

STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF A VETERANS TRANSITION PROGRAM STYLE
RETREAT (COMPANY OF MEN) ON PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTION AND
EXPERIENCE OF MASCULINITY

by

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Abstract

The Company of Men (CoM) retreat was created based on the findings from the Veterans Transition Program (VTP), a 10-day retreat style program that assist Veterans in their transition to civilian life. The CoM is for general population male gendered people facing some sort of life transition, stress or challenge. Research evaluating the VTP found that a key issue for Veterans were the masculine gendered traits that are reinforced in the military. The traits are proven to be unhelpful in many civilian careers and family lives once people leave the military. Since the VTP was seen to help Veterans in the domain of their masculine identities it was theorized that a similar program may be helpful for non-military masculine gendered populations. The CoM was the first attempt to translate the VTP Knowledge with a civilian population. CoM was studied through a post-retreat focus group comprised of 6 participants from CoM program. This study found a shift in participant's experience and perception of masculinity occurred, primarily around emotional expression and help seeking. Moreover, participants elucidated on the factors of change, enactments, facilitator's presence and working in a group.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, T. Laidler. The focus group reported in chapters 3-5 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H12-03572.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter the rationale for the study is laid out along with the background and context that lead to the focus group of Company of Men (CoM) participants. The gap in the current literature will be discussed in chapter 2 but it is appropriate to note a lack of data exists in the realm of gendered specific research focussed on issues in masculinity. Organizations like Movember in North America are beginning to get significant attention internationally for their focus on the unique needs of the male population and an increased understanding of the role of masculine gender influences on how boys and men function in the world.

The purpose of this study is to add to the growing movement of gender focused research. It is also important to note that this study aims to be as inclusive as possible noting that masculine gender is not only relevant for male bodied people. (Shelley, 2008) As a social construct, the gender binary has been shown to be problematic and therefore this thesis will attempt not to reinforce the binary, with exclusive language.

Personally, when I returned from Afghanistan with the Canadian Forces I was fortunate to be introduced to the Veterans Transition Program at the University of British Columbia. The program was central in my transition out of the military and also pivotal in my development as a man. Throughout my journey in the VTP I would be talking about how I was feeling with my civilian friends at UBC. They began commenting on how they often felt the same way as I did but usually prefaced by saying ‘obviously my experiences were nothing like yours!’ This led me to my research interest as I suspected that many of my civilian friends could relate to the challenges faced by Veterans much more closely than they gave themselves credit for. A major part of the VTP focussed on

the role of emotions and clear communication of one's feelings. Post-Traumatic Stress is a real issue and something many of the VTP participants struggle with, yet as in the CoM weekend my experience in VTP is that many soldiers and civilians in this study are concerned about emotional expression and communication with loved ones. As a participant observer during the CoM weekend I was in a privileged position to see the transformations of people that I had known for years. To summarize my experience there, I was aware of more similarities between the civilian men on the CoM retreat and the Veterans in VTP than there were differences.

Background and Context

A significant place to begin to explore is our understanding of gendered factors and issues around multiple masculinities. This has been reported extensively in the stories of Veterans who participated in the Veterans Transition Program (VTP), a group based 10 day residential program that assists Canadian Forces Veterans in their transition from military to civilian life. (Westwood et al, 2010). The VTP has utilized guided autobiographies as part of its intervention, a process that has participants write about major branching points in their life and read them into the group. The Veterans stories give a unique look into the world of Canadians that choose to serve, while addressing issues from their time in the military and before joining. A significant finding occurs in the anecdotal evidence from many graduates who point towards a gender identity shift throughout their careers that follow the program. (Westwood et al, 2010) This concept is well captured by Dr. David Kuhl in the phrase 'boy to soldier, soldier to man (anecdotal comments). Many of the past graduates of the program have stated that their motivation for joining the military included a search for their identity as men. In their new career

many found that a strong identity as a traditional masculine male was encouraged and reinforced. Including a more entrenched disdain for emotional expression that was common in their civilian counterparts. This form of masculinity is familiar to many of the military members. They are often rewarded for their stoicism in combat operations where emotional expression is considered to have no place and is in fact, considered dangerous (Westwood et. al., 2002). In fact, emotional inexpression is encouraged by many, emphasizing that under no circumstances can a man dare to *break down* and show emotion. The impact of Veterans returning home and struggling to connect with their emotional abilities due to their experiences in the military as well as their experience before joining the military is highly informative and a pivotal focus in the development of this particular research program. Currently, government entities like the military and Veterans Affairs have categorical responses to struggles of many Veterans after service where there is a heavy reliance on medical assessments and interventions. Diagnoses of PTSD and the newly coined Operational Stress Injury have been central to the Canadian Government's response to the challenge of reintegrating military personnel into civilian life after service. A disconnect is present between medical response such as pharmaceuticals and psycho-social responses like the VTP to this issue. Stakeholders on both sides have been unable to link programs and coordinate efforts. Unfortunately, they are often adversarial responses toward each other. In an attempt to learn from the tension experienced amongst the various groups helping Veterans deal with psycho-social issues, a proactive plan is clearly needed.

This study lays out an option to help non-military populations with issues that transcend people's world of work, namely the difficulties associated with traditional

masculine traits. Literature surrounding masculinity often look at the spectrum of multiple masculinities when attempting to come up with a working definition. For the purposes of this thesis a socially constructed view of masculinity is taken. Lessons learned through the VTP with regard to dealing with hyper-masculine clients in helping and counselling contexts can be pertinent to non-military men doing group work. Therefore, a similar program was created known as The Company of Men Program (CoM). The data collected examined the participant's reports having completed the CoM retreat as one of the most effective ways to capture the perceived changes in their experience and perception of masculinity and secondarily assess their views on what accounted for these changes.

