difference that historical context makes to these young men's lives, their gendered identity work and their perspectives on their past, present and future. In particular, it identifies the ways in which supportive intergenerational relationships and significant others serve to produce positive turning points and, over time, help the young men to develop resilience and potentially happy and successful futures. © 2020 The Authors. Children & Society *published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.*

Introduction

In this paper we bring together two qualitative longitudinal Norwegian studies of white, ethnic Norwegian men who made the transition to adulthood in different decades; the 1980s and 2000s. Through the re-use of data it disentangles the ways in which young men, who were referred to Child Welfare Services (CWS) and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Units (CAPU) experienced challenging social and economic circumstances growing up in the two periods. The paper considers how they negotiated the transition to adulthood and exercised agency. It identifies the ways in which supportive social relationships help to produce everyday practices that develop resilience and create positive turning points and potentially happy and successful futures. The paper contributes to understanding of the 'turning points' in the young men's lives (Kupferberg, 2012); times at which they achieved some agency, made sense of the past, considered the present and looked to the future. It shows how their lives changed over time and differed between the cohorts (Aaltonen, 2013), illuminating ways in which young men's agency is socially and structurally located in intergenerational and other social relations.

The paper first introduces recent research on the transition to adulthood for young people in challenging circumstances and discusses the theoretical concepts and studies that inform it. The main part of the paper discusses the findings within and across the studies.

The transition to adulthood for young men considered 'at risk'

Quantitative research on Norwegian young people over the past decade generally report that they are happy with life and growing up in good material circumstances with caring parents

(Bakken, 2019) despite reporting more stress than the previous generation (Andreasson and Birkjær, 2018). A small group, particularly young men, report serious problems. For the minority of young Norwegians who have experienced material, social, behavioural and psychological difficulties in childhood and adolescence, the transition to adulthood can be complex and difficult, marked by truancy, substance abuse, poor mental health, and criminality (Backe-Hansen *et al.*, 2014). Yet, some of the young men who have faced such difficulties and have been considered to be 'at risk' of poor adult outcomes establish stability over time (Helgeland, 2010, 2007; Lee and Berrick, 2014). Mochmann and Kleinau (2019, p. 197) point out that children from a range of countries are exposed to various risks and challenges but that these 'can be increased and decreased by interventions from various stakeholders'. However, little is known about how risks are reduced for young men deemed to be 'at risk'.

Sampson and Laub's (2003) reanalysis of the landmark longitudinal study conducted by the Gluecks in the 1930s is an exception. In a qualitative follow-up into adulthood in the 1990s, the men attributed turning their lives around to the importance of emotional relations with wives and children and finding stable work (cf. Werner and Smith, 1992 longitudinal study of Hawaiian children). In keeping with this, Helgeland (2007, 2010) found that key people who helped turn Norwegian young people away from negative trajectories included girlfriends, family members, social workers and teachers. This was a slow step-by-step process 'through interaction with the few adults who represented stability and continuity' (Helgeland, 2010, p. 428) for example in well-resourced and well organised foster homes offering good support. Paulsen (2016) also found that 17–26 years old Norwegians who had been in public care greatly valued caring and respectful support from social workers and caseworkers. Similarly, evaluations of leaving care in England and Ireland have shown that services can make a positive contribution (Pinkerton and McCrea, 1999; Wade and Dixon, 2006), including to the avoidance of homelessness (Stein, 2006) and the development of resilience (Bengtsson, Sjöblom and Öberg, 2018).

Concepts and theoretical approaches

Understanding how young men who have received social work attention in childhood or adolescence negotiate the transition to adulthood requires understanding of the agency they are able to bring to those transitions, the extent to which they are assisted or hindered by their social networks and the impact of their intersectional generation, social class and gender positioning.

