

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Creating better research spaces for narratives around male family relationships and identity: guidance from rural Australian men

S Merritt¹, LM Turner^{2*}

¹*University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia*

²*Algoma University, Marie, Ontario, Canada;*

**Present address: School of Social Work, Faculty of Health Professions, Dalhousie University,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada*

Submitted: 16 December 2012; **Revised:** 23 April 2013; **Accepted:** 8 May 2013; **Published:** 5 November 2013

Merritt S, Turner LM

Creating better research spaces for narratives around male family relationships and identity: guidance from rural Australian men

Rural and Remote Health 13: 2462. (Online) 2013

Available: <http://www.rrh.org.au>

ABSTRACT

Introduction: What is known about male identity or intergenerational relationships between male family members? And how can rural Australian men be engaged in essential health research?

Methods: Narrative inquiry is proposed as an ideal means for engaging in the process of uncovering men's storied reflections about their lives, relationships and identity.

Results: The article begins with guidance contributed by a group of rural Australian men to narrative researchers who hope to create comfortable environments for men to share personal stories about their intergenerational relationships with male relatives. The men discuss how they see themselves as men in today's Australian rural landscape. Following this, the narrative inquiry literature is discussed. Reflections are provided on male identity as influenced by culture and context, consideration of men and their family relationships, and barriers to men's participation in research, which leads to a focus on rural Australian men.

Conclusion: Further research with rural men is called for, in regard to both their participation in research, and their participation in health initiatives.

Key words: Australia, culture, First Nations Australians, Indigenous, intergenerational relationships, men's health, men's identity, narrative inquiry.



Introduction

This study focused on identifying men's preferences for research activities and environments if they were to participate in studies exploring issues of identity, wellbeing and intergenerational relationships. The aim of this research was to ascertain which research methods were preferred, and deemed most likely to be effective, from the perspective of a group of rural men. To fulfil this aim, a focus group (or a 'pseudo research advisory meeting') was held with men who were already part of a regular, ongoing rehabilitation group served by an agency in the rural community targeted. The men were part of a group that met weekly, and part of the methodology of this pilot study was that the researchers met with the existing group of men one week prior to the research taking place. This allowed them to decide if they wished to participate, to gauge the research team, and to volunteer for the research without pressure to be involved.

This group of rural men formed a 'pseudo advisory team', from which to offer advice about appropriate and effective research methodologies, including selection of activities and spaces, within which male identity and male family relationships could be discussed and better understood.

Part of the ethos for the researchers in their approach to researching rural men is the tenet of giving back to participants and community; a reciprocal arrangement that respects men's voices, and takes the time to ask for advice on how to approach other men in the future. A benefit to the participants in this particular study was the opportunity to voice their views in regard to research. The wider research community can benefit from the development and publication of a set of guidelines to ensure respectful and rigorous processes when choosing location, activity and questioning in research with men.

Methods

Important contributions of narrative inquiry

In order to capture the nuances and minutiae of rural men's lived experiences, and the meanings they assign to their

experiences, this study followed the conventions of narrative inquiry. Narratives can give voice to the lived existence of men in rural settings, and in this instance, narrative inquiry was used not specifically to research the narratives around familial relationships and rural men's identity, but rather to elicit guidance around how best to do this.

Therefore, in this article some experiences and lessons on researching with rural men are offered. Of particular interest is how rural men interact, how they may support each other and how family relationships may influence this. Part of the complexity of life for rural men is how they define themselves and how the story of who they are manifests itself. Stories or narratives that inform identity are relational, and they are dynamic.

Randall discusses the narrative complexities of everyday life, especially rural life, and how he had become 'intrigued by the *narrative complexity* that can characterize everyday life in rural communities'¹. Randall also discusses how 'we are continually constructing stories ('likely stories', I like to call them) about where we have come from and where we are going' (p 371)¹. He elaborates by explaining that through these stories we 'explain to ourselves – and others – what is happening to us and what it might mean' (p 371)¹. Additionally, Randall discusses the benefits of 'story'¹ in this way: when we create stories of us, stories of our lives, we shape what has been uninterpreted, and strive for coherence through narrative. The stories we then know ourselves by, or identify ourselves with, give a kind of structure 'to the stream of activities, the flood of emotions, and the swirl of relationships that constitute our existence' (p 372)¹.

José González Monteagudo, when discussing Jerome Bruner's contributions to narrative, states that '...narratives are characterized by their complexity. Stories are about problems, dilemmas, contradictions and imbalances. They connect the past, the present and the future, and they link past experiences with what may be yet to come' (p 298)².



We have seen from the literature that narratives are complex, but they are also powerful and transformative. González Monteagudo states that ‘this capacity of narratives for imagining and constructing other worlds, and for trying to make them a reality, is an essential feature of the human capacity to transform our own selves as well as our social contexts’ (p 298)². Therefore, future research that stems from this current investigation will be in the form of a narrative inquiry to explore the complexities of rural males, using stories to give form to those complexities.

Study cohort: rural Australian men

There are a number of barriers to rural men sharing stories and experiences, due in part to the narratives they define themselves by. Alston states that ‘rural men have long been recognised for their stoicism during tough times and this continues to be the hallmark of many Australian men who farm. However this very stoicism in the face of impossible odds is now the cause of a significant social crisis in Australia’ (p515)³. Alston suggests that the cultural context in which this happens needs to be considered (p516)³. She argues that the construct of masculinity in rural Australia needs to be considered, and that men’s ability to ask for help is restricted by this context.

Part of this context for rural men has been that ‘the dominant form of masculinity has benefited men through good times, allowing them to preserve their power and influence and pass it on to their male heirs’ (p518)³, but a result of this is that a stoic response becomes a barrier for the men in a number of different ways, and stoicalness can become part of the narrative of rural men. Alston highlights a need for rural men’s suicide rates to be addressed holistically. She calls for services at the local level, and for places and spaces where ‘men can get together ...to discuss the widespread nature of the difficult rural circumstances’ (p 522)³.

