ABSTRACT

In the context of a natural disaster, gender stereotypes play an active role in determining the health and safety of everyone involved. Focusing on men, this paper demonstrates the harmful effects that social expectations of masculinity can have on coping mechanisms and decision-making. Expectations based on gender have broad implications for families and communities and for the ways in which emergency management personnel and procedures operate during crisis response. Research findings convey observations and feelings of 32 men about their experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. The findings conclude that constructed ideals of masculinity, and the resulting pressures and expectations, contribute significantly to community suffering, and that acknowledgement of this by the emergency management sector is necessary for improvements in response and recovery.

Men and disaster:
Men's experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires and the aftermath

Claire Zara, Debra Parkinson, Alyssa Duncan and Kiri Joyce, Gender and Disaster Pod[1], detail recent research into aspects of stereotypes for men surviving disasters.

Background

The context for this research on men and disaster is the Black Saturday bushfires on 7 February 2009 in which 173 people died, 414 were injured, and 7,000 lost their homes. Motivated by the need to increase the safety of women and children after disasters and reduce harmful behaviours, Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) and Monash Injury Research Institute established this research project and an advisory group with specialist academic, professional and community expertise. This collaboration followed research by WHGNE with 47 workers and 29 women that found increased violence against women after Black Saturday. At conferences and related speaking events throughout Victoria, researchers were constantly asked, 'But what about the men?'. The partnership with Monash Injury Research Institute was then funded by the National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme to begin to answer this question. The men's research findings convey 32 men's observations and feelings about their experiences of Black Saturday. Speaking openly and generously, they suggested ways to improve the health and wellbeing of all by managing disasters and their aftermath.

Writing of the new gender and disaster subfield generally, American sociologist Elaine Enarson writes:

> *Sex and gender shape men's lives before, during and after disasters. While gender relations typically empower men as decision makers with more control than women over key resources, gender identities and gender norms can also increase their vulnerability.* (Enarson 2009, para 1)

Although men's health and wellbeing are known to be jeopardised by unhealthy coping strategies post-disaster, the nature and extent of these effects are poorly understood. Current disaster risk management practices do not incorporate a specific focus on men in resilience work, and there is little research on the effect of social construction of masculinity on preparation and response (Tyler & Fairbrother 2012). What has been suggested is that 'from Peru to Alaska, men cope through alcohol abuse and aggression' (Enarson & Phillips 2008, p. 51). Indeed, the legacy of disasters for men may be a feeling of inadequacy at having failed to meet the expectations of manhood (Austin 2008). Despite the significance of these findings and their implications for individual and family safety, and community recovery, there is a dearth of information in this area globally and, in particular, in Australia.

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1   The Gender and Disaster POD is a Women's Health Goulburn North East, Women's Health in the North, and Monash University disaster resilience initiative.

Literature review

A detailed literature review preceded this research (Zara, Weiss & Parkinson 2012). The literature review found that Australian men face different health risks to women, with a shorter life expectancy, greater risk-taking behaviour, higher rates of mortality (avoidable and premature), and higher levels of suicide (Victorian Government 2015). The apparent reluctance by men to engage with health services and belief in traditional male values are identified as contributing factors (Victorian Government 2015).

Masculinity studies generally find no single dominant performance of manhood, instead identifying culturally and historically specific forms of idealised masculinity against which men are measured. This study is informed by social constructionist approaches to masculinity, such as those theorised by Raewyn Connell (2005). The work of Bob Pease (2010) and others is drawn on to understand the 'hierarchy of privilege' that empowers middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied white men; men who are able and willing to live up to the prevailing norms of heterosexuality, authority, rationality, emotional control, risk-taking, dominance, aggression, and violence (Austin 2008, Kahn 2011, Pease 2010). Masculinities theorists identify that patriarchy ultimately damages men who aspire to and closely conform to notions of the ideal man (Kahn 2011). Research shows that men have poorer health than women, weaker social support and higher rates of alcohol abuse (Connell 2005, Kahn 2011, Kimmel 2002). Men, as well as women, pay a price for male privilege (Dowd 2010) and constant efforts to live up to Western ideals of manhood can lead to stress, illness and early death (Greig, Kimmel & Lang 2000, Jalmert 2003, Medrado & Lyra 2003).

