Unmasking masculinity:
A qualitative study of men's experiences and understandings of intimacy

by

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ABSTRACT

UNMASKING MASCULINITY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MEN'S EXPERIENCES AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTIMACY

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Intimacy is an important aspect of human health and experience. However, heterosexual men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy continue to be an under-explored area of research. This exploratory study sought to investigate how heterosexual men experience and understand intimacy in their lives. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 11 self-identified heterosexual men between the ages of 23 and 66 was conducted. Five themes are presented in the results: (1) intimacy exists in particular relationships for men; (2) intimacy is a conscious effort for men; (3) men’s understandings of what intimacy is change over time; (4) men experience themselves as different from their learned understandings of masculinity; and (5) men consistently confront social barriers that make practicing intimacy difficult. It is concluded that men experience, understand, and practice intimacy in multiple relationships despite experiencing intimacy as difficult to practice.
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Table of Contents

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review ............................................................................................................................. 2

Theoretical orientation: Gender, masculinities, and social domain theory ......................................... 11

Positionality ..................................................................................................................................... 14

Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................................... 15

Methods ......................................................................................................................................... 15

Participants ..................................................................................................................................... 15

Procedure/Recruitment of Participants ........................................................................................... 16

Interviews ......................................................................................................................................... 17

Qualitative Research and Analysis (Thematic Analysis) .................................................................... 21

Results ............................................................................................................................................ 23

Intimacy Exists in Particular Relationships for men ........................................................................... 23

Sponsorship Relationships ................................................................................................................ 25

Man-to-Man Friendships ................................................................................................................... 29

Intimacy with a Girlfriend or a Wife .................................................................................................. 35

Intimacy Relationships with Children ............................................................................................... 37

Can Men be Intimate with Anyone? ..................................................................................................... 42

Intimacy is a Conscious Effort for Men: Interactions that Facilitate and Maintain Intimacy ............. 44

How Men actively Maintain Intimacy in Relationships ................................................................... 44

Working and Struggling together in Intimate Relationships ............................................................. 52
Understandings of Intimacy Change over time for Men..........................57
Help Seeking (AA and NA) leading to more Intimacy...............................58
Challenging Childhood Experiences of Intimacy....................................59
The Meaning of Intimacy and Sex Change over time.............................60
Men’s Understandings of Being Different from Traditional Men...............62
Barriers for Practicing Intimacy in Society: A Critique of Masculine Culture by Men..............................................................................65
Men’s Experiences of Hiding Feelings....................................................65
Men’s Experiences in Interviews that led them to Question Themselves ......67
Discussion..................................................................................................70
Expansion in Heterosexual Men’s Intimate Relationships.......................72
Men Have Intimate Friendships with other Men....................................72
Men’s AA and NA Relationships allow for the Development of Intimacy......76
Men Feeling Intimacy through Imagining Family Relations.....................77
Can Men be Intimate with Anyone?............................................................78
Men Work on, Struggle and Grow in Intimate Relationships...................79
Men Becoming Intimate and Confronting the Difficulty of Practicing Intimacy.83
Implications...............................................................................................86
Limitations.................................................................................................87
Future Directions.......................................................................................88
Conclusion..................................................................................................89
References.................................................................................................91
Appendix A...............................................................................................101
Appendix B ..............................................................................................................102
Appendix C ..............................................................................................................103
Appendix D ..............................................................................................................105
List of Appendices

Appendix A – Certificate of Research Ethics Approval.............................................101
Appendix B- Recruitment Poster.................................................................................102
Appendix C – Interview Guide................................................................................103
Appendix D – Consent Form.........................................................................................105
Introduction

The word “intimacy” is defined as a close familiarity or friendship (“Intimacy”, 2012). In line with this definition, research suggests that intimacy is an important demonstration of the establishment of trust, attachment, and connection in personal relationships (Birnbaum, Mikulincer, & Gillath, 2011; Layder, 2009; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Many researchers consider intimacy to be one of the integral processes by which human wellbeing is created and maintained (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004; Prager, & Buhrmester, 1998). Having intimacy has been linked to increases in physical health, psychological wellbeing, and healthy aging (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995; Drummond et al., 2013). Intimacy seems to be an important aspect of human experience. However, understanding what intimacy is, or is not has proven to be complex and contentious in social science research (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Laurenceau et al., 2004; and Prager & Roberts, 2004).

Although there is disagreement regarding what intimacy is and how it should be studied, research exploring and investigating intimacy is vast. Some heavily researched areas of intimacy include: intimacy in relationships (i.e. friendship, work relationships, casual sex partners, and committed intimate relationships) (Ellickson & Seals, 1986; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Aron, Aron, & Allen, 1998; Heller & Wood, 2000; Prager & Roberts, 2004); differences in intimacy based on gender (Layder, 2009; Fehr, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Baron-Cohen, 2004; Tannen, 2002); women’s experiences of intimacy (Vollendorf, 2004; Drummond et al., 2013; Fraser, 2005; Winch, 2012); and gay men’s experiences of intimacy (Palmer & Bor, 2001; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2007; Rumens,
2008; Rose, 2014). However, little research has focused specifically on heterosexual men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy (Duncan & Dowsett, 2010; Reback & Larkins, 2010; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009), and thus I intend to expand on this underdeveloped knowledge in the current study. In accordance with Robert A. Stebbins’ (2001) suggestion that true exploratory research consists of a shorter literature review and a description of how the current literature “…leaves unexplored certain critical aspects of that phenomenon” (p. 43), I will review: (1) theoretical approaches to intimacy and some of the salient research informed by these; (2) conventional measures of intimacy; and (3) qualitative research that explores men and intimacy. I conclude my literature review by discussing the limitations of existing theory and research regarding men and intimacy that my research aims to address.

Literature Review

Theoretical Models and Research on Intimacy

The interpersonal process model of intimacy. Harry T. Reis and Philip Shaver first introduced the interpersonal process model of intimacy to social science in 1988. This model posited that intimacy is an interpersonal, transactional process that is comprised of two components: self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. According to the theory, intimacy is achieved when one partner self-discloses and the other partner responds to that self-disclosure with acceptance, validation, and care. The theory proposes that for self-disclosure to create intimacy it must be emotional and not simply a disclosure of facts or information.
Reis and Shaver (1988) intended for this model to be a working model of the intimacy process and a reference point for distinguishing intimate from non-intimate interactions. They postulated that the process of intimacy would be affected by past experiences and current understandings of intimacy that serve as “interpretive filters” for individuals receiving their partner’s self-disclosure (p. 378). Therefore, the receiving partner may not recognize or understand a disclosure as one that is attempting to foster intimacy even if the disclosure was intended to. Reis and Shaver (1988) thus view intimacy as a goal of communication that requires an agreement between the receiver and the discloser. Their model provided the theoretical foundation for Jean-Philippe Laurenceau to research what the process of intimate interaction actually looks like.

In collaboration with various researchers, Laurenceau has worked to test the efficacy of the interpersonal process model of intimacy and has highlighted the usefulness of the model for explaining intimacy, particularly intimacy in heterosexual couples’ relationships (Laurenceau et. al., 1998; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Laurenceau et al., 2004). In one study, Laurenceau and colleagues (2005) conducted an experiment in which married couples were asked, over a 42 day period, to keep a diary assessing all of their disclosures, their partner’s disclosures, and the perceived responsiveness of their partner to their disclosure. They found that both self-disclosure and partner disclosure significantly predicted day-to-day feelings of intimacy, and perceived partner responsiveness influenced feelings of intimacy and increased self-disclosure and partner disclosure (2005). The researchers argue that both self-disclosure and partner-responsiveness are important and independent contributors to intimacy. Laurenceau and colleagues (2004) also determined that attachment style is a powerful
indicator of an individual’s responsiveness to intimacy. The researchers noted that individuals with lower levels of avoidance were more responsive to their partners and perceived their partner’s responsiveness to be higher than partners with higher levels of avoidance. As these studies suggest, attachment is a powerful indicator of individuals’ responsiveness to intimacy in heterosexual couples’ relationships, and thus attachment theory has been utilized to understand intimacy.

**Attachment theory and intimacy.** *Attachment theory* was first conceptualized by John Bowlby (1958) to describe why children seek proximity with a familiar caregiver when they are alarmed. This theory was later expanded upon to include adult relationships. Attachment theory posits that individuals need a *secure base* as children, so they can begin to explore and trust the world. Bowlby (1973), and Collins and Feeney (2004) insist that child and caregiver interactions are critical for individuals to organize their emotional experiences and regulate their attachment needs. They theorize that if an individual has not been provided with a *secure base* as a young child they might manifest *insecure attachment styles* as adults. Researchers who study adult attachment styles have identified two emotional states or relational tendencies that characterize insecure adult responses to attachment: *anxiety*, which is influenced by working models of self, and thus is a manifestation of an individual’s understanding of their self-worth and acceptance by others; and *avoidance* (i.e. the “…degree to which one approaches intimacy” in relationships; Collins & Feeney, 2004, p. 167). Researchers have also identified three particular styles that can be seen in adults with insecure attachment: (1) the *preoccupied* style which is characteristic of individuals who “…have an exaggerated desire for closeness and dependence” and seem to be concerned about rejection; (2) the *dismissing*
avoidant style which is characteristic of individuals who view close relationships as unimportant and value their independence and self-reliance; and (3) the fearful avoidant style which is characteristic of individuals who want close relationships, but avoid them due to a fear of rejection (Bartholomew, 1991; Collins & Feeney, 2004). Research in the area of attachment and intimacy has found that attachment styles are a strong predictor of responsiveness to intimacy in heterosexual couples’ relationships (Aron et al., 1998; Birnbaum et al., 2011; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Land, Rochlen & Vaughn, 2011). For instance, insecure attachment styles in adulthood have been linked to both men’s avoidance of intimacy in relationships (Land et al., 2011), and men’s desire to stay in relationships in which they do not feel loved (Aron et al., 1998).

**Deep intimate connection theory.** Moving beyond a focus on individuals or on interpersonal process, Karen J. Prager and Linda J. Roberts (2004) view deep intimate connection as both an interpersonal and a relational process. Their theory conceptualizes intimacy as a verbal and non-verbal process with interpersonal and relational dimensions. The interpersonal dimension is comprised of three components. The first component is self-revealing behavior, which is characterized by the expression of emotion, vulnerability, and feelings of hurt. The second is positive involvement, which is described as a demonstration of desire for the other that includes both verbal cues such as tracking a partner’s communication, and non-verbal cues such as close proximity, gaze and touch. The third component is shared understanding, (or both partners’ sense of understanding aspects of the other’s inner experience). The relational dimension they simply describe as “…mutual, accumulated, shared personal knowledge” (Prager & Roberts, 2004, p. 46).
Although intimacy is investigated relationally, the effect that intimate relationships have on individuals is examined in deep intimate connection theory as well. For instance, Lippert and Prager (2001) conducted a study that inquired into individuals’ “working definitions of intimacy” (p. 284), and found that self-exposure, positive involvement, and shared understanding emerged as categories that individuals identified as intimate in their interactions with partners, and as important to their understanding of intimacy in relationships. According to deep intimate connection theory, intimacy is a product of interpersonal process and also individuals’ understandings of intimate relationships.

**Discourses of intimacy approach.** Kathy Weingarten (1991) states that intimacy theory tends to promote “individual capacity” (p.2), and/or “quality of relatedness” (p.5). According to her, individual capacity theories assume that the capacity for intimacy rests within the individual, and quality of relatedness theories suggest that intimacy only exists in long-term committed relationships. Offering an alternative understanding of intimacy, she writes: “Intimate interaction occurs when people share meaning or co-create meaning and are able to coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning making” (p. 7). Therefore, intimacy is an experience that happens between individuals who agree that their experience is intimate. Unlike the *interpersonal process model of intimacy* and *deep intimate connection theory*, Weingarten differentiates between *intimate interactions* and *non-intimate interactions* to suggest that intimacy is not an experience that can be understood by an outsider watching an interaction and nor can it be researched or objectively understood; rather it is an inter-subjective experience. Accordingly, intimacy is understood as an agreed upon experience between individuals.
**Evolutionary psychology’s perspective on intimacy.** Unlike the theories described above, evolutionary psychologists do not consider intimacy to be an individual capacity, an interpersonal process, or an inter-subjective experience. Researchers influenced by evolutionary theory would suggest that intimacy or any demonstration of love and care is a strategy utilized by individual humans to ensure the success of their unique genetic make-up (Buss, 1995; Beyers & Reber, 1998). Evolutionary psychologists view individuals as egotistical. Intimacy is viewed as a process that increases an individual’s likelihood of reproductive success, and thus the survival of an individual’s genetic make-up. Although these researchers frame intimacy as a strategy, refer to it as an “illusion” (Beyers & Reber, 1998, p. 176), and suggest a problematic heteronormative perspective on sexuality and intimacy, they do introduce the importance of intentions in intimate relationships. Unlike the theories mentioned above, evolutionary psychologists suggest that intimacy is a goal-oriented behaviour, which is an important contribution to intimacy literature. Conventional measures of intimacy are guided by different theory than evolutionary psychology, but they, too, attempt to explain intimacy objectively.

**Issues with conventional measures of intimacy.** Some researchers have critiqued the use of psychometric measures in studies examining intimacy (Hook, Gerstein, Dettrich, & Gridley, 2003; Heller & Wood, 2000; Waring, 1985). For example, Waring (1985) has argued that commonly used intimacy measures fail to take into account the complexity of intimacy and the contextual factors that shape people’s experiences of it. Waring’s main concern was that although commonly utilized intimacy measures, such as the *Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships* (PAIR) (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), are guided by theory and demonstrate high reliability and criterion validity, they may not
capture aspects of intimacy experiences that have been deemed theoretically relevant. These aspects might include interpersonal events and experience, and subjective experiences of interpersonal events.

In light of Waring’s (1985) critique of intimacy measures, Hook, Gerstein, Dettrich, and Gridley (2003) designed a study to test how well three commonly used intimacy scales capture four aspects of intimacy proposed by existing theories of intimacy: love and affection; personal validation; trust; and self-disclosure. The results of their study indicated that no one measure adequately assessed intimacy across all four dimensions, but when all three measures were amalgamated they together touched on the four aspects of intimacy of relevance to the study (Hook et al., 2003). Beyond the finding that single measures do not adequately measure theoretically relevant aspects of intimacy, Hook and colleagues (2003) found that men and women differ in their expression of intimacy in relationships, which suggested to them that common measures of intimacy may be gender biased. They proposed that gender differences might be attributable to the inaccuracy of common intimacy measures, which may be unable to capture gender “…socialization and learned responses to environmental cues” (p. 471).

Qualitative research on men and intimacy. In accordance with Hook and colleagues (2003), most research focusing on intimacy does not approach gender as a social construction. Instead, existing research tends to posit that gender is a binary relation, that most people fit neatly into one of the two given genders, masculinity or femininity, and that these categories map directly onto their male or female bodies (Ellickson & Seals, 1986; Garfield, 2010; Land et al., 2011). Moreover, this research tends to be quantitative, to compare men’s understandings to women’s understandings of
intimacy, and to suggest that men have difficulty being intimate partners. Heller and Wood (1998) have argued that qualitative approaches to the study of intimacy might help us understand, in depth, how intimacy is achieved and maintained in romantic and other types of close relationships. Furthermore, some qualitative research that explores men’s intimacy has provided a richer description of men’s intimate experiences than quantitative ones (e.g., Duncan & Dowsett, 2010; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Reback & Larkins, 2010).