Rationale

As presented in the background and context, evidence suggests that traditional masculine traits are serious factors confronting military Veterans. It has also been demonstrated that the Veterans Transition Program has proven effective in assisting to shift masculine identities and acquire skills for increased personal effectiveness. (Westwood, 2002, 2010; Cox et al 2013). Wider implications of this research study are assumed by extrapolating findings of the existing research surrounding VTP to other hyper-masculine populations. It is anticipated that the findings of this study can be generalized to many different groups of masculine gendered people. Therefore, this study sought to investigate whether a similar program for non-military people may also be effective in addressing issues associated with unhelpful and limiting masculine traits among men in the civilian world.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review will cover the following three areas: a) conceptualization of masculinity; b) military culture and masculinity, and c) group approaches to facilitating change. The three areas discussed will elucidate upon the rationale that military culture is grounded in hyper-masculine ideology and what are the traditional masculine traits that cause distress in the Veterans.

Conceptualization of Traditional Masculinity

The Oxford dictionary defines masculinity as “possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men.” In discussing the traditions men had in the Middle Ages, one might use words such as strong, virile, powerful, manly, etc. Kimmel and Messner (1989), among others have shown that these masculine traits are obtained through a process of socialization rather than something that people are born with. (Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1995) Different paradigms exist with respect to certain aspects of masculine ideology. However, some specific masculine traits are agreed upon and have been found to cause many social and health issues. In particular, masculinity and traditional male gender roles of self-reliance and emotional inexpression have been a significant barrier to access for the gender male population. (Levant et al., 2007) Help seeking among male population has been widely studied and shown to be significantly lower than that of females (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Gendered male’s low help seeking behaviour is closely related to masculine gender socialization and a stigma that goes along with it to reaching out for help and certainly when it comes to psychological assistance. Masculinity can be defined in positive qualities, such as male heroism and providing for one’s family (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010) but it also has negative

associations, such as the pressure experienced by men so as not to look weak and feminine. Traditionally gendered males have been seen to demonstrate less capacity to express emotion or process psychologically difficult events. (Levant et al., 2007) This underdeveloped ability is often seen as a barrier and are the cause of problems in a number of different domains from family life to careers (Mansfield et al., 2005). The combination of an inability to process difficult emotional experiences and tendencies to avoid help seeking lead to serious problems in society. The fear is that traditionally socialized males have been taught to respond differently to their emotions often suppressing or ignoring them. The consequence is that many men feel forced to live in the more cognitive and competence based systems. Societies may gain in some respects like short term productivity as typical males focus their attention on the world of work. However, the family unit and communities will ultimately lose as these men are pushed further and further away from their emotional worlds. (Schwartz and Waldo, 2003)

Hyper-Masculine Military Culture

Gender stereotypes for Canadian soldiers often start with a “masculine” profile. Many people join the armed forces looking to undergo what may be argued as the ultimate masculine test: combat. The journey of young people joining the military, serving in high stress environment and then returning to civilian life has been of interest for generations. Hollywood movies and the media have often tackled the stories of militaries before, during and after conflicts with the intent to educate and entertain. The archetype of the soldier is often equated with the highest standards of masculinity. (Fox and Pease, 2012; Keegan, 1993). Decreased help seeking is a major barrier to health as most western health systems require patients to self-identify through family physicians or

health care professionals. In support of this idea, data from the Canadian Government show that in 2010 only 14% of eligible military personnel sought services from Veterans Affairs (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2004).

As masculinity plays a central role in military life, then perhaps the work being done to assist military Veterans transition to civilian life could also help other masculine populations? This study sets out to test whether a group program designed for Veterans could also be beneficial for non-military people (Westwood, et al, 2012).

Benefits of Group Work with Masculine Populations

Brooks (1998) offers great insights regarding the benefits of working with traditional socialized males in groups to address personal life challenges. He lays out a number of ways to assist males in a therapeutic group setting. According to Brooks two main goals are to encourage self-disclosure and to be reliant on other men. Both of these items deal with undoing traditional masculine traits. The group context is important as it is expected to not only allow the participants to change unhelpful behaviours and patterns related to masculinity but also to learn about the beneficial elements of masculinity. Courage, competence and caring are all constructs that may be attributed to traditional males and they are all ideas that most would regard as beneficial as part of one's self. The research will help capture the elements of masculinity that are retained following the retreat.

In conclusion, the current study investigated gendered factors such as self-reliance and inability to openly express emotion that are commonly attributed to traditional gendered male populations. A lack of data exists in this realm. The study augments existing data that focuses on administrative and economic barriers providing an important

phenomenological contribution as well as vital linkages to critical studies in counselling and masculinity. Moreover, this study investigated the shift or expansion of a participant's perceptions and experiences of masculinity over the course of a retreat modelled after the Veterans Transition Program.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Questions

The major research question of this study is how the CoM retreat impacted participant's experiences and perceptions of masculinity. More specifically:

- 1) Do participant's experience and/or perception of masculinity shift after completing the retreat?
- 2) What were the reported factors that influenced the shift, if any, in participant's experiences and perceptions of masculinity?

In order to answer the research questions I followed a Social Constructivist paradigm. Described by Berger and Luckmann (1967), the theory of Social Constructionism refers to the way in which we create meaning based on social interactions with others. Verbal dialogue and interactions are a key element in the creation of knowledge. A focus-group method allows for essential human interaction and verbal exchange to be captured and analysed at a later date. The participants are asked to describe their individual perceptions of an experience. In turn, other group members engage in dialogue about their reactions and accounts of the same event.

Company of Men Retreat Structure and Content

The Company of Men retreat was held as a group-based counselling program for masculine gendered people who have an interest in looking within themselves and reflecting on their masculinity. What follows is a summary of the program. For a more detailed description see Appendix A.