Australian rural masculinity appears to be a particularly damaging model for men, espousing as it does, the strong, silent and self-possessed man as the ideal (Eriksen, Gill & Head 2010). Tyler and Fairbrother (2012, 2013) note a number of characteristics that are pertinent in this country, being frontier mentality and the idea of man-against-nature, the importance of physical strength, and the valorisation of risk-taking. Another is the concept of mateship, with loyalty and practical support prioritised over emotional support (Butera 2008). This is not to say that notions of mateship, or indeed masculinity, are inherently bad things. The problem is specifically the way that dominant ideas of masculinity engender emotional withdrawal and isolation, as opposed to promoting communication, emotional support and mental wellbeing.

The limited scholarship on gender and disaster events, mostly since Enarson and Morrow's *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* (1998), finds that disaster research and emergency management have traditionally been 'through the eyes of men' (p. 4) and that this male dominance has seen a focus on practicalities and has influenced the language of disasters as well as who we see as heroes. Firefighting, for example, is associated with heroism, heterosexuality and male hegemony, offering status (Ainsworth, Batty & Burchielli 2014, Tyler & Fairbrother 2013). A number of researchers in Australia write of the dominance of masculinity in narratives of disaster, particularly bushfires (Cox 1998, Eriksen, Gill & Head 2010, Tyler & Fairbrother 2013). In a survey of Australian attitudes to bushfire, the myth of the (male) firefighter volunteer remains strong, and is reinforced by women's exclusion (Eriksen & Gill 2010, Eriksen, Gill & Head 2010). Men's prominence in emergency management gives decision-making powers and control over resources, but, as Enarson notes (2009) gender stereotyped expectations also bring men's reduced perception of danger, valorisation of risk-taking, and the reality of front-line work.

> *Individuals … who do not conform to these stereotypes, may experience varying degrees of rejection and marginalisation, including verbal and physical harassment, victimization, isolation, and potentially traumatic wounding of their sense of self.* (Ballou, Hill & West 2008, cited in Kahn 2011, p. 66)

Such expectations of men test and sometimes expose men for perceived failure to live up to ideal male standards (Austin 2008). A UK study after floods found some men felt unable to protect families (Enarson & Fordham 2001). A rare study in Australia after the Ash Wednesday bushfires (Valent 1984) noted the shame and guilt experienced by men unable to fulfil expected male roles. In times of disaster, men with marginalised sexual identities can also be isolated, and power relationships between men generally can be heightened and increase vulnerability (Enarson 2009). 'Hyper-masculinity' may result during and after disasters as men try to claim their 'manhood' (Austin 2008). The period after disaster has its own tensions, and psychological problems that persist are related to events in the aftermath in addition to events during disaster itself (Borrell & Boulet 2009). Both internationally and in Australia, violence against women increases in the aftermath of disasters (Parkinson 2011, Parkinson 2015, Sety 2012, George & Harris 2014, Enarson 1999, Meyering *et al.* 2014, True 2013).

The extant international and Australian literature provided a rich foundation for research in this area after Black Saturday.

Methodology

The research methodology was qualitative, inviting the men interviewed to speak frankly in individual interviews about their experiences and feelings. Ethics approval was received from both Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee and North East Health. The two primary researchers jointly conducted the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Four open-ended guiding research questions were pursued,

each asked in ways that allowed participants to lead the interview in new directions:

1. What were the effects on men's physical and mental health and wellbeing, if any, during and in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires?

2. What were/are the implications of these effects for the safety and wellbeing of fire-affected men, and for those around them, including their intimate partners and families and work colleagues?

3. What personal, interpersonal, or institutional resources, if any, were available to them in the aftermath with respect to psychosocial effects?

4. What would have helped minimise or eliminate risk of harmful behaviours?

Sample recruitment and characteristics

Theoretical sampling was used to identify potential participants. This approach does not seek a statistically representative sample but a group that is selected in order to flesh out particular concepts or theoretical points, in this case the missing gender perspective of men caught up in bushfire.

This qualitative study involved 32 adult men affected by the fires and their aftermath in Kinglake, Flowerdale, Marysville, Seymour, Alexandra and Yea and surrounding areas within the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi in Victoria. Participants were recruited through community, health, and emergency services networks and public outreach, resulting in a self-selected sample of men aged 36-69, with a median of 14 years in residence, and most living in stable relationships. Many (12) were firefighters or Country Fire Authority (CFA) or State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers at the time of the fires, and other men had taken these volunteer roles in past years.