In a qualitative study on men and intimacy, Duncan and Dowsett (2010) found that men’s feelings of intimacy in relationships were tied to commitment and the willingness to disclose vulnerability. They also indicate that men believe intimacy requires work and that in a committed relationship this work is a mutual obligation. Other qualitative researchers have found that masculinity plays a crucial role in men’s experiences of intimacy. Masculinity seems to influence men’s understandings of intimate interactions and sexual interactions (Reback & Larkins, 2010), and men’s willingness to self-disclose and the threats that they perceive when self-disclosing (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). Intimacy in committed heterosexual relationships seems to be very important to men for two reasons that appear to be connected: (1) a desire to self-disclose information that increases his vulnerability; and (2) a need for the self-disclosure to be heard by a partner who he trusts will not question his masculinity.

**Summary and critique of intimacy theories, research, and measures.**

Theoretical approaches to intimacy have attempted to explain intimacy as a *process within relationships* that can be understood objectively (Laurenceau et. al., 1998; Laurenceau et al., 2005; Laurenceau et al., 2004; Reis and Shaver 1988; Prager &
Roberts, 2004), inter-subjectively (Weingarten, 1991), or as a theorized individual propensity (Aron et al., 1998; Birnbaum et al., 2011; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Land et al., 2011; Bartholomew, 1991; Buss, 1995; Beyers & Reber, 1998). These approaches tend to deny subjective experience and focus on objective understandings of interpersonal interaction to explain intimacy, and/or infer inter-subjective agreement. Some theoretical approaches underpinning existing studies have suggested that men do not desire intimacy (Garfield, 2010), or that men struggle with developing and sustaining intimacy in relationships (Land et al., 2011). Other investigations of intimacy have utilized poorly operationalized psychometric measures that have been criticized for not questioning gender biases and not capturing theoretically important aspects of intimacy (Hook et al., 2003; Heller & Wood, 1998; Waring, 1985). Although the aforementioned theories and measures of intimacy have provided valuable conceptualizations of intimacy—as an interpersonal process, as an effect of individual attachment, as an interpersonal and relational process, as an inter-subjective experience, as a goal-directed behavior, and as a phenomenon that can be psychometrically ascertained—they can all be critiqued for marginalizing heterosexual men’s subjective experiences and understandings of intimacy.

The limited literature analyzing men and intimacy seems to highlight the complexity of gender and intimacy, and suggests that men desire self-disclosure and intimate relationships (Duncan & Dowsett, 2010; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Reback & Larkins, 2010). I believe that research on heterosexual men’s subjective experiences and understandings of intimacy could aid in uncovering or surfacing alternative, gender-sensitive ways of understanding intimacy in heterosexual relationships, and, more generally, in expanding academic knowledge in this area. Based on the literature
exploring heterosexual men and intimacy, I believe that a conceptualization of gender, masculinity, and subjective experience is necessary in an exploration of heterosexual men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy. Below, I will articulate a theoretical orientation for my study that includes: (1) a stance that critically analyzes gender; (2) a conceptualization of masculinity as a gendered construct in late modernity; and (3) a guideline for exploring the social domains of subjective experience.

Theoretical orientation: Gender, masculinities, and social domain theory

The social construction of gender. Hook et al. (2003) suggest that gender differences found in psychometric measures of intimacy might be attributable to gender socialization. Furthermore, West and Zimmerman (1987) have theorized that gender is a socialized performance that is reinforced on an institutional and societal level. They argue that the ‘doing’ of gender serves as both a role and a display (p. 137). Here individuals organize their activities to reflect or express gender as it is understood in the broader society, and they are encouraged to perceive others’ behaviour in the same light. This is similar to Judith Butler’s (1988) assertion that gender is a performative accomplishment that is constituted through repeated acts and behaviours grounded in culture and history. She suggests that gender is not real, but becomes real or natural through reproduction and reification. Therefore, gender is a socialized process that is created and sustained by individual performance, culture and history. Butler (1988) and West and Zimmerman (1987) understand gender to be institutionally reinforced, maintained in interaction with others, and punished or reassessed when it is not done.
correctly. For these social theorists, it is extremely difficult to escape socially produced understandings of *natural* gender.

In accordance with Butler (1988) and West and Zimmerman (1987), I will conceptualize gender as a performance that is informed by internalized norms, which influence individuals’ understandings of their gender roles and displays. I am not approaching gender as a difference determined by biology, or as a normative construct that dichotomizes masculinity and femininity into two discrete categories necessarily tied to biological sex. Unlike literature that focuses on gender as dichotomous (Tannen, 2002; Baron-Cohen, 2004; Ellickson & Seals, 1986; Garfield, 2010), I adopt the perspective that gender is an amalgamation of *masculinities*, suggesting that there are multiple ways in which masculinity is performed, and *femininities*, likewise suggesting that femininity can be performed in multiple and diverse ways (Connell, 2005; Wenger, 2012). This conceptualization moves beyond sex differences and gender dichotomy to posit that masculinity and femininity are not essential but rather, multiplicitous, shifting, embodied, and practiced ways of being. In researching men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy, I attend to how masculinities are personally understood, constructed, and performed. In what follows, I discuss the conceptualization of masculinity that guides my approach to understanding how masculinities operate in current Western societies.

**Masculinities, power and late modernity.** Recently, masculinity scholars have argued that masculinity is a complex, ever-shifting construct within Western society (Atkinson, 2010; Holter, 2005; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). For example, Michael Atkinson (2010) has suggested that uncertainty surrounding masculinity in contemporary Western societies can be partially explained by the “general ontological instability” of
late modernity (p. 11). Drawing on the work of postmodern philosophers Jameson (1991) and Lyotard (1979), Atkinson (2010) theorizes that late modernity has obliterated the certainty of truth and of meta-narratives, and has forced the reorganization of cultural understandings of two formerly inseparable concepts critical to men and to gender relations: power and masculinity. Prior to late modernity, scholars argued that masculine power in Western societies was institutionally reinforced, created and maintained through dominant ideology, and individually exercised and promoted by men through “self-regulation” and “self-discipline” (Holter, 2005, p.18,). However, Atkinson (2010) suggests that the ties between masculinity and power have loosened and become less stable, and thus that the performance, understanding, and mastery of masculinity might not be as simple as it once was. He writes: “…late modernism will not allow one to be a universally masculine/ hegemonic/ authoritarian subject, one can strategically use a range of hybrid masculinities to become quasi-hegemonic in different situations of interaction” (p. 41). Drawing on Atkinson’s insights, I ask men participating in my study to describe how being a man influences how they do intimacy, because I am starting from the assumption that men perform masculinities in many different ways for many different reasons.

**Social Domain Theory.** I understand masculinity and intimacy to be culturally-specific, internalized norms that are experienced, understood, and performed by men. I borrow from Derek Layder’s (2009) *social domain theory* in viewing men’s experiences and understandings as produced through the interplay between three domains: (1) culture and group membership; (2) situated activities and interpersonal relations; and (3) psychobiography. I agree with Layder (2009) that these domains of human experience
and socialization—culture, group membership, social interactions, and personal history—influence individuals simultaneously, and thus that all domains are important to explore in an attempt to illuminate men’s experiences and understandings. An exploration of culture and group membership will allow me to uncover men’s understandings of their masculinities and of intimacy in their lives. By considering the influence of situated activity, I will be able to discuss with men their subjective understandings and experiences of how masculinity and intimacy influence their interactions with others. Lastly, by inquiring into men’s psychobiography, I will be able to examine how men make sense of masculinity, intimacy, themselves and their relationships.

**Positionality**

The ontological position that I adopt is that of relativism (Charmaz, 2003; Hugly & Sayward, 1987). As an ontological stance, relativism posits that objective truth is unattainable, because an individual’s interpretation of events and understandings are subjective. I also assume a constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge acquisition as an interpretive process between participant and researcher (Charmaz, 2003). In my opinion, it is not possible to remove myself from the process and analysis of my data, and thus it is not possible for me to remove myself from the results of the data. Following from a constructivist epistemology, I do not believe that heterosexual men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy can be understood entirely. I do believe that the results of my analysis will be one of many possible interpretations of the data collected for this study. Therefore, I understand that I have my own values and beliefs
that will guide my interpretation of my participants’ communicated understandings and experiences of intimacy, and thus my analysis is my interpretation.

**Purpose of the Study**

As my literature review demonstrates, the field of intimacy studies has effectively marginalized heterosexual men’s experience. The field offers limited knowledge of heterosexual men’s accounts of intimacy, and of how differences in internalized gender norms might inform men’s gender performances and their intimate accounts. In response to these gaps, this study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of heterosexual men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy. My major research question is: how do heterosexual men experience and understand intimacy in their lives? To answer this question, I will focus on men’s accounts of intimacy, how they define intimacy in relationships, how their prior experience influences their understandings of intimacy, and how the performance of masculinity affects their understandings and experiences of intimacy.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Eleven self-identified heterosexual men between the ages of 23 and 66 were interviewed in this study. All participants were residents of the city of Guelph at the time of their interviews. Men who participated in this study met the following criteria for eligibility: (1) self-identified as heterosexual men; (2) were 18 years of age or older; and
(3) were or had been in at least one heterosexual relationship that they would describe as
intimate. One participant indicated that he viewed humans as bisexual by nature, but
stated that he self-identified as heterosexual. One participant indicated that he was a
student at the time of the study, and all other participants reported that they had a job or a
career at the time of the study.

**Procedure/Recruitment of Participants**

Approval for this research including recruitment strategies, procedures, and
interviews was obtained through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board
(Appendix A). Recruitment strategies included poster advertisements, brief presentations
to undergraduate classes with approval from instructors, and outreach to “key
informants” (Marvasti, 2004). Posters outlined study requirements as detailed above; the
time required of participants (an hour to an hour and a half); my contact information; my
previous advisor’s designation and name; and potential benefits for prospective
participants, the academic and professional community, and society (Appendix B).
Presentations in undergraduate classes summarized the information on the posters. In
ethnographic studies, key informants are commonly described as individuals who
researchers actively seek out to gain access to places, information, and individuals in the
field (Marvasti, 2004). For this study, I chose to actively seek out individuals with whom
I did not have a preexisting relationship to reduce the risk of bias in my interviews and
analysis. I asked key informants to ask men in the community who I did not know if they
would be willing to participate in my study. One participant was recruited through a
poster and the rest were recruited through three key informants. Two informants provided
one participant each, and the third provided eight participants who indicated that they were addicts in recovery, and had affiliations with either Alcoholic’s Anonymous (AA) or Narcotic’s Anonymous (NA) at the time of the study.

Men interested in the study contacted me by e-mail or phone. Key informants sent me an e-mail introducing interested prospective participants. I contacted all men who had indicated their interest in participation, screened each interviewee for eligibility, and set up a date and time for the interview. All participants were offered a coffee and/or water before the interview began.

**Interviews**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for data collection. According to Singleton and Straits (2010) semi-structured interviews provide structure, focus interviewers and interviewees on the research question, and give the dyad freedom to explore subtopics related to the research question. Specifically, the utilization of semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask questions that uncovered men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy and enabled participants and myself to digress when relevant and interesting topics arose. The guide included open-ended questions, such as the following: “What is your understanding of intimacy?”, “How do you (or have you) experience(d) intimacy in your relationship(s)?”, “As a man, what challenges or opportunities (if any) do you experience related to developing and maintaining intimacy in your relationships?” and “Can you give an example (or describe a memory) of what intimacy is for you?” Participants were asked all questions in the interview guide (Appendix C).
Interviews were conducted in private seminar rooms provided by the Family Relations and Applied Nutrition Department and the Marketing and Consumer Studies Department at the University of Guelph. Interviews were recorded on a program called GarageBand© on my encrypted laptop computer, which was positioned between each participant and myself. All interviews began with the signing of a consent form (Appendix D) and an invitation to ask me any questions about the process of the interview, as well as anything that the interviewee might want to know about the thesis project or me. Participants were notified that they could ask questions during the interview, and were told that there would be time allotted to discuss the interview experience once it was completed.

There is very little literature exploring the difficulties men might face when interviewing men, and I found that many texts provided ideas for interviewing diverse individuals (e.g. women and racialized groups) with varied characteristics (e.g. old, young, etc.), but omitted men as a group (Marvasti, 2004). In considering this lack of information and in consultation with my advisor (Dr. Carla Rice), we decided that I would discuss with participants their experience of being interviewed at the end of each interview. I referred to these conversations as a “debrief.” The intention of the debrief was to ask participants about their experience of being interviewed about intimacy, and to give me the opportunity to reflect on what I, as a self-identified heterosexual man, heard throughout the interview. All respondents participated in a debrief at the end of their interviews.

**Interviewing men.** After the interviews were completed I found a relevant article on interviewing men by Tristan Bridges (2013) entitled “Issues of Intimacy, Masculinity
and Ethnography,” which describes the least-masculine role as a stance that male researchers can adopt when interviewing men (pp. 53-63). Bridges (2004) argues that the process of interviewing can be threatening to men as it exposes the weaknesses or inauthenticity of masculinity, and thus might inadvertently turn an invitation to speak into a challenge to masculinity. Although Bridges (2004) was writing about gaining access to a population as an ethnographer, the threat of a challenge instead of an invitation to discuss intimacy was a theme present during the interview process of my study.

Through reflecting on the process of interviewing men and through listening to recordings during transcription, I noticed that participants spoke a great deal more than I did, possibly because I had given them the opportunity to share their experiences with someone who actively listened and echoed back to them what I had heard. During interviews, I tailored skills (e.g. active listening and reflection) that I had obtained when I was practicing dialogic psychotherapy (a psychotherapy model that highlights the importance of psychotherapists adopting a not knowing stance, and thus approaching clients as a curious and active listener; Anderson & Goolishian, 1982) as a couple and family therapy student. At the end of the interviews, participants commonly described feeling “comfortable” and experiencing the interview as “intimate.” Active listening, adopting a not knowing stance, and making masculinity a topic of discussion in interviews may have invited rather than challenged participants to talk about their experiences and understandings of intimacy. Many men also explained that they were recovering addicts who had discussed their feelings with counselors and other men in the past, and thus might have been more comfortable than men who had never discussed their feelings with men.
I had envisioned that discussing intimacy with men would be difficult, and thus felt that an understanding of the performance of masculinity would help guide my understanding of myself in relation to my participants. Discussing the struggle of maintaining masculinity in late modernity, Michael Atkinson (2010) argues that the demonstration and embodiment of power have become more nuanced and complex. He suggests that the rigid gender performances that defined masculinity before late modernity are less relevant for men today. In hearing participants describe the struggles they had experienced attempting to maintain masculinity in intimate interactions with partners and friends, I found Atkinson’s (2010) description of masculinity in late modernity helpful. As a way of joining with participants, I frequently felt a strong urge to disclose my own experiences and feelings of confusion, which might have helped to facilitate more open-ended, mutual, and reciprocal discussions about masculinity and intimacy.

**Fatigue and interviewing process.** I found the interview process to be exceptionally taxing, which affected other roles and responsibilities in my life at the time. Due to time pressures and participant availability, I booked three interviews a day and often four interviews per week for three weeks. Very few researchers have discussed the lack of training and preparation required to manage the strain of conducting interviews, especially when participants describe personal difficulties (Wenger, 2012; Wray & Markovic, 2007). I was very familiar with recommended approaches to self-care as a practicing couple and family therapist (Killian, 2007), but without supervision or large breaks between interviews I noticed fatigue. I utilized self-care techniques, when possible, that I had developed and experienced as helpful after psychotherapy sessions.
(i.e. going for a run, going to the gym, calling someone supportive, or taking short naps). I believe that the self-care practices that I engaged in helped to reduce fatigue throughout the interview process.

**Qualitative research and analysis (Thematic analysis)**

According to Snape and Spencer (2003) qualitative research concentrates on “…understanding, rich description, and emergent concepts.” Building on this understanding, Esterberg (2002) suggests that qualitative research tries to “…understand social processes in context” and foregrounds not only the subjective realities of participants but also the subjectivity of the researcher themselves as an active participant in the research (p.2). That said, the purpose of this study was to capture in-depth accounts of intimacy as understood by those interviewed and to provide participants and researcher with opportunities to reflect on the meanings of intimacy in men’s lives. Therefore, I viewed a qualitative orientation to data collection and analysis as appropriate to the purpose of my study.

