
Introduction to the Special Issue of the *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*
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ABSTRACT

Despite multicultural advances in the field, the counselling profession is arguably failing to meet the needs of men who endorse traditional masculine social ideology. This editorial provides the perspective of two practitioners who have worked extensively with traditionally socialized men, including Canadian military men who are thought to strongly exemplify prototypical male ideology. The limitations of a strictly “feminine nurturance”-based counsellor training model are presented. Further, suggestions for effectively engaging men in therapy, based upon 14 years of clinical experience with a military population, are presented.

RÉSUMÉ

En dépit des progrès multiculturels enregistrés dans le domaine, la profession du counseling ne parvient probablement pas à répondre aux besoins des hommes qui endossent l'idéologie sociale de la masculinité traditionnelle. Cet éditorial présente la perspective de deux praticiens qui ont beaucoup travaillé auprès d'hommes traditionnellement socialisés, y compris des militaires canadiens qui sont vus comme prototypes exemplaires de l'idéologie masculine. On y présente également les limites inhérentes à un modèle de formation en counseling strictement fondé sur une approche « nurturance féminine ». Enfin, on y suggère des façons efficaces de susciter l'engagement des hommes à l'égard de la thérapie, en se fondant sur 14 années d'expérience clinique auprès de la population militaire.

This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (CJCP) is dedicated to articles focused on men. We have chosen this topic not because men are more deserving of a special issue than women. Neither have we picked it because the term “men” has any inherent simplistic meaning in Canadian society's diverse understanding and enactment of gender, biological sex characteristics, and sexuality. As guest editors, we live and work in academic environments that cause us to aspire to understand the sociocultural notions and constructions of what it means to “be a man.” We have written this editorial as a call to action in the service of men in Canada and abroad, based on over 14 years of working with men in groups and individually in our clinical

practices. It is with only slight self-consciousness that we offer readers our perspectives, realizing that we hold but two opinions in a sea of many. If this issue stimulates conversations in clinical practice, as well as research and theory in our profession, then we have moved closer to our goal: to help the many men in our society who suffer in silence, despite the available counselling and therapeutic services meant to assist them.

Until our goal is reached, however, the counselling profession is failing men. Not all men, and not in any gross or negligent way, but failing them just the same. As counsellors, we learn how to work with many different client populations as part of our multicultural practice and diversity training, yet the male client (man and boy) is one subcultural group that has not been well served by our profession. Compared to women, men still kill themselves more often, are incarcerated at higher rates, and drastically underutilize the helping professions that are meant to, ostensibly, assist them with the problems and troubles that plague them.

TRADITIONAL MALE SOCIALIZATION AND THERAPY

Over the last 14 years, we have worked extensively with Canadian military men—a population that reflects a common set of masculine attitudes and reactions to seeking and receiving help from counsellors and therapists. In terms of male culture, military men are perched atop the hierarchy of socially traditional notions of what it means to be a man. They are highly trained, highly skilled individuals who know how to kill people, shoot guns, blow stuff up, drive tanks, and defend those who cannot defend themselves. Many of the men with whom we have worked would never have darkened the door of an individual therapist's office to deal with their "issues." The common reasons cited often sound something akin to "I'm not crazy," "That's for people who can't handle their shit," "I'm not weak," or "What the fuck good will it do to talk about things that can't be changed?" Unfortunately, these kinds of perceptions and reactions are not limited to the military. In fact, they are shared by traditionally gender-socialized male clients across all careers, family backgrounds, and ethnicities throughout Canada.

In reading the above, it may seem somewhat anachronistic to speak of "traditional masculinity" in such a pluralist and multicultural society as Canada. It is our experience, however, that there still exists a traditional masculinity within the multiple interpretations and experiences of men in our society. Unfortunately, this traditional masculinity can often be seen as synonymous with "less refined," "less evolved," and "out of touch" with the "way things are" in a relativistic society.

We instead offer the idea that traditional masculinity is complex, nuanced, and not well understood by our profession. We also offer here that there are both healthy and pathological expressions of every identity formation, including traditional masculinity. It is beyond the scope of this editorial to examine in any detail the literature on masculinity and maleness, but we would direct readers to authors such as Warren Farrell and Ken Wilber to explore more explicit treatments of the topic of traditional male socialization and its expressions. Our focus for this

editorial is on the counselling profession in Canada as we live it, being men who work clinically, teach, and conduct research in the area.

