



Neo-traditionalist, egalitarian and progressive masculinities in men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships

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ABSTRACT

Shifts in gender roles, identities and relations since the 1980s are continuing to influence masculinities within intimate partner relationships. Forefront in men's contemporary heterosexual relationships have been calls for gender equality and gender equity as a means to promoting the mental health and well-being of partners and their families. Most previous research has focused on a pathologized role of men in relationships (e.g., intimate partner violence). Little is known about how men perceive intimate partner relationships using a strength-based perspective. The current photovoice study addressed the research question, 'What are the connections between masculinities and men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships?' to highlight young men's (19-43 years-old) experiences of, and perspectives about their intimate partner relationships. Drawing from individual Zoom interviews with 92 heterosexual, cisgender men from 14 countries, we abductively derived three masculine typologies: 1) neo-traditionalist, 2) egalitarian and 3) progressive. Twenty-two (24%) participants embodied neo-traditionalist masculinities characterized by reliance's on traditional masculine norms that assign domesticities as feminine and prize masculine breadwinner and protector roles. Half of the participants (50%, $n = 46$) purposefully distanced themselves from traditional masculine norms to engage egalitarian masculinities. These men idealized equal (50-50) contributions and reciprocity wherein counts were often used to evaluate each partner's relative efforts and contributions to the relationship. Progressive masculinities were evident in 26% ($n = 24$) of participants who focused on fairness and social justice, checking their own privilege to justly operate within the relationship, and more broadly in society. The three typologies are grounded in men's heterosexual intimate partner gender relations, and advance masculinity frameworks to guide future health-research, policy and practice. In addition, there are opportunities for men's mental health promotion by prompting readers' reflexivity to thoughtfully consider what they idealize, and where they map in relation to the masculine typologies featured in the current article.

1. Introduction

Shifts in gender roles, identities and relations since the 1980s are continuing to influence the organization and practices of masculinities within and between societies worldwide (Pringle et al., 2011). While women's freer entry to the workforce and access to birth control continue to be hard fought human rights (Arvonne, 2017), changes to

boys' and men's lives indicate both emergent challenges and opportunities. Kimmel (2008), for example, pointed to young men's delayed and/or absent traditional masculine markers (i.e., career, marriage, breadwinner, home ownership) as entwined with their collective avoidance of adult responsibilities and fixations on the trappings of boyhood amid trying to prove their manhood. Contrasting these problematics, opportunities for pro-social masculinities embodied by

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promoting gender equality and gender equity within intimate partner relationships (and more broadly) have surfaced as much needed new and improved contemporary norms for boys and men (Greig and Flood, 2020). Further, men's lobby (and actions) for gender transformative practices are increasingly visible in public debates, social activism and policy development (Prasad et al., 2021). Also pushing gender equality and gender equity agendas are promises for mental health gains to prevent negative downstream outcomes – including intimate partner violence (IPV) and suicide (World Health Organization, 2021). Yet, within the personal and ordinarily private domesticities where intimate partnerships tend to operate, masculinities are poorly understood (Hochschild, 2012). The current study maps masculinities in men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships to advance understandings of gender equality and gender equity and guide future health research, policy and practice.

1.1. Masculinities, Men's heterosexual relationships and mental health

Masculinities – socially constructed practices, beliefs, and performativity's normed with being a man (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) – have been described and debated for decades, oftentimes hypothesizing the degree to which traditional masculine norms might be changing and diversifying in and across societies (Anderson and McCormick, 2018). In the specific context of heterosexual relationships, the gendered dimensions of men's intimate partnerships have drawn research attention. For example, men's instrumental approaches to intimate relationships – showing love and care through actions rather than words – have been claimed a by-product of men's collective inability to express emotional needs and/or read and support their partner's feelings (Seidler, 1998). Men's limited empathy and emotional restraint have also been linked to traditional masculine norms synonymous with strong and stoic protector and provider roles (Patrick and Beckenbach, 2009). Alignments to traditional masculine norms have, however, been somewhat disrupted by contemporary societal demands for men to more fully participate in their intimate partner relationships (i.e., sharing parental leave, sustained and routine contributions to domestic work, emotional openness and expressiveness). These shifts have invoked discomforts, with some men harbouring (and expressing) concerns about their flailing provider roles amid women's empowerment for securing equitable conditions to independently pursue their own goals (Schuler et al., 2018).

Contrasting these challenges, researchers have pointed to men's opportunities for freedoms to employ practices that break with the restrictive and socially policed performativity's characterizing (and sustaining) traditional masculine norms. Here, work norming men's emotional lives as flexible and expressive is explained as inclusive masculinities (Anderson and McCormick, 2018). Also debated are hybrid masculinities which suggest men's experiences and justifications of privilege have transformed, making available new identity projects (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Contextually, men's growing acceptance of and security with an equal intimate partner, commitment to contesting patriarchies and solidarity with feminism for garnering equitable relationships is growing (Lamont, 2015). Contemporary heterosexual intimate partner relationships have also increasingly emerged as eclectic with family diversity, dual-earner couples, childfree marriages (Bridges and Boyd, 2016) and expectations for emotional mutuality (Giddens, 1992).