Although I gathered literature prior to data collection and used it to write a literature review and develop interview questions, I conducted an inductive analysis of the interviews. By this I mean that my analysis was exploratory and not designed to answer specific questions. Men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy were the focus as I attempted to capture the essence of my participants’ experience and understanding.

Thematic analysis was utilized as the method of analysis in this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis provides a rich description of data, and thus
is particularly useful for “…investigating an under-researched area” and when participants’ perspectives on an experience are not known (p. 83). Research exploring heterosexual men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy and the interplay between intimacy and masculinity is an under-researched area, and one that requires more exploration and rich description. Thus thematic analysis was chosen as a suitable framework for this research.

In undertaking thematic analysis for this study, I drew on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) article “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology” as a framework and point of reference. I began by transcribing all interviews for analysis except for one interview, which was transcribed by an undergraduate student. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) and the advice of my supervisor, I read all transcripts 3 times and wrote notes on printed copies of the transcripts with the intention of making preliminary connections and gaining familiarity with the data for the purposes of developing ideas to guide initial coding. Initial codes were then utilized to label expressions and features of the data that I believed were important to the study. Codes were developed and refined during analysis of each individual interview. Interviews were reviewed following initial coding to ensure that coding of the data was exhaustive.

Themes were created through the grouping of codes, which led to the development of a “thematic map”. Here I wrote potential themes on pieces of paper, which I then organized as a visual representation to capture the connections and interrelations of themes created (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, I reviewed, refined, and named all themes throughout the process of writing the results.
Results

Using a thematic analysis, men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy in heterosexual relationships were explored and five themes were developed. These entail the following: (1) intimacy exists in particular relationships for men; (2) intimacy is a conscious effort for men that requires specific interactions to facilitate and maintain; (3) men’s understandings of what intimacy is change over time; (4) men experience themselves as different from their learned understandings and experiences of masculinity; and (5) men consistently confront social barriers that make practicing intimacy difficult for them. Each of the five main themes include subthemes, which are presented and discussed below. Throughout the results section, participants will be identified numerically (e.g. participant 2 will be written as (2)).

Intimacy exists in particular relationships for men

I found that the most pervasive and grounding theme within my analysis, and present within all participants’ descriptions, was the men’s understanding that intimacy exists in particular relationships. Intimacy was not discussed as existing on its own and nor was it seen as a feature of all relationships. Participants described experiences and understandings of intimacy as experiences and understandings of closeness within particular relationships. As one participant explained it,

…there really isn’t a point in being in a relationship like the one I have with D [girlfriend] without having intimacy… I don’t think you can have one without the other. You can’t have relationships without intimacy, I guess you can, work-type relationships and a relationship with your bank manager. (9)
This participant identified that relationships can be intimate and not intimate, and thus intimacy was not a necessary requirement for relationships but was necessary for particular relationships (e.g. the relationship he had with his partner). Participants revealed the many intimate relationships that they had in their lives: with partners, with friends, with sponsors, and with children. One man detailed the specific types of intimate relationships he had:

I have intimate relationships with my children. I have intimate relationships with my wife. I have a sponsor in the program, and I have an intimate relationship with him. I’m able to share with these people parts of my life, and I’m not worried about what I share with them… (6)

Although intimacy was identified as existing in relationships with other individuals, men maintained that not all relationships were intimate for them. As two respondents in recovery remarked of relationships with their parents, “…there never was a lot of intimacy growing up as a kid” (9), and “…I guess I never saw a lot of intimacy growing up. The passion I saw in my house was the passion my father had for his alcohol and drugs” (3). Although intimacy was discussed as existing in families, intimate relationships for those in 12-step programs were often identified as occurring outside of the family.

Through my analysis, I came to understand that relationships with girlfriends, wives, children, co-workers, sponsors (for self-identified addicts in recovery) and friends were often described as intimate. To elaborate on the theme of intimacy as an achievement in relationships, I discuss the relationships that participants highlighted as most intimate: sponsorship relationships (primarily with men); friendships with other
men; relationships with romantic or life partners; and relationships with children. I conclude my discussion of this theme by considering a question that many men posed: can intimacy happen with anyone? It is important to note that relationships identified as most intimate for men in this study were friendships with other men. It is equally significant that participants explain that intimacy exists between two individuals. Men admit that they can have intimate relationships with many individuals, but all note that intimacy in relationship exists between two individuals. All relationships detailed by respondents below reflect the understanding of intimacy as an exchange happening between two individuals in a specified relationship.

**Sponsorship relationships.** Intimacy was often identified in sponsorship relationships for those men who discussed their involvement with either Alcoholic’s Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA). Of the participants who had disclosed that they had a sponsor, many imparted that their relationship with their sponsor was intimate. One respondent stated, “I guess the first intimate relationship I had was with my sponsor” (3) after conceding that he did not experience intimacy in any relationship before he met his sponsor. Other men described sponsorship relationships as “pretty intimate” (9), “My sponsor, I don’t look up to him, but I appreciate his connection with his spirituality…” (6), and as a “fabricated intimate relationship” (4). In these excerpts, respondents’ accounts suggest to me that there is variance among them in terms of their feelings of connection and intimacy in sponsorship relationships. However, all who had sponsors acknowledged these relationships as intimate, often referred to intimacy stemming from the connection that they and their sponsor forged, and highlighted how
these connections influenced their understandings of what intimate relationships could be. Of the sponsorship relationship, one respondent noted,

…it required me to tell my secrets and tell how I felt and to talk, and to have that person share with me their secrets and their struggles. I found that I wasn’t alone in my thoughts and my feelings in what I was struggling with.

(3)

This respondent conveys this feeling of no longer being “alone” with his thoughts and feelings, which suggests to me an experience of connection in his sponsorship relationship. He also imparts that he has struggled with his feelings in the past and the sponsorship relationship allowed him to feel as though he was not the only man who had dealt with struggles involving his emotions. Men commonly indicated that intimacy was experienced in the process of working through struggles and overcoming challenges in recovery. Similarly, another man divulged that progress through step-work (the 12-step program that consists of a set of spiritual principles utilized by the AA and NA to help members recover from addictions) was an intimate experience for him but also revealed how processing those steps with his sponsor was integral to accomplishing that intimacy,

My sponsor, I have a really intimate relationship with him, because I follow the 7 steps. It’s more of a self-adventure. I’m looking into myself, where my value systems came from, where they broke down, and I’m trying to readjust so I have spiritual aspects in my life, in every aspect of my life. (10)

Beyond the intimacy that was achieved through step work, the process of “looking into himself” and looking into where his “value systems came from” was important for this man and seemed to be important to other men. Respondents who
identified as recovering addicts often reported experiences of being challenged and of undertaking positive personal changes in the sponsorship relationship. One man explained how his sponsor helped him realize why he had difficulty in his sexual relationships:

…he’s the one who actually pointed out to me that me telling women that I just wanted to be with them for sexual reasons… that sort of honesty didn’t necessarily mean that I was considering their feelings. I saw that as me putting their feelings first. It’s a twisted kind of thinking, and he turned that around and had me look at it and said, ‘No.’ He suggested it to me, and it kind of clicked. That’s not me putting someone else’s feelings first just by being honest about what kind of relationship I wanted to have with them. (9)

Another informant expounded how his relationship with his sponsor allowed him to challenge himself to identify why he was afraid of intimacy and how he could work to have intimate relationships in the future.

That led to more risk taking around intimacy, and then it was like that translated into dating, getting to know people, as opposed to having sexual relationships here and there that would only last to a point where I would run away from the intimacy, because I would find a reason for it not to work. The sponsorship and that relationship with another man made a difference. (3)

For this respondent, having a relationship with another man who challenged his ideas about women, sexuality and intimacy allowed him to see how he could have more rewarding relationships in the future. Another former sponsee acknowledged that his sponsor not only challenged his beliefs about heterosexual relationships, but also his
beliefs about same-sex ones and specifically, about gay men, “I’m part of a fellowship and he was my sponsor… and he was gay. At first that really freaked me out, I was scared and nervous and didn’t really like it.” (4) He went on to consider how his sponsor’s sexual orientation challenged his understandings of intimacy and friendship. “I think it’s a standard straight concern that somehow this man is going to want to have sex with me and I don’t, so I’m on guard.” (4) While he had to battle with the feeling of being “threatened sexually”, he discovered that he could have a relationship with a gay man even if he could not fully accept his sponsor’s sexual orientation. Respondents’ illustrations of intimacy as sponsees in sponsorship relationships suggest that these relationships offered rare opportunities to connect with other men, and to experience being challenged by someone with whom they felt trust and connection. One man, a sponsor, precisely captured how he creates a context for intimacy in his sponsorship relationships.

As a sponsor, I get to sit down with people and talk to them and listen to their… and it’s all about trust and honesty, listen to where they’re coming from and what they’ve done. Those are very intimate moments, because, and it’s a male-to-male relationship not a male-and-female relationship... (6)

Although not all participants maintained that their sponsors were men, they often stated that “male-to-male relationships” “made a difference” for them. In the next section, I discuss the importance of male-to-male relationships generally for interviewees in this study, as a prominent sub-theme that those in recovery consistently asserted as pivotal to learning about masculinity and intimacy.
**Man-to-man friendships.** All participants interviewed for this study spoke about their man-to-man friendships, and most men described man-to-man friendships as the most intimate relationships they have in their lives. This suggested to me that these men’s friendships with other men provided them with their most salient experiences of intimacy. In this section, I discuss these men’s processes of establishing trust and comfort with other men; of creating space for intimate conversations with other men; of the ways that intimate relationships with other men are different from other intimate relationships in their life; and of how the intimate relationships they forge with men help them in their intimate relationships with girlfriends, wives, children, and others.

**Establishing that there is trust and comfort in man-to-man friendships.** Some informants maintained that finding or forging intimacy in friendships between men was not spontaneous but required the development of trust and comfort. On his friendship with another man, one participant noted,

> It’s the closest relationship that I’ve ever had with anyone and it’s with a guy. It kind of freaks me out that I feel the way that I do and I’m so trusting and comfortable around this guy and I like it. (10)

In response to my question about his experience of intimacy, this participant declared that the “closest relationship” he had had was with a man, indicating that trust and comfort were important features of this relationship, he went on to disclose that that relationship “freaks me out”, which suggested to me that he was uncomfortable with feeling comfortable in a close intimate relationship with a man. It seemed as though he wondered if it was socially acceptable to be so trusting and comfortable with a man. I wondered if the act of telling another man (me) that the closest relationship in his life was
with a man, led him to deprecate the relationship and proclaim that it “freaks him out.” In
other words, did he feel discomfort when disclosing to another heterosexual man that the
closest relationship in his life was with a man? Another respondent shared in detail the
way he begins man-to-man relationships, how he establishes comfort before entering into
such a friendship, and how he respects the time it takes to build trust in male friendships,

The sexual feelings and the chemistry I’m feeling when I’m building a
relationship, it’s different in regards to. It starts off with simple conversation
and getting to know each other. Coffee dates, or going out to a hockey game
or whatever. It would be the drive to and from the event, because at the event,
I’m at the sporting event. I watch how people behave, because a lot of times I
choose not to drive to certain things and I would say [I] watch their behaviour
driving. If there’s a lot of road rage there, I might not get as involved in trying
to get to know that person. I’d say that it’s timing too. Building a relationship,
it takes time to get to know that person and have that trust level to be able to
share certain details of your life and be comfortable with that. (8)

The participant outlines how his friendships with other men are structured (e.g.
“simple conversation”, “coffee dates”, and then a “sporting event”) and controlled (i.e. he
decides if he wants to have an intimate friendship with a particular man). This suggested
to me that these men intentionally spent time with other men before deciding with whom
they wanted to develop more intimate friendships. Men described their intimate
interactions with other men as accomplishments based on feelings of comfort and trust.
Trust and comfort will be discussed in depth later, but these feelings were named by most
men in this study as important elements of intimate relationships and as defining features of intimacy.

**Men creating space for intimacy with male friends.** Participants not only delineated their experiences of intimacy with other men, they also outlined how they create space for intimacy in their friendships with men. As one interviewee put it,

When I’m talking about intimacy with my friends, primarily my male friends, it’s usually one-on-one, sitting down, there’s no joking around, there’s something to be shared, something they’re struggling with. (10)

This participant distinguishes intimacy talk as “one-on-one” conversation in which he helps to open up supportive space to hear his friends’ struggles. He also highlights the seriousness of the conversations that ensue when space for intimacy is created by maintaining “there’s no joking around.” Similarly in the following excerpt a participant juxtaposed “locker room talk” with “real talk”:

In the last ten years, I will sit down, have a discussion and then it’s not locker room talk, it’s a real talk with male friends about their relationships or their feelings around work or coworkers or the future or what have you. (9)

Respondents often outlined how they created space for intimate discussions, including the two cited above who explicitly emphasized that “relationships” and “feelings” were discussed or something important was “shared” when they had intimate conversations with other men. According to study participants, intimate conversation between men was a product of men creating space for conversation.

**Intimate relationships with men are unique.** Beyond creating space for intimate conversations between men, men used the following phrases to explain how their
friendships with other men were different from other friendships, “…the closest relationship I’ve ever had with anyone” (10), “[participant’s best male friend], I’m pretty certain loves me unconditionally” (7), “…that relationship with another man made a difference” (3), “…men-to-men, there’s no worries of judgment and stuff like that” (2), and “…[male]friends, there’s that basic loyalty needed” (1). Interviewees consistently described their intimate friendships with other men as substantially different from other relationships, specifically friendships or relationships with women in their lives. One participant reflected,

It doesn’t take me a long time to have a deep conversation with one of my men friends. That usually doesn’t happen with any of my women friends. It just seems a lot more rare. (5)

Men commonly articulated the security of their friendships with other men. They detailed having openness, experiencing sacredness, and investing their time and themselves in their friendships with other men. As another participant explained it, “…the attachments to my friends [I] almost feel could be more permanent than the intimate relationships I have with girlfriends” (1), which indicated to me that the “loyalty” that this participant described earlier in our interview was important in friendships, because friendships could be more permanent than the romantic relationships he had with “girlfriends.”

Although one participant explicitly expressed the idea of permanence in intimate friendships with men, participants often alluded to what I understood to be the uniqueness and safety of their intimate friendships with men. One respondent outlined the importance of safety when engaging in an intimate discussion with other men:
Yes. Male friends. Not female friends just male friends and that’s probably…

I have about three men that I could probably share this stuff with and get similar stuff that they’d been through in return as well. There’s a safety regard with you putting something out there and they’re not sharing anything back.

(8)

This description that it is important that men will share back emphasized to me that intimate discussions with other men require safety. For this man, it seemed as though safety was achieved in discussions with other men in which listening, active responding, and mutual sharing were experienced. Participants recognized safety as important in intimate conversations with other men, and, interestingly, identified that their intimate friendships excluded women.

