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Caring Masculinities at Work: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives Across Europe

# Caring masculinities among working-class men in blue-collar occupations in the UK: Understanding biographies of care

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## Abstract

Research considering men, boys, and the concept of caring masculinities has proliferated in the last five years, although attention has predominantly been given to privileged men's practices of care in the private realm. In this article, we explore caring masculinities among working-class men in the United Kingdom employed in blue-collar work, highlighting the possibilities for transformation and change stemming from men in the margins. Drawing on narrative biographical interviews, we analyze in-depth case studies from two men. Their biographies illustrate practices and an ethos of care interwoven throughout both paid-work and other aspects of their lives, drawing attention to how caring dispositions are formed through histories of care throughout the lifecourse for working-class men. We also consider how care can circulate in workplaces that have been considered "low on care", and how these men draw on working-class values of care and solidarity to challenge logics of capital at work.

## KEYWORDS

blue-collar work, caring masculinities, marginalized men, working-class men

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Research on caring masculinities has proliferated in the last 5 years. Arguably, attention has fallen predominantly on more privileged men's practices of care in the private realm. However, there has been a growth of interest in men's paid work in caring roles, with a developing body of work on "professional care studies (such as social work, social care, childcare, youth and community work, and nursing)" (Hanlon, 2012, p. 3). Another focus has been on writing on strategies to tackle stubborn gender segregation in contemporary labor markets, such as Scambor et al. (2019) six European country comparative study, which offers practical guidance on the translation of pedagogical processes to promote caring masculinities among boys and young men in the context of vocational education. Such work is complemented by a smaller but important focus on men in low-paid care work jobs (e.g., Baines et al., 2015; Cain, 2017; Hussein et al., 2016).

In this article, we extend this attention to men's care beyond the home and the turn to considering caring masculinities in paid work by exploring caring masculinities in the lives of blue-collar, working-class men in the United Kingdom. Taking an in-depth case study approach based on narrative biographical interviewing, we investigate care practices by two men: Neal and Eddie. Though blue-collar work is often not considered in the literature on care, the narratives explored in this paper offer insights into how care can circulate and be practiced, even when care is not a core dimension of the job or part of the labor process. We also detail how Neal and Eddie practice care in other arenas of their lives, including with friends, partners, families, and in their communities, with an ethic of care permeating the biographies of these two men. Our analysis reveals that care can exist in non-caring, working-class occupations, and that for these working-class men, care at work is wrapped up with care in other parts of their lives. We also highlight some ways a caring disposition is developed in part through the marginalized positions of these men and through their caring trajectories of repeated and subsequent practices of care across their lives.

While some scholars have been careful not to overstate classed differences in men's care (e.g., Hrženjak & Scambor, 2020), we (Roberts & Elliott, 2020), along with Prattes (2022), have identified a common assertion in studies of men and masculinities that privileged men are more likely to enact caring masculinities. On the contrary, the case studies of working-class men we present speak to our argument that change in terms of men and more open expressions of masculinity—including caring masculinities—are *likely* to be stemming from the margins of society (Prattes, 2022; Roberts & Elliott, 2020). This is in part because of the positioning of marginalized men outside the logics of dominant forms of masculinity (Elliott, 2020; Roberts, 2018; Roberts & Elliott, 2020), reflecting hooks' (2004) visioning of the margin as a site of radical openness and resistance.

Our analysis is also informed by Skeggs' (2014, p. 2) argument to challenge how capitalism "monetizes and commodifies every aspect of our lives, making every thing, person and interaction subject to the value that can be realized in exchange". As we demonstrate through our case studies, working-class men's lives are replete with instances of care that cannot be reduced to part of the production of (surplus) value in accordance with capitalist logic. Accordingly, through evidencing that working-class masculinity can and does incorporate "relating to others as if they matter, with attentiveness and compassion, beyond exchange" (Skeggs, 2014, p. 13), our article provides insights relevant to interlocking literatures: (1) with regard to masculinities scholarship, we (re)assert the need to consider working-class men as possible agents of productive change, rather than passive dupes and/or adherents to traditional and problematic masculine ideals as a vehicle to obtain power (see also Roberts & Elliott, 2020); and (2) in relation to broader sociological thought, we speak directly to Skeggs' (2014, p. 16) "methodological proposition to look beyond the logic of capital" and provide room for *hope* that the "imperatives of neoliberalism, market populism and capitalist realism ... are not the only social relations that shape us".

We begin by considering the literature on working-class men and masculinities, and particularly how these are constructed in blue-collar occupations. We also discuss the limited representation of working-class men to date in caring masculinities literature. We then outline our methodological approach, before turning to our two case studies. In this article, following a long tradition of sociological research on masculinities, we do not position masculinity as reducible to a natural or inherent trait. Rather, masculinity is best understood as a collection of practices and norms

that are socially distinguished from practices of femininity that are linked to women and some people of diverse genders (Connell, 1987). We follow Elliott's (2016, p. 240) definition of caring masculinities as "masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality". These are values and practices that, as above, have traditionally been excluded from men's lives and valued forms of masculinity (Hanlon, 2012), and as such, it has been argued that caring masculinities have significant potential to transform harmful norms of masculinity (Elliott, 2016). We are not suggesting that problematic aspects of masculinity do not continue in the lives of some marginalized men, just as they do in the lives of more privileged men. Rather, the practices of care throughout the lives of the two men considered in this article, and the commitment to an absence of domination these stories contain, highlight the importance of looking for and taking seriously the narratives of care in the lives of marginalized men.