Forefront in men's shifting heterosexual relationships have been calls for gender equality and gender equity. Gender equality idealizes equal workloads, where partners contribute the same or similar labour to mutually benefit the relationship. Gender equity – a focus in the current research – is differentiated and defined as the “provision of

fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women, men and all genders” (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). So, while matching contributions and opportunities (gender equality) might ease some traditionally uneven divisions of domestic labour and career progressions for partners in heterosexual relationships, they can also be called out for shorting actions that ensure each partner's needs are known and fairly met (gender equity). Here, the ontological security and psychological stability of both partners are prized outcomes of, and drivers for gender equity (Bridges and Boyd, 2016). Both gender equality and gender equity demand attention to diverse agency – structure processes and the socio-cultural contexts that entwine to influence men's intimate partner relationships. Structures supporting gender equality and gender equity include positive adjustments to women's income and employment opportunities and men's paternity leave (Nyberg, 2012). Though predicted as diverse, men's gender equality and gender equity practices have drawn little research attention (Waling, 2019), leveraging calls for strength-based and asset-building approaches to empirically account for, and promote men's relationships work (Baker, 2021).

The mental health gains through gender equality and gender equity are also key drivers for change, with evidence that distressed and/or disrupted intimate partner relationships heighten women's (King and Elliott, 2021) and men's risk for mental illness (Oliffe et al., 2022a). Specific to men's mental health risks, separated and divorced men often engage maladaptive practices, especially substance use, and relationship break-ups are a significant risk factor for male suicide (Richardson et al., 2021). By contrast, for men, being married confers protective health benefits that are absent among single men (Markey et al., 2005). These mental illness risks and health benefits underscore the importance of research into men's experiences of, and perspectives about, heterosexual intimate partner relationships (Richardson et al., 2019). Sharing insights on men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships can also lobby reflexive practices to promote mental health as upstream contributories to healthier communities (Levtov et al., 2014; Ruane-McAteer et al., 2019).

2. Methods

Interpretive descriptive methodologies drawing from qualitative traditions were purposefully used to combine virtual photovoice and Zoom interview data collection methods, with the application of constant comparative analytics to build the analyses (Thorne et al., 2004). This iterative approach to design, inclusive of participants worldwide, enabled us to pragmatically adapt and continue sampling in-situ to ensure data saturation (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), apply the findings to advance understandings, and make recommendations for future health-research, policy and practice (Thorne, 2016).

2.1. Procedures

Following university ethics approval (H22-00872), an e-flyer inviting men 19 to 44 years-old to participate in a study to share their experiences of building equitable, sustainable intimate partner relationships was distributed via social media. The age-range sampling was purposeful in that male IPV perpetrator rates are highest in that subgroup (Sardinha et al., 2022), and suicide is the leading cause of death for men 19-44 years-old (Pitman et al., 2012). Men worldwide from any ancestry, locale and sexual identity who spoke and understood English were eligible and potential participants contacted the project manager via email for additional study details. A brief eligibility/intake Zoom meeting was completed with potential participants to explain the

photovoice study objective and procedures, guide the completion of a Qualtrics hosted consent, demographic and survey data, and provide directions for uploading 5–10 photographs to illustrate their experiences of, and perspectives about, equitable, sustainable intimate partner relationships. Some men clarified the photographic assignment asking what content and types of images they might most usefully submit. While wanting to keep this open and creative we did describe a few examples of participant photographs to assist men who were struggling to conceptualize the photovoice component of the research (see [Oliffe et al., 2023](#)). After the consent was completed and photographs uploaded, participants took part in an individual Zoom interview to narrate their images, receiving a \$CAD100 (or equivalent) e-gift card to acknowledge their time and contribution to the study.