Beyond describing how men’s friendships are different from their relationships with women, men in this study also designated as unique intimate conversations they had with other men. One participant specified, “I think men might feel on a deeper level. I think about… the people that I know on a really deep level, the men I know, and they all feel like I do” (5). This participant also stated,

In fact, I think my experiences with men has been a lot more… I was going to say deeper, but I’m not sure about what terminology to use. I think deeper emotionally and maybe freer is the word. (5)

This suggested to me that the experience of sharing, for this respondent, with another man allowed for richer conversations about emotion and more open, and less limited experiences of intimacy. Use of the word “freer”, by the aforementioned participant, was similar to a participant’s sentiment that he did not have “a mask” with his
best friend. This participant stated, “I would say that I probably don’t have a mask with my best friend. We can laugh at the dark side or cry at it, whatever.” (7) This participant indicated that he wears “masks” (to hide feelings and perspectives from others) in many of his interactions, but he does not wear a mask with his best male friend. This interviewee reflected,

So with R [male best friend], I would say that R loves me unconditionally. I have no doubt about that. Not a speck of doubt. If I murdered somebody, R would still love me. I think if I had another affair, R would be upset for W and I, but he would still love me. I know other people who wouldn’t. (7)

This interviewee explains the permanence of his friendship (e.g. that his best male friend would still love him if he had an affair) and his freeness to discuss anything with his best friend. Much like this man, men recognized their friendships with other men as very important to them, and they also asserted that their friendships with men help their relationships with their wives and partners.

**Intimate friendships with men help men in their intimate relationship with their partner.** Participants often illustrated their experiences and understandings of their man-to-man friendships in interviews, and they also outlined the positive impact that these friendships had on their relationships with their wives and girlfriends. Men often explained how spending time with other men allowed them to talk about and do things that they were not able to do with their wives. One participant stated,

“There’s some connections I have with my male friends… We do some things that W (wife) and I don’t do. There’s some things that W and I do that I don’t do with my male friends.” (7)
This participant distinguished between the benefits of his friendships with men and of his relationship with his wife. He elucidated that he had “some connections” with his male friends that he did not have with his wife. One participant explicitly described how his friendships with other men benefitted his relationship with his wife:

I think that the relationship I have with my male friends helps me with my intimate relationship with B [wife]. There are things I can talk to them about. If I’m talking to my male friends about poker strategies, or fishing techniques, or… or we’re reminiscing about a baseball match or [a] UFC fight… (3)

This participant described how he can talk to his friends about things that he cannot with his wife, and that he is able to speak to his male friends about his interests. This suggested to me that his male friends offer him the opportunity to experience connection and similarity in his life that he did not have the opportunity to experience with his wife, because their interests differ. The man-to-man relationships that participants described seemed to allow for an experience of intimacy outside of intimate relationships with their girlfriends and wives. Although all men delineated the experience and importance of their man-to-man friendships, they also explained the value of their experience of intimacy with their girlfriends or wives as well.

**Intimacy with a girlfriend or a wife.** All participants were married or in a relationship with a woman at the time of the study. Men’s descriptions of understandings and experiences of intimacy in relationships with their partners (girlfriends or wives) did not commonly include sexual experiences. Participants typically expounded that their experience and understanding of intimacy with their partner was founded in connection and in friendship. As one participant noted,
Yeah, we are true friends. She is my… V [wife] is my best friend today. Bar any male that I know, she is my best friend. It’s not that I hold a difference in regard to higher levels of friendship, I just don’t, but for what we shared and experienced together it’s above comparison. (8)

This participant expressed how experiences shared with his wife were important to him and described his wife as a “true friend” to him, which suggested to me that his friendship with his wife was integral to the intimacy he experienced with her. This participant also described difficulties he encountered when he first met his wife, specifically around sexual boundaries.

Participant (P): For sure in regards to getting to know A, the first female relationship where I didn’t sleep with her first. We took a year and a half to get to know each other as friends.

Interviewer (I): With those feelings? With those sexual feelings as well?

P: There were definite times when I wanted to advance sexually and she shared that with me too, but she didn’t present the way that I did. I could remember times having visible physical responses to other females and then wanting to act out on those with her while I was getting to know her. At times, she simply said no we’re going to ruin things if we don’t keep building this part of our relationship. (8)

The participant reveals wanting to “advance sexually”, but respecting the wishes of the woman who would become his wife. This seemed to be a new sort of intimate male-female relationship for this interviewee, as he and his partner established a friendship before sleeping with each other. This suggested to me that the intimacy
experienced in the relationship was founded on friendship. This understanding of friendship as important in his intimate relationships with his partner was shared by many men, and was the most common description of intimacy in men’s relationships with their wives and girlfriends. As another respondent put it,

I’ll tear up when I see an 85 [year-old] mom and pop walking down the sidewalk holding hands. That will bring me to tears… It’s the friendship, right? And, if you don’t have that friendship behind it, eventually that intimacy is not always going to be there the way you want it to be. (2)

This respondent also stated that friendship was important to his understanding of intimacy. His description of an 85 year-old mom and dad walking down the street holding hands suggested to me that intimate connection in partnership is reliant on friendship. Similar to participants (8) and (2), other men described, “She’s [girlfriend] like a really close friend as well as a lover, like I could share a lot of my secrets, or my past that she’s already aware of…” (9), “The lady I’m with is one of those people… It’s nice knowing that I can go to these people and not be judged regardless of what it is. I never had that before.” (10), and “…I could never find the right girl is what it came down to, but then everything really changed with this girl. I constantly felt comfortable, [and] I never lied to her.” (11). Men consistently described the intimacy that they experienced with their partners as related to feelings of connection, trust, partnership and primarily friendship.

**Intimate relationships with children.** Most men interviewed in this study described their intimate experiences with children, and understandings of the intimacy in
parent-child bonds. Men in this study commonly explained how cultural images of
mothers and children signified intimacy for them.

**Men’s images of children and intimacy.** Some of the participants in this study
described their understandings of intimacy as the closeness that is shared in parent-child
relationships. One participant imparted what he experienced when AA and NA members
speak about their relationships with their parents,

> Sometimes it’s just… the one’s that really seem to strike me are the parent-
> child one’s for some reason probably because of my childhood I imagine.
> That expression of love and caring always… I feel that intimate connection
> almost always. (5)

During our interview, this respondent had proclaimed that he had not experienced
intimacy when he was growing up, and stated that expressions of “love and caring” was
something that allowed him to feel an “intimate connection almost always.” This
suggested to me that although this participant had not experienced intimacy with his
parents, an understanding and imagining of parental care allowed him to feel an intimate
connection. This also suggested to me that understandings of intimacy are sometimes not
experienced directly, but are observed and felt through cultural understandings of
intimacy. Two participants offer examples of understandings of intimacy that they did not
directly experience, and both understandings involve the perceived relationship between
a mother and her child. One participant responded to a question that I asked regarding his
understanding of intimacy by explaining,

> Nothing that comes to mind. A picture of a mother holding her baby. Where
> the mother is prepared to do anything and everything for that baby and the
baby is very reliant on the mother, but both of them are required for those circumstances. (10)

In response to my query about his role model for intimacy, another participant similarly, but with more detail, described the relationship between a mother and her child:

An infant just reveals themselves as they are. If they are hungry and want to nurse, they’re like, where are you? They’re not holding back. If they’re enraged, they rage. I think mothers who are connected at that end of the spectrum, just reveal the way they are to their baby. When they’re troubled, they’re troubled. When a mom is frantic about her baby, she’s frantic. Maybe it’s not so much the moms, but it’s the baby. I would say the baby is completely revealing of who they are at all times. (7)

These participants acknowledged the relationship between a mother and her child as a connection that they would consider to be intimate even though they had not directly experienced it. This suggests to me that intimacy between a parent and child is not something that has to be directly experienced to be understood as intimacy. Although the men did not have to experience intimacy with or as children to have an understanding of intimacy in parent-child relationships, most interviewees stated that they had experienced intimacy with their children and grandchildren that had a powerful influence on their understandings of intimacy.

**Intimate experiences with children.** Most participants disclosed having intimate relationships with children in their life. One participant indicated how having children afforded him the opportunity to experience something that he did not think he wanted,
It’s the kind of thing to that if you never had kids, you will not be able to comprehend that. I was unable to comprehend it beforehand. There are some things in life that you cannot understand until you’ve done it, and that’s one of them. Having said that, I think… that’s it. I could not have comprehended the relationship before that. I remember seeing parents with their kids crawling all over them and I would just shake and go, “ugh, I don’t want that” and then when I had kids there was nothing else I wanted. (4)

This participant expressed that he had an intimate connection with his children from the day that they were born. He stated that the parent-child relationship is one that can’t be comprehended until it happens. In the following statement, this participant described the closeness he has experienced with his children as something that has grown stronger with time.

We share a perspective… and it could be learned as well, because my daughter and I talk about how the relationship has affected each other. How my parenting style has affected her values and that kind of a thing and the way that she thinks and stuff, but having said that in many ways we think the same way. We can laugh at each other, because we both know that we’re thinking the same thing. It’s almost an external relationship with myself. It’s really strange… (long pause) I don’t really know what else to say. (4)

He identified that he learns and grows with his daughter, and that they are able to talk and learn from each other’s growth. When they engaged with their children and grandchildren, men commonly felt moments of intimacy - of those moments, one respondent relayed,
My oldest daughter, some of the stuff is fear based, and I just see her and at one point she was just overeating and getting heavy and... I said, I’m a diabetic and where you’re heading is not safe for your health and it saddens me, so we had a good cry. We had a heart-felt moment and it took a little while for her to figure it out herself, but she’s working at it. I had an intimate, personal moment. (6)

This respondent depicted his relationship with his daughter as “intimate” and “personal.” Use of this language suggests to me that the interviewee experienced this moment as an intimate one, which allowed him to disclose his fears and connect with his child, and discourage her from “heading” down a potentially unhealthy path toward diabetes. Another informant, in reflecting on his experience of intimacy with his granddaughter, revealed,

It’s really hard to explain, and sometimes maybe it’s not about... maybe it’s just my granddaughter grabbing my hand to walk into the store or down the street and recognizing that we’re connected or bonded. In a really unexplainable way. I know that thinking that in some sort of way I probably provide comfort for her and also for me and we walk down the street and don’t really think about that right? It’s just uh... I guess a lot of it just seems to be instinctual when I really think about it, because there’s no real thought process there. (5)

This informant explained the experience of feeling “connected or bonded” when he walks with his granddaughter as “instinctual” and as “unexplainable.” This suggests to me that men might experience intimacy with their children that is more visceral and
less learned than the intimate friendships and relationships they discussed above. Another participant expressed his understanding of how he achieved moments of intimacy with his children:

When I do these things: when I shovel the driveway, when I fix the kids computers, when I read with the kids, when I help them clean their rooms, because… sometimes it’s like being the captain of the ship. ‘No, stay focused keep cleaning that shelf” telling my… to me that’s intimacy. (3)

This suggests to me that intimate moments for this man come with his duties as a father, and that for him, intimacy entails fulfilling roles that the culture has traditionally assigned to men. Men have very intimate bonds with the children in their lives, and these bonds seem to be grounded in learning and growth that is reciprocally experienced and understood between them. Participants’ descriptions of their relationships with their children and various individuals in their lives consistently emphasized that intimacy exists in relationship, and some men in the study asked if they could forge intimate relationships with anyone.

**Can men be intimate with anyone?** This was not a question that I posed, but was a question that some men asked themselves during the interview process and one that I, too, asked myself during the process of collecting and analyzing data. The suggestion that intimacy can be experienced with anyone led me to wonder about the relationship between propinquity (i.e. proximity) and intimacy. The idea that intimacy could happen with anyone demonstrated that participants understood and experienced intimacy as a process as well as a feeling. One respondent stated,
…I often wonder what the depths of intimacy that I have with any one person is in fact something that I could have with anyone? But, I just, don’t know how to get there. Actually, philosophically I kind of believe that. I think that you can have that level, that depth of intimacy with anyone. That depth of connection with anyone is possible. It’s just that in that case the barriers are all down. (4)

This participant identified that “philosophically” he believes that it is possible to experience intimacy with anyone, but that he was not sure how to get there. He stated that individuals would need to “let their barriers” down. Many men, including (4), used the term letting down barriers to describe what I understood to be their willingness to reveal their flaws and entrust an individual with information about them that could, but would not, be used to judge or hurt them. This participant later explained that his decision to put up barriers was what prevented him from being intimate. Another participant delineated that he can be intimate with anyone, because, according to him, everyone shares at least one similar experience. This participant stated,

You can be intimate with someone, it can be male or female. It’s what binds you. You used the word connection, so it’s the same thing. There’s a common thread through everybody. There’s one thing in your life that’s happened to you, that’s happened to me. (8)

This participant postulated that all individuals could achieve connection and possibly, intimacy in interactions. His belief that connection and intimacy happens through interaction was something that I understood to be common among men
interviewed. All participants discussed a number of ways that interactions in their relationships facilitated and maintained intimacy, a theme I take up in the next section.

**Intimacy is a conscious effort for men: Interactions that facilitate and maintain intimacy**

As mentioned in the previous section, participants in this study often suggested that intimate relationships do not occur spontaneously. I found that, for the men participating in this study, intimate relationships required interactions that facilitated and maintained intimate experience. Intimate relationships were not relationships that simply existed for men, but were carefully chosen and protected by these men. In this section, I proffer that participants’ maintenance and facilitation of intimacy is an active and conscious effort. I outline participants’ expressions of intimacy as a process that requires individuals to work together on struggles, grow from their struggles, and learn to practice acceptance.

**How men actively maintain intimacy in relationships.** Participants in this study accomplished intimacy in their relationships through interactions. Participants explain utilizing intentional interactions to facilitate intimacy. Therefore, men’s intimate relationships are the result of conscious interaction-based efforts to facilitate and maintain the experience of intimacy in relationships. Participants indicated that being selective about the feelings they share with others; supporting others by actively listening to their feelings; sharing their emotions, feelings and thoughts with others; and utilizing the Internet and cell phones to stay connected to the people they cared about enabled them to facilitate and maintain intimacy. I discuss below the ways in which men
consciously interacted within their intimate relationships to facilitate and maintain intimacy.

**Selective sharing in men’s intimate relationships.** Men often delineated how they made decisions to share feelings, emotions and information with others. For some, the decision to share or not was intended to protect them from individuals about who they were unsure they could trust. One interviewee reflected,

> If I see somebody that’s closed and hard and doesn’t express then I’m not as likely to take the chance of being vulnerable. Or, if I see somebody that doesn’t have walls up or some of them taken down, then it’s a lot easier for me to take some of my own down and let myself out. (5)

Similarly, when I asked a participant, “What kind of intimacy was achieved when you had a mask on and you had these superficial relationships?” he responded, “Limited intimacy, I guess. I would probably let people in to a certain degree, but only so far.” (9) He later conceded that “limited intimacy” protected him, because he did not trust too many people. Others expressed being selective in their sharing to protect their girlfriends and wives, such as in the following case:

> It’s hard to say best friend right, because you may not go and talk to your partner about everything that’s super duper deep and intimate to your thoughts, because you know something about your partner, that she wouldn’t accept that because it’s not where her morals are at, or… So, you’ll go to your best friend to talk about it, or a male friend that you can say, “yeah, this is how I feel.” It’s stupid but… Or you go to your counselor, or where you can.
Eventually you have to talk to that partner about something that might be that,
I don’t know how to say it if it’s that detrimental to a relationship. (2)

This participant decided to refrain from disclosing his intimate thoughts because he
was afraid that such disclosure might be detrimental to him and the relationship. Some
men described withholding feelings and information as a way of facilitating intimacy.