## 2 | WORKING-CLASS MEN, MASCULINITY, AND WORK

Discussions of working-class men have long been at the heart of sociological investigations of labor-capital relations and labor processes, though it took until the mid to late 20th Century for recognition to be given to men being gendered, with many foundational works justly criticized for producing a gender-blind theory of class relations (Baron, 2006). While agreeing that gender was for far too long absent from, or marginal to, the analysis of labor, Maynard's (1989) socio-historical analysis emphasizes the long-standing connection between masculinity and labor—forged through a combination of resistance to bosses and the nature of dangerous work—that underscores claims to a valued and dignified class identity (see also Strangleman, 2004). Such themes have been central to sociological investigations of working-class labor since the 1970s, perhaps most famously through Willis' (1977) classic exploration of the working-class culture of resistance put to practice on the shop floor of industrial workplaces, and learned and honed by working-class boys in schools. The tight relationship between such resistance and self-respect remained a constant theme in research through the 1980s and 1990s (see Bourgois, 1995; Collison, 1988). At the turn of the millennium, discussion turned to whether and how the construction of masculine identities remained possible, given the growing demands for emotional labor—necessitating deference and docility to managers and customers—so essential to jobs in an economy increasingly driven by service sector roles (see notably McDowell, 2003; Nayak, 2006; Nixon, 2009).

Of course, blue-collar work remains prevalent, even after the growth of many economies' reliance on the service industries, and scholars have clearly illustrated that conventional masculine practices remain valorized in the identity construction of some working-class men. In an ethnography of manual labor on a building site, Thiel (2007, p. 227) describes these practices as forms of "class-based discursive symbolism", even where the people he observed actively distanced themselves from working-class identities. Slutskaya et al. (2016, p. 165) ethnography of refuse collectors and street cleaners similarly points to men's "adherence to traditional forms of masculinity and ... esteem-enhancing social comparison" to women and minority ethnic others as strategies to avoid class-based subordination. In addition, though, they underline that such "displays of masculine resilience in the face of devaluation are less indicative of a culture of masculine dominance but more an expression of vulnerability and social dislocation" (Slutskaya et al., 2016, p. 165). The turn to focus on vulnerability—somewhat echoing McDowell's work (2003, 2020)—remains complementary to earlier literature on working-class resistance, but moves the discussion further toward a sympathetic reading of working-class masculinity. In this sense, it connects with broader currents in sociological critique that seek to remind us that the working class is often used as a convenient scapegoat for the social ills of our time. As Walker and Roberts (2018, p. 4, see also Tarrant, 2021) express in their survey of relevant literature:

working-class men are frequently positioned within popular and policy discourses as part of the newly abject (Francis, 2006; Tyler, 2013), as perpetuating the danger, disorder, dysfunction, and decay that are associated with more disreputable forms of white working-class identity (Rhodes, 2011; Skeggs, 2004), and especially masculinity (Haylett, 2001; Webster, 2008).

In the same section of their book, Walker and Roberts (2018, p. 4) also stress that:

studies of the ways in which working-class men have responded to the challenges wrought by neoliberal transformation have rejected common tropes about their disaffection, disengagement, or essential difference, pointing instead to the cultural, structural, and institutional barriers they face when engaging in forms of “self-invention” the economy now requires of them.

Notable so far is that we are yet to discuss any work that might be related to care or caring masculinities. This is in part because the literature on employment and working-class masculinity is light on such studies, with much greater emphasis to date on traditional masculine work as laid out above or on men's engagement with caring occupations that require some form of professional codified knowledge and so an interest in *middle-class* caring work. Primary examples of this include excellent work by Simpson (2008) and Huppatz (2012), both of whom consider men's engagement with traditionally non-masculine work, such as cabin crew, primary school teachers, nurses, and librarians for Simpson; and nurses, social workers, (as well as the non-professional occupations of exotic dancers and hairdressers) for Huppatz. Similarly, Lupton's (2006) account offers insights into seven “female-dominated” occupations, six of which are graduate entry level, while Cottingham's (e.g., 2017, Cottingham et al., 2020) sustained treatment of men in nursing is another example of the academic attention to men in professionalized caring roles. The work on men's engagement with paid caring and/or non-traditional roles that has more balanced samples in terms of class profiles has tended to use very small samples (e.g., Cross & Bagilhole, 2002). A hallmark of such studies has been to reveal how men downplay the feminized aspects of their jobs in order to shore up a sense of dominant masculinity or to theorize that men who enter “feminine” or female-concentrated occupations benefit from their minority status relative to women.