Much research on youth transitions focuses on the transition to paid work and shows the structural and personal constraints and choices faced by socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, who are more likely than more advantaged young people to live in poorer circumstances, to have parents with fewer resources and to be more likely to make discontinuous and less advantageous transitions to further education and employment (Cuconato, 2017; Holtmann, Menze and Solga, 2017; Roberts, 2013). However, other social transitions in social relationships and practices are also key (Henderson *et al.*, 2014). To that end, the analysis that informs this paper draws on a conceptualisation of the interconnectedness between the personal and the social, biography, history, and the circumstances and events that constrain and facilitate young men's agency (Elder, 1985). Young people's agency is 'socially situated, and [is] a complex relationship between structure, social conditions, institutions and the actions of individuals' (Evans, 2007, p. 93). Temporality is important to the interlinking of the individual and the social. Not only are past and present perspectives pivotal, but young people's future visions and aspirations also shape their 'becoming', in terms of their agency, development and subject formation (Halldén, 1991; Nielsen, 2015). The processes of 'being' and 'becoming' are inextricably constituted in and through particular spaces

and historical times (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Uprichard, 2008). These particularities include social relationships.

Agency is also 'bounded' and especially so for young men who have experienced difficult or socioeconomically disadvantaged childhoods (Aaltonen, 2013; Evans, 2007; Tomanovic, 2012). It involves the negotiation of tensions that are 'firmly embedded in gendered projects of self through which young people work through the kind of men and women that they can be, drawing on family, community and cultural resources in the process' (Henderson *et al.*, 2007, p. 111). Marginalised young men's ability to 'do' identities in relation to their life experiences and their intersectional positioning in social class, living conditions, gender, and geographical location is therefore socially structured and constrained as well as volitional. For example, numerous research projects have shown that young men's engagement with education and peer relationships are constrained by pervasive constructions of masculinity as hierarchically organised and that men and boys aspire to dominance through the toughness associated with 'hegemonic masculinity' (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1985).

There is also evidence, however, that working class young men can counter hegemonic norms through education or by drawing on the relational support available to them (Ingram, 2009; Roberts, 2018; Ward, 2018). Robb *et al.* (2017) studied the experiences of young men with difficult or disrupted relationships or drug problems. They conclude that masculine identities and capacity to care are positively influenced by close and caring relationships with mothers and other female relatives. Furlong (2016) also stress the importance of intergenerational relationships, pointing out that how young adults fare is dependent on a 'joint enterprise' between children and parents. Children themselves value strong, positive intergenerational relationships outside, as well as within, families, for the emotional experiences of belonging, safety and trust (Bessell, 2011).

Whatever the intergenerational relationships available to them, young people have opportunities to change the direction of their lives at particular moments in their life course. Kupferberg (2012, p. 227) conceptualises these moments as 'turning points' that occur 'at the crucial nexus between social structure and personal agency'. In a comparable way, Denzin (1989) employs the term 'epiphany' while others refer to 'breaks' or fateful moments (Giddens, 1991). Turning points may be negative, positive or both (Höyer and Sjöblom, 2014; Kupferberg, 2012). For example, taking up the opportunity to re-enter education may improve job prospects while causing strain in various personal relationships.

The datasets and methods

Qualitative longitudinal research enables us to make sense of changes across generations, within both a life course perspective and through history (Elliott, Holland, and Thomson, 2008; Rudberg and Nielsen, 2011). It is, therefore, ideally suited to researching social contexts in which families and young people negotiate their everyday practices. The two longitudinal studies span not only several phases of the boys' lives but also different historical periods. They offer unique insights into change and continuity from childhood to adulthood (Park and Schepp, 2015) and link macrosocial processes to individual lives (Elliott, Holland and Thomson, 2008). They are thus particularly appropriate for understanding commonalities and differences between the experiences of young men who made the transition to adulthood in the 1980s and those who made it the 2000s.

Access to the two cohorts of Norwegian young men, both of whom had difficulties in their childhoods and teenage years, was via the CWS and CAPU. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university departments in which the studies were based.[1] Both cohorts lived in the Oslo region and one of the neigbouring counties when they were recruited.