2.2. Participants and data collection

Social norms for intimate partner relationships strongly connect to cultural context. For this reason, we purposively recruited a global sample of men to obtain diverse perspectives and more nuanced understandings. The current analysis draws from 92 participants who self-identified as heterosexual, cisgender men, and completed photovoice interviews lasting between 40 and 150 min ($M = 79$ min; $SD = 20.7$ min). Submitting a total of 589 photographs ($M = 6.4$; $SD = 1.7$), participants ranged in age from 19 to 43 years-old ($M = 28.6$; $SD = 6.3$). Most were partnered ($n = 63$; 68.5%) and just over half resided in Canada ($n = 48$; 52.2%) (see [Table 1](#)). Four male and two female Canadian-based researchers worked with a semi-structured interview guide using prompt, probe and loop questions to advance participants' narratives about their photographs. Interviews purposefully engaged diverse themes within the context of men's intimate partner relationships including mental health, masculinities and emotions. When these topics did not emerge in participants' discussion about their photographs we drew from the interview guide to directly ask about these areas of interest. Interview questions included, What are the connections between your mental health and relationship? What aspects of masculinity work for and against you in your relationship? and How do you work with emotions in your partnership? While gender equity was a central interest in the study, it was evident early on that participants

varied in their understandings, definitions, ideals, actions and language for explaining the gender relations in *their* intimate partner relationships. With this in mind, the research question was adjusted for neutrality to, *what are the connections between masculinities and men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships?* Completed July through December of 2022, the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Participant photographs were inserted into the checked anonymized transcripts, labelled with a numeric identifier, assigned a pseudonym by the researchers and uploaded to NVivo 12 for coding. A written summary was completed for each participant interview to assist with the organization, retrieval and preliminary analyses of the data.

3. Data analysis

The decision to include 92 participants in the current study was made during data collection, and was informed by challenges for achieving data saturation with a geographically and culturally diverse sample of men. As [Brower et al. \(2019\)](#) predicted, an upside of multi-site, large n qualitative studies includes opportunities to examine and build "big picture theories ... outside narrowly bounded systems" (p. 5). Guided by grounded theory's constant comparative analytics ([Charmaz, 2006](#)), three researchers independently read the first 28 interviews and completed written summaries and preliminary interpretations of the data. Each participant interview, as a unit of analysis, was discussed and compared in fortnightly researcher team meetings to inductively derive, define and differentiate three masculine typologies (neo-traditionalist, egalitarian and progressive). These typologies were conceptually advanced with [Connell's \(2005\)](#) masculinities framework and the 28 participants were each assigned to one typology based on what predominated in their interview. Within each typology, we examined and coded men's data regarding the following everyday practices: 1) domestic chores, 2) career, 3) social activities, and 4) income and expenses. In what [Timmermans and Tavory \(2022\)](#) label abductive analyses, the remaining 64 participant interviews were reviewed and assigned to one of the three inductively derived typologies. The assignment of each participant's typology was double-checked by team members to achieve inter-rater reliability ahead of coding the last 64 interview transcripts to the afore-listed labels ([Abraham et al., 2021](#)).

Neo-traditionalist masculinities included 22 (24%) participants who referenced and oftentimes reverted to and relied on traditional masculine norms to explain their intimate partnerships. Embodying some contemporary heterosexual relationship practices, egalitarian masculinities included 46 (50%) men who deliberately distanced themselves from many traditional masculine norms with tangible and specific gender equality practices. Progressive masculinities included 24 (26%) participants who engaged gender equity projects dedicated to ensuring fairness in their intimate partner relationship and more broadly through actions for social justice. Regarding the participant produced photographs and corresponding narratives, a four-part process comprising preview, review, cross-photo comparison and theorizing ([Oliffe et al., 2008](#)) was used to assign each image to one of the five descriptive codes: 1) domestic work, 2) intimacy, 3) activities, 4) values, and 5) communication. In theorizing the coded visual data, the fit with the current study results was evaluated to decide one photograph and corresponding narrative to illustrate each of the three masculine typologies.

Table 1
Participant demographics ($n = 92$).

Age (years) (Range 19–43; Mean 28.6)	N [%]
19–24	26 [28.3]
25–34	50 [54.3]
35–44	16 [17.4]
Locale	
Canada	48 [52.2]
Turkey	17 [18.5]
US	9 [9.8]
Australia	3 [3.3]
Ghana	3 [3.3]
UK	2 [2.2]
Netherlands	2 [2.2]
Hungary	2 [2.2]
Denmark	1 [1.1]
New Zealand	1 [1.1]
China	1 [1.1]
Hong Kong	1 [1.1]
India	1 [1.1]
Bangladesh	1 [1.1]
Current Relationship Status	
Partnered or Married	63 [68.5]
Single/Never Married	27 [29.3]
Separated or Divorced	2 [2.2]

4. Findings

4.1. Neo-traditionalist

Neo-traditionalist masculinities were embodied by men with alignments to some long-standing gender norms. Featured were normative masculine roles and relations which operated across a continuum ranging rigid alignments through contemplative change for some traditional practices. Consistent in this sub-group was the conflation of gender equality with gender equity. For example, Peter, a 23-year-old African-American man, inter-mixed equity and equality explaining that he sometimes did more than his half of the domestic work:

“In terms of equity that equals sharing of work ... It’s equally sharing work but I can say that sometimes I do more work so as to help her [partner] when she’s maybe not feeling very well or maybe when she’s in pain or very tired, I help her out.”