Attention to men in non-professionalized caring jobs is growing, but still represents a small proportion of the literature. One notable, small-scale study discovered more caring, relational, and empathetic attitudes amongst men in low-paid, non-profit care work jobs in New Zealand and Scotland (Baines et al., 2015). Furthermore, Cain (2017) explores men and masculinity in a hospice in the context of the United States, and Hussein et al. (2016) analyze the care sector in England. Such studies encourage us to move beyond positioning marginalized men as necessarily rejecting care or finding ways to reconstitute their power in the face of care. Instead, caring masculinity is shown to be eminently possible for working-class men.

This contention goes against the grain of an implicit—if inadvertent—form of classed prejudice that is especially prominent in much masculinities scholarship (Roberts & Elliott, 2020). As we have explicated in detail elsewhere (Roberts & Elliott, 2020), problematic assumptions and pre-conceived notions about working-class and other marginalized men have run through critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM). Thus, working-class men are typically positioned in CSMM as primarily interested in gaining power through sexism, violence, and domination (e.g., Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Messerschmidt, 1993). This current of thought is in contradiction to Connell's more sensitive treatment of marginalized men and the problematization of masculine dominance and power (e.g., Connell, 1991). Claims about the regressive, abject nature of marginalized men, such as working-class men, men of color, and men with disability are pervasive, yet lack evidence. For example, it is often uncritically assumed that working-class and other marginalized men are more likely to perpetrate family violence. However, whether lower socioeconomic status and lower education levels increase the probability or frequency of violence against women is disputed, with studies finding mixed results (Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth, 2015). What is known, though, is that intimate partner and family violence is perpetrated across class divides (Phipps, 2009).

Meanwhile the work of developing and practicing progressive masculinities risks mistakenly being located as primarily the domain of middle-class men (e.g., Christofidou, 2021). Much work on caring masculinities and fathering, for example, positions middle-class, white, privileged men as those with the resources and ability to be flexible with their identities in order to engage in caring (e.g., Hunter et al., 2017; Johansson, 2011). Such arguments that position caregiving as primarily confined to the lives of privileged men overlook the abundance of literature documenting

the significant care work performed by marginalized men, for example for their children, their openness to egalitarianism, and their ability to be flexible in their gender roles (e.g., Lawson, 1995; Rudd & Root, 2008). In addition, Prattes (2022) demonstrates how the celebrated fathering practices of privileged men rely on privileged men outsourcing less valued and desirable care work like cleaning and “handyman” work to working-class and racialized “others”. Prattes (2022) argues that this form of care from privileged fathers cannot be defined as caring masculinity because though these fathers may embrace care, they do not reject domination, an equally central and critical pillar of Elliott’s (2016) framework of caring masculinities.

The mis-characterization of boys and men in the margin as regressive and patriarchal, we have argued, “impedes the ability to address problems like violence, misogyny, and homophobia and overlooks the possibilities for transformation that emerge among marginalized communities” (Roberts & Elliott, 2020, p. 87). We also subscribe to Torlina’s (2011, p. 4) suggestion that long-standing “theoretical conceptions of blue-collar work grant legitimacy to the negative images of working-class people in the broader popular culture”. As a result, middle-class researchers might “not cause the prejudiced view of the working class, but they give it empirical support” (Torlina, 2011, p. 4).

By contrast, the understanding of working-class life as filled with compassion, communality, and solidarity—qualities fitting into a broader definition of care—is a hallmark of working-class studies (Fazio et al., 2020). With this in mind, we focus on caring practices in the lives of blue-collar men: in their employment and beyond. We highlight caring masculinities as a non-dominating and compassionate set of practices that are enacted in a wide variety of working-class circumstances. We argue that such caring masculinities are likely to be present amongst working-class men and other marginalized or subordinated men, given their positioning on the margins of society (Elliott, 2020).

### 3 | METHODS

Our data for this article are part of a wider ongoing study of marginalized men’s lives in Australia and the UK. It is important to recognize that the concept of marginalized men, and indeed marginalized masculinities, is first and foremost an academic analytic device. As such, people do not necessarily consider themselves marginalized. Often-times instead they deploy comparators that “diminish a sense” of marginality (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013, p. 285) and/or commonly emphasize their “ordinariness” (Savage et al., 2001). Drawing on in-depth narrative biographical interviews, the study explores the biographies of men who we defined as marginalized by their class position and who considered themselves “everyday men”. While they did not necessarily identify with being marginalized, they did recognize that other men have more privilege. Our emphasis was on encouraging participants to talk about what is important to them. We follow the approach of balancing generosity and critique in narrative interviewing with men, as well as navigating interactional issues in the interviews, building rapport, and ensuring feminist ethics are centered (Elliott & Roberts, 2020). Importantly, bringing generosity into narrative interviews with men in the margins of society means we are open to the stories of care these men narrate, rather than the typical approach of assuming that such men are regressive and incapable of anything other than the perpetuation of traditional, harmful norms of masculinity. Pseudonyms are used for participants in this article, and some identifying details have been altered to protect participant confidentiality.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, given the researchers’ location in Australia and the COVID-19 context, with both of us conducting both interviews. Interviews ran for between 90 min and 2 h and were audio recorded. Transcripts were uploaded into Dovetail, a software program for analyzing qualitative data, and were coded by both authors using both an inductive and deductive approach. This coding approach was guided by Elliott’s (2016) framework of caring masculinities, and by an intention to explore whatever emerged from the participants’ narratives, in keeping with our focus on exploring what was important to them. Individual codes were grouped into common themes such as “masculinity”, “work”, and “family”. However, importantly, the data were analyzed following Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) recommendations for analyzing narrative data. Namely, a central consideration was to analyze participants’ stories and biographies in their entirety, rather than breaking their interviews down into easily codable

and comparable snippets (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). We followed Squire et al. (2014, p. 9) who assertion that “[n]arrative thematic analysis focuses on themes that develop across stories, rather than just on themes that can be picked out from stories”. This narrative approach to data collection and analysis allowed us to examine processes over time across men's lives, helping us to gain better insights into the dynamic nature of gendered realities.

