

# Male Stigma: Emotional and Behavioral Effects of a Negative Social Identity on a Group of Canadian Men

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Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Although the concept of stigma has been used to examine the place of various minority populations and women in society, it has not been previously applied to men. This qualitative research explores the experience of 16 Canadian men who believe they were stigmatized due to their sex. The study concludes that the experiences of these participants are consistent with social stigma involving assumptions of male violence and inadequacy with respect to the care of children. Mechanisms whereby such stigmatic assumptions could be maintained are explored along with the need for further research. The results of this research will have immediate application to counsellors working in the area of men's wellness who wish to understand the experience from the perspective of their clients.

## Keywords

stigma, gender, sex roles, social identity, social exclusion/rejection

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Reports of bias in law enforcement with respect to assault and child custody (Wexler, 1995; Kelly, 2002) are consistent with anecdotal media accounts where male guilt is assumed (Atwood, 2018; Bowel, 2017; Kay, 2017), but such reports and accounts are insufficient to demonstrate a general societal bias. If such bias were to flow from a negative imputation of character based on an individual's group membership, then such bias would reflect stigma (Goffman, 1963). While attributes that can be proved constitute a person's social identity, those retrospectively assigned through group consensus constitute stigma.

The concept of stigma has been used in studies involving alcoholics (Link, Struening, Rahav, Phelan, & Nuttbrock, 1997), homosexuals (McWhinney, 1995), nontraditional families (Bouichard & Lachance-Grzela, 2016), the elderly (Kawakami, Young, & Dovidio, 2002), those of divergent skin colour (Raman, 2016), the obese (Latner & Stunkard, 2003), mentally ill (Hinshaw, 2005), and women (Smith, Mysak, & Michael, 2008).<sup>1</sup> There is a dearth of published research applying the concept to the universe of men.

The initial objective of this study is to explore the experience of men who believe they have been unfairly stigmatized because of their sex.<sup>2</sup> An ancillary objective is to determine whether the conditions surrounding this

felt experience are consistent with the definition of stigma as defined in the literature. The following research questions flowed from these objectives:

- (1) Are there common themes to the male experience that would support a hypothesis of stigmatization on the basis of sex or gender?
- (2) How have men who believe they have been affected by stigmatization interpreted and understood their experience?

Stigma, where it exists, necessarily affects the lives of those who are stigmatized. This initial exploratory study of a group of Canadian men was developed to determine whether their lived experience is consistent with such stigma. Future studies will be needed to determine the nature and scope of such stigmatization.

<sup>1</sup>Athabasca University, La Ronge, SK, Canada

## Corresponding Author:

Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Athabasca University, Box 647, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, S0J 1L0, Canada.  
Email: lhrobertson@sasktel.net



## Literature Review

No studies were found that dealt with the stigmatization of males as a class.<sup>3</sup> Kawakami, Young and Dovidio (2002) demonstrated that category priming activated stereotypic social behaviors with respect to the elderly, and a similar mechanism could activate a gender or sex stigma. Taking an evolutionary perspective, Kurzban and Leary (2001) argued that stigmatization served to mark classes of individuals judged likely to lack fitness with respect to dyadic cooperation, beneficial coalitions, and parasite avoidance rendering them unfit for particular sorts of social interactions. The presence of discrimination or differential treatment would not be sufficient to meet these criteria unless such undesirable outcomes included a judgment of unfitness ascribed to the targeted population. Following a meta-analysis, they concluded that studies of female stigmatization failed to meet these criteria. Similarly, the existence of discrimination against men<sup>4</sup> would not demonstrate stigmatization if men as a class are not viewed as unfit for related social relationships. Fillion (1996) said the feminist movement had evolved to view men as morally inferior. Such a view could be the basis of stigma if it could be shown that it resulted in the exclusion of men from specific social interactions. A study into lateral violence in nursing (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Bartfay, 2014) identified educational barriers, social isolation, sexism, suppression of male contributions to the field, and media portrayals of sexual deviance faced by men in the profession; however, the authors concluded that this stigmatization was specific to men who choose this nontraditional career.<sup>5</sup>

A study of 458 fifth and sixth graders in the United States reported that female children sampled were predisposed to dislike same-sex obese children to a greater degree than their male peers, and that the predisposition to dislike the obese had increased by more than 40% since 1961 (Latner & Stunkard, 2003). Smith, Mysak, and Michael (2008) concluded that women with sexually transmitted diseases faced greater stigmatization than men with the same condition; however, the stigmatization was based on the disease, not the sex. A study of 84 men with dual diagnosis of alcoholism and mental illness (Link et al., 1997) reported that stigma continues to complicate the lives of the stigmatized even as treatment improves their symptoms and functioning. Following a meta-analysis of studies of women, blacks, mentally handicapped, learning disabled, and mentally ill, Crocker and Major (1989) concluded that self-esteem among the stigmatized is not lower than among the non-stigmatized with the implication that the self-protective factors are available to these groups.

This necessarily brief review has demonstrated the necessary conditions required to study male stigmatization differentiated from mere discrimination. Stigma has been demonstrated against male nurses, but this stigma

has not been demonstrated as applicable to men as a class. Stigma against women who have sexually transmitted diseases was also context specific and not directed against women as a class. Stigma with respect to at least one minority (the obese) may be growing, but the stigmatized often have mechanisms that protect their self-esteem.

The purpose of this study was to document the behavioral and emotional reactions of a diverse sample of men with the felt experience of stigma. These characteristics, including the coping mechanisms available to the men in the study, were then examined for fit with the hypothesis of male stigma.