In order to contribute to a greater understanding of barriers to participation of rural men in research, and to identify some of the environments and activities which men themselves would identify as being conducive to their participation, a

focus group was created with men who self-identified as being rural Australian males and who were part of an established group that met weekly. In a brief meeting with the men, held one week prior to the interview session, the study was explained and participants were invited to attend the session in the following week. Five of the eight men returned the following week (two had previously indicated they did not identify as rural men).

During the 80 min focus group, the participants were invited to engage in discussion that was prompted by the following questions:

1. Please share with us when you have been most comfortable if you were talking about identity (how you see yourself), wellbeing, and about relationships. What do you think are factors that encouraged you to share when you did?
2. Can you tell us about any activities you enjoy where you would be most likely to be comfortable discussing, with researchers, these types of issues?
3. Can you describe any environments or locations where you would be most likely to be comfortable discussing, with researchers, these types of issues?
4. Have you suggestions for the types of questions you think would be good ones to ask if researchers wanted to learn more about men and identity or men and their relationships?
5. How would you react to being videotaped while participating in research? Would using videotaping have an impact on what you say or share? Are there ways that videotaping could be done that would not have a negative impact?

The research questions were around ascertaining which research methods and interviewer approaches would be preferred, and deemed most likely to be effective, from the perspective of a group of rural men. The specific interview script questions were used to facilitate discussion around the broader questions, and were used as prompts to discussion, if needed.



The first, introductory session was not recorded but the second session was audiorecorded and then transcribed. As this study forms a pilot investigation of how to approach research in the future with rural men, a full narrative analysis was not warranted; however, the data were analysed in accordance with a narrative inquiry approach. The researchers coded the data, the narratives were labelled and the researchers identified patterns and themes.

The location for the research was with a non-government organisation, a rehabilitation service, located in a rural town. The men were advanced in their rehabilitation and were regular participants in group educational sessions, and the focus group research took place during the time of a regular session. The men were free to attend and participate that day or not. The men were recruited by the regular group facilitators from the centre who voluntarily offered to play the role of recruiter. The group was necessarily small, both because the existing rehabilitation group had a maximum of 12 participants, and to allow time for each participant to have the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions, while also making the group large enough to allow for a diversity of ideas. Five men formed the focus group cohort.

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the UNE Human Research Ethics Committee at the University where both researchers were faculty members (#HE12-088).

Results

Qualitative results

The men communicated their perspectives freely. In this section some of the salient themes are offered. These may provide insights into how researchers can overcome some barriers to men participating in research that requires of them the sharing of narratives about their relationships, identity and wellbeing.

One participant summed up the barriers in his upbringing that related to how he felt about discussing emotions, thoughts or ideas:

Geez I've grown up here and had like the generations that have had farms and what not but um...in the male side have never talked about feelings or anything... um you don't really get into feelings at all, my Pop [grandfather] on my mum's side never talked about anything like that, and my other grandfather um with what he has been through in the war um he's just really quiet, and, um, we can talk about card games or the farm or that kind of stuff but as far as feelings go it's just never been a topic that sort of gets brought up at all ...

This illustrates the magnitude of how alien it can be for some men to even consider opening up to each other. This can translate to how comfortable they are to open up to a researcher, or indeed how comfortable they feel to open up to a healthcare provider.

An early point the men shared was that they had 'sized up' the researchers during the prior week's introduction and decided whether they wanted to take the time to speak the following week. In doing so they pointed to qualities of competence, professionalism and trustworthiness to describe what they would expect and require of researchers who are interviewing or facilitating focus groups, and indicated that they would always make such an assessment to gauge whether to participate or to what degree their participation would include sharing at any level of depth.

Another point of importance that had the support of all the men was the need for researchers to be specific in their questioning, and then to have the skills and intelligence to maintain the initial information so the participants would not need to 'backtrack'. One participant felt that questions were vital, as they would help participants focus on issues that would be foreign to some men without the direction 'the right question' could give:



...but I think it's more being asked the right questions because a lot of the things I don't know because we don't ask those kind of things so I don't know much about um the feelings side or my grandfather just bottles everything up and probably been depressed all his life because that generations never asked for help or um...feelings were something you kept to yourself, that, um a lot of the questions I wouldn't even know the answer to but to get it going I think the right questions need to be asked.

The feeling of the group was that specific questions needed to be asked, tailored questions that really 'got to the nitty-gritty', as many rural men would not have thought of these issues, and the questions therefore had to be 'really good' in order to illicit something from the men not previously thought about.

For instance, a participant might initially explain to the researcher that his relationship with his two grandfathers was very different: one who had been in World War II seldom spoke and, in his estimation, had symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome, while the other grandfather shared time and a warm relationship with the participant. If the researcher appeared to be confused or required the interviewee to go back and repeat the initial information, trust in the credibility of the researcher would be lost, and the participant would be frustrated to the point of not wishing to continue. The group recommended engaging in initial questioning that is direct and specific, to demonstrate the capacity to keep the interview or focus group 'on track', rather than opening with broad questions such as 'Tell us who you are'. Examples given of specific questions included: 'So who is in your family?' 'How old were you when that grandfather died...how did you and he get along?' and 'Was your father or grandfather a role model?'.

Another issue raised by the men was that they felt a focused, specific series of questions would aid in keeping the research focused:

...it'd be very hard to get onto that feeling and stay on that track cause it would just drift back and whether it's avoidance

or not knowing how to communicate in that sense or I think that's the big key, that...specially the question that's been asked, the right question is the big.../key].

The issue of avoidance here is salient, as rural men discussing alien, unfamiliar, and/or difficult issues may find it quite confronting. As another participant frames the messages he had from the past, the narrative he had been raised with:

...you were not permitted to...delve into those touchy-touchy type feelings, um, well there was a sort of convention that you didn't go into it, um...