Data collection and analysis

Individual interviews were conducted to collect data. Standard ethical research protocols were applied, providing participants the opportunity to amend their interview following verbatim transcription. Grounded theory following Spradley (1980) guided analysis. Grounded theory offers rules for data collection and analysis that minimise ethnocentrism in the attribution of meaning, combining theoretical sampling (described earlier) and the thematic analysis approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Thematic analysis is the identification of themes through a careful reading and rereading of the data. The methodology is inductive, building up concepts and theories from the data. Although Glaser and Strauss (1967) point to experience, deduction and induction all playing a role in grounded theory, its great strength is the technique it offers for inductive reasoning. The unit of analysis was the sentence, and coding was assisted by the software package Nvivo V.10. Coding validity was enhanced by the second researcher's careful reading following coding by the first researcher, and by participant checks of their own transcript as well as the draft report.

Ethics procedures

When men phoned the researchers to express interest in the research, an Explanatory Statement was used to explain the project and its risks and benefits. Upon commencement of the interview a hard copy was provided and participants were asked if they had read it carefully and if they had any questions before signing a Consent Form. Confidentiality concerns arise in the rural, post-disaster context and the limits of anonymity were identified in the ethics document. Anonymity was enhanced by the use of pseudonyms in reports and by altering minor details that might have otherwise exposed context and identity. Participants were advised during the consent procedure that they had the right to stop the interview at any time, and to refuse to answer any questions.

To further reduce risk, each man was advised of his right to request post-research debriefing through the Men's Counselling Service or the Bushfire Grief and Bereavement Team. While some men indicated they had current access to a counsellor, it was not part of the researcher role to follow up with the men as to whether they accessed any of the counselling options as a result of their interview. However, participants often benefit from participation in research with the potential to speak freely without advice or judgement. In these interviews it seemed a cathartic experience for men to speak about their experiences and feelings. One man requested a follow-up interview soon after his first, and subsequently all 32 men indicated they would be interested in another interview at a future time. Running counter to the common assertion that 'men don't talk' about such things (MensLine Australia), the interviews were approximately two hours in length. The men's own comments – that 'The right questions need to be asked' or that 'No-one had asked them' – may explain the misconception. Without exception, they articulated their appreciation of this opportunity to help others.

Results

Men's experiences on Black Saturday

There were many seasoned volunteer firefighters among those interviewed. One man had spent 32 summers on fire duty. These men, and others in the sample, were acutely aware of the dangerous weather conditions on 7 February 2009. Official warnings could not have been clearer. Yet the bushfires on Black Saturday were unlike other fires. 'Surreal' is the word that seems to capture the enormity and seeming unreality of the day. Men used this word to describe the atmospheric conditions that preceded the fire storm, and the hours and days that followed as its tragic impacts became apparent.

We were stuck in this noxious environment. The smoke was really bad and then as it got dark, I still remember the moon coming up and it was like something out of Lord of the Rings, like Mordor. Every ridge that you could see from anywhere to the

north of Yarra Glen was on fire. It's a huge Melbourne wedding capital of the world so there's people in ball gowns – quite surreal. And chaos. No-one knew what was going on. (James)

We drove into town and cars were all lined up. Then we just sat there while the town burned. We heard the bangs and booms. The [petrol] station was shooting jets of fuel into the air. It was just a real apocalypse experience. People – dirty, burned, smoke covered people – carrying babies and children, just walking or driving in, I reckon 1000 to 1200 people. The whole area between the shops and the CFA was absolutely packed with people. It was really surreal, emotional. For me it just all seems like it was out of an apocalyptic movie … just charred landscape full of dead bodies and burned out cars, fallen down buildings. (Edward)

Edward described 'a series of increasingly hot 46, 45, 46, 47, 48 degree days' in the lead up to Black Saturday. Some participants spoke of monitoring every possible communication about the progress of the fire and tracking it from their own observations. Many travelled to vantage points and used their CFA training, or previous bushfire experience, or expertise from other fields to 'size up' the fire to assess its progress, future path and speed. Other men were not firefighters, but had decided to stay and defend either their homes or those of close friends or family. For some, it was a well-planned decision, backed up by rigorous preparation with equipment suitable for most bushfires. Yet the best preparation was rarely enough:

I thought we had protection and I was just kidding myself. (Patrick)

Adam described his relatives' extensive preparations prior to the fire. Tragically, they died in their home. The firestorm tested the logic of decades of fire knowledge and experience.

