Looking for Mr. PG: Masculinities and men's depression in a northern resource-based Canadian community

Stephanie E. Coen, John L. Oliffe*, Joy L. Johnson, Mary T. Kelly

School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, 302-6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z3

ABSTRACT

Research has attributed the 'silent suffering' of men with depression to the influences of dominant masculine ideals such as strength and stoicism. Similarly, rural ideals – romanticized notions about rural places – have been shown to mute mental health issues and create barriers to help-seeking. This article examines the experiences of men with depression in Prince George, a northern resource-based community in British Columbia, Canada. Findings reveal how depressed men and their female partners enacted strategies to positively reinforce men's gendered sense of self, in a context that otherwise may render them 'out of place'. While favouring men's wellbeing, these strategies can also perpetuate an invisible geography of men's depression.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Men's depression has attracted gender and health research attention, primarily because of what has been referred to as the 'gender paradox'—the discordant relationship between men's low rates of formally diagnosed depression (as compared with women) and high rates of suicide (Kilmartin, 2005). Consensus prevails that men's depression signals vulnerability, attracts significant stigma, and threatens the strength and power synonymous with idealized masculinity (Link et al., 1997). Moreover, in many Western countries depression is positioned as a feminine disorder requiring antidepressant medications (Riska, 2009) and experiencing and being treated for depression is perceived as decidedly unmasculine (Branney and White, 2008).

The influences of hegemonic masculinities on men's depression-related health outcomes are being increasingly scrutinized (Emslie et al., 2006; Oliffe et al., 2012). Despite calls from Campbell and Bell (2000) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) that hegemonic masculinity should be anchored more thoughtfully as a plurality of performances governed by locale and context, many studies have tended to employ a universal set of Western masculine ideals as the reference point. Areas of inquiry in rural geography shed light on how constructions of masculinity are bound up with local rural environments (cf. Campbell and Bell, 2000; Campbell et al., 2006) and how long-idealized characteristics of rural places can paradoxically undermine rural mental health (cf. Parr and Philo, 2003; Parr et al., 2004). Still, there has been little crossover among these bodies of work to investigate the intersections between masculinities, ruralities, and men's depression. Drawing on the perspectives of men with depression and their female partners, this article addresses that knowledge gap by examining how men with depression negotiate masculinities in the northern Canadian community of Prince George, British Columbia. Our study is not of rural men per se, but of the interface of masculinities and depression in this northern place.

Two decades ago, Philo's (1992) seminal call to engage with 'neglected rural geographies' drew attention to the way that rural places and people had long been homogenized

> as all being 'Mr Averages': as being *men* in employment, earning enough to live, white and probably English, straight and somehow without sexuality, able in body and *sound in mind*, and devoid of any other quirks of (say) religious belief or political affiliation. (p. 201, emphasis added)

The rural default is first and foremost masculine, and second, it is (mentally) healthy. The replication of these assumptions in research, health services, and policy is problematic for addressing health needs in rural places. In their review article, Philo et al. (2003) noted that romanticized assumptions about rurality remain largely uncritically embedded in the research designs of rural mental health studies (see also Parr and Philo, 2003 for a similar argument).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 822 7638; fax: +1 604 822 7466.
E-mail addresses: stephanie.coen@mail.mcgill.ca (S.E. Coen),
john.oliffe@nursing.ubc.ca (J.L. Oliffe), joy.johnson@ubc.ca (J.L. Johnson),
mary.theresa.kelly@gmail.com (M.T. Kelly).

An expanding body of work has addressed questions of rural difference and diversity, exposing an underbelly to the myth of the rural idyll (Little and Cloke, 1997; Little, 2002; Bell, 2006; Cloke, 2006a, 2006b). From this perspective, rurality is seen to be spatially inspired rather than bound, and encapsulating a suite of socio-cultural meanings, values, and assumptions that occupy a particular place in the broader geographical imagination (Cloke, 2006a; Woods, 2009). Unpacking these social constructions has the potential to make visible underlying moral orderings about who is 'in/out of place' in rural spaces (Cresswell, 1996; Murchdoch and Pratt, 1997; Bell, 2006; Cloke, 2006b; Sibley, 2006) and to examine what this means for health.

2. Masculinities and ruralities

Rurality resonates in popular notions of masculinity and vice versa—'real men are rural men' (Campbell et al., 2006, p. 2). Campbell and Bell (2000) developed an analytic framework to capture the mutually constitutive relationship between ruralities and masculinities. The *masculine rural* encompasses how masculinities are constituted in rural places, while the *rural masculine* refers to how features of rurality are incorporated in constructions of masculinities. Peter et al. (2000) put forth another heuristic – albeit not dualistic – devise for theorizing rural masculinities. They distinguished between *monologic* masculinity as a traditional form that "limits the range of topics deemed appropriate to discuss, mandates a specific definition of work and success, and sets precise boundaries of manhood" and *dialogic* masculinity as

> a broader understanding of what it is to be a man…more open to talking about making mistakes, to expressing emotions, to change and criticism, to a less controlling attitude toward machines and the environment, and to different measures of work and success. (Peter et al., 2000, p. 216)

Peter et al. underscore that this typology provides a way to understand features of masculinities; no man is entirely monologic or dialogic.

