

'I thought you were more of a man than that': men and disasters

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Abstract

The lived experience of men in disasters is unexpected. This paper draws on 10 years of research and publications focusing on interviews with men. Research in 2013 with 32 men and in 2018 with 26 men (aged 18–93 years) exposed the harm of gendered expectations. Men's narratives were harrowing; not just from a disaster's physical danger but equally damaging were assessments by society of men and how well they live up to the challenges of disasters. Masculinity was judged and consequences in the workplace and the home followed. Men rated their own perceived 'failures' and spoke of the barriers they faced in coming to terms with their experiences. Whether first responders to extreme events or young and old men caught up in disasters, men spoke of expectations from society, people in the workplace and family that they should be strong, stoic, brave and decisive. The literature identifies that gender stereotypes are more stringent when related to disasters. In the aftermath, the pressures only increase and are amplified by the very real barriers men face to access help to cope with their experiences. Disaster risk reduction will be enhanced by policies in the emergency management sector that prioritise wellbeing for its workers.

Introduction

We are all gendered. There's no escaping that society attempts to shape us from before we're born. Fifty years ago, the social conditioning started with a blue or pink blanket for newborns in hospital. Now it's a 'gender reveal' party with a fetus. All very necessary when society treats people differently depending on their gender. Cordelia Fine (2010) observed that children quickly learn the 'codes' for boy and girl, moving from being gender detectives to gender enforcement agents (Apter 2010). The different status given to people depending on their gender lasts a lifetime. This can be harder to see as men become very old and dependent and somehow lose their status in the eyes of the world. Our society is ageist as well as sexist.

About gender

Ours is a patriarchal society evidenced by the normative, structural and systemic discrimination of men against women, for example, in pregnancy, childcare, the pay gap, objectification of women and violence. This is the dichotomy – or 'binary' – of male and female. It is signified by the tick boxes of M or F in data collection. In a recent and small recognition that gender is complex, a third tick box of 'Other' is appearing. Yet the dominant paradigm of male and female persists as the central organising framework of society (Pease 2019) with heterosexual men predominantly in charge. Indeed, the dominant paradigm assumes 'real' men are both masculine and heterosexual, and their privileged status is dependent upon both. Disaster researcher, Duke Austin writes:

The gender categories of feminine and masculine, emerge from the interaction of a group of people at a particular time and in a particular place within a system of power struggles, differences, and negotiations. Categories of understanding are therefore contextual, yet humans act as if the categories were real, which makes the categories real in their consequences (Thomas 1923). (Austin 2008, p.2)

The great test of manhood

In disasters, the consequences are very real. This article considers the costs that accompany privilege of men. It draws on 2 research projects, both with ethics approval from Monash University.

In 2013, the late Claire Zara and I interviewed 32 men for the Men and Disaster research (Zara & Parkinson 2013, Parkinson & Zara 2016) and interviews with 26 men followed in 2018 (Parkinson, Duncan & Kaur 2018, see also Zara *et al.* 2016, 2022 and Parkinson *et al.* 2022).

In one interview, Pete¹ told us of the life-threatening experiences he and his young family faced on Black Saturday. He recalled crying at work some weeks after. A colleague said to him: 'I thought you were more of a man than that'. The sentence is dripping with expectation and judgement; a judgement of failure. Almost 10 years later, Pete has no trouble recalling in detail the words and the tone.

Disaster research tells us men frequently feel they failed the test of their manhood. Just under half of the men interviewed spoke of regret and shame.

Absolute hyper vigilance. Very high, high pulse rate all the time, very rapid thinking, a lot of awareness and thinking about what I did wrong. All the things I could have done that could have kept us safer or saved the house, and I guess some guilt or shame. (Edward)

Objectively, it was impossible to live up to the prescribed role for men to 'protect and provide', but self-blame persists. The stakes are high. Edward continued:

We were putting out fires around the place and then the fire came in through the east side... There was one moment where I thought, 'Oh jeez... I have killed my whole family'. (Edward)

In most research, we learn as little of men's emotional work as of women's physical work (Enarson & Morrow 1998). The 58 men we interviewed **did** that emotional work. They had the courage to reflect on their experiences and the impact on their lives and gave us their insights. Their emotions were in plain sight and we are the beneficiaries. Some had 30 or more years of trying to work out why their disaster experience did not fit the script they had followed since the blue blanket was wrapped around their tiny bodies. Why were they now trapped and accused and haunted?