## Method

In keeping with Kurzban and Leary (2001), stigma was defined in this study as a general imputation of character rendering the stigmatized unfit for particular sorts of social interactions. Men who were in counselling or involved with the justice system at the time of the research were excluded so as to eliminate the potentially confounding effects of those institutions. Sixteen adult men were recruited using posted invitations on internet discussion boards that included university websites, men's discussion groups, and social media. These posts were linked to a recruitment letter approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Participants were asked to share how they have experienced stigma due to their gender.<sup>6</sup> Interviews (45 min to 2 hr in length) were conducted by telephone<sup>7</sup> and the recordings were transcribed by a master's level psychologist with stenographic experience. Using a public domain qualitative analysis software program (Coding Analysis Toolkit), transcriptions were segmented according to the method Miles and Huberman (1994) called "Transcendental Realism."<sup>8</sup> Each segment was labeled with a descriptive code reflective of its content, and segments with similar content were labeled with the same code-word across the participant sample using constant comparison between transcriptions and the resultant code words. These codes were placed into conceptual "bins or thematic clusters." Unlike Grounded Theory, which is methodologically similar, Transcendental Realism acknowledges that a researcher brings a conceptual framework to the research permitting the following question: "How do I permit data to elaborate, correct, and extend my ideas?" (p. 155). In this case, the researcher's hypothesis was that stigmatization was a tenable explanation for some negative experiences faced by men.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the participant research sample are summarized in Table 1. The largest number of participants ( $n = 6$ ) were resident in Canada's largest province. English was the language used in this research and this may have contributed to the lack of participation from Canada's second largest province,

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participant Sample Including Age, the Number Employed and Those Identifying Ethnically as European by Region.

Canadian regions	Number of participants (n = 16)	Age range (32–73)	Average age (mean = 53.2)	Number employed (n = 9)	Ethnic Europeans (n = 12)
Ontario	6	35–73	49.8	4	4
Prairie Provinces	5	32–68	57.0	2	5
British Columbia	3	35–54	45.7	2	1
Atlantic and Northern Canada	2	55–67	61.0	1	2

**Table 2.** Consequences of Perceived Stigmatization by Age and Ethnicity with the Percentage of the Age and Ethnic Sub-Samples Shown in Brackets.

Perceived stigmatic consequence	Age: under 53 (n = 7)	Age: 53 and over (n = 9)	Ethnicity: European (n = 12)	Ethnicity: non-European (n = 3)
Accused of abuse (n = 9)	4 (57.1%)	5 (55.6%)	6 (50%)	2 (66.7%)
Parental alienation (n = 6)	4 (57.1%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (16.7%)	3 (100%)
Job or career loss (n = 11)	4 (57.1%)	6 (66.7%)	9 (75%)	1 (33.3%)

French-speaking Quebec. As can be seen from Table 1, nine participants were employed. Those who were not employed included two retirees. A majority of the participant sample (n = 12) identified as Euro-Canadian. Three participants identified with a Middle Eastern country of origin and one did not ethnically self-identify. Fourteen of the participants identified as heterosexual, one as homosexual, and one as transsexual.

## Results

Fifty-six descriptive codes were used to label 614 segments in the 16 transcriptions. These descriptive codes were grouped according to thematic clusters. The following six themes emerged from the data: negative personal consequences of stigmatization, discrimination faced by men, tactics used to marginalize victims, emotional problems faced by the stigmatized, the role of feminism, and positive coping responses. Each of these themes is examined here separately.

### Personal Experiences of Stigmatization

Eleven research participants reported stigma within the context of male and female relationships. The majority of these (9) experienced false accusations, six reported parental alienation and three said they had been used for their money. Eleven participants reported that they had lost jobs or careers as a result of stigmatization. These results are summarized in Table 2 divided by age and ethnicity.

As can be seen from Table 1, the percentage of men accused of abuse was constant across subsamples.

Although one should be cautious about interpreting results from a subsample of 3, it may be important to note that all of those participants identifying as non-European reported parental alienation while only two (16.7%) of the Euro-Canadian subsample did. While descriptive statistics may give a sense of the overall participant sample, the experience of stigma must be described.

A participant with the pseudonym “Subjected” said his former wife told people he was a danger to her and their children. While such accusations are not necessarily evidence of stigma, assumptions in the absence of evidence might be. Although “Subjected” was never charged with a crime, the accusations affected his standing in the community. “Frank” was also never charged with a crime although his ex-spouse accused him of physical and sexual abuse. Both “Subjected” and Frank believed that people in their communities were predisposed to believe such accusations because of their sex. “Sacha” added, “because she (his ex-wife) is female, she gets enormous amount of help from the town, from individual people, counsellors, the legal system itself; and because I am a man, the knee jerk reaction is I have to prove my innocence constantly.” In contrast, support is not always apparent if the alleged victim is male. Shawn, who had a partner who was physically abusive recalled, “When I told my female friends what happened, they would question what I did to cause her to hit me.”

If there is a general view that men are naturally predatory or irresponsible with respect to family, then that stigma will likely be expressed in institutions designed to help families. “Paul” was amazed to hear a counsellor mediating custody say, “Paul, you know the life of a rabbi, you know the life that you choose, and for you to

have not fulfilled your responsibilities as a husband of a rabbi, especially as of a woman, it's really unfair." Paul had been the primary caregiver of his children, and he had attempted to keep the family together in the face of his wife's on-going infidelity. He reported that other counsellors looked at him as a "lower than life parent because I'm the father." Sacha said counsellors and social workers place men on a "short leash:"

But, the male can yell at his wife twice in public, you know, he caught her having sex with a tennis pro and all of a sudden he's abusive and mean and nasty and you know, that's it. You're pretty much done.