Day 1 (Evening, ½ day)

- Review informed consent, obtained prior to group commencing

- Group building through name game
- Psycho-education on emotions
- Mini life review, 5-major branching points

Day 2 (Full day and evening)

- Practice active listening
- 3 traits of role models you respect
- Each group member presents 5 branching points into larger group and receives guided feedback.
- Enactment about difficult conversation with partner
- Magic Shop, Million Dollar Question activity

Day 3 (Full day)

- Check-in and report on any dreams from the night before
- Enactment of difficult inter-personal family dynamic
- Enactment of past challenging career environment
- Coat of Arms exercise

Included in Appendix A is the informed consent for this study, it demonstrates the non-stigmatizing yet descriptive language used to attract traditional masculine gendered people.

The primary structure of the weekend retreat was similar to a compressed Veterans Transition Program. Life review followed by individualized enactments are the basic elements. The life review component has participant's choose five branching points from their life, positive and/or negative. For example, being accepted into university would be regarded for most people as a pivotal and positive point in their lives whereas,

parental divorce, perhaps equally pivotal, yet would most likely be regarded as a negative experience. After participants describe their five branching points in writing they are invited to share their brief life story in the group and then receive the impacts, perceptions and accounts of common experiences of the other group members. The second key activity, therapeutic enactment, allows a participant to choose a particular distressing or problematic issue from their life. For example, a participant may be considering a major career change and find themselves unable to make a decision and hold to it. A behavioural rehearsal of the participant's perception of what two work environments could be is conducted in the form of a therapeutic enactment. The goal would be to offer the participant an experiential view of a new career. Experiential learning about the role of emotions, advance communications and self-exploration are infused throughout the weekend.

The aim of the research was to capture the participants' subjective interpretations of their experience as reflected within a social constructionist paradigm, and to have them identify possible factors that appear to have contributed or accounted for a shift in their experience and/or perceptions of masculinity. Discourse within a focus group is used to identify socially constructed themes and allow for a thematic analysis of the data collected.

Participant Demographics

The unit of analysis is a group of six recent university male graduates transitioning into the work force who recently took part in the Company of Men retreat. Their ages range from 24-29 years old. The group members were part of a student group while at university and have stayed in contact after graduation. Each of the six members

had a bachelor's degree and were employed or actively seeking employment. They completed the workshop that focused on gender specific barriers to a successful transition between significant phases of life, primarily adjusting to the working world post university.

Data Collection

The group's views and experience of masculinity were examined through facilitated group dialogue to determine if a shift in participant's perceptions or experiences occurred. The first step was to determine the group's baseline perceptions and experiences of masculinity. Therefore, the first section of the results describes and references the group's views of traditional masculine traits. After stimulating questions were asked of the group, the conversation was guided in an attempt to answer the research questions. The group discussion were recorded and transcribed.

Thematic Analysis Process

A thematic analysis was completed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) step by step approach. A six phase approach was used to generate the results. The phases include the following: 1) Familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) Generating initial codes: general topics in the data, 3) Searching for themes: aggregating codes in to potential themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, 6) Producing the report. (Braun and Clarke, 2006) The findings contribute to our understanding of the impact/effect/influence that the group based workshop has in shaping or shifting people's masculine identity. Moreover, by investigating the factors of change an initial evaluation the CoM will assist in determining whether these styles of retreats are effective at achieving their goals. The evaluation will offer stakeholders in the area of men's health, gender studies and

masculine identity formation a possible solution to address some of the current challenges associated with problematic masculine gendered traits. The results of the content analysis are laid out in the next chapter covering the specific shifts and the factors that may have caused the change in the participants.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter summarizes the major themes illustrated through quotations of the participants. The research question set out to be answered focused on whether the CoM 3-day retreat had an impact on participants' perception and experience of masculinity. The primary findings suggest that this group-based approach influenced participants' experiences and perceptions of masculinity. In addition participant's indicated what appears to have accounted for some of the participant's shifts in their perceptions and/or experiences of masculinity.

One of the first questions asked in the focus group was "did you shift in your sense of what it means to be a man?" The group members focused their responses and conversations on their views and changed opinions of emotional expression and changes in help-seeking behaviours. Their changed views are in direct contrast to the held views of traditional socialized males indicating a shift did occur in the participants' experiences and perceptions of masculinity. Even though participants reported a range of different levels of comfort with help-seeking and emotional expression before attending the CoM retreat, a reasonable subjective interpretation of the pre-group disposition is that they were fairly typical gendered males. The two major factors of change that were identified, namely, the effect of the group facilitators and the impact of doing cognitive/emotional and behavioural work in a group. These are presented below, as per the methodology, an investigation of the participants' pre-group perception and experience of masculinity was undertaken.

Exploring Participant's Pre-Group Views of Masculinity

Perhaps one of the most unique findings of this study is the group's account of socialization as young men with regard to emotional expression. The group reported that they were not afraid of the actual emotions but rather they were feeling incompetent in the face of emotions. Insofar as, participant's had no or little knowledge of what to do when they felt emotions inside. Therefore, when they felt emotions in themselves or expressed by others, they did not know how to act. The feeling of helplessness left these men to feel incompetent when confronted with emotional expression. All group members agreed that during their teenage years it became apparent that crying was no longer acceptable. Hank's words captures the essence of the group's feelings succinctly when he states,

I feel like my hatred to crying came from watching the rest of my family cry, and I thought fall apart. I felt like I had to be the only one who wouldn't cry, and the only one who would think and do things.