In Study 1[2], 54 14–15 years old boys judged to be 'at risk' of negative future outcomes (see Table 1). They were recruited from the CWS to the study between 1981 and 1984. The researcher had access to all the boys' records and interviewed 39 (Wave 1). Forty-six were followed up in 1987 (Wave 2) when 22 were re-interviewed in 1986/1987. They were further followed up in the 2000s, when they were around 30 (Wave 3) and around 40 years old (Wave 4). Different types of data were collected and analysed: administrative data, criminal records, CWS reports, interviews with the boys, police, teachers, and social workers (Helgeland, 1989, 2007, 2010; Herland, Hauge and Helgeland, 2015). For this paper, five of the boys interviewed at both Waves 1 and 2 have been theoretically sampled because, when recruited they fitted the following criteria: they had all dropped out of compulsory schooling and come under the care of the CWS because of delinquency, truancy and drug use. In addition, their stories included rich descriptions of the transition to young adulthood.

In Study 2, 64 parents of boys aged 6-13 were selected in 2005 from CAPU (referred to as the clinical group). A comparison group of 128 parents of boys were recruited who either had no presenting problems or few problems. Data consisted of interviews with their parents ($N = 192$) and surveys regarding coping and parenting practices, together with CAPU reports. The interviews covered the following topics: parents' stress and coping practices and their views of their families' and sons' everyday lives. The data were analysed statistically (Solem, 2011a). In addition, 16 of the interview transcripts were selected for qualitative analysis (Solem, 2011b, 2013). In 2015 three boys from the clinical group and two from the comparison group were followed up and interviewed at 16–23 years and their parents were interviewed (see Table 2). They were selected because, as children they were all considered by their parents to be at risk of negative future outcomes.

Although ethnicity was not a criterion for selection, all the boys in both studies were white, ethnic Norwegians, reflecting the CWS and CAPU clienteles in the two study periods. Both studies adopted an 'interviewee-centered' and 'care-oriented' qualitative interviewing approach (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014) that the researchers considered ethically appropriate (Bolzan and Gale, 2012; Hollway and Jefferson, 2008; Munford and Sanders, 2015). The interviews were semi-structured life mode interviews and focused on the current everyday life situation, events in the past and hopes for the future (Haavind, 1987).

Analytic strategies

Ten boys, five in Study 1 (from 1981 to 1984 and 1987) and five in Study 2 (from 2015), were selected for the group analysis that is discussed in this article. The selection of the 10 cases was made by the Norwegian authors from the two samples. The interview transcripts were originally

Table 1: Characteristics of boys Study 1

Study 1	Ed (CWS)	Anton (CWS)	Ben (CWS)	John (CWS)	Robert (CWS)
Working class (origin)	x	x	x		
Middle class (origin)				x	x
Compulsory School (CS)	Dropped out	Dropped out	Dropped	Dropped out	Dropped out
Special/alternative schools	x	x	x	x	x
Upper Secondary School	Dropped out	Dropped out	Dropped out	Dropped out	Dropped out
Started work or on welfare	x	x	x	x	x
Foster care	x	x	x		
Neglect, abuse and assault	x	x		x	x
Bullying	x	x	x		
Behaviour problems	x	x	x	x	x
Drug/Alcohol problems	x	x	x	x	x
Traumatized	x	x	x	x	x

Table 2: Characteristics of boys Study 2

Study 2	Tom Clinical Group (CAPU)	Norman Clinical Group (CAPU)	Simon Clinical Group (CAPU)	Alex Community group	Mikael Community group
Working class (origin)	x		x		
Middle class (origin)		x		x	x
Compulsory school (CS)	x	x	x	x	x
Special/alternative school					
Upper secondary school	x	x	x	x	x
Further studies	x	x	x	x	x
Foster home					
Neglect, abuse and assault	x	x	x		
Bullying	x		x		
Behaviour problems	ADHD	ADD	ADD		
Drug/Alcohol problems				x	
Traumatized	x	x	x		x

in Norwegian, but were fully translated into English to enable collaborative analysis between the two Norwegian and two British researchers. A Norwegian-American professor, who knew the field, did the translation and the two Norwegian authors checked back and forth between the original Norwegian transcripts and the English translations during the group analysis.