Six of the men in this study reported that the actions of ex-wives during separation and divorce had led to the alienation of affection between them and at least one of their children. Two ("David" and "Shawn") reported that they had been alienated from their fathers. As a child, Shawn regularly witnessed his mother berate his father whom he learned to see as contemptible. Following his own similar adult experience, he learned that his father had tolerated such abuse because he had been afraid of losing contact with his children. He also learned that his father had paid child support after his parent's divorce having previously believed otherwise. A predisposition to believe that one's father is morally inferior or contemptible in some ways would be reinforced in children's minds by a societal stigma that suggests such characteristics are commonplace in men.

Eleven men reported stigma related to their careers or employment. Seven reported extended periods of unemployment, and five experienced stigma in subsequent job retraining programs. A "male-as-sexual-predator" theme emerged.

"Toby's" first employer was impressed with his work and discussed sponsoring the 19-year-old in a post-secondary program. He was subsequently invited to a weekend party by a female co-worker. Arriving late, he found his date drunk; and he assisted her while she vomited into a bucket before taking her home. When he returned to work he was accused of "date rape" by his employer and he resigned. Now, over 50 years later, he still expressed frustration at not being allowed to defend himself from this accusation.

A supervisor accused "Derek" of being sexually interested in her. He protested that he only wanted friendship, and she was placated only after he explained he is "gay." This sequence had happened to him previously. He said he resents the need to disclose his sexual orientation to be believed on such matters by women. Frank stopped to aid three women stranded on a prairie highway. While two of the women seemed grateful, the third was fearful, "I felt the stigma was that a just random man had a reasonable

chance of being, even a guy who's stopping to help you, maybe especially a guy that stops, you're in danger."

At his first job after graduation as a social worker, "Howard" was required to assess the parental abilities of a young mother. She called his supervisor and said he reminded her of a sexually abusive male relative. The human resources department interpreted this to be a complaint of sexual harassment, but was unwilling to confront the client for fear of furthering her "trauma." Instead, Howard's female coworkers were told that a client had made a complaint and they were asked if they felt comfortable around him. He was dismissed.

As a student in a social work program, "Abused" challenged an assertion that 90% of domestic violence is male initiated. After his instructor compared him to mass murderer Marc Lepine,<sup>9</sup> the local college first suspended and then expelled him. The college awarded "Abused" a financial settlement after being threatened with a law suit. "Allan" experienced isolation as the only male in a staff of nine in a northern community. He explained:

The notion is that women are much more nurturing, much more compassionate, much more verbal and just generally, just much better suited to the role of a social worker. Then you add to that the fact that many times these female social workers, especially the older ones like my supervisor experienced... a whole variety of negative experiences with men. You can look at the whole narrative surrounding domestic violence.... This led her (his former supervisor) to see men in a very negative light.

After several frustrating months Allan was found crying alone in his office, and his employment was terminated. If women who are found to be in such an emotional state were to receive different treatment, then this would be an example of sexism, but it would constitute stigma only if this differential treatment was prompted by notions that men are unfit for this kind of work. No examples of stigma were offered in this study outside of employment or relationship contexts,<sup>10</sup> and this is keeping with the view that stigma renders the stigmatized unfit for some, but not all, social interactions.

### *Examples of Discrimination Experienced by Men*

Every participant described experiences of discrimination with examples cited including lack of due process, unequal support programs, social alienation, infant circumcision, and military conscription. Howard, the social worker who was dismissed after his client requested another worker, acknowledged the right of a client to make such a request, but he was not sure a request to replace a female social worker would have been received

in the same way. He was "fairly certain," however, that the child welfare agency would not have subsequently asked male coworkers to rate their level of comfort with her. He was certain that if some male coworkers had said they were uncomfortable with this hypothetical female, she would have been given an opportunity to know of and speak to the questioned behaviour.

Allan's career "spiraled downhill" after he was dismissed as a social worker. As a condition of receiving financial aid, he was required to take a job-readiness program, and he found himself in a bridging program designed for young mothers. Although he was the class's top typist, "The other girls in the class were getting offers for interviews coming to them because the business community wanted receptionists and typists, but they didn't want males." Allan set up his own job interviews but because these interviews were outside the class structure he was expelled. He noted that some female students had absented themselves for personal reasons and were not expelled with the implication that he was treated differently. If there were no job-readiness programs suitable for men, and if Allan required such a course, then this would be an example of an additional level of discrimination. A third level occurred if Allan could not obtain clerical work because he was not of the right sex.

Lack of equal programs for men was noted by "Abused" who had court orders supporting his right to see his children, but no agencies mandated to help him enforce those orders. One agency told him, "We don't help people like you." Paul asked to be admitted into a program to help abused men, but was told that such programs do not exist.

Sacha told an investigating child welfare worker that he had bought a home within walking distance of his children's school because, "I want(ed) to encourage them to be able to go to school and socialize more effectively with children their age, especially during this precarious time of our separation." The social worker replied, "Well, that seems like a waste of time and money, you know, because as far as I'm concerned, the mother gets the kids pretty much all the time." When Sacha's ex-wife was not held accountable for breaking visitation rules, the investigating social worker said "Well you know, quite frankly, you're the man, and she's a woman, I have no choice but to take the lesser of two evils." Later, his children were put into counselling without his knowledge on the assumption that his ex-spouse had custody, and he had to pursue legal action to establish his equal right to talk to the counsellor. As an adolescent Shawn observed his mother "would use police officers to keep my father in line. Men have their children taken hostage by the courts unless they pay the women for the privilege to see them." The pervasiveness of the notion that men are secondary to women in parenting was

illustrated by Jason, a stay-at-home dad. He regularly took his children on outings to the local park, the aquarium, swimming pools, and the library noting:

Any time I had my kids outside of the home during normal working hours I was looked down on by almost every mother. They would not talk to me, or include me in any after event get-togethers, and any time I asked if their kids wanted to get together to play with mine, the answer was always no thanks.... The only time it was acceptable for me to be with my kids was during weekends.... That's when dads are supposed to be at the park with the kids while stay-at-home mommy gets some much needed relaxing.