They were trained CFA firefighters. They had everything in place … They had proper firefighting type clothes on. They had heavy boots on … Everything in the house was full of water … They had hoses and everything going. They were consumed by the worst thing we've ever seen. (Adam)

There was a sharp distinction between before and after. Innocence pervaded the men's narratives of going in, feeling prepared, ready to do the job they had trained for. Too soon, their experiences of the firestorm destroyed any semblance of control.

With SES events we're always in control of the situation, but with what happened to me I wasn't in control. And that was probably the hardest thing I've had to deal with – that I had no control over what was happening to me. (Aaron)

The driver poked his head out of the window and said, 'F..k this, we are going to die here'. [The local fire station had said], 'We're not coming up there to get you, it's not safe'. The … crew declared a mayday as

the comms said 'No, no-one's coming up there to get you'. We just didn't think we were going to get out of there. The truck driver was crying. (Lee)

Echoing this, men who had responsibility with the CFA or who had fought previous major fires reflected on their confidence going into Black Saturday as delusional:

I thought as long as we were careful and diligent we'd be fine. (James)

I was reasonably confident that we would be ok. I was even confident that we'd be able to protect the house – and all of that was misplaced, of course … All around me I could see the fire moving towards our sheds – they caught fire. I had fire pumps and hoses everywhere but before we knew it, it was into the ceiling and so it was all over. (Vincent)

Several men reported their wife's or partner's concern emerging before their own. As in other literature, it seemed that the adult with primary caring responsibilities was most keen to leave (Mulilis 1999).

Some of the participants were on CFA deployments and spoke of feeling frustrated by directives from authorities about roadblocks and command centres. Nobody had sound advice to give about local and surrounding conditions and predictions. Pre-Black Saturday procedures seemed unsuited to the extreme conditions. In life-and-death situations, following rules and suppressing individual judgements meant the men could not attempt to save others. The hope was that the rules were right. While the team environment and command-and-control regime offered a measure of security to some in this day of unknowns, others followed the directions of those in authority only to regret not following their own gut instincts. Todd said, 'You sort of try and do what the CFA tells you. That's the first and last time I'll ever do that'.

However, the risks to men's health that emerged from hyper-masculine and risk-taking behaviours held the potential for physical injury and death. On Black Saturday, men were sometimes overly casual in response to the impending threat and sometimes unnecessarily took themselves *into* dangerous situations. Despite the danger to men's health, these were tolerated and even rewarded behaviours, with labels of 'heroism' and awards of bravery medals. Media coverage of individuals who were 'heroes' were very much focused on notions of masculine heroism. For example, 'Australia's bare-chested national hero' was the headline above a newspaper picture of a man defying safety guidelines by standing on a hotel roof wearing only thongs and shorts hosing down the property (*The Telegraph* 12 February 2009). This celebration of male heroism overlooked the heroism of women in traditional female supportive roles, and was galling to those who had different perceptions of events.

If you're talking about men and fighting bushfires, never forget there's a fair bit of ego in it for them. (Walter)

Pressures on men in the aftermath

After surviving the fire, the aftermath presented a further challenge. For some, the sights they saw kept them awake at night years later. Drug and alcohol use, reckless driving, and extreme sports temporarily relieved men's suffering in an acceptably masculine way. Over-work was common.

> *One [friend] in particular, he's done a magnificent job, rebuilt his home … and now … he just can't stop. His way of managing is to just keep working.* (Bob)

> *We were all driving around drunk, which we shouldn't have done but … I think the police … just thought, 'Let these guys do their thing'. Because how do you get it out of their system?* (Luke)

Homeless and displaced locals wishing to rebuild on their land faced costs that were inconceivable before the fires. In a free-market economy, builders exploited a situation where needs were high, supply was low, and funds were available from grants and insurance. Speculation builders bought cheap land in the immediate aftermath and built display homes. Locals, keen to get back to normal and with grant or insurance funds in the bank, paid what was asked. This real estate speculation caused an increase in house prices and meant some people were unable to move back. Competition to contract a builder was high too, so even before consideration of plans, prices were at a premium. Despite high prices, work standards were questionable. Participants expressed despair at the red tape and bureaucracy that delayed or prevented rebuilding even four years after the event.