Empirical examples have illuminated how constructions of rurality and masculinity intersect to shape 'appropriate' masculinities in particular rural places. More specifically, the northern frontier has been theorized as a place associated with particular masculine identities and practices. For example, Hogan and Pursell (2008) suggested the local dominant masculinity in Alaska was derived from a nostalgic image of a place that linked rural masculinity with its frontier past. The geography of Alaska is constructed in the collective imagination as a rural, wild place where men can 'prove' their manhood by withstanding the dangers and challenges of nature, becoming everything that is not urban and feminine. The relationship between men and nature and, more specifically, between men and rural regimes of work, are often at the core of this intersection. Evans (2005), in his auto-ethnographic exploration of the Canadian staples economy, suggested that arenas of production are where monologic rural masculinities manifest, and that fulfillment of rural masculine ideals is ultimately about 'getting the job done'. Participating in traditional rural work requires a resilient and robust male body, one that is able to withstand intense physical demands and gruelling conditions—a common monologic feature of rural masculinity (cf. Saugeres, 2002; Evans, 2005).

Although much research has illuminated connections between rural masculinities and agriculture, in terms of men's control and domination of the land (Little, 2002), the history of the North American west is closely tied to natural resource industries. In British Columbia, this is particularly the case with forestry—a

sector which is male-dominated and occupationally hazardous (Reed, 2003). The performance of resource-based work in this context has a long history of gendered employment, and resource extraction prevails as a critical site for the production of particular masculine identities (e.g., logging is reified as the quintessential man's job) (Egan and Klausen, 1998; Quam-Wickam, 1999).

Forestry has been shown to sustain longstanding connections to narratives of rural masculinity through its emphasis on "hard, heavy and dangerous" work (Brandth and Haugen, 2005, p. 17). Going beyond popular representations of the lumberjack and logger as the physical embodiment of the ideal man conquering nature, Quam-Wickam (1999) argued how the acquisition and practice of skills in the lumber, mining, and oil industries has been the pivotal means by which male workers construct their masculinity. Because these three distinctive resource industries are male-dominated and dangerous, the evaluation and demonstration of occupational skill became an important collective subculture among workers; new workers were referred to as 'farmers' or 'chics' (Quam-Wickam, 1999). Qualitative research in British Columbia revealed that forestry-related injuries and fatalities, as evidence of occupational hazards, could serve as masculine identity markers (Reed, 2003). Although professional management cultures have focused on reducing forestry-related workplace injuries and deaths (Brandth and Haugen, 2000), forestry remains one of the most dangerous types of work in North America (International Labour Organization, 2008; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Some research has also drawn attention to the importance of considering how gender relations and ambiguities can shape resource-extraction communities in the North American context (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2011). Feminist rural studies scholars have argued for greater focus on gendered contradictions in resource-based communities to avoid the stereotype that these communities are necessarily about a masculine public work arena versus a feminine private domestic sphere (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2011). A qualitative study with women from nine forestry resource towns in British Columbia indicated that women favoured the forestry industry and supported their male partners and workingman cultures. At the same time, they accepted their own marginality (e.g., fewer job opportunities and less range of work) as a by-product of forestry work demanding men's strength and skills (Reed, 2003).

There is also evidence of how changes to rural regimes of work can create space for more flexible rural masculinities. Bye (2009), in her Norwegian study, reported that with the opening of new service sector employment, young men negotiated alternative masculine identities that incorporated men's family roles and a greater degree of emotional openness than afforded by the monologic forms that had long prevailed. Bye concluded that for rural Norwegian men, alternative masculine identities were created by a process of 'adding in' new traits, whereas 'subtracting' monologic elements proved more difficult. Young men incorporated new possibilities for work, family involvement, and emotional openness, while continuing to express monologic characteristics such as being handy and expert outdoorsmen. Forest industry restructuring since the 1970s has transformed logging to farmed forestry and forest tourism has made available an array of masculine ideals and identities (Brandth and Haugen, 2005). To build the industry, men preserved traditional rural masculinities such as the ability to be at home in the wilderness and present a 'rugged', stoic affect, while cultivating interpersonal and social skills to effectively interact with 'outsider' groups—skills associated more with service sector and conventionally urban male characteristics (Brandth and Haugen, 2005). These examples provide support for iterative relationships between contextually embedded masculinities and