Another participant who discussed growing up in a predominately male household, discussed the rarity of talking about intimate or emotive issues:

. . . and um just say at home it's just occasionally it would come up and just because someone may be having a bad turn at home um try and do something um have a chat about it, 99% of the time it wouldn't work because being all male, being a male populated family we all sort of like hid our feelings a bit but occasionally things came out that's just how the situations were.

The researchers were curious about whether this group of men might recommend, on behalf of rural Australian men, any creative or non-traditional settings or activities for the research venue; however, they articulated a preference for a formal office setting in order not to portray a sense of casualness or informality about topics they deemed as important and 'fairly serious'. It should be noted that the men in this sample were accustomed to meetings in an office building space. Exploring the same question with men who do not ordinarily meet one another in an office building would be valuable, to determine whether more casual activities or environments could encourage greater participation.

Participants also stressed how important the initial rapport-building phase was, particularly in situations where group members did not know one another or the researcher was



meeting them for the first time. All voiced a need to have some 'small talk' in the initial instance, using an example of queries about a 'footie' team's success or decline, or the weather.

The participants also indicated that the researchers will gain significantly by holding more than one session, as they recognized that a relationship between them and an interviewer that continued would allow them to 'open up even more' and 'get to' the stories they may have hesitated to share in the first session, or that would arise after having a chance to reflect on the initial interview.

With regard to the research exploring whether the gender of interviewers could be a barrier, the immediate response from the men was they would prefer a male interviewer, with the reasons given being concerns about offending a female should they talk 'as blokes do'. As the issue was discussed further, however, and stories were shared that reflected instances of having shared highly personal information with a professional who was female that had never been shared with anyone else, and the group qualified their preference by indicating that trust was the absolute necessary ingredient, and that it would be helpful if gender was acknowledged during the opening of an interview, and permission was given to them to discuss any topic, in any way comfortable, with reassurance that they needn't transform stories out of concern of insulting or offending the interviewer. A participant summed it up as:

Well mate that wouldn't bother me, at the end of the day it doesn't bother me, male or female, it's really just as I say it's the professionalism, there could be some comments like are anti-female, [laughter] you know what I mean....

The participant added: '...and that's the problem is you don't want it could be the female may take it on board and have it personalised'.

Thus, there was a concern both for the female researcher, and also for the fact that discussion may be censored by the men themselves. Thus, what started as a simple discussion

around the effect of the gender of researchers on rural men, became a much more complex dialogue.

Another man voiced his concern regarding rural men's research being conducted by a female researcher:

Just in case something comes up, I don't know not intentionally but something could come up and just don't want it taken the wrong way by the female just in case there's that way inclined, well if it was a bloke it would go over, but with having a lady just say something nasty or vicious got said may take it on board if they weren't professional.

Another point in this investigation is that gender may play a beneficial or even cathartic role in the interview. Some men may open up more to a female interviewer. One man stated:

I might have jumped in there a little bit too quick by saying male, um, the psychiatrist I see at the moment is female and obviously very professional and I've opened up to her about things that happened to me personally overseas, um, that I would never ever tell to anybody else, not even my mother knows about what happened...um...once again that's on the professional side and I agree with what [name deleted of another participant in the group] has said and...[name deleted] and...[name deleted] and...[name deleted], yeah.

The conclusion to the discussion around the effect of the gender of the researcher on rural men was that when feasible, potential research participants could be informed before an interview is scheduled if they have choice in interviewer gender. This may lead to greater participation if the initial reactions of a potential male subject reflect a preference for the gender of the interviewer. The issue of gender dynamics is discussed in later sections of this article.

Trust in the researcher and research team was vital, and was impossible without the rapport building and time commitment discussed earlier. One participant stated:

I suppose for me the only time that I would open about stuff is I'd have to get to know the person and um be able to relate



but know that if I start bringing up that stuff is it going to be beneficial, um...so I'd need to know that the person is professional and can help if it's not going to help I'm just not going to go anywhere near talking about that cause I've brought it up so many times and well other stuff and haven't not got anywhere so I need to know it's going to be constructive to start explaining all that stuff and going over it again.

The previous quote highlights another key theme of the research, that men will put themselves in an uncomfortable, foreign setting (ie an interview with a researcher discussing difficult topics) if they see benefit in the personal outlay. Another interviewee added to the discussion by stating:

I think I agree with [name deleted to protect confidentiality] on that, um...in a...intimate situation I think one of the very important things ah would be the display of professionalism by the inquisitor, the inquisitors ah they would have to appear completely professional, if there is the slightest doubt that they weren't on top of their subject or something I'd go the pretty way rather than the direct route.... that's just me.

It is perhaps funny, telling, and poignant that the participant substituted the term 'researcher' for 'inquisitor'.

The men made suggestions about areas of research they thought could be of interest and in which they would be drawn to participate, such as occupational diversity among male siblings, and how that phenomenon may be different from prior generations in their families. Another area was the issue of being a 'first generation male' to divorce and the meaning or significance of it to rural Australian men.

In this a cohort of rural Australian men we have been given guidance into how they felt about research, researchers, and how research with cohorts, such as themselves, should be approached.

Results from the narrative inquiry literature

In the next section, reflections on male identity, strongly influenced as it is by culture and context, are provided. This will be followed by consideration of men and family relationships. The article will then focus on an exploration of some barriers to men's participation in research.

Male identity: culture and context: The term 'identity' is generally used as a 'catch all label' to cover both the biological and psychological attributes as well as socio-demographic aspects of a person's being while, as argued by researchers such as Vignoles, Schwatz and Luyckx⁴, a more accurate interpretation should consist of the very characteristics of who a person thinks they are and what they understand themselves as being. In addition to this, researchers also recognise that apart from the individual perspective, the term 'identity' is a concept which can exist on multiple levels. These levels include that of relational identities whereby individuals identify themselves through the adoption of specific social roles, whether it be a son, daughter or spouse, collective identities which recognises an individual identity as belonging to a specific nationality or ethnic group, as well as 'material artefacts' where a person's identity is defined by the types of possessions that they acquire (p 4)⁴.