The analytic process was intensive, requiring repeated re-readings of the transcripts, and several days of group discussion of analytic themes. The case analysis was predominantly thematic, involving 'meaning condensation' and 'meaning interpretation' (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kvale and Brinkman, 2014). Meaning condensation entails compressing and rephrasing long statements to condense meanings, and theorising meanings as themes. Concepts of turning points, socially situated action and bounded agency, were used to capture the ways in which these young men negotiated difficulties (Evans, 2002, 2007).

The 10 boys represent 'critical cases' with which to explore how young men with difficult childhoods or adolescence fare over the life course in particular historical contexts. The cases capture the complexities of the biography-history dynamic across generations (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Nilsen and Brannen, 2014). The analytic approach captured boys' narratives of past, present and future life events (Haavind *et al.*, 2015). Young men's positionings were analysed in relation to the periods in which they lived and the 'claims' (Spector and Kitsuse, 2001) they made in their interviews to agency, practices and emotions. Account was also taken of the turning points in their life course that took them in new directions, and/or made them think in new ways. We were interested in how they constructed their masculinities and the elements of their social worlds that facilitated them in doing so.

We now present an overview of all 10 young men in the sample before focusing in depth on two of the cases (one from each study).

Comparing the 10 boys in Studies 1 and 2

In the 1980s the boys' behaviour problems (conflicts with teachers and police, truancy, drug use) in Study 1 were understood as both stemming from neglect, and as learned behaviour. The diagnosis of ADHD was rare. Instead of therapy or medication, the boys were offered social pedagogy, follow-up by social workers, and foster homes and institutions with extra support. Ed, Anton, John and Robert had suffered serious neglect and violence in childhood (Table 1). All five boys in Study 1 reported having been beaten by fathers or stepfathers in childhood. Their parents had not provided help with schoolwork, having to contend with their own problems with alcohol, scarce resources and marriage conflicts.

All the boys had problems with alcohol, and four also reported taking drugs.Yet, by early adulthood, the Study 1 boys reported positive turning points that involved supportive relationships. Ed and Anton, for example, told stories about people inside and outside their families who had supported them during the transition to adulthood. Ed, Anton, Robert and Ben described foster care as a positive experience. Ben grew up on a small farm in the countryside, was seriously bullied, and engaged in pretty crime. He was placed by CWS with a much older brother as his foster carer. While living there he joined an alternative school and worked in the afternoons on his brother's farm, which he enjoyed. Later he found a job with another brother. Both the older siblings guided him in appropriate social behaviour. Ed and Anton considered that school counsellors had helped them in the right direction. Indeed, Anton lived at his counsellor's home for some years before moving in with his girlfriend, whom he met at a fitness centre, where he said he trained almost daily. Although he had no educational qualifications, he managed to find employment. After leaving CWS, Robert, who lived with his mother after moving out of a foster home, and John, who was living with his father, both found temporary work, but had a difficult emotional time. However, they later became truck drivers, jobs they could obtain without school qualifications (Table 1).

Driving was important for many of the young men in both samples. As Aho (2018) found for Finnish men, jobs as truck drivers signify the attainment of respectable masculinity. Car driving is also central to the 'doing' of masculinity. Advertising promotes cars 'as the vehicle, not only of freedom, but of radical excitement, individual expression and masculine display... Cars and displays of car handling skill are also an expression of self-respect, especially for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds for whom the power of the car presents a major avenue through which to gain self-respect and social kudos' (Redshaw, 2008, p. 12). Driving has also been found to be central for buttressing the masculine identities of stigmatised and excluded young Norwegian men living in rural contexts (Lægran, 2007).