One participant explained why he had chosen to reveal only certain types of information
to his wife,

If she has deep down fears that make her unconsciously guarded in a certain
area. There are things that I haven’t revealed to W and there are things she
hasn’t revealed to me. We reveal a lot to each other, but I don’t know about
her sexual acts with former partners. I don’t think I need to know that. I
certainly don’t want to know that. I don’t need those images in my head, but I
don’t have an expectation that she would reveal that to me. Could she reveal
that to me? She could. “I really want to tell you what I did sexually with W.”
If she wanted to do that, I’d probably go, really? I do a little thing here. Do I
have the capability of hearing that without getting all messed up about it? I
have a thing where. If I don’t think I can hear something and still be loving to
the other person and loving to myself, so when I had an affair I wasn’t being
loving to myself or anybody. I felt like I was in love, but there was nothing
loving about that. It wasn’t being loving to me or my wife or the woman I had
the affair with. It was damaging, it wasn’t loving. If I don’t think I have the
capability of handling that conversation and hearing that and still being loving
of the other person and loving of myself then I think my job is to say, “Don’t
tell me, because I won’t be able to be loving of you or me or both of us.” I’m not, I don’t like that. My goal is to be loving of anybody really. I like to be loving in my behaviours. If I can’t be loving in my behaviour, then I shouldn’t have this conversation. I think it’s the same for the woman then. I want her to reveal who she really is, but if any of that means that she won’t be loving of herself, then I don’t want her to do it. I don’t want W to do something with me that is not loving of herself, or loving of me. (7)

The decision to share or not share he regarded as an act of love, as he realized he had difficulty receiving certain disclosures from his wife, such as her past sexual experiences. According to (7), the conscious decision to share or not share was an act aimed at protecting both himself and his wife from difficult emotions. This suggested to me that, as an active participant in a relationship, some men interviewed consciously shared or refrained from sharing to maintain the experience of intimacy in their relationships. Another way that men consciously maintained intimacy in their relationships was through the act of listening.

**Listening as important to intimacy.** Participants in this study commonly explained listening as important in their intimate relationships. They expounded listening as a conscious effort to maintain intimacy and as an important skill for maintaining support and enhancing communication in their relationships. As one respondent noted,

She was worried about it. You can’t say don’t be, it just doesn’t work like that. You just got to support. Listen to what they say, and that’s the communication part, and really listen and say it’s okay, it’s okay. (6)
This participant also mentioned “So, when you’ve got two ears and one mouth use them in proportion that’s what my father always said” (6), and thus clarifying that listening is a skill that his father taught him that allows him to support his partner. This understanding of listening as important is one that some men believe other men do not share,

I’ve heard the comment that a good way for a man to deal with his or her girlfriend after work is to ask them how their day was that way they’ll continue talking and they [the man] can sit back and relax. I think that that’s definitely closed communication because that way they’re talking at you they’re not actually talking with you. (1)

According to this participant, many men learn how to pretend to listen as part of taken-for-granted male privilege in heterosexual relationships, but points out that this problematically leads to “closed communication.” Men understood listening to be an active engagement with others, in which both they and the other benefitted, as the following participant noted,

There’s an immediate payoff being there for somebody when there’s true emotional trouble going on in their life and you can be a part of that and supportive and loving and listening. Sometimes just active listening is all they need. (8)

For this participant, active listening in times of emotional trouble had an “immediate payoff.” This suggests to me that men consciously decide to listen to others to facilitate intimate interactions and experiences in their relationships. One participant noted that he has had difficulty listening in his relationship with his wife in the past.
She comes home and unloads about her day. The good things. The bad things. The things that she hated. Her troubles. She does that mostly, because I’m a good listener. Once and a while I’m not, and when I’m not, she shuts up.

When I start offering advice, her eyes glaze over and I can tell that my status just dropped, and she shuts up. ‘Why would I talk to this asshole who just offers me advice?’ (7)

Men in this study frequently viewed active listening as an important way to maintain intimacy in relationships. They seem to understand that listening allows for stronger experiences of intimacy. In describing the role of listening in the relationship with the woman with whom he had been the most intimate, one interviewee put it, “I listened to what she was saying. I took it in and I didn’t just go, yeah, yeah, yeah. She sparked something in me that I had never experienced before.” (8) These men saw listening as a learned and conscious effort that helped them to maintain intimacy in their relational lives. Although they understood active listening to be important for maintaining intimacy, men also saw the conscious sharing of their emotions as another strategy for creating intimacy in relationships.

**Sharing emotions as important to intimacy.** Participants in this study explained experiencing intimacy when they shared their emotions, desires and thoughts. For some, the ability to share their feelings and emotions was the cornerstone of an intimate relationship. In response to my question *what is your understanding of intimacy?* Participants stated, “I guess my understanding of intimacy at this point is the sharing of how you feel;” (5), “I think intimacy is probably… I think it’s what I share of my inside stuff, my vulnerabilities;” (7) and “Wow, that’s a big question. I guess right off the top of
the head it would be how much I would allow someone to know me. What I’m willing to
share with someone else.” (9) Many men recalled instances in which they experienced
sharing their emotions with others, which subsequently led to an experience of intimacy.
Of the relationship between expressing emotion and intimacy, one respondent reflected,

The first intimate relationship I had was with my sponsor. Sharing my
deepest, darkest secrets and sharing all of those things, and that in itself, was a
shock to the system I guess you would call it, or to the spirit because it was so
different to the emotional numbness [that was experienced]. (3)

Throughout interviews participants expound their understanding of why it is
important for them to share in their intimate relationships. The importance of sharing in
relationships for men seemed to center around a desire to reveal themselves to other
individuals, and have others listen to them. One man stated explicitly this desire:
“Intimacy can be one way, but it’s probably best shared [Laughter].” (4) He also
identifies that sharing can be difficult: “That’s that hardest part, to share the stuff that I
don’t appreciate, or think is inappropriate…” (4) While he found it difficult to share
difficult emotions, he also felt that the benefits of connection and intimacy outweighed a
fear of disapproval, “People want to share your life, and if you only give them the good
stuff you’re ripping them off. People want to be there for you in your darkest hour…” (4)

Men’s conscious efforts to share feelings in relationships allowed for the
recognition and experience of intimate moments. Sharing feelings and emotions with
others seemed to provide men with the opportunity to experience intimacy directly. One
participant communicated the benefits he experienced with his partner when they shared
their life goals with one another,
There’s sexual intimacy and there’s personal, the goals, those kind of intimate moments that you have where you get the, “Aha, this is really good. You’re doing really great. I’m proud of that. I’m proud of you and I’m glad that you’re enjoying it.” You get some benefit from that too. I get to be trusted and be a part of somebody’s life, because they share with me as well. I think that’s about it for my intimacy definition. (6)

This feeling of being trusted and sharing emotions, desires and thoughts with another person seemed to be important to the creation and maintenance of intimacy in respondents’ relationships. The ability to share seemed to be a conscious active decision that enhanced intimacy. The opportunity to share and be active in intimate relationships with others interviewees explained as something that did not have to happen in face-to-face interactions, and thus was possible via phone and Internet communication.

Facilitating intimacy through Internet and telephone communication. Men in this study sometimes reported utilizing text messaging, phone calls, and the Internet to facilitate intimacy with others, specifically their girlfriend or wife. This was reported by men as a conscious effort to let girlfriends or wives know that they are thinking of them. One informant stated,

That’s an intimate moment on the extreme sense, and on the other side is I’m really looking forward to going away this weekend. Just getting a text back saying, ‘I’m really looking forward to that too.’ It gives me a warm fuzzy that we can plan and spend some time together and look forward to it. (6)

This informant’s understanding that intimate communications can come via text message suggests to me that intimate communication can happen at any time and in any
In a long-distance relationship, another man explained why he viewed text messaging as important for relational intimacy.

One way that my current girlfriend shows intimacy is that she will make the effort to come to Guelph frequently. So I’d say another way would be, like we’re long distance, just trying to communicate even though we are far apart. Like text messages, phone calls, Facebook messages… those kind of things, because it shows to me that she was actively thinking about me in that moment. (1)

The Internet or phone allows this participant to transcend distance and maintain closeness through active communication. Internet and phone communication seems to provide the opportunity for men to not only stay in contact, but to also work on their relationships and develop intimacy. I found that men in this study consciously worked hard to create and maintain intimacy in their relationships, but they also reported that intimate relationships could only be maintained if all individuals involved were willing to work on the relationship. In the following section, I discuss men’s descriptions of the work they engage in to enhance intimacy in their friendships and relationships.

**Working and struggling together in intimate relationships.** Participants in this study reported working through difficulties related to their involvement in relationships. Men explained that relational difficulties required the support and the cooperation of the other in the relationship to resolve. Struggles in intimate relationships they regarded as strong experiences of intimacy, and commonly understood that the ability to work through difficulties allowed for greater experiences of intimacy. Below, I discuss participants’ explanations of working through relational and personal struggles with
others, participant’s explanations of how working through difficulties allows for growth in their intimate relationships, and participants descriptions of acceptance fostering intimacy in intimate relationships.

*Men working on relational or personal struggles in intimate relationships.* Men disclosed varying struggles in different relationships, and all explained that through working on those difficulties, they together fostered more intimacy. One participant described how his experience and understanding of intimacy would grow when he maintained closeness with a struggling friend:

> I have about ten people that I have known that have been my friends for about twenty years that is... and the relationship is reciprocal, it’s the same for me and them, this idea that growth doesn’t come without struggles. This idea that it is very easy to be loving and spiritual and kind when things are great and the person is wonderful, but when the person is going through difficult times and struggles and they don’t behave in the way that we thought they should that’s when I think real intimacy comes out, and that’s when I think forgiveness comes in, and that’s when compassion comes in, that’s when understanding comes in, and that’s when you’re willing to lose the friendship and stand up to them. (3)

This suggested to me that helping a friend work through struggles had fostered intimacy for this participant, and that the ability for friends to work together and support each other through each other’s struggles fosters intimacy. When I asked a man if he supported his partner more than she had supported him, he responded, “I think it goes equal both ways, because I’m a male does not mean I have a stronger role in being
supportive. She’s supportive of me as well.” (9) Another participant who reported that he had experienced difficulty with gambling at the same time that his wife was having an affair, outlined the emotional work that they both had to undertake to find intimacy:

No, I guess the one thing that I would say is that I hear a lot of times that people have affairs and that’s it for their marriage and I had to look at it this way, is there a lot more good than bad that happened and I did, and I determined that there was a lot more good than bad that occurred and I was willing to work at it. That’s not to say that I don’t struggle with the thoughts. (6)

Based on his experience, this participant felt that it was important to declare that affairs do not necessarily end marriages. He expresses that when he thinks about the situation he recognizes that more good than bad resulted from the affair. This suggests to me that difficult relational struggles that traditionally lead to separations can cultivate the potential for stronger, more intimate connections if the couple agrees to pursue relationship work and support. Another interviewee explained how communication shifted with his partner as they begun to work through relationship difficulties:

What I share today with P [wife] is complete openness, honesty, I communicate like this. Direct eye contact. I’m not holding something back here. I’m looking away because I know it’s a lie. We’ve been through a lot of stuff with regard to my behaviour, and her behaviour and stuff like that. It just keeps getting better. (8)

This participant details the tools he and his wife developed to work through their relationship difficulties together. Men often explained working through relationship
struggles, and much like (8), others discussed how working through struggles and growing with other individuals, especially wives and girlfriends, had led to growth and stronger intimate connection. Growth with others is discussed in the next section.

**Growth in men’s intimate relationships.** Participants in this study who communicated working on relationship struggles commonly reported working on the relationship in order to foster growth. Some saw on-going growth and learning as a result of successfully working through relationship struggles. One participant envisioned intimacy as the valuable outcome of working through relationship struggles,

The struggles we went through during that period of time made us both grow and grow closer, so I guess intimacy in that sense is not all about this idea of opening up and sharing, but is about this integrity, perseverance, commitment, and also that piece around relational esteem. I believe that the relationship was stronger, because of these small struggles. (3)

This participant utilized the phrase “relational esteem” to identify the result of working on struggles and building a strong relationship that has “integrity, perseverance and commitment.” Participants express recognizing difficulties, improving on these through communication, and attaining new achievements together. These achievements are then integrated into each individual’s understanding of what is important in their relationship. The following participant described how his girlfriend and he acknowledged a problem, addressed it, and improved their relationship:

It’s getting healthier now, but the woman that I’m with, we’ve been on again off again for over 20 years and we messed around while both of us were married, with each other. Now, we’ve talked about it in great length, and we
both understand that was really unhealthy and it was really unfair and we both
damaged each other emotionally, because of it…We’re very honest with each
other, we’re very open with each other, absolutely wonderful girl. Both of us
have had an absolute paradigm shift in terms of our morals. And, I like it. (10)

This acceptance that both of them engaged in an affair with each other seemed to
allow them to move forward and improve on their relationship. Men in this study seemed
to discuss acceptance as an intimate experience in relationships, as the act signified
connection and a desire for intimacy in a relationship. Acceptance is discussed in further
detail below.

_Acceptance in men’s intimate relationships._ Participants often specified
acceptance as important to intimacy. As one put it, “When I think about intimacy, I think
the most intimate relationship would be one where you 100% really know and accept that
person for who they are.” (4) Much like this man, others in this study placed a high value
on acceptance as a path to greater intimacy in relationships. This suggests to me that men
actively make decisions to accept themselves and to reveal themselves to their partners.
In this study, the ability to reveal oneself and be accepted by another was important to
each man’s understanding and experience of intimacy. As the following informant
elaborated,

I’d like to love P [wife] as she truly is. I want her to love me as I truly am, not
as some guarded, masked person. I don’t see a lot of value in that. Being
loved by some artificial person. I would say what value is there if we are not
revealing who we are. (7)
This informant emphasized the importance of valuing his wife for who she is, so he could work to achieve and maintain a mutually accepting relationship. Though he was not always successful, this participant strove to love his wife unconditionally.

Participants commonly spoke to this desire to receive acceptance from others, and to be accepting of others. All expound acceptance as something aimed for but not always fully achieved. One participant stated, “I guess an acceptance of T [girlfriend] as well. I don’t expect perfection from her. Maybe just through my past relationships I realized there isn’t any perfect woman for me.” (9) Based on participants’ descriptions, I understood acceptance to be a way of looking at their personal struggles and relationship struggles and identifying if the relationship is worth continuing. It seemed as though acceptance in relationships occurred through changes that individuals made in their understanding of relationships. Participants not only expressed working on and growing in their relationships, they also equally emphasized the personal work they did on themselves. Men in this study often explained that changes in their understanding and perspective allowed for changes in their understandings of intimate relationships and themselves as intimate men.

**Understandings of intimacy change for men over time**

Participants in this study often reported, through growth, experiencing profound shifts in their understanding of intimacy and as a result, in their conduct within relationships over time. In this section, I discuss how understandings of intimacy among those involved in NA and AA changed through help seeking and among all men, through adolescence and into adulthood and through their sexual relationships.
Help seeking (AA and NA) leading to more intimacy. As discussed above, participants who identified as recovering AA and NA members seemed to form intimate relationships with their sponsors. Participants involved with AA and NA experienced change related to intimacy in their understandings of themselves and their relationships with others. This suggests to me that beyond the intimate relationships created with sponsors, participants experience changes in their understandings of themselves as men involved in relationships. For many, their “recovery” had allowed them to identify and share feelings and hence, to experience intimacy. Participants noted, “When I stopped doing drugs… One of the things I had to find was I had to find myself. I couldn’t just stop doing drugs. I had to do some personal work.” (3), “For the most part, for myself, and most of the people I know, we kind of push that intimate part down. That kind of work I’ve done. It helped me a lot actually.” (5), and “I know that going into recovery that one of the challenges I faced was that I was utterly numb. I didn’t feel anything. I had to teach myself how to feel, and then I’ve become this soft, intimate, gooey, crybaby dude.” (4) These participants identified that the work that they had accomplished during their recovery allowed them to experience change in themselves that allowed for intimacy. One participant explicitly explained how his personal work in recovery enhanced his understanding of relationships,

It wasn’t until I went for recovery this time that I found out that it takes a lot of energy to be a friend and to be in an intimate and trusting relationship. I’m okay with everyone not liking me today. The people in my inner circle, if you will, are the people I call up if I get bad news, when I’m stressed out and
[when] things aren’t going right. I know I can call them, talk to them about it and they’re not going to judge me or break my trust. (10)

These men recognized that the emotional work that they did taught them how to experience, understand, and maintain intimate relationships. Beyond identification of addiction as a barrier and recovery as a step toward intimacy, men also detailed how they challenged their childhood experiences of intimacy.

