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The Stigmatization of Men can be a Humanist Issue

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Earlier this year the author published the results of academic research into male stigma in the *American Journal of Men's Health* (Robertson, 2018). He begins this article by describing the incidents that prompted his interest in this research. After summarizing the findings with references to the study's participants, he discusses the findings and their implications for humanism. Robertson is vice-president of Humanist Canada

One summer day, two girls rang my doorbell and asked to use my inclined driveway for skateboarding. Their family had moved next door a couple of years previous, and they had often used my driveway for winter sledding. Each time they would ring my doorbell and ask permission, and my response was always, "Yes, if you are careful." I gave the same response on this occasion, but as I returned to my couch the thought occurred to me that skateboarding on pavement might be more dangerous. I looked out my window to see how they were doing. After watching them set up and awkwardly fall, I decided to tell them I had changed my mind. However, when I arrived at the driveway they were gone, so I went back to my reading. The following day I was contacted by the police who wanted to know why I was looking at these girls from my living room window.

Even though the policeman accepted my explanation, I found the incident disturbing. Some friends said this was an example of “bad neighbours.” Good ones would have called, and although we had not been social friends, we had been neighborly. Others suggested I should be thankful that there is a system in place to protect girls, but I could not imagine the police questioning my wife as to why she would look at some girls attempting to skateboard on our driveway. I felt “profiled.”

Later that year I went to a secularist conference in Edmonton. The keynote speaker, a transsexual recounting the discrimination ze¹ had faced said, “The reason we have male and female washrooms is because little boys are socialized to rape little girls.” A friend from Red Deer who was at the same conference confirmed I heard the speaker correctly.

Anecdotes such as these cannot confirm the existence of a general stigma against men when other explanations are possible. For example, the parents of the skateboarding girls were Christian missionaries, and finding that their new neighbor is a well-known humanist who performs secular weddings may have primed them to act in some ways. A third possibility was that the incident represented a form of lateral violence where negative gossip is used to enhance one’s standing in a community or employment setting.

If a diverse sample of men reported a targeted imputation of character rendering them unfit for particular sorts of social interactions due to their sex or gender, then we could say male stigma exists. We could not say, in the absence of random sampling, how extensive this stigmatization is, nor could we speak to the motives of individuals. Irrespective of motive, if stigma exists then gossip or accusations reflecting the stigma will be more readily believed. The

¹ In this article “ze” is used as a pronoun referencing people who identify as neither male nor female with respect to their gender..

purpose of my research was to determine whether male stigma exists and, in the course of doing so, describe it.

I examined the lived experience of men from a variety of occupations, regions, racial groups and, as it turned out, genders. Sixteen men ages 32 to 73 participated in in-depth interviews. All of the men experienced discrimination including: the assumption of guilt without due process, a lack of support programs, social alienation from friends and community, and infant (male) circumcision. It is possible to have discrimination without stigmatization. For example, women were not allowed, until recently, to drive cars in Saudi Arabia. This was not based on the idea that women were unable to obey traffic laws because of their sex, nor was it based on the notion that women are predisposed to use the technology malevolently, as would be the case if one was to use a vehicle as a weapon. Rather, the discrimination was based on a belief about social roles. To be stigmatic, discrimination must be paired with the idea of social unfitness.

Illustrating this pairing of discrimination with attributed social unfitness, “Sacha²” bought a home within walking distance of his children’s school following his legal separation from their mother. An investigating social worker told him, “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.” This could be an example of discrimination without stigma; however, later, when Sacha’s reported his ex-wife had broken visitation rules, the same 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.”

² All names used here are pseudonyms

The notion that fathers are secondary to mothers with respect to parenting was pervasive in this study. For example, stay-at-home dads reported that they and their children were treated differently by schools, support and recreational services, and other parents than stay at home moms. Two were accused of being “deadbeat dads” because they did have a paying job while their wives worked. Paul, who attempted to keep his family together in the face of his wife’s on-going infidelity, was amazed to have a counselor tell him he had not fulfilled his responsibilities “as the husband of a rabbi.” Sacha explained that counsellors and social workers place men on a “short leash” with the expectation that they have been abusive in some way. Shawn had a partner who was physically abusive but, “When I told my female friends what happened, they would question what I did to cause her to hit me.”

Eleven research participants reported stigma within the context of male and female relationships. A majority of these (8) experienced false accusations, and an equal number reported parental alienation. Three participants reported false accusations that were criminal. Although none were charged, all reported that the accusations were widely believed in the community. If such an accusation were more readily believed of one group than is the norm, then that group is subject to stigma.