Though equal domestic workloads and contributions were referenced (as equity), the specificities of those labours reflected men’s alignments to some traditional masculine norms. Peter rationalized his domestic work divisions suggesting, “most men don’t like doing the house chores, they like doing more physical work” in setting his contributions to housework chores as conditional, favour-driven and somewhat special. Indeed, participants including Wayne, a 25-year-old African-Canadian man, strongly aligned to some traditional gender roles in the domestic sphere. Ahead of delineating who did what in their six-year partnership, Wayne foregrounded meeting his partner at school when he was 19-years-old, suggesting that even though “it started out as a friendship” it was “love at first sight”:

“Most of the time she [partner] does the house chores ... while I do the manly duties like, maybe washing the car. Also, sometimes I do go for groceries, and I also do paint jobs in the house.”

Wayne brushed these labour divisions as ancestrally informed normative practices, “we’re both African-Canadian, and she [partner] also understands that most African men don’t do womanly duties.” He further clarified that occasionally he would break these cultural rules and help out with domestic work conceding, “you may find me washing the dishes.” However, such transgressions were private and hidden, and Wayne explained that he shielded his father from seeing such contraventions because “he could judge me” and “think that my girlfriend is the one that is wearing the pants in the house”:

“My parents are from an African origin and in African homes you can never find a man doing such house chores [washing dishes, washing clothes, cooking]. So, for me, I’ve never seen my father washing the dishes ... I found my father not doing it, and so I guess his father did the same and the cycle continues.”

Replicating these traditional masculine norms, Wayne differentiated what he could *not be seen* doing (womanly duties), all the while confiding (confidentially within the interview) an underbelly of domestic bores that he contemplated and occasionally completed “only when my wife is around.” As Wolcott (1999) suggests, knowing and being complicit in sustaining cultural norms also affords men insights to, and avenues for discretely breaking with those rules. Specifically, Wayne (and many men) diversely worked different gender relations (i.e., son, husband) and arenas (i.e., intimate partner relations, intergenerational gatherings), though their reference point and reliance on traditional masculine norms was ever-present. The net effect was women’s disproportionate responsibility for domesticities – an imbalance that King and Elliott (2021) suggest is fundamental to gender inequalities.

The intergenerational carry over of traditional masculine norms also featured in men’s social practices, and their narratives about finances related to household income and spending. Philip, a 30-year-old African-Canadian man who stated early on in the interview that he valued the company of and drinking alcohol with other men, contrasted those

homosocial masculine practices with the morally informed conservative feminine norms of his fiancé and partner of four years:

[P]: I do have my boy’s nights, mostly Friday, but she [partner] doesn’t love partying ... she loves to only spend time with me ... she doesn’t have like a girl’s night out. [I]: Is she okay with you having guys nights out? [P]: She has never talked about it, and plus she has not, whenever I come back home I have never seen her upset, so I’m thinking she is just fine with that.

Philip elaborated, “the man is the head of the family” and by extension “he is responsible for the relationship being equitable.” Offering examples of regularly giving his partner roses and caring for her by going bike-riding (because she enjoyed that) even though “I’m not a fan”, Philip declared, “you should never be selfish ... you can’t deny her [partner] happiness.” He also understood many of the gender differences between himself and his partner as biologically driven, “men are built different; men are created different” in the suggestibility that his level of care reflected contemporary shifts in men’s partnerships:

“I think in the old times ... men didn’t spend a lot of time with girlfriends compared to this time. I think this generation we are spending a lot of time, we are pampering them [women partners] a lot. Our grandfathers never did because you can see it in the movies that most old men, most men in that time used to spend time together, maybe drinking a beer.”

Notwithstanding Philip’s weekly replication of men’s historically normative gatherings to drink alcohol together, he claimed some relative changes. Reminders abound here that men can concurrently distance themselves from traditional masculine norms amid reproducing some rituals and gender relations from a bygone era within their contemporary worlds.

Household finances were idealized as men’s responsibility. Peter, a 23-year-old African-American man who was trading stocks full-time while his girlfriend of two-years studied at university, explained:

“Because the society that we live in, men are the ones who provide and protect for the people that they love. It’s been like that for very many years. And I’m not saying that there shouldn’t be any changes. I am saying that a man should be responsible and should be the one who’s looking for money, but also the woman can contribute, there’s no problem with that. But mostly, a man should ensure that the family is well. The family is financially stable.”