By their early 20s all five boys reported longstanding 'nice' girlfriends and only John had experienced a break-up with his. Girlfriends can provide young men from difficult backgrounds with intimate, confiding relations and emotional support as Bengtsson *et al.* (2018, p. 15) found in their study of Swedish young people leaving care. They can also act as a bridge to other rewarding relationships, which may continue even when relationships break up. All five boys in Study 1 emphasised marriage and fatherhood as a means to becoming adult.

From the 2000s bullying has been recognised as a cause of young people's problems. In Norwegian schools there is now a zero tolerance policy for bullying, in contrast to the 1980s when what is now called bullying was dismissed as 'just teasing' and part of ordinary play and social interaction by teachers, parents and other adults. Both Tom and Simon in Study 2 reported experiencing serious bullying that they considered had a long-lasting impact on them (Table 2). Fosse (2006) found that almost half the adults seeking help from Norwegian psychiatric units reported bullying in childhood. The worse the bullying, the more serious the mental health problems young people have been found to experience (Vatn, Bjertnes and Lien, 2007).

Four of the boys had psychiatric problems (Mikael, Tom, Norman and Simon). Mikael and Simon each lost a parent before they were 12 years old, which constituted a major negative turning point in their lives. Mikael reported that his life had been 'perfect' before his father died. Since then he had spent a long time struggling with grief, 'I cried every day, and didn't do so well at school after that'. Norman lived in a family marked by a great deal of conflict between his parents and found this very traumatic. After dropping out of school Alex became involved with a gang of boys and used alcohol and cannabis. When he started

school again, he stopped using drugs, suggesting that being meaningfully occupied and away from bad influences led to a positive turning point in his life.

Mikael, Norman and Alex made important steps towards adulthood through education, and had girlfriends. All three had parents who, they said, stimulated and promoted interest in their school activities (Table 2). Despite having dropped out of upper secondary school, these three boys started studying at university (Table 2). A positive turning point for Norman, who had experienced conflict in his family over many years, was 6 months spent in an Israeli kibbutz. The experience changed his priorities and made him feel privileged. He said: 'Things that I have sort of taken for granted actually turn out to be luxuries that we have in Norway that others do not have'. He still lives with his father and has no plans to move out, both because they have a good relationship and for economic reasons. At 22, Simon was working nightshifts at a gasoline station, while he waited for an apprenticeship. He planned to study computer science and reflected: 'I dropped out of secondary school for a year. That was a really stupid decision'. He also reported problems in making relationships. Tom had successfully completed vocational education and was working as a car mechanic. He had a long distance relationship with a young woman living in South East Asia.

The section below focuses in depth on Ed from Study 1 and Tom from Study 2. It examines the processes by which these two young men came to establish themselves in ways that suggested hopeful future narratives.

Achieving stability and hopeful narratives of the future

Ed: A narrative of modest hope (Study 1)

Ed's case has been built from two interviews, the first when he was 17 years old in 1982, after he had lived in a foster home for 18 months; the second in 1987 at 22 years, when he lived with his girlfriend in a rented flat.

At 15, the social reports from the CWS described Ed as having dropped out of school, 'hanging out' with other boys, using drugs and stealing. Interviewed at 22 years, he identified the 'real problems' in his childhood as beginning when he was 6 years old after his parents divorced and his mother started a relationship with an alcoholic.

> Mum was quite often admitted to the hospital because of an illness she has. While she was there, my stepfather was often drunk, shutting us out of the house, beating us. We could walk alone in the middle of the night at the playground. . . Finally, he was put in jail.