Catastrophic disasters test our mettle. To pass the test, the men we interviewed said they needed to be brave, heroic, decisive, unemotional and stoic – and right in their decisions. Men, no matter how they expressed their masculinity, were helpless in the path of infernos like Tarrawingee fires in 1943, Ash Wednesday in 1983, Black Saturday in 2009 or devastating floods in Victoria's north-east in 1974, 1993 or 2011.

I didn't know I had the emotions that I did. I mustn't be this big strong bloke after all. Just as soft as the rest of them. (Aaron)

I should have just stuck my head up my bum and put a wet towel over my head and not witnesses nothing. But I had a job to do and I just didn't think that it would affect me that much... I wouldn't do it again. I've always been strong-minded and I don't scare easily but that scared the shit out of me. (Gerald)

There are expectations regarding performance of masculinity and femininity and there are rewards or punishments based on how well individuals conform to stereotypes (Demetriou 2001, Messerschmidt 2009). So-called 'heroes' in disasters and front-line responders are assumed to be both masculine and heterosexual (Leonard *et al.* 2018, Parkinson *et al.* 2021). Society monitors it. Family monitors it. Communities and workplaces monitor it. Like Edward, other men were hurt by the thought of what could have happened and how close they and their families had come to dying in the fires.

One of my friends really, really struggled ... that he fled at the last minute and drove through fiery conditions with his young son and could have been responsible for their deaths ... He managed to keep telling himself a story of failure around what he would understand as a traditional male role. (Paul)

The pressure to 'measure up' to prescribed masculine behaviours was not restricted to self-imposed reflection, but a community and media judgement about what they did on the day. In our interviews with 30 women (Parkinson 2012), some sadly reflected that their male partners seemed to relive the danger they felt in saving, or attempting to save, others, and blamed themselves for not doing enough. The death of neighbours was a source of great pain to men and a constant reminder of their own perceived 'failure'. Regrets haunted men. For some, no matter what they did, it was not enough.

[The concept of] 'I am a man, and I can do' has been defeated in so many men. Things they couldn't do and they couldn't be and so much was lost. (Madeline)

In our research, most of the men spoke of having to shut down emotions in order to stay 'in control'. Very different men felt this pressure. Paul said, 'I think the majority of men suffered in silence'. One man chose to be angry at work in order to prevent colleagues being kind and potentially causing him to cry. Several coped by leaving the room if there was any discussion about the fires. When asked about men's strengths, Steve said:

The ability to shrug things off, which isn't a strength at all is it? It's just a denial really isn't it, shrugging something off? ... It's not so much admit defeat, but self-preservation ... If I don't pull up here, I'm going to drive myself into the ground and be good to nobody. (Steve)

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

We started to see fire trucks... and I just bawled...[But] I switched it off. I thought if I don't, it's going to overcome me. (Walter)

Men intuitively knew penalties would follow their honest expression of human reaction to disaster. As 'heads of the family', they felt they had to deal with their feelings alone.

My second eldest son was with me, and grandson ... I was the father figure and they had me to lean on, or felt I was their protector. So they didn't have the fear that I had ... I'm at the forefront ... I was there as their fatherly figure, and they felt protected. Whereas I didn't have any protection. (Alex)

[T]he little girl ... was bloody terrified [I said], 'I promise you I'm not going to let you die' and I just kept saying that over and over again. There's nobody around to say it to me is there. (Todd)

Barriers to getting help

For men, the risk of not managing emotions was too big. Many spoke of consequences for not being in control, or struggling with grief and loss in the workplace. The penalties extended to being sidelined, no longer thought of as reliable, and not promoted. If I tell someone in the brigade that I'm feeling a certain way, they might likely take me off the rescue. So that holds me back. (Murray)

Not wanting to risk his rescue role by using an Employment Assistance Program or other workplace supports, Murray tried calling Lifeline. He said his confidentiality was breached when they acted on 'duty of care'. In his small, remote country town, police officers (who he knew) knocked on his door at midnight to check that he was not going to harm himself. Murray said, 'I won't do that again'.