Hank uses the word 'hatred' when talking about his transition away from emotional expression through crying. The strong language indicated the power of the meta-emotions experience by him where he felt resentful of the feeling of wanting to cry rather than sad about the situation that caused his family to become emotional. Hank went on to describe how his disdain for crying was grounded in a feeling of helplessness in the face of other family members crying. He reported that he had never been taught how to deal with emotional expression as a child and was feeling incompetent when suddenly confronted with intense emotional expression by his close family. Hank's response was to become more 'stalwart' and attempted to be a support for his family. In retrospect Hank described

how he never considered taking time to process his own emotions, instead focused on figuring out how to best help his family.

The teenage transition away from emotional expression was also well articulated by Jesse when he stated,

You're growing up, and if you doing sports, you have a coach who will give you a hard time for not being tough enough. You're never rewarded for being sensitive or showing your emotions. You're always encouraged to do the opposite.

Jesse's account of the early social pressure discouraging emotional expression in sports shows that he felt pressure to be the opposite of expressive. The socialization for Jesse was therefore not only a discouragement of emotional expression but also overt encouragement to be tough or be the opposite of expressive.

All group members were able to think of experiences as teenagers similar to Jesse and Saul's where they felt pressure to break from emotional expression, particularly when in the presence of others. However, most of the group differed in their current beliefs about traditional masculine traits like limited emotional expression. For example, when Jesse was asked if he felt being vulnerable in a group was acceptable he said, *"Things go back to my idea of what the 1950s were like. I find those traditional ones [masculine traits] that I don't really agree with... Yeah, I think vulnerability is okay"*. It is important to note the difference amongst the participant's pre-group perceptions about masculinity. All participants reported positive shifts in their perceptions and experiences of certain traditional masculine traits but the level and end point of each participants change varied as they each held slightly unique views of masculinity at the beginning of the group.

The idea that traditionally gendered males avoid emotional expression due to a lack of knowledge about how to respond and express emotions rather than avoidance of the emotion itself was further reinforced by Mike when he made the following analogy between using a screwdriver and emotions:

if you didn't know how to use a screwdriver and somebody asks you to screw something in, you'd probably find your way around it and try not to admit you didn't know how to use a screwdriver. In the same way, I think it would be characteristic of traditionally masculinity that if you didn't know how to engage emotionally with a situation, you would probably avoid the situation... rather than having to admit that you didn't know how to engage in it.

The group all agreed that the fear of looking incompetent was a contributing factor towards their avoidance of emotional expression. Some reported being able to overcome this fear, but all agreed that they felt pressure to know what to do when they were confronted by someone crying.

Undoing the Tear and/or Hatred of Crying

Theme Description: Fear and hatred of crying were terms used by the participants when they described their feelings towards heavy or deep feelings before participating in the CoM retreat. After completing the CoM weekend participants reported feeling more comfortable expressing emotions in the group as well as in front of trusted friends and family outside the group.

Emotional expression via crying is often showcased as being unmanly in more traditional pop-culture. This theme demonstrates the extent to which the CoM retreat impacted participants' views on emotional expression through crying. The CoM was

reported to have a significant impact on participants' relationship with emotional expression. A majority of participants stated they felt much more comfortable expressing their feelings in front of the other group members during the weekend. Moreover, many group members reported also feeling more comfortable expressing themselves outside the group. Mike recounts a conversation he had with other group members during the CoM retreat about their increased level of comfort with crying in the group as follows,

I can't remember if it was you who started crying first or somebody else, but I remember us having the conversation about when the first person started crying or just outwardly displaying emotion. A lot of us agreed that that made us feel comfortable.

Mike goes on to describe a 'tipping point' in the retreat when one group member was the first to cry. Everyone agreed that once that happened the tone of the retreat changed and allowed them to be more expressive.

Hank summarized his emerging perception of emotional expression when he states,

seeing these [group members] that I really respect get up and be willing to cry in front of the group and willing to work on their stuff. That's the strongest thing I can imagine someone doing. It very effectively changed that for me... it's a weak thing to try and hide your emotions, because it's way harder to show them. Watching the re-enactments really switched that for me. Afterwards, it made it easy to [do an enactment] for relatively trivial help with a girl. It's a strange thing, but still it was like, oh, well. Here's this thing, and I want to put these new

confrontation ideas into play, and I'm going to ask for help, because that's what I learned real men do, is ask for help from friends.

Hank describes a significant change of his view of emotional expression to being something a strong person does. Moreover, Hank states it is weaker for a person to hide their emotions as he found it much harder work to be open in front of the group. There was consensus in the group for this new perception of emotional expression. Hank's statement also introduces up two other themes around help seeking and role of enactments on his change process.

Increased Comfort to Seek Help

Theme Description: Seeking help was thought of by the participants as reaching out to a friend while they were experiencing emotional distress or faced with a personal barrier that seemed insurmountable. CoM participants reported being much more comfortable seeking help from friends, family and colleagues for support around emotionally-charged and/or personal barriers following completion of the program.

The avoidance of help-seeking is often the point of pop-culture humour in the Western world, where a husband and wife are driving towards a destination and the husband is determined to figure out how to get there on his own rather than stop and ask for directions. The scene often plays out as the wife continually urges the husband to just stop and ask someone. In contrast to this, the participants in the study reported a willingness to engage in more help-seeking without being asked by the facilitator. A majority stated they were much more open to asking for help while they were dealing with an emotionally challenging situation. Specifically, participants were willing to ask

for the support of their close friends. Most participants stated they were willing to ask for help before the CoM retreat, however, all reported being much more comfortable asking for help as well as reporting that help seeking with emotional issues was essential.

Saul captured the group's feelings when he stated,

Yeah. I'll just echo what I said earlier about asking for help and being more open to seeking that kind of stuff [help]. I still think that certain very sensitive, emotional, personal stuff, I still keep that within ... but with my friends and people that are close it is easier [to share] than in a bigger group.