Peter, and many men, were committed to providing for, and protecting their partner (and themselves) from hardship. Participants did however deny these practices as financially controlling of their partner, delinking patriarchal power while simultaneously aligning to traditional breadwinner roles. Qualifying women’s capacity to financially contribute to the partnership, Peter acknowledged some social easing amid restating his resolute buy-in to being the main source of income in his partnership. While men’s provider and protector roles were steadfast, decisions about household spending were less fixed and oftentimes emerged as pressure points. Arham, a 29-year-old South Asian-Canadian man whose arranged marriage was in its fifth year confirmed that:

“For both partners, I mean, both are working hard and then the argument comes like who’s going to pay for what and how, and that is where I would say most problems occur.”

Expanding on this, Deniz, a 34-year-old Turkish man living in the Netherlands referenced gender stereotypes regarding affordability versus ascetics in detailing a two-month conflict that preceded his eventual and somewhat resentful concession to jointly purchase a car with his wife. Captioning Photograph 1, *It’s our car and it’s a photo of conflict actually*, Deniz explained, “a big car ... was her dream” quipping that “she convinced me to buy a car” even though “it is not a logical decision we don’t need it ... the train system is very well connected.”



Photograph 1. It's our car and it's a photo of conflict actually.

"For us, generally, I think about the cost of it. She has much more idea about the decoration stuff and if we have two separate decisions, then she wins that's all."

Deniz summarized and closed his conflict narrative saying, "*sometimes logical decisions are not best for relationships*," highlighting what Flood et al. (2021) call backlash and resistance to social change and gender equality. Here, appropriation was also evident, in that Deniz contributed an equal amount of money to purchase the car, but covertly undermined that joint decision. Such backlash can be a sign of progress according to Flood et al. (2021), wherein changes to Deniz's partner's status were well underway. Indeed, Deniz's buyer regret and resentment reflected a wider uneasiness for giving in (again), to the point where his wife's *wins* were expressed as his accruing *losses* for control and agency within their partnership.

In summary, neo-traditionalists aligned to traditional masculine norms amid recognizing (and resisting) some contemporary shifts in heterosexual intimate partner relations. Though contemplative about some changes, participants tended to reside or revert to traditional masculine norms through a range of performativity's (i.e., housework, social connection, breadwinner roles, household spending). Bridging toward egalitarian masculinities, it was clear that some neo-traditionalist men expressed more sensitivity and openness to gender equality.

4.2. Egalitarian

Egalitarian masculinities were defined by participants' commitment to and action for gender equality in their intimate partner relationship. Also conflating gender equality and gender equity, these men nonetheless purposefully and deliberately embodied practices delinking them

from traditional masculine norms. These positionalities were often influenced by and co-constructed with partners. Muyang, a 23-year-old Asian man, who had lived with his partner in Canada for two-years, proactively responded to her lobby to more equally decide household responsibilities:

"Before there were conflicts where ... my girlfriend, she felt like she was cooking more often than I was, which was true ... how we resolved that was we'll schedule days ahead of time. For example, if you cook three days, I cook three days. Then I think by having a more rigid schedule like that, more quantifiable schedule, we were able to sort of divide it more equally."

Muyang worked with his partner to adjust and ease into a more equal partnership. In distancing themselves from traditional masculine norms, many men highlighted their desire for doing things differently than previous generations. Contrasting his father's marriage, Kevin, a 29-year-old man who grew up in Hong Kong and was living with his partner of seven-years in Canada, explained:

"My dad was from a part of China where it was very, very traditional and conservative ... In general males ... should just carry the whole family, they go out for as long as they need to bring in the money and the female should, on the other hand, just stay at home ... My mom would always say his [husband] way of bringing up a kid is 'my way or no way' ... So, I was under this kind of relationship influence ... I don't want to be him in some ways ... In terms of communication I want to do better ... I don't want to be that 'my way or no way' kind

of partner ... when my mom sees how I treat my girlfriend, she's like, 'I'm so glad that you didn't turn out like your dad.'"

Evident was Kevin's recognition of and distancing from his father's patriarchal practices, and the inequalities that stained his parent's marriage. Avoiding replicating the marginality his mother endured, Kevin worked at being a better man and partner than the masculine model he had grown up with. Though Kevin, and most participants, railed against patriarchal power within their relationships, they did not overtly contest (or seek to disrupt) traditional masculine norms more broadly. Instead, men's gender identity and relations labour in egalitarian masculinities focused on self-work to sustain their intimate partnership through responding to societal changes and their partner's expectations. This dual positioning might be argued as complicit for sustaining traditional masculinity, as Connell (2003) has highlighted elsewhere.

While generation-specific practices were consistently referenced in asserting change, many men were uncertain about exactly how to be within their own relationship. Benjamin, a 28-year-old Canadian man, was adamant that he would not be like generations past, but also recognized his disorientation for knowing how to effectively show-up in his four-month relationship, *"I'm learning it all from scratch."* As Oliffe et al. (2022b) have argued, there is no relationship blueprint or template to guide men's intimate partnerships.