CURRENT MODELS OF COUNSELLING

Counsellor preparation and training in Canada, especially at the master's level, is much like the nursing profession: it is dominated by female practitioners. In both of our counselling programs at major Canadian universities, we consistently see ratios of admitted male students to female students in the range of 1:8 or even less. As a profession, we have become adept at training counsellors to work in what could be conceptualized as a more "feminine" nurturance model. That is to say, we train counsellors to create a safe space where clients can bring their concerns and problems to a soothing environment of calm and serenity. In this model, clients are helped to explore the innermost workings of their emotional, psychological, and sometimes spiritual worlds, while attempting to promote increased self-reflection and problem identification.

We do not in any way intend to pigeonhole women in our society as the emotional nurturers, an image that many feminist scholars and practitioner have fought hard to balance out and expand. Furthermore, we do not view the abilities to offer emotional comfort, receive pain, and create a safe, soothing environment as innate qualities of a person based on their biological sex, but rather as potentialities enacted by a particular caregiver. In this case the term "feminine" stands in as a socially constructed placeholder.

As effective as nurturant-based training is for counsellors and for the many clients that they serve, this environment is somewhat antithetical to traditionally socialized male values. Instead, men often adopt a largely analytical (in the non-Freudian sense), problem-solving, non-emotional culture. They are neither equipped to listen to, nor interested in listening to, how other men "feel" about things. In the culture of these men, the question is "What are we going to *do* about things?", not "How do we feel about things?"

In many heterosexual relationships, this divide is typified by the scenario wherein the female partner's strong desire to talk about her feelings and experiences is met by the male partner's equal desire to fix the perceived problem. In the counselling profession at large, we invite these same men to come and be helped, listened to, and respected by a counsellor who is trained, not to be a problem solver but to be an empathic, compassionate receiver of pain and suffering. Not surprisingly, this stance is then met by male clients with withdrawal, avoidance rejection, and/or frustration at the lack of attention to solving problems. In turn, this can trigger a shame reaction in experiencing the inadequacy of their skills for engaging in such an environment.

We feel that the most effective counsellors develop exceptional skill in both "feminine" (e.g., openness and the creation of emotional safety) and "masculine" (e.g., action planning and mobility) nurturance. This allows them to flow between the two modes in reaction to each client's current needs.

ENGAGING MEN IN THERAPY

In our work with Canadian Forces veterans and serving military members over the past 14 years, we have found (through very clear and, at times, uncomfortable feedback from our clients) that there are several keys to successfully engaging these men in the counselling process. The primary awareness we have developed is to begin the work with masculine nurturance skills largely focused on acknowledging competencies of both clients and counsellors, problem identification, action, and an emphasis on “hard work.” We begin here but then move between masculine and feminine nurturance models, depending on what is required by each client in the moment.

In the early stages of our work with men, we avoid referring to it as counselling or therapy, except in specific instances where professional ethics requires clear and descriptive language for establishing informed consent. As an example of preferred language in this helping process, the vast majority of our clients over the years have been referred to the Veterans Transition Program (VTP; see Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010) as a “course.” Once we have established informed consent with the members, we do not continually correct the reference to the VTP as a course or a program. In individual work with men, we refer to the counselling and therapy in terms of “getting hard work done,” “getting past barriers or blocks,” and “moving forward in life.” The use of action words and movement is often helpful in reducing the stigma associated with engaging in counselling and psychotherapy. The word *transition* implies movement and action, which speaks to many of our clients’ needs to feel as though they are “doing something.”

Men very often need to feel competent early on in a relationship. Thus, we aim to counterbalance the inevitable mismatch in power in all helping relationships. In our work with military members specifically, we engage the men as “experts” in their military experience, much the same way many client-centred practitioners approach the client as the expert in their personal lives. Another way to think of this is empowering the client so they have a sense of agency to support themselves as they begin to move into the necessary phase of recognition of problems, challenges, and injuries that have occurred in the past.

We have also learned that, with veterans and military clients, an interest in and an ability to support the other men in the group to do their work is essential. In other words, there is a need for reciprocity. The implicit message sounds something akin to “I’ll let you help me get to where I need to go, but only if you will allow me to help you later.” This is partly as a result of the military culture and the interdependent group dynamics instilled therein, but it is also a part of traditional masculine culture and the notion of debt (i.e., “If you are going to help me, then I am indebted to you and, if I am to feel comfortable in this relationship, you must allow me to help you when the time comes”).