All group members reported an increased willingness to express emotion within a close group of people in order to get support. Walter speaks about the impacts on him -post group - in regards to help seeking. Walter was unique in the group in that he openly stated he was comfortable being emotional in public and sharing his feeling when he needed to. Walter states,

Yeah. It reaffirmed it. It reaffirmed; being honest and having conversations with people, like in the workplace and stuff. If you're feeling shitty or whatever, you just tell them that you're feeling shitty. If you feel like you screwed up, you just tell them you feel like you screwed up. Stuff like that.

A majority reported a willingness to ask for help in particular when it came to needing emotional support. Increased help seeking and willingness to be vulnerable by expressing emotions are two uncommon traits for traditionally socialized males. The CoM, therefore did have an impact on the participants' perception of masculinity and how they were able to respond differently during the retreat. It is noteworthy that the effects appear to have continue for up to 6 months following the retreat. Having reviewed

the participants' reported shifts in their experiences and perception of masculinity, the next set of themes captures the reported factors that appear to account for the shifts in those themes described above.

Role of Facilitators

Theme Description: Participants reported the facilitators were essential in allowing them to be more emotionally expressive by teaching and modelling how to show and communicate emotion effectively. The facilitators' presence, role-model status, voice, and age were reported as significant factors of change by the CoM participants.

Two facilitators ran the CoM retreat, one was a Registered Psychologist and one was a medical doctor with core competencies in counselling psychology. Both were founders of the Veterans Transition Program and have extensive experience with group counselling and with counselling men. All members agreed the facilitators were a highly significant factor in assisting members to change their self-perceptions as men and how to communicate emotional expressivity more effectively

Saul's comments about the group facilitators, adequately captured the group's consensus when he stated,

They have a soft voice. They're father figures, which is obviously important in the context of masculine situations. When you have those, essentially role models, helping you do that, it makes it way more okay. You have the most elder experienced peers being like, yep, this is what we should do.

Group members agreed that it was not only the group leaders' skills that had an impact on them but it was also who the facilitators were that added to the shift in traditional

masculine traits for the participants. The leaders' presence as men themselves and father figures gave the participants licence to express themselves and support one another and in this way were social models to some extent.

Saul stated,

There's something about being in the presence of whatever energy was established at that place that made me feel like it was an okay place to have fun, but also be serious and be honest.

The blend of seriousness and playfulness was effective for the all-male group.

Participants reported feeling relaxed enough to open up while feeling safe enough to trust the leaders and other participants with true emotions.

Impact of Enactments

Theme Description: Enactments are guided behaviour simulations that allow a participant to gain an embodied experience of how a past or future event may occur. Enacting future difficult conversation and situations as well as enactments of past troubling events was described as a key factor of change by the participants. Participants that completed enactments reported more confidence and clarity around the challenges they addressed in the CoM retreat. The enactments were reported to be deeply impactful on those that took part as well as those that observed.

Part of the CoM weekend allowed some of the participants to enact a circumstance that was challenging them currently in their life. Enactments in CoM were behaviour simulations of past or future events that a participant found troubling or distressing. The simulation required group members to take on different roles and respond to the participant doing the enactment as guided by the facilitators. The CoM

enactments resulted in a tremendous amount of cathartic release. Group members reported learning many different things from the enactments. However, this study focuses on the shifts in perception or experience of masculinity. The role of enactments in the CoM retreat was to give a few of the participants the opportunity to deal with a personal barrier or challenge in their lives. The enactments were reportedly very helpful to the group members. Saul recounted how he felt much better in relation to his father after his enactment. Saul had rehearsed a conversation he planned to have with his father but reported he did not feel the need to do so after the group. Hank rehearsed a conversation he planned to have with his girl-friend and had spoken with her as planned. Hank stated he felt 'more confident' and was satisfied with the conversation, while appropriately sad about the content. It is important to note that all the group members reported gains from observing or taking part in others' enactments. For example Mike said,

Yeah. It also just ... there was a vicarious experience of the emotional journey that you were taking and dropping the baggage that you were doing in that process. It made me really want to do the same in my own specific situation.

Mike went on to report a hard conversation he had with a parent after the group, even though he did not do an enactment of his own. Mike felt confident enough to have a conversation with his father he had been wanting to have for many years. Watching Saul's enactment gave Mike a script and the motivation to have the difficult conversation. It is noteworthy that this impact on Mike led to an unexpected finding around behavioural changes as a result of the CoM. The behavioural shifts are discussed at the end of this chapter.

Returning to the theme of the impact of enactments, Jesse states,

A lot of people in the group were crying and having a really emotional experience. I think it was during yours [enactment] near the end. That speaks to exactly what you're saying, that everyone was taking parts of that and experiencing it personally and relating it to personal things... it seems like it didn't really matter who was up there. You were going to take what you needed for yourself. It was really powerful.

Jesse highlights the enactment's power on the observers while also commenting on the level of emotional expression present among all the group members, not just the person who is the focus of the enactment.

Impact of the Group Context in Facilitating Change

Theme Description: The group format played a key role in all the reported results for this study. By doing emotionally difficult work in a group, members modelled how to behave for one another while creating a new group norm that emotional expression is acceptable and encouraged. The group provided a 'lab' or 'space' to practice and learn from others how to confront and problem solve difficult situations.