Participants embodying egalitarian masculinities most often defaulted to equal 50-50 partnerships, where measurable give and take, and compromise and reciprocity were the centrepieces of gender equality. Similar to Muiyang's evenly divided cooking duties, Robert, a 39-year-old American man narrated Photograph 2 titled "split down the middle," explaining how an equally divided bedroom dresser reflected the overarching gender equality in his four-year relationship.

Highlighting his partner's selflessness for giving him an equal number of dresser drawers, Robert spoke to their collaborative spirit and drive for equality in the relationship. While quantifying and tracking 50-50 splits, equality was also expressed as an implicitly known principle for some men. Leo, a 39-year-old man who was born and grew up in Canada ahead of moving to China with his wife for their mutual career advancement, described a skill-based approach to explain the specificities of who did what within their ten-year relationship:

"She [partner] doesn't like my cooking straight up. She doesn't like meat and potatoes ... And I like her cooking. So, it's not a matter of needing her to cook. It's a matter of we're both happy with the result ... It's just whatever you're best at. That's what we try to go to. When it comes to teaching [their son] to swim ... I'm a better swimmer ... When it comes to teaching them English, alphabet songs, things like that - that's me ... So, yeah, we always go to our strengths, and we try to step up where we can."

Leo detailed what might be argued as a blend of traditional domestic and contemporary co-parenting labour divisions (i.e., women cooking, and activity, instruction-based fathering) as jointly decided and evenly distributed partnership efficiencies. Such equality was also important in the labour-intensive demands of the day-to-day for running a household. Oliver, a 41-year-old Australian father who had two sons from a previous marriage, and a current partner with three children from prior relationships, spoke to their blended family context as demanding equal contributions, but without a rigid 50-50 count to check-and-balance all that needed to be done:

"Transactional probably seems like the wrong word but we give and take pretty equally ... it's an unstated agreement, that mutuality to go and share things together as best [as] we could."



Photograph 2. Split down the middle.

"It is a pretty big deal because girls usually have so many more clothes ... for her to let me have that very boyish right side of the dresser, that's pretty awesome."

Similar to Oliver, some egalitarian men spoke of an even playing field where gender equality was a philosophical position, rather than a hard count which risked conflict about real and imagined disparities. Key here was reciprocity, which participants paid close attention to in determining the quality of their partnership. This included risk assessments for being under-valued and/or taken advantage of in the partnership. Luca, a 28-year-old man who lived in New Zealand, and met, married and left his wife within two years, spoke to unacceptability of gender inequalities:

“Never again will I be in a relationship with someone that suffers from PMS [premenstrual syndrome] and takes that out on me ... I’m not someone’s punching bag ... And unfortunately, my pay check ended up going into her bank account ... just because she wanted to be in control of the financial side of things.”

Luca’s list of grievances from his failed marriage situated his yearning for gender equality as learnt through its absence, and the harms that flowed from those exposures.

Regarding finances, most men were in dual-income relationships, and there were some tensions when participants’ partners had higher incomes. Thomas, a 34-year-old American man in a one-year relationship conceded, “*there’s that part of me that feels in some way insecure about making half of what she [partner] makes and not having a whole lot saved up.*” Tempering his vulnerability, Thomas appreciated his partner’s acceptance of the situation, though his plans to correct the imbalance were evident:

“The fact that it didn’t change her reaction to me made me feel a little bit more comfortable with it ... allowed me to start looking at other options without feeling pressured to find a higher paying job immediately, a second source of income immediately just so I can keep this person happy. So, I think the fact that there’s no pressure there has helped too.”

Having a lesser income disrupted one of Thomas’ ideals for gender equality, and lit concerns that he might somehow be (or be seen to be) dependant rather than self-sustaining in the partnership. Elaborating, Thomas spoke to maintaining “*a significant amount of independence*” in their finances to avoid “*feeling like we’re burdening the other with certain debts that we have*” or “*feeling trapped.*” This echoes Kimmel’s (2008) observations that young men can grapple with their slow progressions in comparison to their female contemporaries. Income as quantified marker, was also a bidirectional issue. Kevin, a 29-year-old Asian man who had a higher income than his partner, explained their pro-rated financial arrangement, “*we try to keep it around 60% to 40% so I’m paying 60% of it.*” In what was effectively a means-tested and adjusted model, Kevin rationalized their apportioned financial contributions as equal. Benjamin, a 28-year-old Canadian man had a similar arrangement, conceding his higher income and input to joint expenses might be understood as “*chivalry*” and “*reinforce some old-fashioned values where the man ought to pay for everything.*” Here, hard-count finances signaled the reach of traditional masculine norms for men needing to reconcile uneven salaries and purchasing powers within their partnerships.