Stigma can lead to discrimination by people not party to a marital conflict. The ex-wife of "Subjected" obtained a restraining order, but there was no order prohibiting him from visiting his children. When his "ex" appeared at a local hospital where his teen-age daughter volunteered, he left in compliance only to subsequently receive a letter stating he would be charged with trespass if he appeared on hospital property again. Bob had been part of a wellness support group. After his marital separation, he was no longer welcome even though his "ex" was not part of the group.

According to Derek, discrimination against males begins in infancy. He felt so violated at discovering that he was circumcised that he attempted legal action against the doctor who had performed the ritual concluding, "There is no societal conscience against male circumcision.... so basically it's very different treatment than you would get say for a doctor who made a ritualistic nick in a girl's clitoris." He concluded that the experience of boys is trivialized as compared to that of girls "and this is not always fair."

Male disadvantage was reported in early grade school. Erika<sup>11</sup> recalled, "I got kicked in the nuts by girls, I think in grade three.... I dropped to the ground and I cried." Erika recalled feeling powerless because ze had a male body and was not allowed to retaliate to a girl. Toby also recalled, "My mother always drilled into me to have respect for the opposite sex and you never hit a girl even when that girl (at school) was twice your size and persisted in beating on you."

### *The Experience of Marginalization and Silencing*

It has been expected that at times of war, men willingly sacrifice their lives. The oldest participant in this research, David, recalled seeing his great uncle publically shamed for refusing to fight in a war when a woman publically delivered to him a white feather symbolizing his cowardice. Shaming, gossip, and social isolation may serve to

**Table 3.** Gossip, Harassment, Shaming, Social Isolation, and Silencing as Experienced by Participants Divided by Age and Ethnicity.

Participant experience	Age: under 53 (n = 7)	Age: 53 and over (n = 9)	Ethnicity: European (n = 12)	Ethnicity: non-European (n = 3)
Gossip (n = 10)	5 (71.4%)	5 (55.6%)	7 (58.3%)	2 (66.7%)
Harassment (n = 3)	1 (14.3%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (16.7%)	1 (33.3%)
Shaming (n = 4)	3 (42.9%)	1 (11.1%)	2 (16.7%)	1 (33.3%)
Social isolation (n = 11)	4 (57.1%)	7 (77.8%)	8 (66.7%)	2 (66.7%)
Silencing (n = 7)	2 (28.6%)	5 (55.6%)	5 (41.7%)	2 (66.7%)

keep the stigmatized from challenging dominant orthodoxy. Table 3 summarizes the experience of this participant sample with respect to such tactics.

When Jason attempted to express his emotional needs, his wife would tell him, “Get over it; be a man.” In this context, the phrase “be a man” is an act of shaming with an expected consequence of silencing. David noted that male shaming was part of his family culture. As a child his mother and grandmother would shame him for “rambunctious boy behavior.” As an adolescent, his father joined them in shaming his emergent sexuality. Later, as a Presbyterian minister, he was required to attend a workshop on male harassment organized by feminists in his church. He recalled, “It was a portrayal of a sleazy guy... Now, it may be that some men actually behave this way, but I found it quite unbelievable. It was a caricature created for this specific purpose of shaming.” The men in forced attendance remained silent with their heads bowed.

Ten participants said they had been the victims of gossip. Sacha said that subsequent to his wife’s gossip, the staff at his children’s school “didn’t want anything to do with me.” “Subjected” described gossip as “like opening a feather pillow and standing at the top of the building and emptying the pillow out. You can get back what is said about you by collecting all of the feathers and putting it back in the pillow.” He has convinced many people that he is not dangerous. “Abused” who was compared to a mass murderer in a debate about statistics, said some students were genuinely afraid of him. Jason, whose decision to stay at home and raise his children was made jointly with his wife, learned she told others he “couldn’t hold a job.” Ben experienced a “chill” with doctors and teachers when given the label “deadbeat dad.” Bob, who was accused of sexual perversions, began losing work as a private contractor and moved to another province. Frank said he did not know what was said “behind his back” but he noted that some of the husbands in his neighborhood would glare at him following his separation.

Much of the gossip recounted by participants in this study involved allegations of uttering threats. Complaints

were made to the police in two cases. Toby received a call from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police requesting his appearance to tell his “side of the story.” On arrival, he was told to sign a peace order guaranteeing his good behavior. Since then his guilt was assumed and “even my male friends were keeping their distance for fear of upsetting their harmonious relationships.” Charges against “Subjected” were dismissed.

The majority of men in this study (11) experienced social isolation. Paul was originally from another country and he had developed few close friendships in Canada. As had happened with Toby, both “Subjected” and “Abused” reported that former friends of both sexes kept their distance. Bob was left with one male friend who let him keep his possessions in a barn. A woman who refused to speak to Sacha or his child at school told a teacher in their presence, “When I first met (Sacha), you know, he was an awesome guy but aah, apparently not anymore and I’m not to, I will not talk to him anymore.” Alternative interpretations of causal events between ex-spouses following a marital separation may be expected; however, stigma would affect the believability of one sex as opposed to the other.