Six of the men in this study reported alienation of affection between them and at least one of their children and another two reported that they had been alienated from their fathers. As a child, Shawn had been groomed by his mother to see his father as contemptible. As an adult, he learned that his father had tolerated such abuse because he had been afraid of losing contact with his children. While it is unfortunate that parents in conflict will sometimes attempt to use their children against the other parent, stigma would be indicated if the sex of the other impacted on believability. The issue of believability emerged again in discussions about employment.

Eleven men reported stigma related to their careers or employment with an emergent “male-as-sexual-predator” theme. Toby lost his first job following an accusation of date-rape. Now, over 50 years later, he still expressed his innocence and his frustration at not being allowed to defend himself from the accusation. A supervisor accused Derek of “coming on” to her and was placated only after he explained he is “gay.” He said he resents the need to disclose his sexual orientation to be believed by women. Howard’s first client after graduation as a social worker told his supervisor he reminded her of a sexually abusive male relative. The employer interpreted this to be a complaint of sexual harassment, but was unwilling to further “traumatize” the client by discussing it with her. Instead, Howard’s female co-workers were told that a client had made a complaint of harassment 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 Lepine³, the local college first suspended and then expelled him. The college awarded “Abused” a financial settlement after being threatened with a law suit but he remained out of the program.

Stigmatization is maintained by a dominant group working as a team to silence and marginalize the stigmatized and force them to accept the stigma. For example, 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 behaviour.” As an adolescent his

³ In 1989 Marc Lepine murdered 14 women at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, Canada following his failure to gain admission to its engineering program.

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.

Nine participants said they had been the victims of gossip and shaming. "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." 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 lost work as a private contractor. Frank said he did not know what was said "behind his back" but he noted that some of the husbands in his neighbourhood would glare at him following his separation. The same result was reported by the three men who had been accused, but not charged, of uttering threats or assault. A majority of men in this study (11) said they experienced social isolation.

Only three of the participants attempted to tell their stories publically prior to this research. "Subjected" was told by the moderator of a public meeting on domestic violence that his story of being falsely accused was "inappropriate" and he was asked to sit down. Later, another attendee complaining his presence made the meeting "unsafe for women" and he was asked to leave. 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.

All of the research participants described lasting emotional consequences from their experiences. Toby said the false accusation of date rape affected his subsequent relationships with women. Frank was in tears as he related to me that he did not know what to say to his children. 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" unwilling to risk having a relationship with a woman. 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?"

Many men developed symptoms of 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." Toby said, "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?" Two of the men attempted suicide.

Discussion

The men in this study were stigmatized as being 1) a potential threat to women and children, and 2) potentially irresponsible or inadequate in child care. This rendered them vulnerable to unsupported accusations with respect to their roles as parents or employees in some occupations. 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 were told of any specific behaviour that led to his

dismissal as a social worker. 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.

The term “gender” was appropriated from the study of grammar during the 1960s to reference stereotypic sex-roles with the dichotomous view that one learns to be male or female. If a female gender has been defined to include victimization or oppression with moral superiority, then in a dichotomous worldview men are necessarily seen as victimizers and morally inferior. This was the experience of the men in this study.

“Erika” did not identify with either stereotypic genders. Ze grew a full beard, but denied it was an attempt to masculinize, stating: “I just didn’t care... I would work, go home, be on the computer; then I would go to sleep, wake up, go to work. And that was me.” Although ze was taking hormone treatment to enhance female characteristics at the time of this study, ze did not identify as female but as member of a third gender with its own sexuality, dress and normative behavior. We can speculate that those not wishing to change their sexual characteristics could create unique genders based on their presentation, sexuality and defined roles. While Erika’s participation helped clarify that the study was about sex and not gender, many of the heterosexual men in this study did not conform to gendered notions of masculinity.

Humanists have been at the fore in freeing women from restrictions of gender. We lobbied for the liberalization of Canadian divorce laws with increased entitlements to property, assets, and child support for women choosing this alternative (Robertson, 2017). In keeping with our campaign to protect and extend the secularization of marriage, common-law co-habitation was granted marital status for the purposes of taxation and the equitable division of property. We have supported laws prohibiting discrimination in education and employment on the basis of sex,

and affirmative action programs ensuring women (and minorities) have the opportunity to access career opportunities formerly dominated by men. A former Humanist Canada president (Henry Morgentaler) was jailed for protecting women's right to choose abortions. Just as it would be racist to advocate for the rights of only one race, it is equally sexist to advocate for the rights of only one sex.

Men face higher rates of PTSD, suicide and alcoholism as compared to women, and they have been seeking help for these conditions at lower rates. It has been asserted that men do not seek help because they have been conditioned to be independent, silent, and deal with their problems on their own (Buitenbos, 2012). The men in this study failed to seek help because they felt they would not be supported or believed.

As humanists, we can take lead by examining our own biases toward men. Are we, like Howard before he lost his career in social work, 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 then blame the victim for not seeking help?

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