To summate, egalitarian masculinities idealized gender equality as both partners taking responsibility and being accountable for the relationship. Deliberate actions away from traditional masculine norms were evident but there were some pressure points, especially when the 50-50 hard counts were relied on, but did not tally. Egalitarian men also had some blind spots for historical and structural elements that continue to reproduce gender inequities. In what follows, progressive masculinities are differentiated by men’s attention to fairness and gender equity in their intimate partner relationships and more broadly.

4.3. Progressive

Progressive masculinities were defined and differentiated by men’s gender equity work including addressing inequities within their intimate partner relationships and more broadly through actions for social justice. These participants had thoughtfully considered and adapted to gender equity, and purposefully worked to disrupt traditional masculine norms. Agustin, a 41-year-old Canadian father in an eight-year relationship, put it succinctly:

“Fair doesn’t mean equality, it means equity, like it means ... that everyone needs to be given something, the thing that they need, instead of like, everyone being given the same thing and I think through a relationship that’s important to know.”

Many men had learnt about gender equity in their paid-work settings and/or through formal education and studies wherein their understandings of social systems and power were applied to the everyday and their intimate relationships. Here, agency and structure inter-mixes were a focus – and participants connected social and cultural systems to their understandings of partner’s experiences, and contextualized gender equity for themselves. Justin, a 31-year-old Canadian man, explained:

“It requires work to be a person who has an equitable relationship. It requires self-reflection, reflection on our society, reflection on what you want as a person, what your partner wants as a person, and it requires a lot of emotional introspection to develop a relationship that is equitable, safety where vulnerability is treasured, where intimacy is built in.”

Justin highlighted gender equity as an individual and joint project prescribing reflexive and collaborative processes to disrupt traditional masculine norms. Replacing stoicism with expressiveness, competitiveness with collaboration, control with fairness, and ultimately giving up power for equity, participants’ masculine values prized righting societal wrongs in *their* relationships. Ashon, a 31-year-old single Ghanaian man, asserted:

“Equity looks at justice, you know. It’s a relationship that, in my mind, we are looking at progressive kinds of conversations happening in those relationships.”

Ashon spoke to the need for deep authentic connection to know and understand partners as requisite to building gender equity into the relationship. He pledged support for feminist agendas to counter the long-standing mistreatment of African women, asserting that his next partner would have all that she needed to grow and thrive within and outside of their relationship.

Central to gender equity was effective communication to ensure depth and shared decision-making in the partnership ranging day-to-day domesticities through career and life goals. Noah, a 29-year-old Canadian man in a three-year long-distance relationship qualified that “*tons of communication*” was needed to honestly and fairly decide a true partnership rather than just “*settling*” to avoid conflict:

“It’ll be better for both of us if we’re able to collaborate in coming to [a] compromise as opposed to well ... ‘she doesn’t want me to do this so I don’t want her to do that’. And then you both end up kind of resentful.”

Participants were willing to invest in processes to fully understand their partner’s wants and needs, as well as honestly express their own views and preferences with the goal of securing mutually beneficial arrangements and outcomes. Agustin, a 41-year-old Canadian father, spoke to how learning to communicate was hard work, and a long-term process for building equity in [Photograph 3](#), titled “Discussion”.



Photograph 3. Discussion.

"Sometimes we have discussions that are like 15–20 minutes long, and sometimes they drag on for hours and hours, and we just have to get to where we need to right? I think at the start of our relationship, we really had to go through [developing] a sense of empathy ... it did take a bit to figure that out to make sure that no one was like attacking the other ... we were just trying to be in the space together ... and I think that space of empathy is really important and then we're both in the same kind of level playing field, so it is ... a strategy of, 'I'm listening and summarizing what it is you need.'"

Work for understanding the experiences, views and needs of partners was purposeful, routine and planned rather than triaged to address crises in the partnership. Many men credited partners for broadening their understandings of and appreciation for gender equity. Ahmet, a 33-year-old Turk living in the UK with his partner of two-years, recounted:

"I was speaking with my partner a month ago and she told me that ... now it's a triple burden [for women], because you have to be a good mom, a good worker, and a beautiful woman at the same time ... So, it's becoming more of a burden for women, as I see, and it's highly dependent on the social policy of the country."

Sensitized to his partner's perspectives and challenges, Ahmet also spoke to appreciating the context without feeling blamed or pressured to apologize or explicitly remedy what his partner felt. In this example, listening to and understanding his partner was enough. Alp, a 30-year-old Turkish man spoke to learning about equity more broadly through his partner of one-year:

"She's a vegan and she is supporting LGBTQ, so I didn't know much about LGBTQ, which was interesting for me, and she made her case very well, which changed my opinion on this matter; I didn't really know, I didn't read about it ... and I was like 'okay, you are right, I should be supporting this'."