Accordingly, in this article we take an in-depth case study approach in order to pay sufficient attention to the narratives and biographies of two participants from the UK, and how care emerges across their biographies. In doing so, we follow other examples of small-scale, in-depth case study research of men and masculinities such as Reay's “Shaun's story” (2002), Hollway and Jefferson's (2005) case study of “Vince”, and Connell's (1991) approach of incorporating in-depth life histories for a small number of participants (see also Andersson, 2008; De Visser & Smith, 2006; Ward, 2015). The narrative biographical case study approach allows us to speak to Holter's (2007) challenge to scholars of masculinity and social change to better integrate evidence about the connections between men's personal and professional lives. It also permits us to explore fine-grained detail and situate men's practices, experiences, and outlooks in relation to frameworks of care, and to do justice to exploring their narratives. This is particularly important in understanding the lives of working-class men, as they are more likely to be homogenized and be cast by researchers and policy makers as negative and regressive. Paying close attention to case studies thus helps to give such men a voice to push back against their representations in public and political arenas (Tarrant, 2021) and to trouble static ideas and stereotypes of marginalized men. We now consider the case studies of these two men and tease out elements of care alongside any continuation of more traditional ideals of masculinity.

## 4 | FINDINGS

### 4.1 | Neal

Neal is a white man in his 40s living in the south-east of the UK with his partner and her two children. Neal has three children from a previous marriage who visit and stay over regularly. His history is rich and diverse, particularly his working history, where he has taken on many jobs across a number of sectors. He described himself as not being “the stereotypical guy—I wasn't the stereotypical teenage boy”, something he said his father had disliked. Unprompted by us, an ethic of care permeated Neal's narration of his life, in both paid work and other arenas.

#### 4.1.1 | Neal's early life

Neal's jobs throughout his life often involved unsocial hours, were physically demanding, and were precarious or without contract. While physical work is often described in the literature as a source of working-class masculine pride (Torlina, 2011), Neal desired to get out of work that was low paid and “back breaking”, particularly as he got older. He aspired to more white-collar work, hoping since the age of 12 or 13 to be a primary school teacher. However, for much of his life, he had no choice but to take on blue-collar work in order to get by. Neal's aspiration for white-collar work goes against the grain of research that explains how a love of manual work can be a product of a working-class *habitus* (Altreiter & Flecker, 2020). However, it aligns with understandings that the better wages of manual work—relative to similarly “unskilled” but more poorly paid service sector work—are crucial determinants to working-class occupational choices (Nixon, 2009; Roberts, 2018).

Neal's living situation with his parents, and his father in particular, was difficult and unhappy. He described:

not enjoying where I was. I wasn't really enjoying my home life. Wasn't enjoying the social aspect of where we were living and growing up. So I just wanted to get out of there quick.

As a result of wanting to get away from home as quickly as possible, Neal left secondary school with a suite of good GCSE<sup>1</sup> qualifications, but dropped out during his A-levels<sup>2</sup> and began an apprenticeship with the armed forces. This apprenticeship was also motivated by uncertainty about what his future might hold and, he believes, a

convincing recruitment pitch from the armed forces. However, completing the apprenticeship would have committed Neal to a long period with the armed forces, something he said he would not have liked, so he dropped out of the training before the completion date, which left him with no formal qualification or educational credit.

His decision to leave the armed forces meant Neal had to return to the parental home, which he felt was “much to the disappointment of my family”. He described how “I wasn’t really enjoying home life before I left. And then that didn’t really get better when I came back either”. He then got a job transporting clinical waste, which he described as “a pretty gross job”. He took some pride, though, in knowing that he stuck with this work when he felt that most people would give up on it quickly, echoing scholars who emphasize work ethic as being a source of working class self-esteem (Skeggs, 2014; Slutskaya et al., 2016).

#### 4.1.2 | Standing up for others at work

Neal then switched jobs again and began working in hospitality, working his way up to becoming a self-trained (non-certified) chef. Stories of caring for others at his workplace were particularly notable from this point on in Neal’s narrative. He described how he stood up for people at his job, stating: “I’ve never really been a yes man” and “I always stood up for people that I thought management was screwing over, you know, I didn’t really accept rudeness and that sort of thing”. When we asked him again about this care later on in his interview, he told us:

I suppose that was more of a personal thing. If people were being spoken to disrespectfully, if they had been singled out for something unnecessarily, I can’t really think of specific things. It was more just like, tons of situations. And if I felt like something was making somebody unhappy and it was unfair, then I would try and sort it out, but there wasn’t really much I could do, except for saying to the management, “this is the situation”.

