Expert Interviews

August 2020
Androulla Harris and Alex Augustine, Centre for Mental Health

Four expert interviews were conducted with professionals who have worked closely with young black men. This included two academics, a psychologist and a professional who works at a strategic level directing programmes and co-production work with black men. Here is the summary of the key themes which emerged from these conversations.

This builds upon the literature review to further develop our understanding of successful coproduction approaches with black boys and men. The expert interviews provide valuable insight into how the process of developing the tool ought to be, to work towards establishing a measure that engages boys' / men's interest and speaks to their needs.

There is a real need for a co-produced outcome measure approach for this cohort

- Interviewees struggled to think of any **outcome measures which were tailor made for young black men** – there is nothing widely used, commercially recognised and validated. Institutional support is important to bringing this about and it is positive that the current project has the backing of Mind and the involvement and evaluation from Centre for Mental Health.
- Traditionally used outcome measure tools do not necessarily translate well to young black men's needs. More generally, there is some evidence that when filling in surveys on services, black people fill in giving the answers they think the service wants, rather than really focussing on whether the service met their needs*.*
- Mental Health services are so linked up with achieving clinical outcomes, that young men can see mental health practitioners as 'working to a script', they tick the box to show whether their symptoms are 'under control'. A new measurement tool/approach is needed as the important outcome(s) are those which *mean something* to young black men.
- '*I see the need for an outcome measure –practitioners want to fit the young men into boxes otherwise they will see them as 'difficult to engage or hard to reach' – which I have always argued against'.*

What the process of developing the tool / approach ought to be like
The following suggestions were made:

- Focus groups, one to one interviews and consultations with the black boys and men are needed for *'any chance of success'* and are *'the best way to capture as many different narratives as possible'*
- *'These men have to be* **understood at the intersection** *of race, ethnicity, masculinity and mental illness (or health)'*

- As a starting point, find out what helps black men to **contextualise wellbeing**, as that would help guide which domains are going to be useful when focusing on building a culturally sensitive outcome measure.
- **How you engage young black men** is important, with regards to the wording of questions and the creation of a safe space, *'It's how you're asking them [questions], and in what space? Using what language?'.*
- Be comfortable talking about race and racism because it shapes young men's lives in many ways – for example stop and search and racial profiling.
- Make research attractive to young people to get them on board using different media like video to introduce the research
- It would be wise to take the same approach as you would with a pilot project, when trying to coproduce a culturally sensitive measurement tool. Try **not to come with any preconceptions** of what this measure ought to look like. Be realistic about what can be achieved - things won't be perfect. Be interested in the learning you can glean from the process, as well as the overall outcomes of the project. Understand that like-minded people get on with things more quickly, whereas when groups come together who haven't worked together before, things can take longer. There will be some assumptions that won't work – it will just take more thinking and that is part and parcel of the work.
- Understand that different generations of black men/boys you speak to will have **different experiences and reference points**. The same set of questions may not apply to every group, setting or context and so it is important to codesign or tweak topic guides to be appropriate for different age-groups. *'If you take those questions and those kinds of unconscious presumptions into a space where the audience is very unfamiliar to the service that you're talking about, it's unlikely they're going to work'.*

- From one expert's previous qualitative research study with black men, various learnings emerged:

  o **Keep flexible and learn about what approach works from participants themselves**
  *'We asked the men about what mental health recovery meant to them, but they wanted to discuss their life histories, **so we had to change our tack and give them the opportunity to speak about** their life histories and life trajectories – how do you capture that in an outcome? They also spoke about racial trauma and bullying – how do we measure this? There are American tools which measure racial discrimination but they often aren't linked to mental health.'*

  o **Ideally the measure will help build a relationship with participants**
  *'Men were looking for a relational thing, rather than tick the box and say yes I've spoken to you about racism, school bullying and so on - **it's about finding a way to have a different relationship with these men.'***

  o **Realise that the research process can be beneficial in itself, for participants are not often asked what they think**
  One participant had said to the expert who was conducting the research: *"I've been in contact with mental health services for 8 years and I've never had anyone take this much interest in who I am, in my view, in my voice"* and he said that had been very

therapeutic for him – but it wasn't supposed to be, it was supposed to be just a research interview.'

What the outcome measure tool/approach might look like

There was acknowledgement that the measure / approach must of course be shaped **by the young men themselves**. Black men should be the consultants on this type of project as there are questions that only they can answer. Nonetheless, based on their experience working in mental health with black men, some suggestions were offered on what measure/approach might look like:

- For black males, positive outcomes for them may relate to **safe spaces, identity, relationships and their level of agency/control.** These themes have emerged from qualitative research on black male's views on recovery from mental illness.
- **Employment** is often a significant challenge for young black men who are often excluded from the labour market, and so these outcomes may be important.
- Bear in mind the strong role of **religion / spirituality** on many black people.
- It might not be about **resilience**. One expert pointed out that in services and interventions there is often a focus on black boys/men building their resilience. *'I'm not sure whether if you asked black men what they were hoping for out of intervention, they would say resilience'.*
  This expert noted that the impetus shouldn't be on black men to build resilience, but on the social structure and mental health system tackling discriminatory issues. In this light, *'resilience is something that's been co-opted by services to do damage limitation against systemic injustices within the mental health service and beyond.'*
- The measure *'shouldn't be service-focussed, serviced-driven or clinical – if it is it won't help black men'.*
- A very interesting suggestion was made, that it the tool/approach ought to measure how well **mental health practitioners** are able to engage with young people and their needs, interests, concerns – that would be far more helpful because: ***'The problem is not with young men themselves, but how they are dealt with in society;*** *how their families, parents and teachers don't understand them, and then they go to a mental health service which doesn't understand them and* **no wonder they won't want to engage.'** This measure would be completed by the young people about the professionals.