Central to any discussion on the impact of cultural and contextual influences and the development of the male identity is the understanding that 'men are not born, they are made'. Indeed, the idea of a 'male identity' may be realised as an 'acculturation' process where 'meanings of manhood' (p xxiii)⁵ are communicated as a set of standards whereby boys learn what it is to be a man in their respective culture through observation and reinforcement via 'feedback from peers, parents, and others about how well they are performing as a man' (p 38)⁶. For those in contemporary Western cultures such as Australia, these influences on male identity also extend to the masculine images that are reproduced in both 'popular culture' and 'institutionalised sport and media' (p 14)⁷. As suggested by Coles (p 237)⁸, it is these hegemonic definitions which men use as 'standards' for by which to judge themselves, an argument supported by



Crawford⁷ who maintains that hegemonic masculinity is ‘the measure by which all men are judged’ (p 5).

Unfortunately, Western culture does not provide a ‘safe space’ (p 2)⁹ in which adolescent males and adult men can discuss feelings and other emotional issues. As argued by Barnes⁹, this leads to men suppressing their emotions and using avoidant strategies such as adhering to the belief that ‘boys don’t cry’ in order to escape feelings of vulnerability and ‘emotional expression’. The present research may help to give voice to rural men in this regard, and may facilitate future research that lends weight to the need for male spaces that feel safe and supportive for at risk rural men.

What characterizes being ‘male’ can be fluid, and can be informed by context and culture. For males from culturally diverse backgrounds who relocate to countries such as Australia evidence shows that this group of males do not feel compelled to adhere to the characteristics of hegemonic definition of the male identity. As argued by Donaldson and Howson¹⁰, Indonesian Muslim and Chinese male immigrants, for instance, perceive the Australian male as being ‘competitive, uncontrolled and animalistic’ (Nilan et al in Donaldson and Howson, p 214) and so choose to reject those male sensibilities that are associated with being a ‘bloke’ (p 214)¹⁰.

With regard to the impact of hegemonic masculinity on male identity of adolescents, research suggests that there is a profound lack of cultural ‘rites of passage’ to assist both Indigenous and non-Indigenous males transition to adulthood. For example, as suggested by a study of second generation Australian males, hegemonic masculinity fails to present a coherent explanation of what it means to be a man, and since Western societies only provide what is primarily an ‘uncertain [and] vague process as opposed to “evident social markers or passages” this then leaves young male adolescents with feelings of “uncertainty, contradiction and bewilderment”’ (p 10)⁷. In the absence of formal transition into adulthood, studies suggest that those young males who engage in alcohol intoxication may consider this behaviour as a rite of passage, therefore upholding the belief that they will

become men once they are able to ‘drink like a man’ and be seen to be able to ‘handle their liquor’ (p 52)¹¹. The adverse effects of a lack of recognition of rites of passage are also noted in relation to Indigenous male adolescents by Wenitong, who notes that young males have been negatively impacted by the absence of male cultural values and recognised pathways transitioning young males into adulthood (p40)¹². Culturally, it was adult males who were responsible for providing education to male Indigenous adolescents on traditional values and the role played by adult Indigenous males in Aboriginal society; however, the ‘disempower[ment] through the reduction of authority and status’ of Indigenous males and the ‘restrictions on their cultural activities and values’ has resulted in the ‘absence or dysfunctionality’ of Indigenous male role models through either imprisonment or substance abuse (p 52)¹². These adverse social conditions have seen a ‘increasingly matriarchal family structure’ which, as claimed by Wenitong (p 396)¹², adversely impacts on the identity development of young Aboriginal boys.

Apart from cultural impacts on the development of the adolescent male, the context of work is also seen to have a significant influence on men’s identities. Furthermore, a report on men and migration found that for men seeking asylum in Australia, paid work represented their ability to provide for their family, echoing this same belief that men should assume responsibility for ‘bringing home the bacon’ (p 212)¹⁰. Interestingly, the authors also argue that this belief regarding paid work and the male identity was one that was perpetuated throughout other cultures, regardless of ‘nationality, education, family background and experience’ (p 212)¹⁰, which is an essential element of maintaining their male identity.

Related to this is the issue of unemployment and involuntary redundancy from work and how these contexts impact on the male identity. Sherman noted that those males unable to fulfil the role of breadwinner often experience ‘personal difficulty and internal conflict’ (p 22)¹³. In terms of the rural context, it is suggested that rural men adopt ‘agrarian values’ (p 770)¹⁴ of ‘strength, rationality, self-control/sufficiency



and stoicism' (p 68)¹⁵, and that the male identity is closely aligned with the idea of 'male dominance over the elements', characterised as being 'tough, strong, [and] able to endure long hours, arduous labour and extreme weather' (p 666)¹⁶.