The thing about patriarchy is that ideal men not only don't show emotion or speak about personal issues, but they are also expected not to seek psychological help. It's double jeopardy (Addis & Mahalik 2003, cited in Kahn 2011).

It is impossible for individual men and it is problematic for emergency services through ingrained assumption that those not asking for psychological help are OK.

After Black Saturday, the psycho-social recovery of survivors was well resourced although the approach was weighted to pathologising individuals, with fewer resources to community building.² Between 2009 and 2012, 17,772 psychological counselling vouchers were issued. Steve told us, 'You get intercepted in the street and asked if you've been to counselling

2. A significant emphasis and substantial resources were devoted to the psycho-social recovery of Black Saturday survivors. In the 3 years to 2012, 50 information sessions on aspects of recovery were run for communities, 17,772 psychological counselling vouchers and 12,744 wellness vouchers were issued and \$1.8million was provided to Australian Red Cross to provide outreach and other support activities (Victorian Government 2012, p.9).



In the aftermath of disasters, the very real barriers men face in accessing help to cope with their experiences is amplified.

Image: Nik Shuliahin, Unsplash

yet'. About a third of our interviewees found it valuable. However, a third of the men reported that, having overcome stigma and bureaucratic hurdles, they found it unhelpful. Others never shifted from thinking they had only themselves to rely on.

It may not be easy to provide completely confidential support to emergency services personnel, but it is an essential step to expanding the range of accepted behaviours from men—a step towards changing culture.

Failing in the aftermath

The second 'failure' for family men was in not 'providing' after an event. There was monitoring by the community to ensure a continuing 'stronghold of the "male-breadwinner/female carer" model of household and working life' (Pocock, Charlesworth & Chapman 2013). As noted in Hoffman (1998), progress in gender relations takes a 50-year set back in disasters.

The old-fashioned male, female roles and distinctions are a bit more alive and well [in the country]. (Will)

It goes back to the caveman days of, the man's the provider, he's the hunter gatherer, she's just the cook. And I know that's a derogatory term, but that's still the mentality of a modern-day family. (Lou)

Men were pressured to prove they were providing for their families and be quickly recovering from the disaster. Bernard described the intrusive questioning he faced regularly in the aftermath:

Why haven't you got it together? Why haven't you got your garden fixed? Why haven't you got your house done yet? What are you doing with your life? Why haven't you gone back to work? Why haven't you? (Bernard)

Masculinity is well theorised, most notably by Connell (2005) and by others (Donaldson 1993, Jurik & Siemsen 2009, Messerschmidt 2012, Pease 2010, Wedgwood 2009, West & Zimmerman 1987). Some masculinity theorists conclude that patriarchy ultimately destroys those men and women who conform to its requirements (Kahn 2011).

'Doing alright'. That why I keep saying it because if you don't keep saying it to yourself, you'll end up hanging on the end of a rope. (Eric)

Four men in our research said they had felt suicidal:³

I'm pretty vulnerable. I've got a history of suicide in my family on both sides... so I've had a determination to fight that. But... I found that when I was really negative, [when] it got that bad... I couldn't find a way of telling anyone.

I haven't even told [my wife] this... Anyway, I came home and I was just sitting in the car out there, nothing was built... and I just felt like hanging myself. So I just sat there... You are the only two I've told. I've told no-one else.

I was lucky enough [to be seen] at the right time otherwise I would have done stupid things to myself or to other people... When you're in a suicidal/homicidal state you really haven't got many tools to keep you on a level field.

There have been very, very many times where I've certainly thought about ending it all and, 'This is just not worth it', or, 'How many people can I kill?'... To get up in the morning and think to yourself, 'Why am I bothering to do this? What's left?' Because there's nothing left.