**Challenging childhood experiences of intimacy.** Many participants revealed that they did not experience intimacy when they were younger. These participants frequently describe intimate experiences and interactions with friends and partners, and self-reflection on these intimate experiences and interactions, as the way in which they began to conceptualize intimacy in their lives. Many mentioned experiences of intimate interaction as new and very different from what they had experienced growing up. Consequently, men commonly utilized their upbringing as an example of what intimacy is not. One respondent explained,

> I try to not emulate many of the things in my parents’ relationship, because their relationship’s over. They’re divorced, and I think that was the biggest problem and actually it wasn’t just my father who wound up with problems with communication it was also my mother. But yeah, there was definitely a big communication problem. (1)

In his interview, he consistently described communication as important in his relationship with his girlfriend. Many participants explained resisting what they were taught as children. One participant explicitly stated,
I grew in a family where there were very pretty strict ways you should behave, and most of them involved putting on that mask. Being a good boy. Being proper. Not being stupid, silly, inappropriate, those sorts of things. I think I learned to appear that way. For me, that’s that putting on that mask, or putting a shield up and I would say that I didn’t know a lot about me and nobody else knew a lot about me. I think I learned that this was necessary for social success and the family and beyond. It was an upper middle class family. I gradually decided that I didn’t like that. I don’t hang around very masked people. Do I know people with masks? Not so much anymore because they just don’t… they interest me, I mean I find every person to be interesting, but I would say my friends are pretty unmasked, which I like. (7)

This participant asserted that being “unmasked” in our interview as the way he experienced true intimacy. He maintains that being “unmasked” is the opposite of what he was taught as a child, and has been a precursor for the intimacy he experiences with his wife and his friends. One man explained overcoming his childhood experiences of his father’s demeaning views of women by “…giving women the respect that they’re due.” (10) These men questioned their childhood experiences and understandings, and developed new understandings and experiences of intimacy in their lives. Men had also expressed that their understanding of intimacy in childhood and into their adolescence was centered on sexual activity, and almost all participants disclosed this shift in their former views that intimacy was simply sexual activity.

**The meaning of intimacy and sex change over time.** The understanding that intimacy is not equivalent to sexual activity is a universal understanding among the
participants of this study. However, almost all participants in this study identified that when they were younger (i.e. an age range between adolescence and the early 30’s) they understood the experience of intimacy to be the experience of sexual activity. One participant described how intimacy had changed over time for him,

Yeah, you’re asking about the present. How I’ve described things about my relationship with V [wife] right now. I think I’ve done a pretty accurate present description of what I believe intimacy is today and previously, I had a lot of belief that intimacy just happened in the bedroom in past relationships. I didn’t understand that doing the dishes meant something. I didn’t understand that communicating on a different level then, ‘okay you have a problem? Let’s hear it fast and go. We’ll move on to the next thing.’ That’s, previously I would just be, if I wasn’t in love with the person it was hard to be truly intimate. If I knew the relationship was over, it wasn’t like I was giving my heart to anyone anymore. To me, intimacy at that point and time would just be sexual. That was my base off of intimacy, basically. (8)

Almost all men in this study consistently expressed that their understanding and experience of intimacy had changed as they had grown. Much like (8), men describe similar changes in their understandings and experiences of intimacy,

Well, you know, if you’d asked me that question ten years ago it would have been sexual intimacy and those people that I have sexual intimacy with, but that’s before I took a look at my sexual behaviour and stuff like that, and realized that I’ve had sex with a lot of people and not everyone of them was intimate. (3)
How has it changed over time? Well, it’s hard to remember how it was a long time ago. I can’t remember what I would say about intimacy when I was 20. I probably didn’t think about intimacy when I was 20. I might have thought about sexual intimacy, but I didn’t think about intimacy the way we’re talking about it now. That’s one way, from sexual intimacy to intimacy and yourself as a person. Thoughts, feelings, actions, instincts, whatever. (Participant 7)

I guess it’s just changed. You nailed it when you said that. I used to see intimacy as primarily sexuality, or being sexual and I see it as something different now. I see it as it roles across my range of work relationships female friendships, parents, siblings, sponsor, all those sorts of things that have changed in sexuality. (9)

Intimacy as an experience of sexual activity for men in this study seemed to shift as they aged and experienced more in their lives. For these men, this shift in their understanding of intimacy seems to promote a new understanding of themselves as intimate men. In the following section, I discuss participant’s assertions that they are different from other men, because they experience and understand intimacy differently than traditional men.

**Men’s understandings of being different from traditional men**

Beyond these changes in participants’ understandings of intimacy in their lives, participants often reported identifying as different from the “manly man” (6) or understandings of “traditional masculinity” (1) in society. This suggests to me that men’s desire to experience and accept intimacy requires them to reorganize their understanding
of masculinity, because identifying as an intimate man and traditionally masculine is paradoxical. One respondent identified as what he called a metrosexual and stated,

Yeah, what do they call that? Well there’s metrosexual depending on the context. There’s… it goes back to a time frame, Renaissance man, because there you would talk about a diversification of the arts and culture and all that soft stuff. Before it was like gladiator cave men, a uni-dimensional kind of a thing. A renaissance man opened up more and had that kind of a thing. The modern equivalent and it’s a little more charged because it has the word sex in it, but metrosexual, which means I can do anything. (4)

This participant also expressed that being able to be intimate and “soft” meant that he “can do anything”, and added:

I think I embrace both sides [toughness and softness] and personally I think I have an edge if I am embracing that softer, emotional, intimate, feminine side and you’re not. I consider myself to actually have an edge over you, because it’s a limitation. (4)

Men in this study often utilize the word soft to characterize themselves and explain how they are able to practice intimacy. However, men in this study also identify as tough. This suggests to me that men view toughness as an inherent quality of men, and softness as a learned quality that allows for men to experience and practice intimacy. Another participant who identified as masculine and tough added in our interview,

In a manly sense, I look after the house. I pull my weight around the house. I do a lot more domestic things than most men would even dream of doing. I do laundry and grocery shopping and put out the garbage to cutting the grass and
renovating the house. You name it. I don’t have a problem doing anything. I don’t really like sewing. I take that stuff to my mom. I’ll iron my clothes. I’m not your typical… Like, football, it’s not a part of my life. Hockey, it’s not a part of my life. American Idol, I like American Idol. (6)

This participant discussed the “domestic stuff” (or chores) that are typically understood to be things men don’t do in the home, but he made a point of revealing that he did. Men in this study seemed to balance their expressions of softness with toughness throughout their accounts. This suggested to me that participants wanted to be understood as men who actively practiced being soft and tough in their lives. One participant explicitly divulged that he felt that most men balanced hardness with softness:

Yeah, I think we have to play both sides of the fiddle a little bit more, because if we’re playing it for just the woman it’s fine, but if we’re playing it for the woman and say fifteen of her other buddies we’re going to make ourselves look a little bit tougher even though we shouldn’t. More people should be real in situations like that. I think for us we’ll fake it a lot of the times just to look tougher than we actually need to be. I’ve been known to be like an egg, hard on the outside soft as hell on the inside. I think a lot of men are exactly like that. They’re just too afraid to let other men see that intimate side of them, because weakness is a very intimate thing. The ultimate form of weakness is showing somebody how soft you can be. (2)

Men in this study often expressed the difficulties that they experienced coming to an understanding of themselves as capable of being soft and tough. This difficulty was revealed through men’s critiques of their socialization and the cultural scripts they had
learned regarding how to be a man in society. In the last section, I discuss participants’ critiques of how they were taught to be men, and the difficulties they had encountered practicing intimacy society.

**Barriers for men practicing intimacy in society: A critique of masculine culture by men**

Participants in this study often articulated an understanding of themselves as capable of being both tough and soft in their lives. Although men recognize they are capable of practicing both toughness (or manliness) and softness (or a more intimate, feminine side), they also acknowledge the difficulties they experience attempting to balance an embodiment of softness and toughness in their lives. Specifically, participants seemed to have difficulty demonstrating softness socially in their lives. In this section, I will delineate men’s accounts of social pressures to hide their feelings and exemplify manliness.

**Men’s experiences of hiding feelings.** All participants in this study conveyed that cultural messages, socialization and other social pressures made it difficult for them to outwardly display emotion in their lives. One respondent illustrated confusion about what a man is in his statement: “When I think about what I’ve learned of what a man should be or what a man is, it doesn’t match my experience and that’s the conflict from my head to my heart.” (4). He also stated,

…That’s the message that I got. I’m not sure where I get the society stuff from, I guess just through the experience of people I know and the attitude of the groups of people I know. I have men over here and women over here.
They’re very similar to my dad’s cold, men don’t cry; go to work, work hard; take care of your wife, your kids, all that just seems like that’s society’s expectation of what a man is and none of that equals intimacy. (4)

This respondent adamantly questions what he learned about being a man growing up. The “cold”, “men don’t cry” message that this participant expresses is one that other participants consistently reiterate in interviews. It seems as though men feel crying is a specific expression that they were taught is unacceptable to show in society. One participant describes the pressure he feels to hold back tears:

For myself, most of my life I’ve been afraid to express my feelings. It’s not manly, men don’t cry, were lots of the messages I got. So, it’s easy for me to be in that bubble, and if you [a man] don’t cry, I don’t cry, but if that starts to change somehow, then it seems to make it safer for me that you can express that. (5)

This assertion that it “makes it safer” for this participant to cry in front of others when other men are crying seems to suggest that situations and mirroring among men dictate what is acceptable for men to do. These men were very well attuned to the difficulties they experience in society when making a decision to show emotion or not. One participant illuminates how men are taught to hide emotion at a very young age:

I think there are challenges for men about being around each other just because of that whole wolf pack phenomenon in the schoolyard and teasing and all of that stuff. My experience as a kid, and once and a while as a grown man, was that if you reveal something then often you were mocked or
tortured. If you cried in the schoolyard, that would be intimate. That would be revealing of your sadness or fear. (7)

Respondents often conveyed this fear of falling out of the tough image, because there were learned, tangible repercussions for deviating from the expectations of traditional masculinity. I found in the expressions of all participants in this study that it is exceptionally difficult to practice intimacy as a man in society. In fact, the pressure to assert masculinity was so strong that some men presented in this tough masculine way in interviews and I had the opportunity to discuss these presentations with them.

Men’s experiences in interviews that led them to question themselves. In all interviews included in this study, men explained their experiences and understandings of intimacy and masculinity. Two participants made statements during their interviews regarding their masculinity that they subsequently retracted. Both men permitted me to reflect with them on why they had felt the desire to portray themselves in a personally (for the men) non-desirable, but traditionally masculine way. One participant shared with me the experience and understanding of a joke he made before our interview about being a “gynecologist”:

P: For me personally, if there’s a certain kind of image for what masculinity is, in the past I probably felt that I had to absorb some of that or mirror that… I don’t really feel like that now. Or maybe I do. Obviously, I made that joke so I’m still kind of mirroring an image of masculinity by doing that so. I guess the fact that I said it was inappropriate shows that I really didn’t feel a need to do that as much anymore even though I actually did it. Even though I shared the joke with you, I saw it as potentially inappropriate, so there’s an awareness
there rather than sharing the joke and carrying on. There’s consciousness in the
fact that I’m potentially being something that I’m not.

I: So there was an after-the-fact consciousness when you said that, but it was
unconscious when it came out.

P: It was probably a little bit conscious as well.

I: In the sense that it was an icebreaker and in the sense that you wanted to
portray a certain kind of person?

P: Yeah.

I: What is it about that comment that would suggest to you that it’s a masculine
comment?

P: The lady-killer-type image, the sexual exploits. I have had a lot of sexual
relationships, but you don’t really need me to share that with you for an
interview like this, maybe during, but not before as a joke. I questioned
whether it was appropriate. Whether I really want to portray that image is what
I was conscious of when you left. Why am I feeling a need to portray that sort
of masculine image? If that’s even a masculine image, I don’t know. What
would a definition of masculinity be? Is it having a lot of sexual intimacy with
women? (9)

This participant explains being conscious and not conscious of his desire to share
this “lady-killer-type image” of himself with me before our interview. Another
participant shared:

P: …I don’t believe that drugs and alcohol are a problem. It becomes a
problem onto itself. It’s a solution at first. At a point, I’m second-guessing but
was it a solution to trying to grow up in a world where I’m not supposed to feel. I know that I was really good at it. I know that going into recovery that one of the challenges I faced was that I was utterly numb. I didn’t feel anything. I had to teach myself how to feel, and then I’ve become this soft, intimate, gooey, crybaby dude, and I do. I’m a freaking waterworks. I love sad movies and shit. Yet, I can be a tough masculine in your face kind of guy if I had to be. I think it’s both, but I struggle with that. I struggle with… As I said that to you I thought I don’t want him to think that I’m a pussy, so I better add in that part that I can be tough too.

I: Yeah, I like that you’re aware of it.

P: (Laughter) And where is that from? Why do I feel that way? That I think is that cultural thing that we are taught as men. We are taught what we are supposed to be.

(4)

This participant noticed that he had shared some personal intimate information with me and felt a desire to insert a statement about him being “tough” and “masculine.” Much like (9), (4) acknowledged this desire to demonstrate to me that he is masculine. This suggests to me that the process of discussing intimacy and masculinity in interviews with me might have introduced confusing internal feelings and questions for participants regarding what is appropriate for a man to disclose with another man. This further suggests to me that men feel an insidious social pressure to embody masculinity when they are afraid that their ability to be masculine is in question. I was very appreciative of the willingness of men to explore and describe their inner thoughts with me as they experienced a conflict between what they had felt and what they had said.
Discussion

This is an exploratory study of men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy in heterosexual relationships. Due to the nature of exploratory research (i.e. research conducted to expand our limited academic knowledge), my literature review regarding intimacy and men proved to be deficient as a foundation for explaining my results. That said, the interpersonal process model of intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988), deep intimate connection theory (Prager & Roberts, 2004), the concept of intimacy as an inter-subjective process (Weingarten, 1991), and a late modern approach to understanding masculinities (Atkinson, 2010; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005; Holter, 2005) were helpful guidelines for understanding my results. Stebbins (2001) suggested that, “…exploratory researchers, when presenting their findings in later sections of their report, do nevertheless refer occasionally to some of the more remotely related studies, thereby showing how their own findings support or contradict them” (p. 43). Following my search for more remote literature that investigates intimacy and men, it was particularly interesting to notice that my analysis demonstrated a sharp contrast to literature that explores men’s relationships and friendships.

The results of my study suggest a departure from findings in men’s relationship literature, especially literature that explores men’s intimate relationships and friendships. The existing literature examining men’s friendships suggests that men do not have intimate friendships for various reasons, including: emotional restraint and fears of homophobia (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Gaia, 2013; Reid & Fine, 1992); an inability to maintain friendships and a fear of rejection (Seidler, 1992); a disposition to not think about their friendships (Greif 2009); and a tendency to be engaged in “side-by-side”
friendships, which is commonly discussed in contrast to women’s “face-to-face” friendships (Adams & Ueno, 2006; Greif, 2009). The literature investigating men’s relationships suggests that men do not think intimacy is important in relationships (Beyers & Reber, 1998; Buss, 1995; Garfield, 2010), that married men only disclose to their partner and, relative to women, men would prefer to avoid self-disclosure with others (Nardi 1992; Mashek & Aron, 2004), and that men have better friendships with their partners than they do with their male friends (Adams & Ueno, 2006; Bedford & Turner, 2006; Nardi 1992). However, the men in my study suggest that men do have strong and intimate friendships; that men know how to facilitate and maintain intimacy; and that men desire intimacy with their friends, wives, girlfriends, and children.