Other changes in rural industries, such as the exodus of young men choosing to relocate to more urban environments, also provide insight into the expectations involved in being a rural man. For example, as evidenced by one of Bye's respondents who had moved away to attend university and then returned to live in the rural area in which he had grown up, they invariably found it difficult to assimilate back into the rural male context – in this case compounded by the fact that he did not necessarily 'subscribe to hegemonic definitions of rural masculinity' (p 281)¹⁷. The response from the community was to label him an outsider and, because of this, he was not privy to 'male networks or other male-dominated activities in the community'; as he could not demonstrate an interest in such things as 'hunting and handyman skills' he was unable to reaffirm his masculinity as a rural man (pp 281-282)¹⁷. Interestingly, the same study also suggests that men living in the rural community who regard themselves as 'non-hunters' may be still be perceived to be 'rural men' and therefore legitimate members of the 'local masculine fellowships' if, for instance, they display an interest in outdoor related activities. The study by Bye, for example, described how men who were interested in nature photography could participate in hunting activities as a 'non-hunter', particularly since photography of wild animals requires similar skills to that of the hunters, especially in terms of displaying such attributes as 'adventure, tenacity and physical strength' (p 282)¹⁷. Moreover, those who are not 'actively hunting' also need to 'pass the physical and emotional tests of the hunt' by not only 'demonstrating endurance' and 'restraint when an animal is killed' but also by participating in social drinking after the hunt, which demonstrates their ability to be a 'real man' (p 282)¹⁷. In addition to those males who choose to not subscribe to the masculine values of rural environments there is also the issue for those rural males who because of homosexuality appear to 'reject these male stereotypes'. As a result, this group of

males are forced to endure stigmatisation, isolation and 'homophobic attitudes' (pp 68-69)¹⁵.

As the above demonstrates, both culture and context have had a significant impact on the development of the male identity. Culturally, the main influence on both the adolescent male and male adults appears to be the adoption of a measure of standards as set by this idea of a hegemonic male profoundly influencing the way in which both men view themselves. Furthermore, in the absence of 'cultural rites' helping young males to transition into adulthood, these are inevitably expressed in terms of substance abuse and violence. Contextually, sport, work and the rural environment are some of the more significant settings which impact on the identity of males, particularly in terms of being spaces in which masculine attributes are embedded and reproduced.

Men and familial relationships: What part then do families play in the representation and formation of an individual's identity? The construction of a person's identity occurs through interactions and contexts. A person's family, for instance, is one such structure or context which plays a significant role in the development of an individual's identity.

From a theoretical perspective, the transmission and internalisation of a family's 'values, norms and behaviours' is primarily based on the work of Bourdieu and his concept of 'habitus'. As discussed by Hedges (p 2)¹⁸, habitus is about a type of socialisation, and so it is in the habitus of the family environment that individuals undergo a process of socialisation by being exposed to the reproduction of specific behaviours which appear, to those in the family habitus, to be 'normal and natural' events.

In Indigenous and ethnic cultures the influence of family on identity may be readily apparent, whereby family uses narrative as a means of communicating history and culture. Furthermore, and as demonstrated in the case of Indigenous cultures, the cultural identity of the family also allows individuals to 'reaffirm' their identity in the



community and may provide a sense of belonging and connection. For instance, Aboriginal people, through their Indigenous culture, are able to converse with other Indigenous people on such things as which 'clan group' they belong to and which family members are related (p 151)¹⁹. However, there are those cases where individuals have been denied access to their Indigenous culture, thereby impeding their ability to connect with their Aboriginality and hindering the 'opportunity to consolidate a secure sense of their own identities' (p. ix)²⁰.

Habitus, as well as the storytelling of family legacies, play a significant role in the formation of an individual's identity by creating meanings for individuals that continue to prevail 'beyond the family context' (p 111)²¹. Interestingly, while individuals may choose to disassociate themselves from their family, whether it be psychologically or by distance, what is irrefutable is that the identity of that individual will forever remain connected to their family and its members²².

Researching rural men and their familial relationships, and the researching of how to better help rural men discuss such matters, merits greater attention. What also requires attention is why rural men tend not to take part in research, which is discussed in the next section.

Barriers to men's participation in research: In this section some of the barriers to men's participation in research, as identified in the literature, are explored. These include: issues related to masculinity; time constraints; gender of the interviewer; privacy concerns; attitudes towards research; environmental barriers; mistrust of outsiders; and specifically in the case of Indigenous males: beliefs and perceptions, language barriers and concerns regarding the methods used to collect data.

Masculinity One barrier found to affect male involvement in research relates to the issue of masculinity. Mackereth and Milner propose that the male British subjects in their study appeared to adopt a masculine image of the 'strong silent type' in order to 'conform to traditional expectations of the male role' (p 24)²³. The adoption of this role hindered

participation as it made the subjects less inclined to communicate and share their views on issues that they considered to be of a personal nature. Furthermore, the issue of masculinity as a gender barrier also appears to depend on the nature of the topic being investigated. For example, as suggested by Butera, a study on friendship is a topic generally equated with feminine traits and therefore male subjects were less likely to participate as it 'deviates from notions of masculine behavior' (p 1271)²⁴.

Time constraints A lack of time is another impediment that appears to deter men from participating in research studies. For example, rural agricultural workers have indicated that spending time on research activities takes them away from their 'normally autonomous and demanding work environment' and diminishes the quantity of work that they need to achieve (p 77)²⁵. Similarly, a report that examined the challenges of conducting studies with fathers uncovered a corresponding view that time constraints also contributed to a lack of response from fathers to participation in research. Similarly, Butera in a study on the recruitment of males also identified time constraints as a major factor in the participation of males²⁴. However, Butera remains 'unconvinced' on the issue of work as being a reason why men appear to be unwilling to participate in research, particularly since both middle-aged men and women share the same amount of work commitments. Butera further notes that an additional barrier is the 'privileged role men hold in society' whereby they use their wives, children and secretaries to act as gatekeepers in order to protect them from 'uninvited challenges to their time' (pp 1269-1270)²⁴.

Gender of the interviewer Apart from time constraints, the gender of the interviewer has also been shown to affect the likelihood of engaging males in research. The current study included a lively debate from the participants around their preferences for the gender of researchers. What initially appeared to be an emphatic and resounding preference for male researchers, when explored became less about gender preference and more about trust in the researcher.



Connection points between the interviewer and interviewee, such as gender, may facilitate possible negative impacts. For example, 'the potential for dialogue (or indeed, impression management) aimed at pleasing the interviewer' (p 59)²⁶. Broom, Hand and Tovey point out that research has been undertaken which considers the dynamics of gender when women are being interviewed, 'however, in large part, this has not been extended to an examination of the ways in which gender shapes a range of interview contexts...' such as female researchers interviewing males (p 51)²⁶.