“Subjected” attempted to tell his story to a public meeting on sexual assault and domestic violence. After explaining that he had been falsely accused, he was told by the moderator that this was an inappropriate venue and he sat down. Later, another attendee approached the microphone complaining that he had made the meeting “unsafe for women” and asked that he be removed. David explained that as a man “You can’t speak up because after all you are one of the (presumed) guilty party; you’re one of the perpetrators.” Allan said that since men are not allowed to speak of their own victimization, women have taken a leading role in men’s equality movements.

Most of the participants did not report an attempt to speak publically. Shawn thought it would be easier to tell his story to a “total stranger,” and this motivated his participation in this research. Paul did not tell others of his wife’s infidelity because he thought it was not manly to

gossip. Bob remained silent in the face of his wife's gossip hoping it would "blow over."

### *Emotional Consequences of Stigma, Discrimination, and Marginalization*

All of the research participants described lasting emotional consequences from their experiences of stigmatization and discrimination. Toby said the false accusation of date rape affected his subsequent relationships with women. Two decades after being unjustly dismissed, Howard found himself ruminating over what he could have done to give offence. His former psychotherapist had approached the employer and was told: "This guy is going to have trouble," but no specific objectionable behaviors were disclosed despite Howard's waiver of confidentiality.

"Subjected" recalled losing "an enormous amount of sleep" while ruminating on the possibility that his difficulty coping without his children was less than their difficulty in coping without him. When "Abused" is cutting firewood in the northern bush, he wonders why his children are not out with him learning these skills. His desperate search to find his children has spanned two provinces and one territory.

Paul and Toby reported frustration and anger following unsuccessful attempts to maintain their marriages in the face of their wives' on-going infidelity. Frank was in tears as he related: "It's just the most terrible thing cause I don't know what to say to (his children), but at some point, they'll maybe come to the conclusion that their mother is kind of a lying wicked woman."

Derek felt so violated that as an adult he attempted legal action against the doctor who performed his circumcision. Erika concluded that her circumcision resulted in untreated posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and she sought therapy. Ze wondered, "How did that change who I was going to become?" and ze concluded that ze had not been valued as a boy. As an adolescent ze had worried, "All it is for a woman to regret the night and then you know, renounce her consent and now I'm a rapist and my life is over."

The experience of not being believed about his sexual intentions left Derek feeling cynical and "emotionally insecure." Shawn described himself as "delusional or damaged goods." He said when he sees a woman he likes, "I picture her breaking my heart, me paying for her expenses while she sleeps with another man. I see her holding my children hostage if I don't pay for her or the government. I see myself going into depression."

As can be seen from these examples, a general theme of men who experienced stigma is fear. Paul's lawyer advised him his ex-spouse could make a false accusation

to the police complicating his legal position. Sacha said he panicked when he realized government bureaucrats had the power to keep him from seeing his children. Howard developed a career outside of the social work profession, but when he was required to share his office with a newly hired young woman he recalled, "I was really, really uncomfortable. Until I got to know her, I was scared coming to work... Was I dealing with another woman who's had a bad experience with a male?"

Another theme was depression. Jason began drinking at night to deal with his misery. Shawn experienced depression following a relationship with a physically abusive girlfriend. "Abused" said he was "in a state of depression" despite winning a financial settlement "because I really did want to become a social worker and mostly because of this discrimination." Toby said that after his wife left him for another man, he was "thoroughly depressed and disillusioned." He continued, "My greatest regret was being born a boy. None of this would have gone this way if I had been born a girl." Allan said it became "a struggle to get up in the morning" and asked, "How are we to understand our situation; what hope is there for us really?"

Ben said "I kept my cool throughout. I was never violent; I never lashed out verbally, physically, or anything." In the aftermath of the divorce he became suicidal. Jason, a former stay-at-home dad, emerged from an alcohol treatment center to find that he was unable to see his children. He relapsed into addictions, attempted to kill himself repeatedly, and destroyed a vehicle while driving drunk.

### *Feminism From the Perspective of the Stigmatized Male*

Unprompted, 11 participants named feminism as a source of male stigmatization. Shawn, having initially identified with his feminist mother, reported feeling "sickened and betrayed" as women in the university women's studies class in which he enrolled, took turns reviling him as a male and potential rapist while he was forced to remain silent. "Abused" estimated that "sixty to seventy percent of the (social work) course in which he enrolled was based on radical feminist ideology." "Subjected" attended a meeting of university feminists where he was told that men have set up society in order to enslave women and that every man would rape and abuse if given the opportunity. Frank does not discuss feminism at the technical institute where he is employed because a supervisor has "tried to have half a dozen of the men in the department fired because they weren't teaching the students properly from a feminist perspective."

John experienced the assumption of male privilege when his ex-wife insisted he make decisions that he did not

have the power to make. She interpreted results that were not to her liking to be the result of his malicious decision-making. The notion that one sex is privileged leads to assumptions that the other is oppressed. This assumption led Howard to “automatically take the side of the woman” when he was a social worker.<sup>12</sup> David surmised, “There is an ideology that I was raised with, which is that, and it’s deeply ingrained, and that is women are always the victim.... And there’s enough proof of it worldwide to encourage this type of generalization, but unfortunately it, like all ideologies, leaves out huge chunks of the reality.”