The CoM retreat allowed group members to do work in a large group as well as smaller sub groups. Often cognitive and behavioural work was done in pairs or triad. Most of the heavier emotional work was done in the large group through group process and enactments. Enactments were the primary area in which the group members were exposed to each other's work. Group norms became different quickly as emotional expression was completely normalized and all the activities required group member's to work together. Many participant stated that they did not know it was possible to express yourself and feel better after. Only a few of the participants did an enactment of their

own. However, there was an overwhelming consensus that observing or taking roles in the enactments was equally beneficial. For example Jesse describes the impact of participating and observing enactments as,

[I thought] 'Oh, man. I think I'm going to cry. I don't want to.' All that embarrassment and that pre-programmed shame around that kind of emotion. Afterwards, when we were all talking about what that experience was like for us, everyone had experienced really intense emotions. [Previously] It was like, ... "Oh, there's something wrong with me." It's an individualized thing and stigmatized thing, but everyone in that group was all feeling that way. This isn't a big deal at all.

The main impact reported by Jesse was a feeling of normalization around feeling intense emotions like grief, anger and compassion during another group member's enactment. Jesse casually described the initial feeling of embarrassment and shame when he started to feel emotions. However, his concluding comment shows that once he discovered the other group members felt the same way the initial discouraging feeling was no longer a 'big deal'.

In conclusion, the focus group results in a number of rich themes that described how participant's experiences and perceptions of masculinity shift after taking part in the CoM weekend. Moreover, themes were presented that were perceived to have caused the shifts in their views. The findings along with the powerful language used in many of the participants' quotations have numerous broader implications and contributions to the current body of knowledge in this area. These implications and contributions will be addressed in the next chapter.

Unexpected finding: Behavioural Change

Participants' perceptions and experience of masculinity was set out to be investigated in this study. However, another significant and relevant finding was discovered outside the research question. A majority of participants reported that behaviours changed as a result of the CoM program. In line with Bandura's social learning theory, participants' gained awareness and confidence from observing each other doing psychological work in the group. A great example is Mike's statements in reference to action he took one month after the group. Mike did not do an enactment himself but said the following in response to the question asked by me as focus group facilitator, "did Saul's enactment have an impact on anyone else in the group?" Mike stated,

I'll specifically mention that particular piece you did around your dad, it was obviously quite emotional. Being on this side of it, I can see how significant it was for you. I also had my own stuff to deal with... It actually ended up empowering me to do that, after the fact. Although, I talked about that [only] a little bit during the session, I think that just after the fact it definitely changed my willingness to just say, "Well, fuck it. This is done. Hard stop, period," and to basically reset the terms of our relationship [with my father]. I ended up having a phone call with my father where we've been going back and forth.

Mike also reported that he had spoken with his father in the past yet it wasn't until he saw Saul's enactment that he gained new insight on a different way to communicate important emotional information to his own father. Moreover, watching the enactment gave Mike the motivation to actually have the conversation. This change in communication style is

an unexpected but important finding as it speaks to another benefit group work done in the CoM had. Other group members reported similar adjustments to their communication style post CoM group. Those that did future enactments about difficult conversations ended up having the rehearsed conversation or in some cases found the challenges they brought up in the group less problematic and reported feeling better about the difficult relationship/conversation/situation as a whole. Mike's changed communication is perhaps the most profound. As stated previously, he did not do an enactment but was able to change his behaviour just from witnessing other group member's doing the enactment work.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study further supports the concept that masculinity is socially constructed, which is agreed with by many scholars. (Kilmartin, 2010, Addis & Cohane, 2005, Hoover, 2012). The evidence is from the fact that most of the participants were able to identify specific instances in their life when social pressure to be more ‘manly’ was felt. The socially constructed idea is in opposition to many who argue for the essentialist paradigm that sees gendered traits as innate and linked to a person’s biology. (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Brooks, 2010; Englar-Carlson, 2006). The evidence in this study further supports the existence of real and powerful social pressures for young men to not be emotionally expressive for fear of being seen as weak. Participants varied in the amount they subscribed to the traditional masculine traits, however, they all reported having felt the pressure to be ‘hard’ and not talk about personal issues. In order to undo some of the entrenched social norms, groups like CoM are particularly effective as they create a peer group guided by knowledgeable leaders that embody more integrated, interpersonal, and more effective masculine traits.

One of the more interesting findings of this study and one that has not been discussed in the current literature on this topic, came at the beginning of the focus group involving participants’ pre-group views around masculinity. Before tackling the research question, participants were asked about their pre-group perceptions and experiences of masculinity. During this initial phase the group members recounted moments from their lives that influenced their masculine identity formation. Avoidance and disdain for emotional expression was discussed at length by all the group members. This was not too surprising but once that participants had described and reflected on their feelings or

perceptions of masculinity, an interesting point emerged. The participants reported that it was not the feelings themselves that the participants were necessarily concerned about. Rather it was the feeling of incompetence – not knowing how to handle these emotions that caused them to avoid emoting and avoid situations where others would be expressive. It was as their difficulty was the result of the fact that they had never been taught what to do with these ‘feelings’. The analogy given by one of the participants of a man and a screw driver seems to come close to capturing this challenge. The analogy ran along the lines that if a man was expected to do something, such as use a screwdriver, but had no idea how to do it they he would most likely avoid the situation in order to avoid displaying a lack of competency. In a similar fashion, many of the participants felt the same way about emotions. Nowhere in their lives had an adult clearly explained the role of emotion and what appropriate expression could look like. The lack of knowledge combined with popular media stereotypes and first-hand social pressure have left this group with a baseline to work with in reference to emotions. Hoover’s (2011) findings were the closest to this study’s results in his exploration of emotional inexpression in men. Hoover provides further evidence that men do have a real and significant fear around emotional expression. Whereas, my study provides a further explanation into what is causing the fear to exist around emotional expression, namely, the fear of incompetence in the face of extreme emotion. What is exciting about this finding is that it gives our society a better understanding of the direction to take if we plan to address the issue of problematic masculinity.