This opposition prompted me to continue exploring the literature, which then suggested to me that my analysis of men’s intimacy required not only an analysis of masculinity in late modernity, but also relationships in late modernity (Giddens, 1992). An analysis of relationships and masculinity in late modernity offered a more complex reading of intimacy and masculinity. It is also important to highlight the uniqueness of my sample and to note that eight of the 11 men interviewed for this study were affiliated with AA and NA. The impact that these organizations had on these men was profound. Participants affiliated with AA and NA referred to their work within these fellowships very often in interviews, and thus these affiliations influenced the results of my study. Below, I will present my discussion of: (1) men’s intimate relationships and men’s intimate friendships with men; (2) men’s AA and NA relationships; (3) men feeling intimacy by imagining intimate family relations; (4) men pondering if they can be intimate with anyone; (5) men’s descriptions of working, struggling and growing in
relationships; and (6) men’s accounts of becoming intimate and confronting the difficulty of practicing intimacy. Throughout the discussion section, participants will be identified with a capital $P$ and a number (e.g. participant 1 will be written as (P 1)).

**Expansion in heterosexual men’s intimate relationships**

**Men have intimate friendships with other men.** As noted above, literature examining men’s friendships and relationships would suggest that men experience various limitations to their ability and desire to form intimate relationships. However, men in my study identified multiple intimate relationships: intimate relationships with a sponsor, male friends, partners and wives, and their children. This suggests to me that men have multiple, satisfying intimate relationships. The most interesting aspect of my analysis regarding men’s intimate relationships was men’s expressions of intimacy in man-to-man friendships. Men’s friendship literature often found that men had better relationships with women (Adams & Ueno, 2006; Bedford & Turner, 2006; Nardi, 1992), but men in my study explained being less worried about judgment (P 2) when speaking to other men, and less capable of having a “deep conversation” with a woman (P 5). Furthermore, participants described their relationships with their male friends as “deeper emotionally” (P 5), “freer” (P 5), “safer” (P 8), “more permanent” (P 1) and unconditionally loving (P 7). Participants disclosed that they thought hard about their feelings of trust and comfort with their male friends, which demonstrates that they had not only thought about their friendships, but had also thought about how their friends influence them emotionally (or how their friends make them feel).
Beyond identifying how friendships affected participants emotionally, participants reported creating space for intimate interactions in their relationships. For example, one respondent distinguished between “locker room talk” and “real talk” (P 10) with his male friends and another respondent identified that he will create space for “one-on-one” intimate conversations with his male friends. This contradicts literature that suggests that man-to-man friendships are not supportive (Bank & Hansford, 2000), men have difficulty maintaining intimacy (Land et al., 2011; Seidler, 1992), men do not think about friendships (Greif, 2009), and men do not care about intimacy (Garfield 2010).

Participants’ descriptions of creating space for intimate conversations with other men demonstrate that support and the maintenance of intimacy is important for men’s friendships with other men. Research has suggested that men refuse to have intimate conversations with other men, because they are afraid of rejection and view their friendships with other men as competitive (Adams & Ueno, 2006; Nardi, 1992). However, men in my study express that they engage in and create space for intimate conversations with their friends of the same sex. It is important to note that the eight men who were affiliated with AA and NA often described experiencing and understanding the importance of having supportive conversations with other members and friends in their lives. That said, men in my study might have identified closer friendships with men, because my sample included eight AA and NA affiliates. These men developed strong intimate relationships with sponsors and members who were primarily men, and these relationships were crucial to their recovery. I believe more research specifically exploring how men who are not affiliated with AA, NA, or men’s help groups create space for intimacy in their friendships with other men, and, more broadly, why men choose to
create this space for their friendships could help us understand the differences between men who do have intimate conversations and men who do not. Although research-based literature exploring men, friendship and intimacy contrasted with my analysis, theoretical conceptualizations of relationships in late modernity paralleled aspects of my findings.

Anthony Giddens’ description of the late modern transition to “pure relationships” in *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992), aligns well with my analysis of men’s relationships. Giddens (1992) asserts that pure relationships are an outcome of the restructuring of intimacy in late modernity. For Giddens (1992), late modernity is characterized by moving beyond industrialization and rationalization, and a liberalizing of the individual, which has transformed relationships. Being influenced by late modernity, he explains that relationships have transformed into pure relationships, which are relationships entered into “for their own sake” and are characterized by repeated interactions that continue to satisfy each individual (p. 58). He also suggests that intimacy is created through “…emotional connection, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality” (Giddens, p. 130, 1992). Following from Giddens’ perspective, Dermott (2008) asserts that friendships are an exemplary pure relationship, because friendships tend to be less socially structured. Friendships are sought out by individuals, because they satisfy these individuals. In relation to my analysis, men consistently detailed experiencing trust and comfort, and making an effort to create space for intimacy with their male friends, which demonstrates a relationship entered into for the benefits of emotional connection or, as Giddens (1992) suggests, “for its own sake” (p. 58). That said, I wonder about how men’s experiences in this study would be described by their male friends. In other words, I wonder if a “context of
interpersonal equality" was experienced by both men (Giddens, 1992), or if there would be inter-subjective agreement between men (Weingarten, 1992). As noted above, I also wonder if my sample is unique, and thus wonder why man-to-man relationships were experienced so differently from other relationships in my study, and from the general research investigating men’s friendships. I do believe further research investigating men’s intimate friendships with other men could help us understand what men’s intimate friendships look like, and what benefits these relationships afford men.

Although I believe it is important for future research to investigate the benefits man-to-man intimate friendships provide, I also believe it is important to highlight the potential dangers of idealizing man-to-man friendships. In my study, men’s accounts of their man-to-man friendships mirrored ideologies of the problematic Mythopoetic Men’s Movement. Often acknowledged as the founder of the mythopoetic men’s movement, Rober Bly and his book *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) inspired a movement in which men were encouraged to attend workshops and retreats with other men to find their “inner king” and “wild man” through rituals that would help them reclaim their manhood (Kimmel, 1995, p. 15). Many feminist scholars proclaimed that this movement propagated essentialist assertions that men and women are different due their natural biological and psychological make-up, and critiqued the movement (Kimmel, 1995). Similar to the rhetoric of the mythopoetic men’s movement, participants in my study often illustrate their friendships with men as better than relationships with women (P 8), and that men might feel more deeply than women (P 5). These sentiments promote essentialist perspectives of men and women that ignore gender as a social construction (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1988), and support a patriarchal stance that
privileges men and oppresses women. That said, I recognize that many men included in this study formed beneficial and, for some, their first intimate relationships with men in AA and NA, and thus I assert that I do not intend to condemn those experiences and do encourage participants to celebrate them. However, I believe that it is important to address the idealizing of man-to-man friendships, and maintain that this perspective can be oppressive. I do wonder about how AA and NA affiliations, and sponsorship relationships affected men’s understandings of their friendships and relationships in my study. In the following section, I will explore aspects of men’s descriptions of intimacy in sponsorship relationships.

Men’s AA and NA relationships allow for the development of intimacy.

Participants’ descriptions of their intimate relationships with their sponsor demonstrate to me an intimacy that is created through (1) trust, (2) connection, (3) challenge and (4) introspection. The sponsorship relationship was commonly described as intimate and sometimes the first intimate relationship that participants had experienced. Some research has identified that sponsorship relationships can be particularly helpful for abstinence (Crape, Latkin, Laris, & Knowlton, 2002; Tonigan & Rice, 2010), and other research has explored the spiritual component of AA and NA as helpful to sustaining abstinence (Bradley 2011; Galanter, Dermatis, & Santucci, 2012; Weegmann & Piwowiz-Hjort, 2009), but no research has explored men’s intimate experiences of sponsorship relationships. My analysis found that intimacy in a sponsorship relationship was very important for the achievement of abstinence, but also introspection and, subsequently, self-identified positive change. Sponsorship relationships helped participants in my study to: trust others, “I get to sit down with people and talk to them and listen to their…” and
it’s all about trust and honesty” (P 6); experience connection, “I found that I wasn’t alone in my thoughts and feelings…” (P 3); be challenged by others, “…he’s the one who pointed out to me that me telling women that I just wanted to be with them for sexual reasons… didn’t necessarily mean that I was considering their feelings” (P 9); and be introspective, “I’m looking into myself, [and exploring] where my value systems came from, where they broke down, and I’m trying to readjust” (P10). It was clear that these relationships assisted men with abstinence, but these relationships also provided the opportunity for men to question and reshape their values and actions, and orient themselves toward self-identified positive change. I do believe that future research should explore men’s experiences of intimacy in sponsorship relationships, as it seems as though interactions that occur in sponsorship relationships can allow for men to experience and understand themselves, both relationally and introspectively, in beneficial ways.

**Men feeling intimacy through imagining intimate family relations.** Although men had experienced intimacy directly in their man-to-man friendships and AA and NA relationships, some men also revealed that an intimate image for them was that of a parent-child relationship. This was an interesting disclosure from male participants, as men typically articulated intimate images that they had not personally experienced (e.g. a mother’s love for her infant). Generally, this suggested to me that cultural understandings of intimacy are so powerful that they had created an image of intimacy for men that was removed from their direct experience. It seemed as though traditionally understood bonds, or traditional conceptualizations of intimate bonds allowed participants to understand intimacy without experiencing it directly. I was unable to find any research that investigates vicarious, or imagined, understandings of intimacy, but I do feel that this
area is an important area of inquiry. Why do men identify intimacy as a mother with her child and not a father with his child? Is it due to men feeling as if there are restrictions to intimacy that women in our society do not experience (e.g. allegations of sexual abuse and occupation of a traditionally female-dominated area: Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006)?

Do men understand intimacy without experiencing it?

**Can men be intimate with anyone?** In the midst of participants discussing their intimate relationship experiences and images of intimacy, some men asked themselves if intimate relationships could happen with anyone. I did not ask this question of participants, they asked themselves during interviews, which I found very interesting. The notion of intimacy occurring with anyone questions common understandings of the importance of structured intimate relationships (Greif, 2009), and parallels the idea of modern relationships, specifically pure relationships (Giddens, 1992). Participants’ man-to-man friendships seemed to embody a pure relationship, but participants also seemed to know that these relationships were not structured. It seemed as though these men were recognizing that intimacy and relationships can move beyond role (e.g. wife, girlfriend, children), and can be sought out and created by two or more individuals who mutually benefit from each other’s company. Similarly, men might have understood intimacy to be interaction-based, and thus could have felt that intimacy is an inter-subjective experience that can happen with anyone (Weingarten, 1991). This made me wonder about how men define intimacy in their lives. Is intimacy an inter-subjective experience, and/or does intimacy occur in relationships that are sustained by the benefits that are offered to the individuals engaged in the relationship? I do believe that future research should explore,
in more depth than my study, men’s understandings and definitions of intimacy and connection in their friendships and relationships.

**Men work, struggle and grow in intimate relationships**

Throughout my analysis, it was clear to me that men work on the intimacy in their relationships. These participants delineated many ways in which they work on, facilitate, and maintain intimacy in their relationships. They understood that intimacy in relationships is not something that happens, but is something that is fostered.

In my analysis, intimacy was practiced by men interpersonally, and thus was explained by men as comprised of elements that mirrored the *interpersonal process model of intimacy* (e.g. active listening during communication, and personal disclosures of feeling) (Laurenceau et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, it was very interesting that participants acknowledged that they will selectively share their feelings with their partner, and that they understand this decision as intimate. As a phrase, selective sharing in my analysis was utilized to elucidate participants’ desire to share with their partner only that which would not hurt their partner. One participant (P 7) very pointedly articulated his desire to share that which his partner could hear, and still be loving of him. This was an interesting aspect of my results, as it suggested to me that some men believed that they understood what, and what not to reveal to their partners.

The intimacy literature has identified that couples in intimate relationships share mutual understandings (Layder, 2009; Prager & Roberts, 2004), and a perspective that individuals in intimate relationships will embody their partners perspectives and identities (Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004), but research has not explored how mutual or shared
understandings might influence individual reticence, and thus disclosure. I believe that this would be an important area of study in intimacy literature, as it suggests that shared understandings in relationships that influence decisions to withhold personal feelings might not be intimate in the moment, but could contribute to the maintenance of intimacy.

In men’s descriptions of maintaining intimacy in their relationships, they also explained experiencing growth through the process of struggling and working through individual and relational difficulties. Interestingly, participants reported that the ability to work on both relational and individual struggles with another individual fostered intimacy. My analysis of men’s growth in intimate relationships echoed Judith V. Jordan’s (2009) descriptions of the theory of relational-cultural therapy. The origins of relational-cultural therapy can be traced to Jean Baker Miller who suggests that psychology’s view of women’s weaknesses can be construed as women’s strengths (Jordan, 2009). According to Jordan (2009), the theoretical underpinnings of relational-cultural therapy posit that relationships that focus on “…relational resilience, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” allow for growth and connection in relationships (p. 24). Jordan (2009) states “…connection in which growth is a priority is the core motivation in people’s lives” (p. 24). Unfortunately, as Jordan (2009) notes, Western psychological theories tend to promote a model of human development that valorizes “growth of the separate self” (p. 2). Humans are expected to grow from dependence and achieve independence. This framework effectively marginalizes and pathologizes interdependence. This pervasive understanding that independence is ideal problematically suggests that men’s ability to work through struggles on their own represents healthy
mental functioning. However, participants in my study commonly proclaim experiencing personal struggles and struggles in their friendships, and relationships that they worked through with one other person. Similar to Jordan’s (2009) focus on relational resilience and mutual empathy, men stated, “…growth doesn’t come without struggles”, and “…that piece around relational esteem. I believe that the relationship was stronger, because of these small struggles” (P 3); “Both of us have had an absolute paradigm shift in terms of our morals. And, I like it.” (P 10); and “We’ve been through a lot of stuff with regard to my behaviour, and her behaviour… It just keeps getting better.” (P 8) These men identified that their relationships had offered them the opportunity to grow individually and create what Jordan (2009) describes as relational resilience (i.e. the ability to reach out for help and to move into connection when disconnection is experienced). I do believe it is important to note that individuals affiliated with NA and AA had an increased opportunity to work on their personal struggles with other like-minded individuals as a process in recovery. That said, I believe that future research should step away from traditional psychological theories that imply healthy mental functioning is a product of independence, and explore how men practice relational resilience in intimate friendships and relationships, as this could inform research, and psychotherapeutic modalities (e.g. relational-cultural therapy or emotion-focused therapy) that focus on an understanding of intimacy as a process and goal of growth in men’s relationships.

Beyond men working on relationships and fostering relational resilience, men also spoke to the importance of acceptance in their relationships. This assertion that acceptance is important to intimate relationships was recounted by men as a desire to be
accepted (e.g. “I want her to love me as I truly am” (P 7)) and to be accepting (e.g. “I think the most intimate relationship would be one where you 100% really know and accept the person for who they are” (P 4)). All men who discussed acceptance stated that they could not be unconditionally accepting in their relationships, but that unconditional acceptance was what they strived for. In my opinion, for participants to truly be accepted and be accepting they would need to grow and change over time, and this would require courage to explore the unknown. Jordan (2009) discusses relational courage, which is the ability to notice difficulty or fear and find ways to work with it. I believe men’s descriptions of growing and attempting to practice acceptance are examples of their relational courage. These men described working on struggles, growing in their relationships, and practicing acceptance, which very strongly suggested to me that these men had the courage to feel fear and worry. These men also demonstrated through relational work and work in AA and NA that they have the courage to access resources that will help them grow in their relationships. In relation to relational-cultural therapy, I believe that it would be important to integrate into literature exploring men’s development and masculinity that men are not independent, and do benefit from interdependent relationships that influence growth. Men’s growth in and through relationships was a very prominent theme within my analysis, and I believe that future studies should explore this theme in more depth, and psychotherapeutic interventions with men should emphasize the importance of working on intimacy and growth in relationships.
Men becoming intimate and confronting the difficulty of practicing intimacy

Men identified that experiences, interactions and self-reflection allowed them to experience and understand intimacy differently as they grew older and/or experienced more in relationships. Men explained that help-seeking and membership with AA and NA afforded them the opportunity to experience intimacy differently through relationships with sponsors and members. Men often stated that their intimate interactions with others were accomplished by reflecting on past experiences, working to improve communication (or doing the opposite of what they experienced growing up), and questioning the social norms they were taught at a young age (e.g. men are supposed to be tough, “be a good boy” (P 7), and accept demeaning views of women). Interestingly, all participants had identified that the meaning of intimacy changed from sex to meaning more than just sex. This suggested to me that all of these men had learned earlier in life that intimacy was synonymous with sex, and also experienced a change in this understanding as they aged and/or had more experiences in relationships. Although men’s change in understanding through age and experience was an important aspect of my analysis, I found men’s critiques of masculinity and men’s decisions to practice intimacy and masculinity exceptionally important and interesting in my analysis.