Despite the potential limiting factors of gender in research, there are some reasons why gender can facilitate better research outcomes. An example is that, 'in the context of women interviewing men, there may be subject areas and contexts where men are equally or even more comfortable speaking with a woman than a man' (p 54)²⁶. Broom, Hand and Tovey discuss the potential benefit of a female interviewer conducting research with a male participant, stating that 'once masculine status has been established, the female researcher may facilitate an "opening up" about family life that may not be achieved in male-to-male interviewer/interviewee contexts' (p 59)²⁶. And, in the context of men interviewing men, the researcher and participant sharing points that connect can aide in rapport via commonalities (such as gender), and this can be a 'potentially powerful resource for the qualitative interviewer' (p 62)²⁶.

This issue of the gender of the researcher and interviewee is particularly relevant in the case of male Indigenous subjects whereby forms of cultural taboos which prohibit women from discussing sensitive topics and engaging in 'men's business' may also make it difficult for female researchers to recruit Indigenous males²⁷. However, as argued by Scougall, it is not so much about the gender of the interviewer as the cause of the barrier – it is more likely to be the type of subject being discussed²⁸. Both male and female researchers may find it more difficult to recruit Indigenous males for studies particularly if Indigenous people consider the subject being investigated to be sensitive. Rae et al echo this difficulty with recruitment and retention of Indigenous participants, stating that '...researchers in many areas have found the

recruitment of Aboriginal people into scientific studies almost impossible' (p 1)²⁹.

For the non-Indigenous males in the study by Butera, the issue of the gender of the interviewer does not appear to have the same impact since male interviewers in the study struggled as much as female interviewers in recruiting males for the purposes of research²⁴.

Privacy concerns Concerns for privacy have also been identified as hampering the participation of male subjects in research³⁰. This issue is particularly relevant to those males who reside in rural populations, especially since one of the sociocultural aspects of rural communities is the problem of maintaining confidentiality and privacy. As conceded by Robinson et al, maintaining privacy is difficult particularly when residents of small rural communities are well known to each other 'as they pursue common interests and connect across divisions of age, gender, length of residence and class' (p 2)³¹. Therefore, men may be reluctant to participate if, for instance, the study requires them to 'draw attention to themselves', reveal 'something personal about themselves' or provide opinions on controversial issues (p 2)³¹.

Environmental barriers Physical barriers and an inherent distrust of outsiders may also impede the participation rate of rural males in research. In terms of physical barriers, the isolation for some subjects along with a lack of transportation and geographical distance have been suggested as contributing factors in the recruitment of rural participants³². Geographical distance, characteristic of many rural communities, was highlighted as a potential barrier to participation in two studies. Goodsell, Ward and Stovall noted that subjects who reside out of town may be reluctant to commit to a focus group if this means having to travel a long distance in order to attend³³. Furthermore, and depending on the time of year, unsettled weather may also make driving conditions hazardous or roads impassable making it difficult for either the researcher to interview clients and or participants to engage in a study^{33,34}.



Mistrust of outsiders Several studies have noted the effects of a sense of distrust and mistrust of outsiders on both male and female participants from rural populations. For example, Morgan et al³⁴ noted that subjects were less likely to agree to participate if the researchers were not known to them; while DiBartolo and McCrone³², in their review of recruitment barriers for older rural residents, commented on the extent to which there pervades in rural communities a 'basic distrust of the researcher's motives or of the research concept' (p 77).

Specific barriers for Indigenous males There are also a number of barriers that are particularly specific to the recruitment of Indigenous males including such issues as attitudinal barriers, language barriers and methods used to collect data. With regard to attitudinal barriers, studies suggest that Indigenous populations are reluctant to participate in research due to a lack of trust towards outsiders²⁸. This perception has been largely attributed to the historical effects of colonisation and the oppressive practices by governments and 'the exercise of power and control over Indigenous people' (p 52) and their communities and as a result there remains a legacy of wariness and suspicion of Indigenous people towards outsiders particularly those that represent research and government agencies³⁵. Liamputong maintains that this may be a primary cause of the 'low participation [rates] in biomedical and positivist research of Indigenous and non-western minority groups' (p 8)³⁶. Indeed, studies examining the issue of why African-Americans are so underrepresented in terms of participation rates have observed a similar theme to that of Indigenous populations whereby racial inequalities and human rights abuses of this minority group have also contributed to a lack of trust towards researchers^{37,38}. Furthermore, this barrier may also be complicated by the fact that there is a history of appropriation of Indigenous knowledge in the name of research, with little benefit or value provided in return³⁹. Indigenous communities may also be wary of researchers due to their concerns that 'secondary research that follows on from a research project' may be 're-interpreted without the consent of the community' (p 5)³¹. While there is little documented evidence that these

types of issues have a direct effect on the participation rate of males in research, it is plausible that these beliefs and perceptions may play some part in deterring potential male participants.

A further impediment that may have an impact on the recruitment of Indigenous male participants relates to the issue of communication barriers. As recognized by Liamputong 'language is crucial not only to the research process but also to the resulting data and its interpretation' (p 136)³⁶. In order to ensure the quality of the study, the researcher and the subjects need to be able to understand each other in order to avoid miscommunication. However, in Indigenous communities where 145 different languages are spoken and English is often used as a second language, the recruitment by non-Indigenous researchers of Indigenous males may be hindered by difficulties arising from a language barrier³⁵. Cultural misunderstandings too may obstruct the participation of males in research particularly with regard to the methods used to collect data. Guilfoyle et al, for instance, suggest that focus groups and 'storytelling' forums are more likely to promote engagement of Indigenous participants, as opposed to the completion of surveys and questionnaires which generally 'limit the opportunity for respondents to provide personal and nuanced answers' (p 225)²⁷.