From age 12 to 13 Ed had therapy in a CAPU while living at home with his mother. Because of his mother's alcohol use and nervous breakdown, at 14 years Ed was shuttled back and forth between members of his mother's family. He developed relationships with boys who were truanting and taking drugs. Therefore he was placed in a foster home for 18 months. While there, he completed compulsory schooling and almost stopped using drugs. However, he never felt that he was really accepted as a member of the foster family, and considered that they failed to recognise that 'I had problems with my nerves'. He identified a teacher and his social worker as having supported him and advised him to stay in the foster home until he finished compulsory school. The teacher gave him driving practice in his own car and followed Ed up for the next 2 years, at his request. After leaving the foster home, Ed lived for 6 months in a Norwegian Folk High School before moving in with his grandparents who lived in a rural area. Tom achieved self improvement and as well as desire to accomplish normatively scheduled life stages.

While at his grandparents' house Ed had contact with a gang and took drugs but, after falling in love with a 'decent girl', he gave up drugs and ceased contact with the gang. When

interviewed at 22, Ed was living with his girlfriend, who was employed. Because he was having problems with his 'nerves', he wanted a driving job so that he could be alone with his dog in the car. He explained, 'Perhaps it is a kind of claustrophobia... In a way you feel that people are looking at you all the time, as somebody who is unusual.' In that context, driving could function as a resource, affording Ed solitude and signifying respectable masculinity (Lægran, 2007). Ed said that he and his girlfriend mostly lived in isolation. 'We have both cut out our friends. We both participated in the gang who were shooting and fighting up there. So coming to a new place where nobody knows us is okay. We could start over again'.

Ed considered that his traumatic childhood has made him vulnerable. However, engaging in driving for pleasure and repairing cars helped to ameliorate that vulnerability by enabling him to 'do' masculinity through driving and mastery over other men's cars (Hirschman, 2016; Redshaw, 2008). His hope for the future was to achieve some modest self confidence, obtain a job and have a nice place to live with his girlfriend, whom he respected and loved. He also had confidence in his grandparents.

Ed's narrative was one of modest hope, based on a positive belief in his future possibilities while knowing that he could, in the meantime, rely on social welfare to provide him with sufficient economic resources. He was realistic about his relatives' lack of ability to help him. Having frequently felt an outsider in many contexts, he explained that 'having a room of his own' was important for him to withdraw to, and that getting along in the world 'depends on yourself, on your own will power'. Despite his feeling that he had to be self-reliant, one of his major expressions of agency and a turning point were relational in that it was after meeting his girlfriend that he stopped seeing friends with whom he used to take drugs.

Tom: A narrative of strong agency (Study 2)

Tom's case is constructed from clinical records and three interviews, the first two with his mother and one with Tom. The first interview with his mother in 2003 was when Tom was 12-year-old and had been referred to CAPU for behaviour problems; in 2015 when he was 24-year-old Tom was also interviewed. Both Tom's parents lived on disability benefits at the time of the interviews. His mother lived with Tom's stepfather and his father lived alone and had alcohol problems.

Tom was diagnosed with ADHD, and prescribed medication from the age of 6 years. His mother said that, at that time, he was unable to concentrate and was impulsive. He destroyed things when he had tantrums, and lied and stole. At the first interview, when Tom was 12, his mother reported many arguments about homework, tidying up and computer gaming. CAPU recorded the family situation as 'dysfunctional'. His parents divorced in 1999, when Tom was 8 years old. Tom has two younger brothers and a half-sister from his father, who is almost his age, with whom he said that he had a good relationship. His oldest brother had drug problems. Tom considered that his problems started when his stepfather came into his life when he was 13 and enforced strict rules that generated conflict, because 'I am not the biggest fan of rules'.

Tom moved to his maternal grandmother's home between 14 and 17 years old, and felt he belonged. She suggested he stop the ADHD medication, and he functioned well without it. He highlighted his grandmother's importance for himself and his brothers for both care and economic support. Tom contributed to the care of his younger brothers throughout their childhood. At 17, he was fed up with school, got a job and moved into his own rented flat, in his father's house, where he still lives. He explained that 'I enjoyed being able to be alone'.