### *Attempts to Cope With Stigma and its Effects*

The men in this study differed in their responses to similar narratives of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. Paul said “I learned incredibly, I still lack confidence but I’m a lot stronger now.” Frank, however, became “a bit of a recluse” with “a grudge against society.” Erika grew a full beard while in her early 20s, but she denied it was an attempt to masculinize: “I just didn’t care. I just was so, I would work, go home, be on the computer; then I would go to sleep, wake up, go to work. And that was me.” Erika explained that she made more money while in a male gender, not because of any discrimination against women but because “Now there is so much more I can do with my life, I get creative.” While none of the other men (6) who also reported similar periods of “numbing out” decided to change their sex, they eventually proceeded in new directions. Denied a social work career, “Abused” found work in a shelter for homeless men where he helps people with their addictions and mental health. Howard now works in adult education and volunteers several months each year to train people in third world countries. Bob moved to a new province.

Family connections were identified as important by all participants. Alan said a concern and love for his wife keeps him going. Ben’s primary support was a younger sister who “has always been a huge supporter of me “cause she knows me well.” Shawn found love and respect from his formerly estranged father. Many men found meaning and purpose in their children. Jason proclaimed: “The fact is that I am a better parent (than his ex-wife)... I understand my kids and try to help them work through their feelings to express themselves in healthy ways.” He said that despite his wife’s attempts to alienate him from his children, they remain close. Frank’s children were adults at the time of this study, and he proudly said both had professional degrees. After his divorce he worked in the resource industry away from his community but would return for 2 weeks at a time:

As soon as I got home, I would drop by the grocery store, load up with groceries, call in and ask for the kids and she,

my ex, was always willing to get rid of the kids. So she’d let me have them as much as I could so I would do as much as I could. I would have them every hour when I was not out in the field.

Some find meaning in social activism. Ben hopes to increase awareness to the problems men face stating, “We will still always have problems. But, if I can mitigate it to some degree, even help one person; that would be something.” Frank became “a bit of a child advocate” and he has lobbied politicians to end “no-fault divorce.” “Abused” has lobbied for changes in judicial law to support the rights of fathers as parents, and the rights of children to have fathers.

As part of his coping response, David married a woman from a non-western culture in which “life is lived;” and his sex and sexuality are not shamed. He described this relationship as based on equality and mutual acceptance. A majority (10) of the research participants expressed a belief in equality and no one expressed a desire for inequality. Bob joined a feminist support group as an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous hoping to find equality in that venue. Ben said he believed in “equality one hundred percent down the line.” Sacha agreed adding, “It has to be real equality with no gender bias, no race bias, no color bias.” Howard said that because of his experience he would no longer automatically take a pro-feminist viewpoint as this does not necessarily represent equality.

Derek suggested that the movement toward equality had not been reciprocal: “Maybe a hundred years ago it was more true that men had the power in society and therefore if women wanted to be equal, women had to emulate men; except there was never sort of the idea that men could do the opposite and do more feminine things.”<sup>13</sup> He suggested that if men do enter traditional female roles, like child care, they are stigmatized. John added, “I don’t find that this kind of (negative male) profiling happens to me very often. You know, I’m in the educational field and you occasionally find that students might prefer a male teacher compared to a female teacher. That is also an example of how society creates these roles and identifies the gender with particular roles.”

## **Discussion**

Stigma as understood here is the imputation of characteristics rendering a class of people unfit for particular sorts of social interactions. A diverse sample including non-heterosexuals with representation from every Canadian region except Quebec was used to explore this stigma in men. All participants experienced imputations of character and exclusion from certain social interactions due to their sex. While 11 participants in this sample were

accused of being a threat to women or children, some accusers believed all men are potentially violent or sexually predatory.<sup>14</sup> For people holding such an imputation, the remaining five participants would be suspect. One anonymous reviewer asked "How do you know (these men) weren't a danger to women?" This question, which may also occur to other readers, reveals an imputation which, if not extended equally to women, is evidence of stigma. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which such attitudes are prevalent in the general population.

Ten men in this study reported experiencing gossip. While the purpose of negative gossip may be to damage personal reputation independent of stigma, it is reasonable to expect that such gossip is more readily believed if it aligns with an accepted stigmatic stereotype. Campbell (2005) suggested that women generally prefer employing indirect or relational strategies such as "rumor spreading, punitive friendship termination, gossiping, ostracism, and stigmatization" (p. 639) as opposed to physical violence. One feminist writer described gossip as "a way of talking between women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in scope and setting, a female cultural event..." (Jones, 1990, p. 243). Gossip may be seen as a way of seeking allies. For example, as children David and Shawn were enlisted as allies by their mothers using narratives that played to male stereotypes.

All participants in this research experienced the assumption that they were a threat to others or irresponsible with respect to family responsibilities with the result they were judged as unfit in their roles as parents or as employees in specific occupations. If male stigma is experienced an imputed potentiality, then men in "nontraditional" roles will endeavor to elicit signals that they are not like other men so as to be trusted. For example, Derek found that he was believed about his lack of sexual interest in women when he explained that he was homosexual. Heterosexual men could distance themselves from stigma by espousing feminist values or by being critical of masculine stereotypes. The hypothesis that men in nontraditional occupations will attempt to distance themselves from the perceived majority of males is testable.

If men as a class are victims of stigma, then certain characteristics associated with being male could be expected to trigger a protective response to the perceived threat. For example, neither Howard nor his therapist was told of any specific behavior that led to his dismissal. An unspecified number of female coworkers answered in the affirmative when asked if they felt uncomfortable around him; however, no specific behaviors leading to this discomfort were shared. It may be that Howard appeared insufficiently reserved or contrite (distinguishing him from other men), or that his exuberance and rambunctiousness matched a triggering gender stereotype. Research into the

correspondence of personality to the experience of male stigma is indicated.