This care and standing up for colleagues came at a cost to Neal, who felt that speaking up had caused management to overlook him several times for head chef. He said his actions:

never went down well ... it was one of those places where you had to be in with management to be able to do well. And I just sort of never allowed myself to be that person. I didn’t ever want to brown nose or play the game or whatever. But you know, I realised afterwards that that’s not actually helped me, not playing the game throughout life.

The problems Neal faced because of his care for others at work complicate notions that men’s care tends to come at no cost to them, compared to the messy, undervalued, time-costly care work usually done by women (Elliott, 2020; Hanlon, 2012). It also suggests again that revolutionary possibilities for men and masculinities stem from the margins of society: Neal’s working-classness—with its values of solidarity and community—in part drove him to stand up to management. At the same time, had he been in a management position, caring for others would not have been as costly for him. Engaging in these acts of care despite the consequences points to a model of caring in the margins that others could learn from.

Neal finally left cheffing, in large part because of how difficult management made his working life as a result of him standing up for others, with Neal describing that he ultimately felt “desperately unhappy” in that role. Despite the cost of looking out for others though, Neal was undeterred and continued to look out for others in his subsequent workplaces. He turned to working in a physically taxing manual labor role, where he was also in charge of supervising and working alongside a small team. The theme of caring for others emerged particularly saliently as Neal narrated his experience of this role, again without prompting from us. He explained during two moments in his interview:

I think at that point, as well as me wanting to make a decent amount of money – I think I was on ... almost double what I was on as a chef just like a year before, I was laughing really – but I think the most

important thing was looking after my lads ... and making sure that they were all kept in work, because they came from different companies onto my [team] and I took new people with promises of all this work etcetera. So I sort of felt that pressure to make sure that they were okay. And there's a couple of weeks where we didn't really have work, but then [management] gave me work to try and keep me happy, but then I gave those shifts out to the lads because they were my responsibility. Making sure that the work got done, making sure that my lads were happy, basically.

...

I care, you know, I always want the best for people, especially those that deserve it. But I think everybody deserves a chance and I think that was just my role. That was my role as ... team leader. I decided early on what it meant even before I was a team leader, what it meant to be a team leader. Which is why – there were team leaders that I worked for that I wasn't particularly a fan of because they were, it was all about them. It was all about making themselves look good, having the team look good so they can progress, but that's not what it was for me. I felt like I'd already made such good progression there. That actually being a team leader is about looking after your lads, making sure that, like I say, making sure the work's done properly and making sure your lads are okay.

Here, Neal spoke about the care and concern he had for his workers, even giving them work at his own expense in order to make sure they were happy and had enough work. A stereotypical reading of this might follow Coston and Kimmel's (2012, p. 109) argument that “[t]here is a type of White, male, working-class solidarity vis-à-vis privilege that these men have constructed and maintained, that promotes and perpetuates racism, sexism, and homophobia”. In other words, a typical response in CSMM to the story of a working-class man looking out for his colleagues might be to position this as a matter of men's homosocial bonding that can lead to the exclusion of those deemed “Other”. But such a reading is contested by Neal, who also stated in his interview that:

I didn't accept any racist or homophobic banter in my group and they all knew about it ... In the other teams that I worked on before, when I wasn't the leader, I always put myself in a bit of a tricky situation by sort of speaking up when anybody made any sort of racist or homophobic comment. And it is rife in [that workplace], it is relatively racist and homophobic, people who've got to, you know, be the stereotypical man ... so I always sort of tried to take that opportunity to educate people, which never really went down very well. But I always stuck to my guns about that one.

Here, Neal describes showing solidarity with people of color and LGBT+ folk, while also taking the time and effort to attempt to educate others. His behavior could be considered a true example of bystander behavior, and again he was not deterred by the costs of standing up for others. Later in his interview, he even spoke about his belief that he has an:

understanding about how it's been, how society is, has been, and still is a patriarchy, and that women have been kept down in so many ways over the years. And it's not just with genders. It is about equality, certainly equity, but across the board really with race and ability and across classes and whatnot. Politically, it's just about realising what's right and what's wrong, really.

Neal's understanding of inequalities speaks to the working-class commitment to solidarity and egalitarianism identified by a variety of writers (Skeggs, 2014; Strangleman, 2004).

Toward the end of his interview, Neal revealed that he had spent a few years as a youth worker in his mid to late twenties, working with vulnerable children. He said he “really enjoyed” this work, and told us “I was very good at it. I was very passionate about it”. He explained that he had taught children who “other teachers couldn't or wouldn't [teach]” because it involved teaching children with learning difficulties, children with difficult home lives, or children



who were seen as “naughty”. Neal described his motivation for getting into this work as “[j]ust sort of wanting to help people and make a difference in people's lives that needed it”. However, he had found himself “thrown into” the teaching side of the work after a time with no formal teacher training or support, and Neal told us:

I just felt like I was letting the kids down. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I was asking for help and not getting it. It was stressing me out.