We also emphasize skill building for success in life as opposed to “getting in touch with one’s feelings.” At the same time, however, we teach participants to

name what they are feeling, why they are feeling it, and what actions need to be taken in response. We teach the skills of active listening as life skills required for navigating the world of work, relationships, school, business, sports, and many other environments. Active listening and seeking to understand another become skills that bestow an advantage on the bearer of those skills such that life becomes more engaging and success more plausible. Thus, we communicate the usefulness that comes with a deep working knowledge of one's emotional system, recognizing it as a mark of success and competence.

As has been emphasized, it is important for men to move beyond "talking" into action. Talk therapy works. We know this in our profession and have known it for years. However, as with all therapy (including the VTP), it is sometimes limited, and most counsellors are aware of this. Many men are doers, not talkers. Yet the counselling profession often constructs men as deficient talkers who need to increase their ability to communicate. While we agree that this is the case, we see the value in engaging what men *are* inclined to do instead of emphasizing what they are *not* familiar with.

In regards to engagement in familiar "doing" activities, action-oriented interventions such as therapeutic enactment (TE; Westwood & Wilensky, 2005) become effective tools to assist men in showing what happened to them as they struggle to describe verbally what happened to them. We use TE to help the men create scenes where injuries (physical, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual) have occurred so that everyone can understand the situation just by observing. Given that many men are highly visually attuned to their surroundings, a group of men focused on an enacted scene engages in the particulars of the scene rather than only focusing on the emotional state of the individual, as can be the case in talk therapy. The clients in the groups may be called upon to recreate a car crash scene, take on the role of a dead civilian, or become a Taliban insurgent. We have experienced moments when a kitchen table scene is required and, in a split second, group members have assembled a table and chairs in order to facilitate their fellow group member enacting a painful scene from childhood. These actions are taken without hesitation and allow all members to visually support another person while also allowing them to receive the same help when their turn is taken.

Beyond activities performed in session, it should also be noted that we make explicit the link between any homework assigned and the progress in their work moving toward the end goals for therapy. We have found that the more explicit we can make the link between the exercise and the end goal, the more engaged our clients feel with the tasks.

We have also come to know that discussions of sexuality are an integral part of male client experiences that are often glossed over or ignored. Engaging in these discussions, we include allowances for humour, irreverence, and direct communication in lay terms, yet pay very serious attention to the issues being addressed. Too much humour disallows intimate and serious discussion of sometimes painful and shameful experiences. Too little humour creates an environment of seriousness that dampens openness and invokes shame and fear. Irreverence allows us all to

take sexual issues with a grain of salt and “lighten up” (thereby reducing anxiety) when needed. It is a fine balance and yet we have found that if we are missing any one of those three components, then discussions of sexuality are stilted, awkward, or simply do not occur.

The last component of engaging men, and one of the most important, is the demand for us as counsellors to be “real people.” One veteran remarked that the only reason he trusted us was that we were willing to talk about ourselves. If we had not been so willing, he would never have opened up. This means that counsellors must be personal and self-disclose without crossing boundaries that may hinder the therapeutic work. Whether it is with sexuality or other issues, we must walk the line between being personal and over-disclosing. Being a real person means we must be comfortable just being a person and letting the persona of counsellor and therapist guide us from the background while our presence as men and human beings lead us from the foreground.

MOVING FORWARD WITH MEN IN MIND

We feel that the time has come to turn our focus to how we, as a profession, can better serve men in our society. Too often we have heard from colleagues, students, supervisees, and supervisors that they experience a sense of frustration, helplessness, and ineffectiveness when working with male clients. As we present our work nationally and internationally, many counsellors have shown a keen interest in learning how to work with men as clients. Our profession has responded in the past to establish better practices for working with women and girls, as well as more effective approaches for working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. As guest editors for this special issue, we suggest that it is time for the counselling profession to turn its focus on research, theory, and practice that will better serve men. We feel it is an ethical imperative for us to reduce the gap in utilization of our services by men in Canadian society.

It is our pleasure to be able to present four engaging articles for CJCP readers that focus on work with men. We sincerely hope that this issue will serve as a starting point for discussions at the local, provincial, and national levels regarding how to reduce barriers to access for men who need the help. We know too well the harm visited on society when its members suffer and inflict more suffering on others. A healthy society requires sexually, emotionally, physically, psychologically, relationally, and spiritually healthy men. We keenly thank Dr. Kevin Alderson for his continual work overseeing this special edition and helping to get it off the ground. We hope you enjoy this special issue of CJCP!

Sincerely,
Marv and Tim

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