The men in this study reported they were excluded from nurturing roles and relationships even while in the role of financial provider. As Robertson (2017) noted, the notion of the absentee father who is none-the-less the financial provider dates back to the Industrial Revolution when men were driven from feudal agricultural industries and forced to work in more distant mills and factories. Further, with universal conscription justified by nationalism,<sup>15</sup> qualities that make for good soldiers such as the respect for hierarchy and the repression of emotions became identified with the male psyche (Sanchez-Lopez, Cuellar-Flores, Liminana, & Corbalan, 2012). It is not clear how many men conformed to these gender stereotypes; however, as we have seen from the example of David's uncle, they could be enforced through public shaming by women.

The 1960s appropriation of the term "gender" from the study of grammar was justified by the notion that one learns to be male or female<sup>16</sup> (Carbone & Brinig, 1990) with male infants arbitrarily selected to form a dominant ruling class (Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Pinker, 2002). With this ruling class narrative, marriage was seen as an instrument for the continued oppression of women (Ferree, 1990; Mohr, 1984), and Canadian divorce laws were liberalized with increased entitlements to property, assets, and child support for women choosing this alternative (Robertson, 2017). Fault, defined as the failure to comply with the terms of the marriage contract, was abolished as a prerequisite for divorce (Carbone & Brinig, 1990), common-law cohabitation was granted marital status for the purposes of taxation and the equitable division of property, laws were passed prohibiting discrimination in education and employment on the basis of sex, and affirmative action programs were implemented to ensure women had the opportunity to access career opportunities formerly dominated by men. With courts and government programs primed to protect and advance the interests of women, it is not surprising that they would not be predisposed to protect the men in this sample.

The legislation adopted by most industrialized countries during the 1970s to guarantee equality of opportunity produced a massive influx of women into the workforce.<sup>17</sup> The rationale that men are secondary to women in child care because they are necessarily absentee providers is no longer operative in these countries. A narrative that men are potentially abusive, malevolent, and irresponsible may be viewed as a new rationale justifying such post-Industrial Revolution norms (Robertson, 2017). Men in this study who experienced alienation from their children reported an expectation that they should continue to be providers regardless of the circumstances leading to that alienation or their earning power in

relation to that of their ex-spouses. Ben and Jason said they were unfairly called “deadbeats.” Bob, Shawn, and Sacha reported that they felt used for their money. A stigma that supports parental alienation while treating the alienated parent as an irresponsible provider would be expected to produce such feelings.

“Gender,” under this formulation, may be understood as an extended stereotype. If the female gender has been defined to include victimization or oppression with moral superiority (Fillion, 1996; Tappin & McKay, 2016), then, in a dichotomous worldview men are necessarily seen as victimizers and morally inferior. Stigma is the projection of such negative stereotyping. The way sex and gender have been constructed and represented will ultimately relate to male stigma and requires further study, but the participation of a transsexual person in this study challenged the dichotomous view.

Although Erika was taking hormone treatment to enhance female characteristics at the time of this study, ze did not identify as female in gender. In fact, drawing on previous experience, Erika was afraid of females. Ze identified with a third gender with its own sexuality, dress, and normative behavior. Similarly others who may not wish to change their sexual characteristics (and thus would not be considered transsexual) may create unique genders based on their presentation, sexuality, and defined roles. A Spanish study (Sanchez-Lopez et al., 2012) concluded that the majority of men and women behaved in ways not consistent with ascribed gender norms and it may be that a dichotomous notion of gender misrepresents men and women. Several men in this study (Paul, Sacha, Frank, Jason) had been the primary nurturing caregivers of their children, but this was not recognized or supported by institutions such as schools and child-welfare agencies. The possibility of releasing the notion of gender from male and female sex characteristics, while intriguing, is beyond the scope of this study.

This research confirmed Goffman’s (1959) view that stigma is maintained by individuals acting as a team “whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (p. 104). “Abused,” challenged the dominant narrative with respect to domestic violence in class<sup>18</sup> and was removed from his university program. “Subjected” was removed from the building in which a meeting on domestic violence was held when he attempted to tell his story.

Seven participants (Howard, “Abused,” Sacha, Allan, Shawn, Paul, and “Subjected”) shared experiences of stigma they faced as social work clients, students, and professionals. Since this study did not involve an investigation of the social work profession, this result was unanticipated. With methods similar to those used by Clow, Ricciardelli, and Bartfay (2014) with respect to nursing, social work could be studied. If stigma serves to

mark groups judged to lack fitness with respect to specific social roles (Kurzban & Leary, 2001), then stigmatic assumptions that men are ineffective care-givers and potentially dangerous to women and children would render them unfit (or less fit) in matters of family and in professions dedicated to protecting family. Since men are not perceived to be potential victims in this paradigm, Paul’s inability to find programs for abused men is explained.

The reactions of these men to their experiences indicated changes to their self-identities. Two men said they avoided all relationships with women because of the risk of false accusations. A third participant married a woman from another culture, and this resulted in freedom from relational male-shaming. A fourth admitted to becoming a recluse with bitterness toward society. Others made a decision to remain single. This type of change to the selves of individuals may be studied as adult transitions (Schlossberg, Water, & Goodman, 1995; Bridges, 2001; Robertson, 2011). Longitudinal studies into the changes to the male self-related to stigmatic experiences would assist counsellors and psychologists to better assist men whose identities have been negatively affected by the experience of stigma.