And later:

I think that feeling that I was letting them down, it just, it really brought me down in the end. I said to them, I'm not doing this anymore. You're not giving me the help. There are other people that are better trained, better equipped to deal with these kids. It wasn't dealing with the kids themselves. Because I was a good youth worker. They liked me and respected me. I was like a professional friend to most of these kids. But yeah, the teaching side of it, I just sort of thought, well, perhaps I'm not cut out for this after all

Neal here described how much he cared about these children and how passionate he was about helping them through this work. At the same time, because of his working-class and family background, he had been unable to pursue the teaching qualifications he had wanted to gain since he was very young, and this ultimately left him ill-equipped to do this caring work. Another notable aspect of Neal's revelation here is that he mentioned it almost as an aside, saying “I often forget about that”. For middle-class men, conveying to researchers interested in contemporary men and masculinities that they had worked with vulnerable youth might seem an obvious way to portray themselves as a caring and progressive “new man”. Neal, on the other hand, had not realized that his youth work would “look good” in our eyes. This accords with empirical findings that while middle-class men subscribe to discourses of progressive masculinity without necessarily taking progressive action, working-class men's more egalitarian practices are pragmatic, undramatic, and done without fuss (Behnke & Scholz, 2015; Lyonette & Crompton, 2015; Prattes, 2022; Roberts, 2018; Sullivan, 2010).

At the time of his interview, Neal had taken up a role training others in his line of work. Despite his concerns that he held no formal qualifications to be a trainer, and his difficult experiences teaching as a youth worker, the move into the classroom setting was a welcome relief from manual labor. As he put it, “I'm 40, I haven't got too many years on the shovel left. It's a lot, you know, digging ballast, that sort of thing”. He also finally found himself working in a role where he was teaching others, without the difficulties he had faced as a youth worker.

### 4.1.3 | Caring across work and life boundaries

Work and other parts of Neal's life were of course intimately intertwined, and Neal's care also crossed these boundaries. For example, he described his worry about not being able to provide for his children because of having to take several months to retrain in order to begin working in manual labor, describing this as:

a big gamble with three kids, going from earning a small amount, you know with benefits as well, just sort of keeping us just above or on the bread line, and then going to this [training course] where I knew I wouldn't be getting paid for three months. It was a gamble, but it was a massive opportunity. It seemed decent money to start and there were loads of different, it's like a big tree, there's loads of different branches you can go. It just seemed something that I could make some progress in and I decided that I was going to do it and make as much progress as I could as quickly as possible and do whatever it took to grow myself up that ladder.

Neal also noted, though, that moving into manual labor allowed him to spend much more time with his children because he was no longer working nights or long hours without days off as he had been as a chef. His narratives indicate that he cared about and for his children and wanted to spend time with them, *and* that because of his working-class status, part of looking after his children required earning money. Scholars have repeatedly clarified that the “sacrifice” of men engaging in paid work is offset by the benefits of increased agency and other components of power, including the prospect of domination of family relationships (Broomhill & Sharp, 2007). Yet, what we observe with Neal is a genuine understanding that providing an income was much less about domination and more about *necessary contribution*. In so doing, he gains access to the emotional rewards of love, respect, and care (Hanlon, 2012), but it is clear that he, like many men in Europe, wants to work fewer hours than he actually does, especially when work compromises time spent with children (Kanji & Samuel, 2017).

Care again worked its way into Neal's story about his training course, as he described how he helped others to do well:

I really sort of stuck my teeth into the practical side of it. And the theory side, as well as quite a lot in engineering, maths. I quite enjoyed throwing myself into that and being able to help other people in the course. They ended up sort of crowded around my table and me just sort of explaining these things once I'd got it.

Rather than this being a display of mastery, intellectual muscularity, and/or power from Neal (Maloney et al., 2019), when Neal's story is approached in the context of his narrative as a whole (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), it can be seen as an instance of him putting into practice his commitment to help others, and his belief that “everybody deserves a chance”.

Neal's narratives tell a complex picture of a life dictated by the need to earn a living, but with practices of care imbued throughout these experiences, even in workplaces and settings where care is not necessarily required. Neal's care went beyond just caring *about*, to carrying out practical tasks of caring, even at significant cost to himself. His ethos and practices of care illuminate a pathway others might emulate in attempting to practice a form of caring masculinity.

## 4.2 | Eddie

Eddie is in his 30s, white, and from just north of London. He works as a warehouse manager and lives with his mother while he and his partner save up for a house deposit. Eddie's father left and cut all ties when Eddie was around 13 years old. Eddie, emphasizing traditional working-class values around the centrality of family and work ethic (e.g., Mendick et al., 2015; Torlina, 2011), described himself as:

a kind guy. I'm always looking out for my family and especially [my partner] as well ... Basically I try to work hard and just make a good living for myself, but I'm doing my best.

### 4.2.1 | Caring voluntary work

Eddie spent around 4 years as a teenager teaching football to disadvantaged children. He did this work on a voluntary basis for 3 years and then was paid for the fourth year. Eddie described this work as challenging, but also explained how much he valued this volunteering because of his background. For example, Eddie felt his distant father had not encouraged him to take up extracurricular activities like sports, explaining:

I told you about my dad and things like that. It's kind of, I know what it was like not to be pushed into extra things like football and learning different things and like being taken to football training. I taught myself how to play. I never got taken – I never played for a football club as a kid. My dad wouldn't take me.