> *They're still a bit rattled and they're not thinking clearly and there's so much competition to get a builder … the builders are picking and choosing because there's 300 houses to build or something in this little locality and they're all charging extra to come up the hill. They're loading it up for everything they can think of and it really did cause a little mini bubble.* (Scott)

> *We then went through this extraordinary period of (a) trying to find a builder, (b) trying to comply with the new regulations, which I didn't actually find difficult or offensive, until you actually started pricing things and getting builders to look at what that might cost them to do. Because they were unsure of what they were faced with they said, this might cost us more so they added a premium.* (James)

The initiative and drive of the locals in the early days were smothered by a recovery process described as overlooking local knowledge and expertise. The effect was one of disempowering local people and marginalising them from real decision-making processes. Their sense of being disenfranchised ran counter to the appearance of deep community consultation. Such issues have been documented elsewhere, but are touched on here as men described the *effect* of what they saw as lack of genuine consultation. The sense of being patronised and controlled engendered anger. Meetings were described as 'top-down'.

> *What we found in the aftermath of the fires was that people were assuming authority … it was 'power over' rather than 'power with'. We found the same with police, and emergency services staff, state government staff, local government staff, professionals … It's profoundly disempowering.* (Paul)

The disaster's aftermath saw a change in leadership in some communities as people who had this role before Black Saturday were unable to continue through personal grief and other demands. In the void, others (mostly men) took on leadership roles, for example, as heading community recovery committees. As people aligned with those of similar values, factions emerged, intensifying community anger and division, even to physical aggression and violence. Points of difference arose over the direction of community rebuilding, and local and state government decisions that directly impacted on people's daily lives as they tried to re-establish.

> *After the honeymoon period of cooperation and collaboration, about six months in, people shifted from turning to one-another to turning away from one-another and to turning on one-another.* (Paul)

> *It actually became very personal where people didn't speak to each other. Very nasty where people threatened other people, made obscene gestures at people, derogatory … remarks at people in the street because they didn't agree.* (James)

Layer upon layer of inequity and dishonesty fuelled the discord. The unfairness and seeming capriciousness of grants and insurance drove much community anger. It seemed to come down to good fortune in having an effective case manager, having an insurance company that did not 'rip you off', and being considered deserving of a grant. Apparent 'obsession' with funding domestic housing over business was of concern to several men interviewed.

> *Insured, uninsured, it didn't matter, just money turned up in their accounts … [There was] a real disparity here of needs being met … If I was sitting in Spring Street I'd be saying, 'Well people donated … this money to help people. Okay, this guy's lost his joinery shop, he's the only one on the hill, he's fairly useful when they're doing rebuild'. There was a mechanic … who had his shop burned down, his workshop. There was a sawmill, all these things were just left to dissipate into the ether. They're just gone now.* (Scott)

The enormous task of 'the clean-up' was controversial from the outset with the tender given to Grocon. Once the tender was granted, local men (and women) were sidelined from participating in the official clean-up for a number of reasons. Perceptions of 'fire-brain' affecting those fire-affected (suggesting they were not thinking clearly) sat alongside Grocon's inflexible work and employment practices for the clean-up. These practices demanded employees work 10-hour days for five or

six days a week. Local people, with the complex and unrelenting pressures of rebuilding a life in communities devastated by trauma and tragedy, were practically and emotionally ill-equipped for such a workload away from their own properties and families. Although the literature points to men more than women benefiting from recovery employment, the men who did the bulk of the paid clean-up after Black Saturday were predominantly from outside the area. Few locals benefitted.