For some of the identified barriers to male participation in research, such as gender issues and time constraints, there is evidence that suggest the roles these issues play in hindering the recruitment of male interviewees. For other matters such as privacy issues, the mistrust of outsiders, environmental barriers and cross cultural barriers in relation to Indigenous populations, little research has been conducted which focuses on the direct impact these barriers play in terms of participation rates by males in research studies.

Discussion

Ways of uncovering men's storied reflections about their lives, relationships and identity (where discussed), come both from the literature, and from the discussions with the cohort



of rural men consulted for this research. The stories we identify ourselves by can form a type of structure to the experiences we live. Narratives can be complex, powerful, and transformative. Future research can further explore the complexities of rural males, using stories to uncover those complexities.

This current research undertook to respect these men's voices: the research team prioritized the time and effort to ask for advice on how to approach other men for research in the future. As has been discussed, many factors influence whether men will participate in research that asks them to offer narratives that are highly personal. These factors need to be further explored, especially with rural men, as these narratives may be valuable to researchers who wish to explore the meaning of identity, relationships and wellbeing.

Mental health issues, especially 'suicidality' in rural Australia, are increasing. In order to address these type of issues, researchers cannot focus only on health and health outcomes; Alston and Kent consider that it is 'of critical importance that ...we also expose dominant rural masculinities as a construct to be exposed as inherently unhealthy if we are to improve rural men's health' (p 144)⁴⁰. It is important, therefore, that potential participants in research be invited, regularly, to advise researchers on appropriate methodology and the 'setting of the stage' that, for them, would be most conducive to a wish to participate in studies. The outcomes of this current research (a focus group with a group of rural Australian men) indicate that a high level of interest can be elicited from rural males with regard to participating in studies.

The research offers some other valuable guidance to researchers, above and beyond the benefits of consulting with stakeholders before research is conducted. The men in this study made it clear that they would 'always do an assessment on a researcher' to gauge whether to participate or to decide upon the degree of 'sharing' and disclosure their participation would include. The men also felt that specific questions needed to be asked. Tailored questions were deemed to be necessary, as the questions needed to illicit some conversations and content that had not previously been

considered by some men. Participants also indicated, quite emphatically, the importance of the initial rapport-building phase to their 'opening up'.

Interviewer gender was discussed at length in this study. Initially the men seemed to prefer not to be interviewed by women, but under further scrutiny this was not as concrete as it seemed at first. Gender dynamics play a part in how rural men define and perpetuate concepts around masculinity. Rural women are partners in masculinity, whereby 'gender relations are continually reshaped by ongoing negotiations between men and women as both face inherent tensions in these contested roles' (p 137)⁴⁰. More research needs to be undertaken in this co-authorship of the construct 'masculinity', and how it relates to rural men not participating in research, and also how this affects rural men's health, access to healthcare, and their health outcomes. In their research into farmers in the context of stress around drought, Alston and Kent state that 'normative masculinity leads to a resistance to help seeking behaviour that threatens their health and well-being' (p 144)⁴⁰.

Masculinity in rural Australia needs to be researched further, in part because rural men's ability to ask for help may be restricted by a stoic persona. This stoic masculinity can become a barrier for the men, as it can impact upon how comfortable men are to 'open up' to researchers, or to seek treatment. This can translate to how comfortable they feel to open up to a researcher, or indeed how comfortable they feel to open up to a healthcare provider. It can be even more 'alien' for some men to open up to each other.

We call for further research with ('with', as opposed to 'on') rural men, and we echo the call of such researchers as Alston and Kent to create 'a discourse where men can understand and address their resistant behaviour is a small step that may create improved health outcomes' (p 145)⁴⁰.

Conclusion

The current study asked rural men about how to best undertake meaningful research with cohorts such as



themselves. This research can inform further research into men, including masculinity, male identity, stoicism, and other such potential barriers to male participation in research. More so, it can inform how such contexts, traits, or constructs can also form barriers to better health outcomes for men.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank Tania Pearce, Master of Social Work student at the University of New England (Armidale, New South Wales, Australia), who was hired as a research assistant for this project with funds from the University of New England's School of Health Research Grant.

References

1. Randall WL. Narrative and Chaos Acknowledging the Novelty of Lives-in-Time. *Interchange* 2007; **38(4)**: 367-389.
2. Monteagudo JG. Jerome Bruner and the challenges of the narrative turn: Then and now. *Narrative Inquiry* 2011; **21(2)**: 295-302.
3. Alston M. Rural male suicide in Australia. *Social Science & Medicine* 2012; **74**: 515-522.
4. Vignoles VL, Schwartz SJ, Luyckx K. Introduction: toward an integrative view. In: SJ Schwartz, K Luyckx, VL Vignoles (Eds). *Handbook of identity theory and research*. New York: Springer, 2011; 1-32.
5. Kimmel MS, Aronson A. *Men and masculinities: A social, cultural, and historical encyclopedia*. New York: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
6. Harris IM. *Messages men hear: Constructing masculinities*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1995.
7. Crawford D. Becoming a Man - The Views and Experiences of Some Second Generation Australian Males. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*. (Online) 2002. Available: http://scholarlyexchange.sociology.org/content/vol7.3/02_crawford.html (Accessed 1 April 2013).
8. Coles T. Finding space in the field of masculinity Lived experiences of men's masculinities. *Journal of Sociology* 2008; **44(3)**: 233-248.
9. Barnes L. Influences and challenges of the male gender construct. *Journal of Education and Human Development* 2008; **2(1)**: 1-8.
10. Donaldson M, Howson R. Men, migration and hegemonic masculinity. In: M. Donaldson, R Hibbins, R Howson, B Pease B (Eds). *Migrant Men: Critical Studies of the Masculinities and the Migration Experience*. Hoboken: Routledge, 2009; 210-217.
11. Sanders JM. Coming of Age: How Adolescent Boys Construct Masculinities via Substance Use, Juvenile Delinquency, and Recreation. *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* 2011; **10(1)**: 48-70.
12. Wenitong M. *Indigenous male health: a report for Indigenous males, their families and communities, and those committed to improving Indigenous male health*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2002.
13. Sherman J. *Men without sawmills: Masculinity, rural poverty, and family stability*. Columbia, MO: Rural Poverty Research Center, 2005.
- 1, , 4. Judd F, Jackson H, Komiti A, Murray G, Fraser C, Grieve A et al. Help-seeking by rural residents for mental health problems: the importance of agrarian values. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2006; **40(9)**: 769-776.
15. Robertson S, Elder K, Coombs R. Rural men's mental health. In: D Conrad, A White (Eds); *Promoting Men's Mental Health*. Oxon: Radcliffe, 2010; 57-73.
16. Little J. Rural geography: rural gender identity and the performance of masculinity and femininity in the countryside. *Progress in Human Geography* 2002; **26(5)**: 665-670.
17. Bye LM. 'How to be a rural man': Young men's performances and negotiations of rural masculinities. *Journal of Rural Studies* 2009; **25(3)**: 278-288.