Eddie's drive to engage in his volunteering work also stemmed from his working-class background. As he described it:

I know what a lot of families go through, especially people without those kinds of extra funds and stuff, like a lot of clubs are really expensive to play for. Even like a Sunday League team, you've got to pay like two hundred pound a year just for like kids, and like for the matches and for the referees and things like that. And it's like, I can't provide that, but if your kid still wants to go out, you want to leave your kids here and they want to play for an hour or two ... I'll happily stand here and you know, take a fiver an hour for it.

Eddie's working-class background, then, including his family not being able to afford extracurricular activities like sport, led to him volunteering so that other children might have the opportunities he had not. This could be seen as a form of caring masculinity at play in Eddie's volunteering work, supporting the argument of openness and possibilities for change from the margins of society.

#### 4.2.2 | Economic imperatives and the transition to manual work

Eddie described his work with disadvantaged children as "one of the most rewarding things I ever did" and said:

I would definitely not pass it up to do it again. Definitely not. If that came about again, if that opportunity came about again for me, then yeah, definitely.

However, practically, Eddie knew this had been "a time in my life that's gone", and this was primarily because he needed work that earned him more money. Having a stable income and 1 day being able to buy a house were important to Eddie, as he had seen and experienced the financial difficulties his mother had faced. He explained:

I'm trying to do my best with what I've got, basically. And I won't let that get in my way of being able to afford a house. So I'm just, that's the best I can aim for at the moment is making sure me and [partner's name] have got a place of our own. And that's what I, that's my sole goal at the moment.

Later, he expanded more on his need to work and earn money, saying:

No one's given me the money, I have to work for it. So it's a case of, I have to pick what I want and go for it. And at this moment it was, well, I've only got enough money [to aim] for a [house] deposit, so I'm [aiming to save] for a deposit.

And later again:

When you're 30 and you're trying to save up so you can live in a house with your partner. Still paying rent, still trying to save, still trying to work late nights and all this kind of stuff ... I don't think you should ever feel bad about having to work hard to achieve your aspirations and then not being able to do that kind of stuff that you would like to do as well.

Although Eddie was made an offer to do his football coaching voluntary work on a paid basis, he found that the pay was not enough to achieve his housing goals, particularly combined with the very high cost of completing coaching qualifications. While middle-class young people may have the option to follow their passions by pursuing volunteering opportunities and/or lesser-paid work (Dean, 2016), Eddie had to give up his poorly recompensed

and/or voluntary care work in order to contribute to achieving financial stability for him and his partner. The enjoyment he felt caring for children was interrupted as he transitioned to becoming an economically responsible partner in order to care for himself, his partner, and their future together. As he grew older, his care shifted, then, from the realm of volunteering and work to the realm of the home and relationships.

The dominant reading of working-class men's lives would critique this transition as a move to the role of provider, a role described within CSMM and gender studies more broadly as being emblematic of patriarchal gender relations. However, an important caveat in Eddie's story is that he and his partner were dual earners. Eddie's partner was in fact in more professionalized work than Eddie, and Eddie was willing to prioritize her work over his, stating:

She's got a potential for a proper career. And I've always said to her, "look, if you're not happy at this job, you do what you need to do. You can get a better job and earn more money somewhere else". With me it was a case of, if we have to move away to afford a better house and things like that, I would drop [my] job [rather than] her [leaving her job].

Eddie's prioritization of his partner's career counters simple readings of him as a dominating breadwinner, instead highlighting their need to both work to be financially secure, and Eddie's respect for his partner's career. This points to our argument of the importance of challenging thinking that automatically positions working-class men as devoid of care and concern for others.

### 4.2.3 | Care in blue-collar work

Eddie's blue-collar work at the time of his interview was not in a care-related occupation, but he nevertheless mentioned instances of caring as part of this work. One example was when a friend was having a difficult time at work, so Eddie found him a position at his own workplace. Eddie described how:

After about three years of me telling him "they're messing you around", he decided to leave, and I managed to get him straight through the door [into Eddie's workplace].

Again, this quote on its own might be taken to be part of a masculine gender performance of demonstrating self-worth, pride, achievement, and power. However, it is crucial to note that this comment was not in response to questions that would elicit such answers, and it was not an effort to take personal credit for the outcome; instead, consistent with understanding Eddie's whole narrative (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), this moment was underpinned by a quiet, humble articulation of care and solidarity that regularly punctuated Eddie's life story without celebration.

In his manager role, Eddie also made sure to check in on members of his team who might be marginalized in that working environment. This included their first woman colleague and a gay man. Eddie described regular one-to-one meetings with all the workers, and how he would check in with these colleagues, asking them:

how things are going, and you know like, is there anything we can do? Is there anything we can really [do to] improve things for her, to improve on, things like that.

Eddie also again countered stereotypical expectations of working-class men when talking about this woman co-worker. He described how:

A lot of people associate, you know, like really heavy lifting and manual work in warehouses, they just think it's like a lad's territory, and it's not. And basically she ended up being our first female through the door in terms of the warehouse, and she's actually better than all of them. It's ridiculous. And you

always have that one person who's just like, "oh yeah, like we can't be who we are. We can't be like the lads anymore. There's a lady in the building" and it's just like, get with the times, it's 2020, a woman can work wherever she bloody wants. Like do you know what I mean? And you just have to explain that to some people, because some people still think certain parts and certain areas of life are restricted to male and female.