Tom's story is one of having achieved equilibrium. He praised his former teacher, who encouraged him to go back to upper secondary school to complete the theoretical part of his vocational training. At the interview when he was 24, he had just completed his education, and enjoyed working as a car mechanic, feeling that he had made the right decision: 'I'm on the right track at last'. He had a few friends, but considered that he thrives best on his own. He said, 'I was not the kind of guy who goes out for a beer', drinking only twice a year, at his sister's summer party and his best friend's party. He reported that his school friends bullied him a lot over the years, 'I really took things to heart, and sat a lot on my own then'. He felt that he had no one to talk to about these problems at that time, but now Skypes almost daily with his girlfriend and had visited her four times in South East Asia. His main future hopes and resolutions included further education, taking more exercise, saving money for his wedding, and buying his own flat. Tom's narrative demonstrates agency to act and think in ways that will ensure that his future is positive. To that end, he determinedly avoided people who may distract him from his goals. For example, he had ceased contact with his younger brother (aged 21) because he was always 'nagging' him for money.

Turning points in negotiating agency

Agency becomes evident through processes of reflection and negotiation as individuals cope with and shape their environments at particular times in particular contexts (Ferguson and Walker, 2014; Munford and Sanders, 2015). The concept of 'turning point' is thus important for understanding agency (Kupferberg, 2012). Tom and Ed (and John from the broader sample) described their interaction with their stepfathers in ways that constituted negative turning points. They experienced their stepfathers as authoritarian men, who came into their lives and tried to change their family life in negative ways the boys considered illegitimate. Tom explained that when his stepfather moved in, 'It was then that sort of proper hell with him began'. Neither Ed nor Tom considered their parents supportive, even though in Tom's case, 'My father took his responsibilities in the end'. In both cases the young men acted to get away from their stepfathers and the move away constituted positive turning points for both. When Ed was 15, he contacted his teacher, who became a part of Ed's 'responsibility group' in the CWS. In a similar way, Tom was able to exercise agency by moving out from his mother's and stepfather's home, first to live with his grandmother, and then with his father, in order to escape his stepfather's cruelty.

While stepfathers and the boys' peer groups often constituted negative turning points, there were three relational positive turning points for Ed and Tom. These were produced by their grandparents, girlfriends and teachers or foster parents. Tom's grandmother managed to maintain a semblance of family life for her grandchildren, and Ed was able to live with his grandparents after leaving the youth institution. Tom met his girlfriend, on the internet, has had a relationship with her for several years and intends to marry her. For Ed, meeting his girlfriend helped him to stop drug taking. In forming a relationship with a young woman, he gained a new family (her parents and siblings) and came to experience different family norms than those practiced by his own family. Although Ed said that her parents were worried about his past exploits, her father helped him to buy his own car, which was important to him and, as discussed above is a signifier of respectable masculinity (Lægran, 2007). A recurrent theme for Ed, however, is that he feels a perpetual outsider.

Over time, Ed re-constructed the importance of his foster parents. He still considered that they had not been sufficiently understanding and emotionally warm to him, but believed that they gave him much-needed respite from his troubles. Tom was positive about his teacher, who '…was crucial. I managed to do education, thanks to the teacher. She was life

saving'. The only family members whom he thinks he can turn to, are his grandparents. particularly his grandmother who was 'always there' for him.

Tom also showed agency by seeing himself in the process of change, 'I am learning a bit gradually!'. He talked about learning English and his girlfriend's language as an investment for his future with his prospective wife. Despite his problems in childhood and earlier periods of unhappiness, he was the one in the family who had achieved; he had returned to education, found a job, and had a positive relationship with his girlfriend, who is central to his wellbeing. Tom can be understood at the age of 24 as having resilience and a strong enough will to reject alcohol unlike his brothers and father who have alcohol problems.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown the value of bringing together two cohorts of young men growing up in two periods; the 1980s and the 2000s. Before the 1990s it was not unusual for Norwegian young people to leave education early, after compulsory school (Markussen, 2010). All five boys from the 1980s cohort dropped out of both compulsory and upper secondary school. However, they completed education later by attending courses for pupils with special needs. Yet, by 22 years, all had stopped using drugs, four were employed and only Ed was in receipt of social security between short-term jobs.