18. Hedges KE. A family affair: contextual accounts from addicted youth growing up in substance using families. *Journal of Youth Studies* 2012; **15(3)**: 257-272.
19. Clark Y. The construction of Aboriginal identity in people separated from their families, community, and culture: Pieces of a jigsaw. *Australian Psychologist* 2000; **35(2)**: 150-157.
20. Brooker L, Woodhead M. Developing positive identities. *Diversity and Young Children* 2008. Available: http://oro.open.ac.uk/16988/1/ECiF3_Eng_as_published.pdf (Accessed 1 April 2013).
21. Thompson B, Kellas JK, Soliz J, Thompson J, Epp A, Schrot P. Family legacies: Constructing individual and family identity through intergenerational storytelling. *Narrative Inquiry* 2009; **19(1)**: 106-134.
22. Scabini E, Manzi C. Family processes and identity. In: SJ Schwartz , K Luyckx, VL Vignoles (Eds); *Handbook of identity theory and research*. New York: Springer, 2011; 565-584.
23. Mackereth C, Milner SJ. 'He'll not talk to anyone': researching men on low incomes. *Community Practitioner* 2009; **82(4)**: 24-27.
24. Butera KJ. Manhunt: the challenge of enticing men to participate in a study on friendship. *Qualitative Inquiry* 2006; **12**: 1262-1282.
25. Prinz L, Kaiser M, Kaiser KL, Von Essen SG. Rural Agricultural Workers and Factors Affecting Research Recruitment. *Online Journal of Rural Nursing and Health Care* 2009; **9(1)**. Available: <http://rnojournal.binghamton.edu/index.php/RNO/article/view/106> (Accessed 12 February 2013).
26. Broom A, Hand K, Tovey P. The role of gender, environment and Individual biography in shaping qualitative interview data. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 2009; **1**: 51-65.
27. Guilfoyle A, Coffin J, Maginn PJ. "Make sure there is a shady tree": Participation and action research with Australian aboriginal communities. Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective. In: *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, vol 9. Oxford: Elsevier, 2008; 213-240.
28. Scougall J. Reconciling tensions between principles and practice in Indigenous evaluation. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* 2006; **6(2)**: 49-55.
29. Rae K, Weatherall L, Hollebone K, Apen K, McLean M, Blackwell C et al. Developing research in partnership with Aboriginal communities - strategies for improving recruitment and retention. *Rural and Remote Health* **13**: 2255. (Online) 2013. Available: www.rrh.org.au (Accessed 12 August 2013).
30. Mitchell SJ, See HM, Tarkow AKH, Cabrera N, McFadden KE, Shannon JD. Conducting studies with fathers: Challenges and opportunities. *Applied Development Science* 2007; **11(4)**: 239-244.
31. Robinson A, Burley M, McGrail M, Drysdale M, Jones R, Rickard C et al. The conducting and reporting of rural health research: rurality and rural population issues. *Rural and Remote Health* **5**: 427. (Online) 2005. Available: www.rrh.org.au (Accessed 12 August 2013).
32. Dibartolo M, McCrone S. Recruitment of rural community-dwelling older adults: barriers, challenges, and strategies. *Aging & Mental Health* 2003; **7(2)**: 75-82.
33. Goodsell TL, Ward CJ, Stovall MJ. Adapting focus groups to a rural context: Challenges and strategies. *Community Development* 2009; **40(1)**: 64-79.
34. Morgan L, Fahs P, Klesh J. Barriers to research participation identified by rural people. *Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health* 2005; **11(4)**: 407-414.
35. Shahid S, Bessarab D, Howat P, Thompson S. Exploration of the beliefs and experiences of Aboriginal people with cancer in Western Australia: a methodology to acknowledge cultural difference and build understanding. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 2009; **9(1)**: 60.
36. Liamputpong P. *Performing qualitative cross-cultural research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.



37. Byrd GS, Edwards CL, Kelkar VA, Phillips RG, Byrd JR, Pim-Pong DS et al. Recruiting intergenerational African American males for biomedical research studies: a major research challenge. *Journal of the National Medical Association* 2011; **103(6)**: 480.
38. Branson RD, Davis K, Butler KL. African Americans' participation in clinical research: importance, barriers and solutions. *American Journal of Surgery* 2007; **193**: 32-39.
39. Humphrey K. *Indigenous Health & Western Research*. Melbourne, VIC: VicHealth Koori Health Research & Community Development Unit, Centre for the Study of Health & Society, University of Melbourne, 2000.
40. Alston M, Kent J. The Big Dry: The link between rural masculinities and poor health outcomes for farming men. *Journal of Sociology* 2008; **44(2)**: 133-147.