## Conclusions and Limitations

Articles in a recent special issue of a peer-reviewed professional trade journal on counselling men suggested the profession: (a) was failing to meet the needs of men “who endorse traditional masculine social ideology” (Westwood & Black, 2012, p. 287); (b) needed to conduct more research on men (Hoover, Bedi, & Beall, 2012);<sup>19</sup> and (c) needed to find ways to reach men who do not seek help because they have been conditioned to be independent, be silent, and deal with their problems on their own (Buitenbos, 2012). The overarching theme of the men in this study, that they were not believed and were left without supports, was not addressed. It is possible that men often fail to reach out to the “helping professions” because they believe that those professions are not designed to help them and that their stories may not be believed. Further research is needed to establish the frequency of such views in the male population.

While the accounts given by the research participants satisfied the criteria of stigma outlined at the beginning of this article, given research design limitations it is not possible to state whether this stigma applies to Canadian men generally, or to some as yet undefined subset of the Canadian male population. The self-selection process used here ensured the recruitment of individuals who are aggrieved. While this exploratory study has established that some men have experienced stigma, it is possible that this experience is shared by a minority or subgroup of the universe of Canadian men. Further research is indicated.

In the interim, counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and others in the helping professions would be well served to examine their own worldviews for bias with respect to their male clients. Are we, like Howard was before he lost his career, predisposed to take the word of a woman over the word of a man? Do we assume that men invariably operate from a position of power and privilege? Do we believe that there is a “toxic masculinity” at the root of many of the problems men (and women) face? Do we blame the victim for then not seeking help?

Men face higher rates of PTSD, suicide, and alcoholism as compared to women, but they seek professional help for these conditions at lower rates. By giving voice to the men in this study, I hope to have contributed to a dialogue into the societal factors contributing to the mental health of men.

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### ORCID iD

Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9158-538X>

### Notes

1. The terms used here were used in the referenced studies into stigma and are repeated to allow the reader to gain a sense of how the subject matter was approached. In an effort to combat that stigma, some people use “person-first” language so that “mentally ill,” for example, becomes “persons who suffer from mental illness.” A literature search by the author failed to uncover any studies demonstrating that such approaches reduce the level of stigmatization experienced by a target population and the proposition remains controversial.
2. This study initially used the term “gender” to describe its universe of interest; however, as the presence of a transsexual person has demonstrated, the dichotomization of gender into male and female is simplistic. Since non-heterosexual males participated in this study, maleness was defined by sexual characteristics as opposed to gender. The term “gender” is used here to reference presentation or ascription.
3. The term “class” here is used here to reference all men. There have been studies on stigma as it affects the males of minority populations but such studies cannot demonstrate stigmatization of males per se.
4. For example, legal systems in North America may have a bias against men in child custody (Wexler, 1995) and domestic violence (Donnelly & Kenyon, 1996). Based on his former career as a justice of the peace, law professor Peter Bowel (2017) contends the assumption of male guilt has continued in the Canadian justice system.
5. The authors also reported that this stigma was more prevalent in the general society than in the nursing profession itself.
6. Note that this study was initially conceived as a study about gender. The interviews with the non-heterosexual males clarified that the stigma examined was related to sex not gender defined as a phenomena of social learning.
7. One participant said he did not feel comfortable with a recorded interview by telephone and requested that he be permitted to complete the questions by e-mail. This request was granted.
8. Miles and Huberman (1994) named their method “Transcendental Realism” referencing Bhaskar (1975) who held that there exists a reality outside of our selves, but our understanding of it is necessarily interpretive.
9. In 1989, Marc Lepine murdered 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, Canada following his failure to gain admission to its engineering program.
10. Due to the focus of this study, accounts of stigma involving the court system were not reported if such accounts involved legal proceedings.
11. Erika is a male to female transsexual person who identified with neither gender commonly associated with those sexes. As a result, the pronoun “ze” is used here instead of “he” or “she.”
12. This bias is not limited to Canada. Sarantakos (2004) reported that the majority of women in his Australian sample admitted that they had been the dominant, violent, and abusive partner but “In every case, the authorities had sided with the women and treated the male victims as perpetrators.”
13. Derek may be referencing the 1960s Women’s Liberation Movement in suggesting that equality means women emulating men. Many modern feminists take the view that the sexes are different and that femininity needs to be honored (Carbone & Brinig, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Branaman, 2010).
14. Conversely, female violence is minimized. After finding that female-only violence within domestic relationships was almost three times as common as male-only violence in their Canadian sample, Kwong, Bartholomew, and Dutton (1999) observed, “Our society seems to harbour an implicit acceptance of women’s violence as relatively harmless, even amusing” (p. 159).
15. Napoleon justified universal conscription on the grounds that all French speakers owed allegiance to the French nation, but the idea of the nation was developed by Joan of Arc to foreign (English) rule.

16. This appropriation was first made by sociologist John Money in 1955 to reference the socially constructed attributes of sex, and was adopted by the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s to emphasize the view that sex-roles are culturally constructed. By the 1970s this use of the term was common in the social sciences in North America.
17. Equality of opportunity is not the same as equality of result. Studies by Hakim (2011), Zeng (2010), and Polachek and Xiang (2009) have led to the conclusion that men and women often have different life goals and priorities which account for differences in career trajectories.
18. In North American studies, female-initiated violence has consistently equaled or exceeded that of males in domestic relationships (Kelly, 2002; Kwong, Bartholomew, & Dutton, 1999). Brown (2004) estimated that violence against men by women is under-reported by 93%.
19. Content analysis of published articles in the Canadian Journal of Counselling Psychology from 2000 to 2011 inclusive revealed a 24:1 ratio favoring articles about women's issues.

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