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Men's Health – A couples' perspective in  
shared narrative

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Murray Hetherington

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## **Abstract**

Men's health is often studied in isolation of the supportive and caring relationships that have significant influence on their lives. This qualitative research employs joint interviews with heterosexual couples to explore the interworking between them in health. A narrative analysis approach is undertaken and the stories these couples construct analysed in a natural setting.

The couples' perspective is discussed in the context of two key structures; firstly, couples' shared narratives are explored to investigate the stories couples construct together in the context of the cultural narratives they are immersed in, and their unique ways of challenging these narratives. Secondly, a temporal view is presented across the participant group to describe their shared journey in health over time, and how their shared narratives evolve as they transition through formative, established and mature life phases.

The influence of parents is also discussed as they provide, along with other members of wider society, a reference group of less effective others for the participants to compare and contrast their success in health. The negative aspects of this other group are contrasted with hope for upcoming generations giving some indication of progress being made toward wider, positive cultural change in men's health.

Overall, the couples participating in this research are inspirational in the level of ownership and accountability they take in men's health and their sharing of life's burdens, and rewards as a couple.

## **Preface**

This thesis is located in a field of research that explores how men's health is influenced by being in a heterosexual relationship. A critical focus is placed on how couples create shared identities, in a semi-structured joint interview, within the constraints of culture and the couple's interactive frame.

What started as an inquiry into a field of interest has evolved to reveal something not only about men, their partners and the couple relationship; but also the work they perform through narrative and their expectations for the future of men's health.

### **Matters of ontology and epistemology**

This research is undertaken from a social constructionist ontological orientation where it is proposed that the social world is constructed through discourse, that truth and meaning are multiple, and the stories we tell are contextual. Further to this, the research is informed by an epistemological perspective where knowledge is shared between people and that which can be considered knowledge relates intimately to those using it and the context in which it is used (Tuffin, 2005). To that end, it is proposed that the study of the social world is best served through observation of people and their use of language in a natural setting, rather than through scientific intervention.

The joint interview context chosen for this research has had significant influence on the outcomes achieved in the study. In particular the participants and researcher commence interview sessions as strangers and then, through the course of the interview, work to construct identities that they wish to project and be recognised by. It is proposed that the primary tool available to participants, to enable this construction, is the act of talking together.

The interview structure also challenges participants by limiting the time they spend together on this activity. In order to make sense of each other, in this short period, it is proposed that participants employ culturally embedded rhetorical devices which allow them to shortcut their way to a joint understanding. This shared understanding is built on the cultural landscape they are bound to, although in New Zealand there may be significant leeway available for participants to express themselves within these bounds.

It is further proposed that culturally embedded stories, as employed by interview participants, can be surfaced by remaining sensitive to commonalities that span across a number of interviews. These cultural artefacts are contrasted by those constructs that make the couples individual and unique in their own right (Freeman, 2001).

### **The research journey in time - getting from then to now**

This research is founded on an iterative development of understanding, where an active navigation through participant interviews and associated theory, has culminated in an increased awareness of the discursive tools employed by couples when discussing men's health.

The preconceived view of the research landscape, held by the researcher at the start of this journey, was challenged using a critical approach that encouraged frequent reassessment of current in-use theory against the interview data collected. A number of assumptions and understandings employed in the structuring this research were invalidated during this process as new perspectives revealed more complex analytical relationships in the research data.

This thesis report is, therefore, the endpoint of a research effort that has taken many directions unforeseen at the start. It

is presented in a somewhat unconventional format that encourages readers to join this journey, to understand the evolution of analysis and a growing connection with the participants and their stories. In this regard an on-going review of literature is, in some places, interleaved with the presentation of findings reflecting the tight interlock between these two streams of the research process.

### **Structural considerations**

The transcription extracts presented in this thesis are exemplars of couple interviews employed to facilitate a discussion of narrative from across the interview set. These extracts are not the sole examples of the concept being discussed, but are relatively contained narrative segments that reflect the views of a number of couples. The extracts are presented in a non-edited state and should be read in the context of an interview setting. The key discourse in each extract, relating to the surrounding thesis findings, is bolded to ease location and reading.

Transcription extracts are identified in the first line by interview number and participant pseudonyms. All occurrences of interview content identified by participant 'M' reflect the interviewer (Murray) speaking.

Content within this report that is *italicised* consists of researcher reflections intended to assist with reader navigation of the report. And finally, following contemporary convention (Riessman, 2008b), the terms story and narrative are used interchangeably in this thesis.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible without the generous participation of couples who volunteered their time and spoke frankly and openly in interviews that were scheduled into busy days and evenings. Their contribution goes beyond the time invested and the disruption generated.

The support and guidance of my supervisor, Professor Kerry Chamberlain, who encouraged me to extend my interests in men's health beyond the individual into the couple context, was invaluable. His extensive knowledge of qualitative research approaches, theories and methods provides a backdrop to this thesis research.

A timely approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Northern) ensured the thesis project started early with sufficient runway to allow for the evolution of thinking required.

And finally, I would like to thank my partner Paula and my friends and family, who have navigated this journey with me. They have provided shoulders to lean on, along with intelligent reflection, in my many hours of need.

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