A big difference between the two historical periods is that the older cohort found it easier to find employment without upper secondary education and professional qualifications. From the turn of the century, however, the labour market increasingly demanded skilled and educated people and by 2010, 97% of all Norwegian 16-year-olds started studying at upper secondary level (SSB, 2014). This is at least partly responsible for the difference in qualifications between the cohorts.

The five young men in the 1980s cohort negotiated more difficult childhoods (drugs, alcohol and behavioural problems in particular, see Tables 1 and 2) than those in the later period. They were more likely to be categorised as 'bad' and 'at risk' by the authorities. All five boys felt unsure about their social roles, identities, masculinities, work and personal relationships. Only one of the boys was involved in stereotypically 'masculine' activities such as sports. However, they chose to enter traditionally gendered occupations and developed heterosexual relationships with 'nice' young women while learning to 'do' masculinity without violence and bad behavior.

Family practices, as well-being influenced by or subjected to state intervention, are embedded in socioeconomic and historical contexts that shape boys' future lives. These include both parental ambition and caring relationships (Robb *et al.*, 2017). In Study 1 fathers were largely absent and relations with stepfathers were negative turning points in the 1980s while, in Study 2, some of the boys' fathers were role models, reflecting the ways in which fatherhood has come to be seen as more important in contemporary Norwegian family life.

All except one boy from the 1980s cohort, but only two from the 2000s cohort explained that their experience of adults in early life left them with feelings of not belonging. In addition, Tom, Simon (2000s cohort) and Ed (1980s cohort) said that they did not like to have many people around and considered themselves loners because of their experiences of having been bullied.

As the research on the transition to work suggests, young men's constructions of masculinity are reflected in the ways in which they made sense of the past, present and what they hoped for themselves in the future (Roberts, 2018; Ward, 2018). Drawing on Evans' (2002, 2007) concept of 'bounded agency' we have shown how young men, in spite of their difficult childhoods and adolescence, sought to exercise some control over their own lives.

As Hall and Lamont (2013) suggest, the concept of 'social resilience' is useful for understanding the relationship between social change and the life course. This is especially the case for those who cope with adverse circumstances in contexts where state intervention seeks to protect them against further adversity.

Coming from different generations, Tom and Ed grew up in unhappy families riven by conflict in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions. Both were referred to the CWS and CAPU because they were considered 'at risk'. Yet, both showed themselves to be resilient through processes of reflection, compromise and negotiation with their relational environments (Bryant and Ellard, 2015; Tomanovic, 2012). Both Tom and Ed gained some control over their lives as adults in spite of structural constraints and had hopes for the future. The concept of 'turning point' is helpful to understanding the moments and contexts in which the young men took action to improve their lives. Supportive social relationships were also crucial resources helping these two young men to improve their lives (Bolzan and Gale, 2012). Teachers, social workers, grandmothers and girlfriends provided opportunities for Ed and Tom to shift their everyday practices and understand those practices differently. In their successful transitions to adulthood, therefore, relationality was central to the young men's feelings of hope for the future and ability to make agentic use of turning points.

A limitation of this analysis is that boys from two cohorts, studied 30 years apart, inevitably differ. More boys in Study 1 showed externalising ways of handling their situations than the boys in Study 2, for example, stealing, truancy and drug use. The Study 1 cohort were more socioeconomically disadvantaged than the Study 2 cohort, for example, in terms of educational opportunities. However, despite these differences, the re-analysis of these qualitative interviews demonstrates the similarities between the two groups. It represents a unique analytic possibility to understand how young men growing up in challenging circumstances 'do' agency and create hopeful futures.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Notes

1 Study 1 was approved by the The Norwegian Data Protection Authority at each study wave. Study 2 was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics and the Data Protection Authority.

2 Study 1 consisted of both girls and boys. Only the boys are incuded in this article.

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