In my analysis, men conceded that it is very difficult to practice masculinity in today’s society. Participants consistently explained a desire to embrace a balance between a dichotomous representation of softness and toughness. Softness was characterized as intimate, emotional, and feminine. Toughness was characterized as manly, masculine, and intimidating. This is similar to what Michael Atkinson (2010) discusses as a shift in the practice of masculinity in late modern society. As argued by Michael Atkinson
(2010), the uncertainty of masculinity in Western society can be partially explained by the “general ontological instability” of late modernity (p. 11). Atkinson (2010) suggests that masculinity is “increasingly less defined, nuanced complex and negotiated” (p. 22). Men are not required to subscribe to what Atkinson (2010) refers to as hegemonic masculinity, which is characterized by “…aggressiveness, physical strength, drive, ambition, lack of emotion, and self-reliance” (pp. 19-20), and can practice different masculinities in late modernity. Participants in this study described what I interpreted as an inability to identify with hegemonic masculinity in their descriptions of the way they practice masculinity. One participant (P 4) juxtaposed an understanding of the “gladiator cave man” with a suggestion that he was a “Renaissance man” or “metrosexual” who “…would talk about the diversification of the arts and culture and all that soft stuff.” This participant also stated, “When I think about what I’ve learned of what a man should be or what a man is, it doesn’t match my experience and that’s a conflict from my head to my heart” (P 4). In accordance to participants’ inability to identify with hegemonic masculinity, Atkinson (2010) describes what he believes to be the changing expectations of how men do masculinity in late modernity that some scholars refer to as the masculinity crisis (e.g. Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel & Messener, 1999). Atkinson (2010) articulates that men are encouraged to practice traditional masculinity (or hegemonic masculinity), but also to refrain from it, which forces men to experience, “…masculine realities that are paradoxical, contradictory, rewarding, disempowering, and confusing all at the same time” (p. 18). I believe that Atkinson’s (2010) description of the changing expectation of how men do masculinity in late modernity, and the pressure to practice traditional masculinity and other masculinities, was evident in participants’ descriptions
of confusion regarding what a man should be, and two participants’ performances and self-reflections on traditional masculinity in my interviews.

The pressure to perform “traditional masculinity” (or hegemonic masculinity) was briefly represented and reflected on by two men in my interviews. One participant explained that he wanted to present himself as a “lady killer” (P 9), and the other wanted to be seen as “tough” (P 4). These men’s incongruous communications seemed to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity, which parallels Atkinson’s (2010) description of confusion regarding how men do masculinity in late modernity. However beyond the confusion regarding how to do masculinity in late modernity, I also believe that these two men might have performed traditional masculinity, because they felt vulnerable during the interview. Brene Brown (2012) discusses the difficulty that men experience being vulnerable when they are perceived as “weak” or “a pussy”, which she describes as a learned experience of “shame” for men (p. 93). These interviews asked men to describe their understandings and experiences of intimacy, and thus could have made men feel vulnerable. One participant (P 4) explained that he wanted to portray himself as “tough”, and stated that he did not want me to think that he was a “pussy.” When I asked the other participant (P 9) why he wanted to present himself as a “lady killer”, he stated that he associates that with a “masculine image.” Therefore, Brown’s (2012) and Atkinson’s (2010) theories align well with my interpretation that these two men might have felt vulnerable or confused, and performed hegemonic masculinity to assert themselves as masculine.

Ultimately, the complex and ever-shifting construct of masculinity that many scholars believe induces identity confusion among men in Western society was germane
in men’s accounts of practicing intimacy in my study (Atkinson, 2010; Holter, 2005; Kimmel et al., 2005). Men commonly discussed a desire to be softer, but also recognized the real consequences of their actions (e.g. their fathers would scold them and others would tease and mock them). It seems as though the practice of masculinity and intimacy is not impossible, but is an exceptionally delicate task.

**Implications**

Research examining men and intimacy should approach men as social beings, and thus research should investigate the *social domains* of men’s subjective experiences (i.e. psychobiography, situated activity or interpersonal relations, and culture and group membership or macro-level influences; Layder, 2009). Men’s experiences and understandings are deeply informed by multiple social domains. Shifting social discourses surrounding what it means to be a man and the way that intimacy is practiced in our society inform men’s experiences and understandings. In my analysis, men were deeply influenced by their relationships, involvements in AA and NA, and the messages they received throughout their lives regarding what it means to be a man. Therefore, research focused on the multiple domains of human social experience will help inform our understandings of the complex and ever-shifting social experiences and understandings of men and intimacy.

Beyond research examining men as social beings, it should be understood that each man is a unique social being. Although this analysis was focused on identifying themes and collective similarities, each man interviewed understood and experienced intimacy in different ways in their lives. I do feel that it is important to note men
experience and understand intimacy in many similar ways, but each man experiences and makes sense of intimacy on their own.

Lastly, I believe that it is important to note that men do experience, understand, and practice intimacy. My analysis demonstrated that men practice intimacy in multiple relationships (e.g. sponsorship, friendship, with a spouse, with a girlfriend, with children and with grandchildren), understand how to maintain intimacy in relationships, and recognize the difficulty that they experience being intimate in their lives. I believe that intimacy in men’s lives has not been adequately investigated, and thus research that suggests that intimacy is not an experience of men should be critically analyzed (Garfield, 2010; Greif, 2009; Land et al., 2011; Seidler, 1992).

**Limitations**

My study was limited by the characteristics of my sample. My sample was 11 men who were residing in Guelph, Ontario at the time of the study, which is a small sample for an exploratory study. Of the men included in the study, eight were recruited by one key informant, and those eight men identified as recovering AA and/or NA members. All of the eight men who identified as recovering AA and/or NA members disclosed that their experience of AA and/or NA was positive, and had positively influenced understandings of themselves and their relationships. It is highly likely that the results of this study were influenced by the work that men had done with others (e.g. counseling and step-work in AA and NA) and on their own (e.g. self-reflection) to recover from addiction.
Another limitation might have been the recruiting process. I did not offer any incentives for participation in this study, and thus it is likely that men involved in this study were interested in intimacy and likely confident in their understanding and practice of intimacy in their relationships. As is a concern when utilizing key informants for recruiting purposes, the key informant offered a snowball sample, and thus eight participants were recovering AA and/or NA members. A common assumption of snowball sampling is that participants might know one another, and might be similar with regard to values and experiences (e.g. sponsorship relationships in AA and NA) (Singleton & Strauss, 2010), which reduces the diversity of the sample.

A further limitation of this study was that race and class were not identified for the participants. Race and class in this study cannot be determined, and thus important dynamics such as power and culture cannot be speculated on. Future research investigating men and intimacy should ask questions before interviews or administer questionnaires that inquire about participants race and class.

**Future Directions**

Throughout the discussion section of my study, I offer future research directions and I will not reiterate those questions, suggestions, and ideas here. In my opinion, the most interesting aspect of this study was the inadequacy with which men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy were represented in academic literature exploring intimacy. That is, literature in the field of intimacy does not explore men’s understandings, experiences and practices of intimacy. While engaging with my analysis, it was clear to me that I could not make sense of men’s experiences and understanding of
intimacy without exploring gendered experience (i.e. masculinity), and culture (i.e. late modernity). My advisor Dr. Carla Rice wrote a comment about how words are gendered (Personal Communication, 2014), which helped me recognize that the word intimacy is gendered. Intimacy is a feminized word, and men are not commonly referred to as intimate. Therefore, I believe future research exploring men and intimacy should explore the gendering of intimacy and how that accommodates or inhibits masculinity. That is, I think that discourses and the social constructions of intimacy and masculinity should be examined in future research. I also believe that it would be important to explore spaces (or social contexts) in our society in which men can practice intimacy and masculinity.

Lastly, participants who identified as AA and NA members likely influenced the results of the study. I do believe that future research should explore men and intimacy through the utilization of a more diverse sample. Research utilizing a more diverse sample could identify different ways in which men practice, understand, and experience intimacy in their lives.

**Conclusion**

My exploratory study and analysis of heterosexual men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy suggested that men do experience, understand and practice intimacy in multifarious relationships. This is contrary to existing literature exploring intimacy and men’s friendships that suggests that men do not practice or value intimacy in their relationships (Gaia, 2013; Garfield, 2010; Greif, 2009; Land, Rochlen & Vaughn, 2011; Seidler, 1992). My analysis demonstrated that men work on intimacy and maintain it in multiple relationships, men foster intimacy through the resolution of struggles in
relationships, and men understand themselves to be practicing intimacy in their lives. My analysis also suggested that men’s understandings and experiences of intimacy could not be understood without an analysis of masculinity and late modernity. Men demonstrated that shifts in the practice of masculinity from *hegemonic masculinity* to a softer more emotional masculinity were preferred, but difficult to practice in our society. In sum, my analysis articulated that men experienced, understood, and practiced intimacy in multiple relationships, even though they described that practicing intimacy is difficult in our society.
References


Appendix A

Certificate of Research Ethics Approval

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<td>DEPARTMENT:</td>
<td>Family Relations &amp; Applied Nutrition</td>
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<td>SPONSOR(S):</td>
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CHANGES: 19 March 2013: A.1 Title; B.10 Methodology; B.13 Recruitment

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The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:
- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any modifications before they can be implemented.
- Report any change in the source of funding.
- Report unexpected events or incidental findings to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:
- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit a Status Report to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the EXPIRY DATE, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature: Date: July 22, 2014

L. Kuczynski
Chair, Research Ethics Board-General
Appendix B
Recruitment Poster

**MEN TALKING INTIMACY**

*Help Wanted! Men, What is Intimacy?*

- Contribute to an underexplored body of knowledge on heterosexual men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy in relationships.
- Participate in an one-hour to an hour and a half interview that will allow you to give voice to your experiences of intimacy as a man.

**INTERESTED? Email Tristan Price (supervised by Dr. Olga Sutherland)**

*pricet@uoguelph.ca*

*This study is part of a Master’s Thesis being conducted at the University of Guelph*

We value your experiences…email or call for more information!
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Thank you ________ for agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like to remind you that you can refuse to answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering, and you can choose to leave/discontinue the interview whenever you would like to. After the interview you have the option to participate in a debrief. The debrief will give you the opportunity to speak about what it was like to have the interview, and for us to have a conversation about the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin? (*pause for response). Okay, we can begin.

The following interview questions will serve as a guide for semi-structured interviewing in this study:

- What is your understanding of intimacy?
- Is there a word/expression, metaphor, or image that captures the notion of “intimacy” for you?
- How do you (or have you) experience(d) intimacy in your relationship(s)?
- How is your experience of intimacy similar and different with various people in your life?
- Are there areas or aspects of your relationships that you feel are more intimate, or require intimacy? What are these areas or aspects?
- Can you give me an example (or describe a memory) of what intimacy is for you?
- In what settings or situations would (or do) you experience intimacy?
- Could you speak to the importance of intimacy in your romantic relationships?
- How has your understanding and experience of intimacy changed over time, if it did?
- As a man, what challenges or opportunities (if any) do you experience related to developing and maintaining intimacy in your relationships?
- Who would you consider to be your role models for fostering intimacy in relationships?
- Are there any family, community, or cultural dynamics that you believe may have contributed to your understandings and experiences of intimacy?

Thank you. Do you have anything to add, or any questions for me? (*pause for response) We will now proceed to the debrief.

End of Interview
Appendix D
Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Exploring Men’s Understandings and Experiences of Intimacy Using Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

You are asked to participate in a study conducted by Tristan Price as part of a Masters Thesis, from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:
Tristan Price (pricet@uoguelph.ca), Master’s student, University of Guelph or,
Dr. Olga Sutherland (osutherl@uoguelph.ca), University of Guelph: 519-824-4120 ext. 56336

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
To gain an understanding of how a community sample of self-identified heterosexual men who are 18 or older and have been in at least one heterosexual relationship understand and experience intimacy.

PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an hour to an hour and a half long interview. This interview will comprise the total length of participation time.

If you wish to obtain information regarding the results of the study, please write your email on the consent form. Results will become available in the spring of 2013.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
Some people may be embarrassed or feel uncomfortable discussing their personal experiences of intimacy, especially in areas where other individuals can overhear these conversations. All interviews will be conducted in an area where privacy can be controlled. You can refuse to answer questions at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and/or choose to skip questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU AND/OR TO SOCIETY
There are a few of benefits to participating in this study. Many people enjoy participating in social science research of this type. You may learn something new about yourself as you answer questions during the interview. You will also benefit by knowing that you are contributing to a body of knowledge that has not been adequately researched. That is, heterosexual men’s experiences and understandings of intimacy.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
There is no payment for participation in this study.
CONFIDENTIALITY
Anonymity for persons participating in this project cannot be ensured because we will be engaging in in-person interviews. However, every effort will be undertaken to ensure your confidentiality.

The interview will be audio recorded on a system called GarageBand to assure accuracy of the content, and then transcribed by the student investigator of this study, Tristan Price. Audio recording will be saved on the student investigator’s laptop containing an encrypted folder. All information stored on the researcher’s laptop will be encrypted according to the University of Guelph’s encryption policy. The recording will immediately be saved into this folder and completely erased from any other storage space on the laptop. Therefore, the recording will not be in an unsecured area for any amount of time. Transcripts generated from recordings will not include the participants’ names, but rather pseudonyms to protect their identities. Transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s locked office. The data (including transcripts) will be saved on a password-protected computer. The investigators (Olga Sutherland, Tristan Price & Carla Rice) will have access to the data. After the study is completed (approximately December 2013), the digital recordings will be completely deleted and consent forms shredded. The study’s results may be disseminated through publication in academic journals or at conferences. Verbatim quotations from interviews may be used in published or unpublished papers and at conferences. Exceptions to participant confidentiality include the legal and/or ethical obligations to inform a potential victim of violence of a participant’s intention to harm; inform an appropriate family member, health care professional, or police if necessary of a participant’s intention to end his or her life; release information if there is a court order to do so; inform the Children’s Aid Society if there is suspicion of a child being at risk or in need of protection due to neglect, or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer during the interview and still remain in the study. You may withdraw at any time while participating in the interview, or directly after the interview without consequences of any kind. However, you will have 3 days to notify the investigator that you would like to withdraw from the study. You will be unable to withdraw from the study if you do not notify the investigator 3 days after the interview was completed. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

Research Ethics Officer          Sandra Auld
University of Guelph           Telephone: (519) 824-4120, ext. 56606
437 University Centre         E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1            Fax: (519) 821-5236

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE
I have read the information provided for the study “Exploring Men’s Understandings and
Experiences of Intimacy Using Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

Name of Witness (please print)

Signature of Witness Date

Email address: _________________________________
(required only if results of the study are desired)