Successful co-production approaches

- Understand the **importance of people from the same communities** as those you want to engage, finding people that those communities will engage with. When a service or professionals refer to people as 'hard to reach' it means the service / professionals are not trying hard enough. They need to connect with gatekeepers in the community. This may be reaching out to youth organisations, those who work with the cohort on a daily basis
- **Be aware of the expectations you have** which you are bringing into a space – you may not understand or be aware of other people's experiences – but the least you can do is be aware of what *you* are bringing with you – understand that your reference points may be out of date or completely off – being actively aware of this can **minimise your blind spots.**
- Understand that **culture is 'both fixed and positive, and fluid and negative',** and that neither of those sides to culture are absolute. Culture is a loaded concept as well as a dynamic concept. Be ok with this, so that our work can be flexible and nuanced. As we continue this

research journey, **hold in mind the complexity of what culture is.**

- For example, there will be significant cultural differences between people who were born and raised in the UK versus people who were born in the country of their original heritage. *"Many of the young black men engaged with the project are 3rd generation with grandparents from the Caribbean, which means they have little direct experience of non-UK society and generally speak English only. More recent migrants, particularly who have a shared religion and language will have tighter, more extrinsic cultural connections than this group. Also, cultural norms within a community can be experienced as constraining, particularly where people push back against them."* There may be tensions between different identities, for example being black and gay may not be supported within one's culture.
- It is important to dig deeper into people's experiences – for example there are many differences between African and Caribbean, and between different parts of Africa and the Caribbean.
- Two experts expressed **ambivalence towards the term 'culturally sensitive'** – as it can put people into boxes / stereotypes: *'One has to be careful – it can further the othering of black people.'* This expert favous
- red the critical race theory perspective rather than a cultural sensitivity perspective, because in the latter white people are wrongly assumed to be the norm and have no culture. Thinking about culture can also *'become too crude and become about food and clothing when it's much broader than that – one's life experience. Black people's experiences are so different to white people not because of our culture but because of **racism**.'* The expert noted it would be interesting to know what the young people think about 'cultural sensitivity'.

- One expert mentioned an event that was put together by **300 voices** (a young people's project based in Birmingham), where young people and police officers from local communities assembled to educate themselves on their experiences of each other and the challenges they collectively face. Although this was a success at ground level, the expert was less confident about the change this had at a more senior and clinical level.
- 300 voices worked well through bringing young people into contact with police, counsellors and other agencies/ professionals in a different way. It enhanced young people's power and autonomy and levelled the playing field via a series of workshops. These were coproduced with young people and then delivered by young people. The main reasons why this approach was successful is it:
  - o **disrupted the normal power relationships** (eg. Between researcher and young people) and created a space where they felt comfortable to express themselves
  - o put **young people in a leadership** and steering position rather than just being consulted

- Another expert cited the **Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network and Black Minds Matter** as a powerful example of co-production. They have co-produced IAPT services available from the mosque, trained black pastors. This worked well because '*they offer IAPT in places where people go, rather than expecting people to come to a very sterile office and get IAPT'.*

Concluding points

Our expert interviews provided many valuable insights to help guide this project. Experts could see the clear need for a culturally sensitive measure to be made for black men and boys and emphasised that what it will ultimately be shaped by participants. However, they had some ideas on how to best engage with young men: suspending your preconceptions, creating a safe space, understanding the racialised context of culture at the heart of this, keeping flexible, and the importance of making a relational experience with the young men (rather than it feeling like a 'tick box' exercise). Effective examples of co-production were also shared, which enhanced young people's power and autonomy to level the playing field with professionals they would not normally interact with.

Practical recommendations for the project

The process of developing the measure

- Focus groups and one to one interviews are 'the best way to capture as many different narratives as possible'
- Think carefully about how to create a safe space in our workshops and acknowledge the impact of race
- Be comfortable talking about race and racism because it shapes young men's lives in many ways
- Make research attractive to young people to get them on board using different media like video
- Aim to disrupt power relationships (eg. between researcher and young people) by putting young people in a steering position rather than just being consulted
- It emerged that existing measures are not fit for purpose and we need to start from scratch, led by young people, in developing our measure. Therefore shortlisting existing measures is not needed before the workshops.

Overall recommendations for researchers' perspective

- Try not to come with any preconceptions of what this measure ought to look like
- Be realistic about what can be achieved - things won't be perfect. Be interested in the learning you can glean from the process, as well as the overall outcomes of the project
- Understand that different generations of black men/boys you speak to will have different experiences and reference points. The same set of questions may not apply to every group, setting or context and so it is important to tweak topic guides to be appropriate for different age-groups
- Keep flexible and learn about what approach works from participants themselves
- Realise that the research process can be beneficial for participants as they may not be frequently asked what they think
- Hold in mind the complexity of culture (i.e that it can be problematic, is nuanced, and people's experiences need to be understood at the intersection of gender, race, culture, sexuality and mental health. White people also have culture)

The outcome measure/ approach itself

- Ideally the outcome measure/ approach will help build a relationship with participants

- As a starting point, find out what wellbeing means to young Black men, as that would help guide which domains are going to be useful when focusing on building a culturally sensitive outcome measure
- Content of the measure - outcomes may relate to employment, spirituality, safe spaces, identity, relationships and young men's level of agency/control. It may not be about resilience, as that can put the impetus on young men to deal with systemic racism themselves, rather than the system/service needing to change
- The tool/approach might measure how well mental health practitioners are able to engage with young people and their needs, interests, concerns because: 'The problem is not with young men themselves, but how they are dealt with in society