The two main findings that lead to the shift in the participants’ perceptions and experiences of masculinity were the group format and the facilitators. The group all knew

each other to some degree before the CoM retreat and continue to be in contact post-group. This suggests and supports the need to have a level of cohesion or familiarity and connection to exist for them to be able to move ahead. By allowing this peer group to see one another tackling some challenging personal issues and to be coached by the facilitators throughout the retreat participants were able to learn the skills experientially and make rapid changes in some of their lives. The learning in the group was communicated primarily through modelling by the facilitators. At one point a facilitator printed out a template for a challenging conversation a participant planned on having with his partner. The participant reported at a later date that he brought the print out with him to reference during the conversation. Ideally these skills will eventually be integrated. However, this incident does point towards the gap in knowledge for young men in terms of emotionally charged conversations.

Another post focus group incident of note is a camping trip that a majority of participants went on about 6 months after the CoM retreat. Other group members from the same peer group also attended. At the camp, one of the non-CoM group members brought up an issue he was having in a relationship at some point during the weekend. The CoM members took lead in the conversation and spent almost three hours discussing the issues with their friend. Humour and problem solving (typical responses among male groups) were barely present. Instead members of the CoM weekend held the space for the individual to fully explain his situation, and there to offer their personal and emotional reactions in response to what their friend was going through. What is very interesting to note is the spin-off effect the CoM retreat seemed to have. Members of the same peer group picked up the new group norms relatively quickly and participated in the

conversation. Two days after the camping trip the individual that raised the issue sent an email thanking the group for the support, here is an excerpt,

"On Saturday night we discussed ways to address this lack of intimacy I have been experiencing in my relationship with Sofie, and I promised to follow up on that conversation to let you guys know about my progress.

What I did was, as per your feedback, listened to her, and allowed her to clear her thoughts, may it be positive or negative. Through listening without judgement, we are now more emotionally connected. Also, I was assertive and communicated what I look for. I told her how important sex is to me in a long term relationship, and I am very interested in maintaining a high level of intimacy with her."

Of course without a controlled environment and control group it is impossible to determine direct causation, however, anecdotal correlation exists as some of the group members stated they had learned about these sorts of issues at the CoM weekend.

Confidentiality in counselling is essential, however, a potential unintended consequence may be the alienation of many male gendered people. Therapeutic work is so often done in private and surrounded in secrecy that younger men may not be getting an education on how to process and deal with emotions. One-on-one therapy is obviously going to continue to play a key role in supporting people, however, this study speaks to the strength of group work, in particular with gendered males. By watching one another process challenging life issues in front of a group, it models for other group members a possible way for them to act when emoting and process emotionally difficult events. Moreover, professional facilitators that exude emotional competency by expressing emotions as a model lead to significant experiential learning for the group members.

Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge

The research has captured the experience of men stepping away from entrenched gender socialization dictating that they should ‘suck it up’ and deal with personal issues on their own. Better understanding the experience of traditional masculine groups sets a frame of reference for the investigation into other traditionally masculine dominated groups. For example, the National Hockey League (NHL) is another organization based in traditional masculine roles. The hockey league was confronted by suicide of a number of players a few years ago. This research could help set the stage to better understand how gender issues influences these men and purpose a solution to undo some of the traditional masculine traits that have caused many of the issues faced by men.

Future research studies could bring together groups of traditionally gendered males from military, professional athletics and the business world in an attempt to further investigate the role masculine traits play in helping or hindering these groups. Transcending the boundaries between each of these cultures through group work may be beneficial as each group can give permission to the next as mutual respect between the groups is predictable.

Implications for Counselling and Group Practice

For clinicians working with traditional male or military populations, this study reinforces the importance of gender specific counselling. A client’s culture is deeply respected in the field and a person’s gender should be equally respected and catered to. Finally, there are several implications from the findings of this study that would be helpful for professional practitioners working with male clients. Most significant is the group counselling approaches, could be amended, modified to include program

components similar to those cited in both the VTP & CoM as well as the skills focus for how men learn to use skills effectively.

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Appendix A



Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Consent Form

Company of Men Retreat: A Focus Group

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marv Westwood, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, the University of British Columbia. Dr. Westwood.

Co-Investigator: Timothy D. Laidler, Masters student in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, the University of British Columbia.

Background: This study will investigate the experience of group members that took part in the Company of Men Retreat. The Company of Men is a group-based counselling program for typically gendered men who have an interest in looking within themselves and reflecting on their masculinity. Moreover, the impact of being raised as a man in the world and what parts of traditional masculinity are helpful or not. The workshop consists of 2 and a half days. There has become an increasing number of publications concerning military mental health treatments. Anecdotally, psychologist working with military populations reported many of the military members struggle came not only from combat but from their traditional gender socialization. Gathering data from a non-military civilian population that are also in various states of transition will make a contribution towards knowledge. The discovery lays in the potential overlap between military members and civilian gendered male's struggles with transition.

Problem: While many new forms of counselling are becoming more available most are targeted towards populations in crisis or that are facing adversity. For a more prosperous society it is beneficial for health population to also engage in self-care and personal growth. A group of younger males has sought out a program that was developed from the military dealing with transition issues. The participants have anecdotally expressed very positive impressions of the program. No data has been captured to date.

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of the experience of participants that completed the Company of Men Retreat. Specifically, the questions that will be investigated are:

How the retreat impacts participants experiences and perceptions of masculinity.

- 1) Do participant's experience and/or perception of masculinity shift after completing the retreat?

- 2) What were the reported factors that influenced the shift, if any, in participant's experiences and perceptions of masculinity?