Violence against women

The depth of men's suffering post-disaster led to tolerance of their anger. A man's anger was seen as more acceptable than his tears. Even men's violence in the home was excused (Parkinson 2019, Sohrabzadeh & Parkinson 2022). Austin (2008)⁴ makes the link between the stereotypical male role and violence:

Men ... are likely to encounter a feeling of inadequacy following a disaster because they are unable to live up to the expectations of their socially constructed gender roles ... Feelings of inadequacy build in men, creating additional stress, more depression and a need to exert control. The presence of these conditions influence higher numbers of men to choose violent, abusive, hyper-masculine masculinities. (pp.7–8)

We sat with women who were deeply worried about their men, and women who had been hurt by them. These women

had their own traumatic experiences and their own reductive feminine stereotypes to follow, for example, female scripts of self-sacrifice, giving up the right to autonomy, to their career and to a life without violence. This was deemed necessary after disaster for the good of the man, the kids, the community. This is the flipside; ideal masculinity comes at a cost, but with great privilege.

What should be done

Constructed ideals of masculinity and the resulting pressures and expectations contribute significantly to community suffering. Acknowledgment of this by the emergency management sector is necessary for improvements in response and recovery. Enarson (2009a) identified key challenges for change: gender is seen as a personal rather than structural issue and is usually read as meaning 'women'. There is limited interest by decision-makers in gendered research, policy and practice, perhaps because there is no reward for men working on gender issues. Report after report^{5,6} reveals that rape, sexual assault, harassment and discrimination against women is a part of many (if not all) male-dominated emergency services organisations in Australia. Yet so far, these organisations are yet to demonstrate gender balance and gender equity. Contrition for the discriminatory culture follows each report, but little changes. Knowing these damaging cultures exist and failing to achieve change rubs salt into the wound. It exacerbates harm to women, men and people of diverse gender and sexual identities who try to forge a career without pretending to embody a macho persona.

Australia leads the world in its acknowledgment of the importance of gender in emergency management. Yet, across the nation, the steps are small, fragmented and neither structured nor embedded. The world has moved on and the emergency management sector must catch up. Risks are high for emergency management organisations that choose to wait rather than become safer, more diverse and gender-equal workplaces. Change will need courage as well a multifaceted approach at all levels, and it will be worth it. There are gains to be made in capacity as well as for the wellbeing of individuals who are part of this essential and respected field. There are gains, too, for disaster-affected communities.

In 2012, the first GAD Taskforce aimed to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disaster effects and expand the range of acceptable behaviours for both women and men. Now, 10 years on, significant change is well overdue. There are 3 ways we can progress essential cultural change using the resources of Gender and Disaster Australia:⁷

3. No pseudonyms are given here for increased confidentiality.

4. See also Austin 2016.

5. CFA says sorry after review lays bare ongoing bullying, harassment 2022, The Age 23 June. At: www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/cfa-review-highlights-ongoing-bullying-harassment-20220623-p5avy1.html.

6. Women face structural barriers at Ambulance Victoria, Human Rights Commission report finds 2022, ABC NEWS 31 March. At: www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-31/ambulance-victoria-paramedics-human-rights-report/100953792.

7. Gender and Disaster Australia, at www.genderanddisaster.com.au.



Emergency management sector must move beyond the stereotypes and myths of strong, silent men who protect and provide in the face of extreme weather events.

Image: Australian Red Cross

1. Take up Gender and Disaster Australia's Lessons in Disaster training as more than 1,000 people have already done and as the National Red Cross is planning to do. We aim for sustainable change and a key element is the train-the-trainer component. The legacy will be communities and organisations with their own gender and disaster trainers.
2. Make the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines and checklists an automatic and valued part of prevention, planning, response and recovery in your organisation or community (Parkinson *et al.* 2018).
3. Advocate for your state or territory to work with Gender and Disaster Australia to establish a GAD Taskforce, headed by your Emergency Management Commissioner (or equivalent). The purpose is to provide statewide strategic direction and leadership to identify and address gendered issues (Parkinson *et al.* 2018).

Conclusion

The likelihood of frequent and catastrophic extreme weather events resulting from climate change dictates that prevention, planning, response and recovery move beyond the stereotypes and myths of strong, silent men who protect and provide. We need to move to a gender-equitable approach for men, women and people of diverse gender and sexual identities. Disaster risk reduction will be enhanced by a contemporary approach to who does what in these events. Policies are needed in the emergency management sector that prioritise the health and wellbeing of its workers. In an increasingly risky world, it is vital that rigid gendered expectations be recognised as outdated and damaging.

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