> *Oh no, you stand back out of the way, we'll bring the other people in from outside… Grocon, they need the money, better help them out.* (Scott)

> *People who needed the work after the disaster, both for financial reasons and for emotional psychological recovery reasons, weren't getting the work. And yet they were sitting here in their town watching all these trucks track in from all over the place every day with outside contractors coming in to do all the work … And given that most of the blokes around here are tradies that was a huge issue for them.* (Brad)

In the immediate aftermath, when donations and media coverage were at their height, employers were generally supportive. Some men were fortunate to have supportive workplaces. Where workplaces were calm and colleagues were aware of what Black Saturday survivors had been through, early return to work was helpful. Yet, in two accounts, men spoke of their employer's extraordinary insensitivity. Both were asked to undertake work that revived their traumatic bushfire experiences. It was confronting for the men and beyond what should reasonably be asked of workers returning after a disaster experience. One man was expected to undertake work that would implicate him in appearing before the Royal Commission, thereby reliving his disaster experiences in a courtroom even though he had stated his reluctance. A second man spoke of working long hours for more than a month, helping police and forensic teams locate and identify bodies of local people killed in the fires. Yet, when he returned to work, he was directed to work on evidence-gathering from the Triple Zero tapes for the Royal Commission. He said:

> *It's one thing to listen to audio tapes. It's one thing to see dead bodies. It's different to actually put the conversation that you're having to the image … That was the straw that broke the camel's back.* (Chris)

Mental and emotional impacts were clearly present. One man spoke of being haunted by flashbacks, and described anxiety to the core of his body. Others described unexpected and abnormal depressive states in the aftermath:

> *When it got bad for me [for a couple of months] I didn't actually want to get out of bed… My wife would come home … with our son and it was like, 'Are you still in bed?' The neighbours would come and knock on the door and you'd pull the blankets up.* (Bernard)

Sadly, four participants spoke of their own suicidal feelings. Many spoke of the suicides of others that they believed resulted from disaster experience or the additional pressure that the fires and the aftermath exerted on complex lives.

> *There's been a lot of suicides and they don't publicise it, of course … They got killed in the fires and they just didn't know it … About four months ago, in about four weeks there were five people committing suicide.* (Todd)

> *His issues were pre-fire of course but his capacity post-fire to live with everything that had happened was clearly challenged and … he should have been added to the list of people who died because of the fires.* (Vincent)

Domestic violence

Violence against women after disasters was documented in Australia after Black Saturday (Parkinson 2012, Parkinson & Zara 2013) and internationally (e.g. Austin 2008, Enarson 2012, Sety 2012). Some men, brought up not to cry and not to seek help, reacted to their own failures or their trauma with anger and aggression, or turned to drugs and alcohol, with results that sometimes exacerbated abusive or harmful behaviours and increased risk to women and children.

> *Our street was replete with domestic violence … We had local coppers and they have their own strong social relationships and I think that they were sometimes inappropriately protecting perpetrators and inappropriately protecting people who were drinking or using drugs, et cetera. So I don't think that they really realised the vulnerability of children and partners at home.* (Paul)

Gender stereotypes

In contrast to the acceptance of men's aggression, traditionally 'feminine' behaviours like expressing emotion and seeking help were perceived as unacceptable. For volunteer firefighters and those employed in firefighting roles, the implications were that their future roles within the CFA or the DSE could be limited by perceptions that they had 'not coped'. The parameters of expected and acceptable behaviours were defined for individuals by their gender first. Men who were perceived as not coping were stigmatised, judged as not measuring up to the hegemonic masculinity that characterises emergency services. This was an absurd expectation on a day like Black Saturday and in its aftermath marked by chaos and grief. There is a perception, or perhaps an understanding, that accessing such individual counselling may affect future prospects within emergency service organisations.

> *People would be worried about the confidentiality, whether there was any feedback that came around the back saying, 'Keep this guy away from big fires'.* (Matthew)

When the Works Coordinator was away [I used to be on higher duties]. When I took that month off, which I took off as stress leave, ever since then there's been nothing. (Stuart)

Rather than provide effective support, employing bodies often failed to offer accessible and personal debriefing or ongoing and confidential access to counselling. Alternative work roles were rarely an option. An institutional paradigmatic shift could achieve better support for men, rather than fail to support this generation of firefighters and emergency management professionals.

I don't care how many psychologists and psychiatrists everybody sees … the only way this stops with anybody … is when you die. (Eric)

Stigma associated with seeking counselling and men's reluctance to talk about their trauma or their treatment emerged as a strong theme. This has been described in the literature as double jeopardy; the masculine ideal is impossible to meet but help cannot be sought because real men do not admit any 'weakness' such as PTSD or depression or anxiety (Addis & Mahalik 2003, cited in Kahn 2011). One CFA leader tried to cut through this by sharing that he needed assistance to deal with the trauma, but was met with some disdain.