The research will be conducted using focus-group methodology. A single 3 hour focus group will be used to gather information in the context of a group dynamic that will encourage a variety of opinions, and experiences. From this, a collection of themes that highlight general similarities among the group can be gathered that provide the description of their experience at Company of Men Retreat, thereby filling the current gap in the literature. Success of the focus group will be determined in that each member has been recorded as having made a contribution to the group conversation and description of experiences or recommendations about the Company of Men program. Using this information, this study will contribute to a greater depth of understanding in this area of literature, and will also contribute towards a Master's thesis, which will be a public document. At no time will study-participants be identified.

Study procedures: Agreeing to take part in this study implies that the information you present will provide a description of your experience of the Company of Men. Participating in this project in the form of a focus group will require approximately 3-hours of your time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I will send you this consent form and provide you 24 hours to read it and formulate questions before asking for your participation in the interview process. We will arrange a time and location on UBC campus to meet for a maximum of 3 hours with up to 11 other group members. In this meeting, I will read and explain this consent form to you and answer all questions you have about it. We will then spend up to 2.5 hours completing the focus group session. This session will be audio and video recorded, and I will ask specific questions about your experiences of Company of Men Retreat.

Should you be interested, I will contact you to provide a follow-up opportunity over telephone and email. A copy of the full transcription of our group interview and an analysis of the thematic overview observed will be provided if requested. I will also ensure that you can receive these documents confidentially. You will be provided 48 hours to read over the material and come up with any questions, comments or concerns. My goal is to learn about, observe and listen objectively to information that describes accurately the experience of the Company of Men Retreat. Using your experience and those gathered from the group, a more comprehensive understanding of the Company of Men Retreat experience and any potential impact on participant's perceptions and experiences of masculinity.

Potential Risks: There is the possibility of:

- a) Some level of anxiety at describing personal stories and emotions.
- b) Some negative emotions while revisiting potentially painful experiences or memories

- c) Unexpected negative emotions from sharing something that you have rarely or never discussed.
- d) Discomfort due to new insights or understandings about past events while engaged in discussion.
- e) Seeing significant events or people in their lives in a negative way after re-experiencing the event and related emotions.
- f) Anxiety during the research focus group due to sharing these experiences among other participants.
- g) Due to the group format of the design, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed. Every participant however, will be asked to keep the information discussed confidential, and adhere to the CENTRE guidelines of the group.

To minimize these risks, I will ensure that you have complete control and discretion over what material you share. Your comfort and safety as a participant is my primary concern. If at any point you start to feel uncomfortable, you may tell me so, or just say “pass”, and I will understand that you want to pause or stop the interview. I will also pay attention to levels of intimacy, and any discomfort I notice in you and will check on your willingness to proceed at such times. Should any intense emotions arise during the interview, I commit to debrief these with you, or should you want to continue to explore issues that arose from your participation, I will provide you with a handout at the beginning of the study that includes information about counselling services available to you.

Your confidentiality will be protected with the utmost care. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to audio-recorded interviews and transcripts and this data will be password protected and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator’s office in the Neville Scarfe Education building on the UBC campus. You will choose a pseudonym to be used to identify the transcripts and to be used in the written report of findings and at no time will any identifying information will included in the written report.

To maintain safety and uphold confidentiality to the best of the group’s ability, all participants will agree to adhere to our focus group guidelines while engaged with other members:

CENTRE Guidelines:

C – Confidentiality: what is said in the group does not leave the group except for the principal and co-investigator’s own research. While you may discuss your own participation in this focus group, names of other members, personal information, stories, and descriptions of events will not be discussed outside of the group.

E – Equal Air time: each member will be encouraged to contribute equally within the group.

N – Non-judgmental listening: each person speaks their truth about their experience; no one else passes judgment.

T – Timeliness: start and end on time.

R – Right to pass: some members may wish to forgo their contributions for a time, although I will always give multiple opportunities to members who have not yet spoken much of their experience into the group.

E – Engaged: while we are here, we will contribute as best we can.

Your participation in this group offers potential benefits as well.

Potential Benefits: Potential benefits include:

- a) A greater understanding of how you have experienced Company of Men.
- b) Gaining a sense of acceptance and understanding among your peers.
- c) A new perspective of significant events that you discuss.
- d) Increased comfort expressing previously proscribed or forbidden experiences or opinions.
- e) Therapeutic benefit from having been listened to and attended to without judgment in the context of a group.
- f) Gaining a sense of knowing yourself better.

Confidentiality: Your participation in the research interview will be recorded and retained by me, and participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. The results of this study will become a public document in the form of a Masters-level thesis. You are welcome to view your own digital audio-file or interview transcript and may request this of the co-investigator who will give you access to only your own data.

Contact for Information about the study: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Tim Laidler in Vancouver, BC.

Consent: Your participation in this project is **entirely voluntary** and **you may refuse** to participate or withdraw from the study at any time until the study is completed.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this project.

Your signature below also indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Participant

It is important that you provide accessible and accurate contact information for the sake of follow-up and interview analysis. Please provide the best methods of contact below:

(_____) _____
Telephone

E-Mail &/or Mailing Address

.....
 Check if you would like a copy of a report on the findings, ensure you have provided me an e-mail or mailing address.

Appendix B

Gentlemen,

The time has come to embark on an adventure.. together!!!

As young people we are all trying to figure our lives out. Now is a chance to work on them together.

Dr. Marv Westwood and Dr. David Kuhl are world renowned group experts and specialize in men's health. They are the creators of the Veterans Transition Program at UBC. For my thesis I will write on the experience, they have agreed to do it run this workshop in order to create some initial data for a VTP style program for the general population.

A more detailed consent form will be given and explained, for now it's a matter of scheduling. So if you are open to taking part could you fill out this doodle?? Or reply direct to me.

The retreat will be 2.5 days **Fri - Sun. Jan 4,5,6 2013.**

There is room for 10-15 if anyone that is not on this list is interested please have them contact me.

Feel free to call if you have any questions!!

Cheers,

Tim