Far from regressive or sexist expectations around women's roles, Eddie demonstrated a progressive attitude toward the roles and capabilities of men and women, and even describes taking action in explaining this to others.

In terms of the gay man at his work, Eddie also looked out for him through their regular meetings and said "why would I treat him any differently?", distancing himself from typically homophobic attitudes associated with traditional masculinity. In some ways, though, Eddie's narratives followed common tropes about gay men. He conveyed a slight sense of uneasiness in his interview about the thought of a gay man hitting on him and relayed common stereotypical understandings about effeminate gay men. This demonstrates the continued strength of these negative stereotypes, but also likely stemmed from the fact that Eddie did not know many gay men himself.

The complex picture that emerged in Eddie's narratives demonstrates that problematic attitudes can co-exist alongside more progressive and caring behaviors. Again, we do not suggest that problematic aspects of masculinity are not present for marginalized men, just as they are for more privileged men, but rather that it is critical to also highlight examples of the presence of care emerging in the margins. Accordingly, it is important for us to stress that even though Eddie was not working in a caring occupation, and though these instances of care are relatively small, he nevertheless managed to continue enacting care in his work for his colleagues and friends, as well as in other spheres of his life.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Care permeated paid work and other aspects of both Neal and Eddie's narratives, speaking to caring masculinities playing out across different arenas of their lives. Often, care at work was connected to care outside of work. This was the case, for instance, in regard to Neal helping others in his training course, which he was undertaking in order to move into work that enabled him to both better provide for his family and spend more time with his children. In the case of both Eddie and Neal, we observed Skeggs' (2014, p. 14) assessment of working-class values that "were generated *in opposition to* the logic of capital, against an instrumental 'dog eat dog world'". Working-class men are so commonly described and discussed in relation to their jobs that understanding their lives as anything other than bound by logics of capital can all too often remain absent. They are also often described in public and policy discourses as being morally suspect, incapable, and self-centered (Tarrant, 2021). We risk missing that "caring, selflessness, anti-cruelty, anti-greed, anti-instrumentalism, loyalty, [and being] against injustice" (Skeggs, 2014, p. 14) are central working-class dispositions, and that these values come to bear on the construction of masculinity.

This care can occur in workplaces, but need not necessarily be central to or part of the labor process. In our data, caring practices were observed in jobs that are *not* caring occupations. This speaks to Skeggs' (2014) hope of resisting the all-consuming nature of capital, which has increasingly captured the affective dimensions of worker subjectivities (see e.g., Farrugia (2021) on the ways "youthfulness" becomes a source of value and immaterial labor). Both Neal and Eddie highlighted what we describe as a caring trajectory, with their caring dispositions fostered and growing through subsequent acts of care throughout their lives. In many ways, their sense of the importance of caring stemmed from their working-class backgrounds and their difficult family histories, with Neal strongly invested in standing up for others, and Eddie wanting to care for those who experienced the same hardships as him as a young person.

The narratives of both men point to our argument that revolutionary potentials for men and masculinities are likely to stem from the experiences and lives of those at the margins of society, rather than from more privileged and powerful men (Elliott, 2020; Roberts & Elliott, 2020). Indeed, as Prattes (2022, p. 14, emphasis original) suggests,

privileged men may in fact be “less attuned to domination and structurally positioned as much less able to practice the non-dominating aspects of Elliott’s (2016) theorization of ‘caring masculinity.’” This accordingly highlights the importance of listening to working-class men’s stories—and the stories of others at the margins—and approaching these stories with both generosity and critique (Elliott & Roberts, 2020). The typical approach in the field of CSMM has often been to only believe men on the margins when they talk about regressive or unequal behaviors, and to suggest they are being insincere if they talk about more egalitarian or progressive practices. Even authors who are more generous lean toward a view that the capacity to develop new or productive masculinities is limited by a lack of access to material resources (see Roberts and Elliott (2020) for discussion). This is despite Connell (1991, p. 141) long ago articulating that “working-class politics and labor parties, with all their contradictions, have generally been more progressive in gender terms than conservative parties drawing their bloc votes from the affluent”.

We must, then, work harder to assess the working class as a population from whom we can learn, and we must complicate the “negative connotations that are confirmed in the social-science literature” (Torlina, 2011, p. 8) about working-class life. Delving into the stories of men on the margins and being open to learning from them—as we have done here—provides insights into how such men practice caring masculinities at work and more broadly. Utilizing narrative methods in such work—and incorporating a balance of generosity and critique in analysis (see Elliott & Roberts, 2020)—is, we suggest, a fruitful way to uncover care in the lives of men in the margins. Approaching the stories of men in the margins with generosity, rather than only critique, highlights the revolutionary possibilities in their lives and practices.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are the UK qualification exam for each subject, undertaken by 16-year-old secondary school students.

<sup>2</sup> “Advanced-level” qualifications in the UK. These are generally required for university entry and are achieved through exams in the final 2 years of secondary education.

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