I've talked about how I got depressed, and how I took medication and all that, just to try and show, that hey, this guy that they seem to respect is okay with it, so why shouldn't you? A few of them sort of scoffed … I guess is that there is a stigma attached to seeking counselling. (Chris)

Discussion

Taken together, the current findings indicate the psychological costs of a hegemonic masculinity ideal and the way this manifests in a crisis. A tough, staunch, and risk-inclined construction of masculinity can jeopardise the mental and physical health and safety of men themselves, and their families and communities. Even though the risks to men's health associated with hyper-masculine and risk-taking behaviours place them in physical danger, these behaviours are not only tolerated but celebrated. The way in which gender is constructed in rural Australia meant that men were expected to measure up to the firestorm in their behaviour and to not break down in its aftermath. The research indicates that impossible gendered expectations resulted in suicide ideation and depression for some men, and contributed to increased drug and alcohol abuse, and the increased risk of domestic violence against women and children. Negative perceptions of those who had 'not coped' affected their employability and their work relationships. Without the disaster of Black Saturday, the men interviewed would not have been propelled into the situations of powerlessness they described. None had ever experienced a fire like that before. Most had never been viewed as a victim in any aspect of their life before

the fires, nor relied on others for the basics of life. Their loss of control during the fire lived on in continuing loss of control in its aftermath. The cost of male privilege is most apparent in these circumstances. Emergency management is highly male-dominated, and is a sector in which hyper-masculinity is celebrated and rewarded, as it is in the broader Australian society (Parkinson, Duncan & Hedger 2015, Hogg 2013).

Contribution and limitations of the research

This research contributes to understanding the gendered terrain of disaster (Enarson 2012, Enarson & Morrow 1998) and begins to address the gap in sociological research into men's experience of disaster. It finds that disaster impacts can be severe and long-lasting, yet men may be penalised for seeking psychological help. In the aftermath, employment issues, housing and rebuilding, and drug and alcohol abuse can inhibit recovery. Interpersonal and domestic violence often increase, along with community anger and aggression.

The research is limited in that no young men were interviewed, and there was little ethnic diversity as the sample reflects the ethnic composition of the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi (only 5.7 per cent of the population in Mitchell, and 3.3 per cent in Murrindindi speak a language other than English in the home (ABS 2016). Time constraints meant that data analysis was necessarily limited to domains that were relevant to the funding. This report reflects a first attempt to document men's perceptions of events on and after Black Saturday. More time to reflect and engage further with the men could be of value.

Future research could begin in the following focus areas:
- Research effective ways to address gender norms that may restrict men from seeking help. Research effective psychosocial support strategies for application in disasters.
- Research effective gender and disaster awareness packages and incorporate them broadly in emergency response trainings across the sector, prioritising men's self-care and safety.
- Research, trial and implement a sustained social marketing campaign to proactively educate the public on disasters 'through men's eyes' and 'through women's eyes', modelled on effective mental health awareness campaigns.
- Research independently and retrospectively the fairness of recovery grants to ensure equitable support, especially among those men most vulnerable to the economic impacts of disasters. Use the findings of this audit to develop improved grant guidelines for both men and women.

Conclusion

Catastrophic disasters test the ability of men to live up to the impossible hegemonic male role expected of them; to be brave, heroic, decisive, unemotional and stoic. The increasing risk of more frequent catastrophic disasters resulting from climate change dictates that planning, response and recovery move beyond the stereotypes and myths of strong, silent men protecting and providing. Men, no matter how closely they fitted the image of the ideal, hegemonic male, were helpless in the path of the firestorm on Black Saturday. For men, a huge risk in the aftermath of the fires was the risk of not managing emotions. The narratives used in this research illustrate the ways they were punished for apparently being out of control, crying in public, or struggling with grief and loss in the workplace. The stigma they felt led to perceptions that they were being sidelined, no longer thought of as reliable, and not promoted. Some had internalised this as their own failure to live up to the prescribed hegemonic male role, not realising that few men ever do.

With more women playing equal roles in emergency management and more men taking up caring responsibilities, many of the gendered risks described in this paper and in other disaster research may be reduced. The lived experience of gender equality in disaster and in the home is yet to be known, but the gendered risks as explored in this and other research suggest such a move will benefit both men and women. Clearly, breaking down expectations of 'ideal' and 'manly' behaviour can only increase the health and wellbeing of men as well as those around them.

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