Evident was Alp's interest to learn from his partner, and willingness to recognize and use his privilege and positionality for social justice rather than mobilizing patriarchal power to dominate, dismiss and marginalize. Consistent with [Anderson and McCormack's \(2018\)](#)

inclusive masculinities, Alp's willingness to foster belongingness for people who were living in marginalizing conditions, and routinely 'othered' by traditional masculine norms was explicit and visible to his peers.

Regarding domestic labour and finances, men understood their partnership practices as joint, fluid and contextually driven. Jackson, a 35-year-old Canadian man who took parental leave when his wife returned to work postpartum, noted, "*a lot of women still face discrimination in the workplace,*" ahead of differentiating his gender equity actions more broadly, "*within society there are stacks of men that just don't pull their weight around the house, and that's not right.*" Speaking to these career, parental leave and domestic work problematics Jackson characterized his actions and philosophy as deliberately focused on righting gender inequities. Here, there was a need to be proactive and flexible, as Ashon from Ghana asserted:

"Even if I suck at doing the domestic work, I should still do that. That shouldn't mean that because I'm the one who could really clean the place and clean it well, then it is my job to do that. It's everybody's role. It's everybody's responsibility to contribute and play their part."

Regarding income and expenses there were also flexibilities for jointly operating finances. Agustin, who worked in the non-profit sector, anticipated that his wife would probably become a higher earner than him after she completed graduate school:

"I make most of the money in the relationship right now, but that will change because she's going through school, she has a better career path than I do at this moment, so in five years' time she might make more money than me."

Career trajectories and opportunities determined incomes in progressive masculinities, and these joint-projects were anticipatory and accepting of change over time. Akin to [Creighton and Oliffe, 2010](#) communities of practice, these standards were unequivocally dyadic, relational and always inclusive of both partners. Indeed, fluctuations were expected and understood as part of the couple's long-term future (and planning) together.

Evident also were participants' actions for what [O'Brien et al. \(2007\)](#) coined standing out from the herd, wherein men deliberately contested traditional masculine norms. William, a 41-year-old Canadian father of two who had been married for six-years, elaborated:

"Traditionally, men have held power in all forms of society and certainly through relationships. I just see so many examples – even with our group of pretty progressive-minded, forward-thinking friends – these entrenched patriarchal ways of being in the relationship ... I think it's up to men ... I think women have been rightfully asking over time to change the way that we think about relationships. Across all of the feminist movements and continuing to #MeToo and everything, now it's like ultimately men need to step up and be willing to change."

William, and many participants, forthrightly critiqued traditional masculine norms to lobby men to collectively move gender equity forward as fair and just for promoting the health of the women in their lives, and ensuring a healthier society more broadly.

In summary, progressive masculinities were active in contesting traditional gender norms, and the needs and views of partners were paramount within the broad social contexts of men's disproportionate power and privilege. In essence, progressive masculine behaviours (i.e., domestic participation, emotion awareness) were openly engaged and normed in participants' intimate partner relationships as leverage and lobby for adjustments to social structures (i.e., parental leave, women's leadership) and other men's agency.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The current research is amongst the largest qualitative photovoice studies to explore men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships. It is also one of the few projects to sample men from diverse contexts and countries worldwide. These methodological contributions are significant in breaking with the longstanding confines of in-person photovoice studies and qualitative gender and health research describing specific settings with small samples and single-sites (Oliffe et al., 2023). Not to overstate these points, but the COVID-19 restrictions have paved virtual avenues for scaling explorations of an ever-growing plurality of masculinities that shape, and are shaped by men's gender relations. Such methodological advances can garner important empirical gains, and as Connell (2018) notes, the relational differences and patterns flowing from the "gender structuring of social life ... affect our common fate" (p. 333). By mapping masculinities in men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships in the current study we can advance mental health promotion, and the discussion of the findings that follows offers some vital upstream potentials for preventing downstream IPV and suicide linked to distressed and disrupted partnerships.

While the current study had intended to focus on gender equity, it was clear early on that there was confusion amongst many participants regarding the meaning of gender equity, as well as challenges for differentiating and operationalizing gender equality. These uncertainties were especially apparent among *neo-traditionalist* masculinities, where, akin to Payne and Doyal's (2010) commentary, there was widespread puzzlement about the semantics, let alone application of gender equality and gender equity for men's relationships. Fisher and Ryan (2021) assert that COVID-19 put a halt to gender equality whereby divisions of domestic and parenting labours reverted to femininities' work. Though COVID-19 may have influenced some neo-traditionalist masculinities, these men's domesticities and allegiances to breadwinner roles reflected long-standing alignments to traditional masculine norms. Perales et al. (2023) suggest that the heterosexual sons of fathers who align to traditional masculine norms are likewise anchored and stalled, which might explain some men's neo-traditionalist practices in the current study. This is not to suggest that men's neo-traditionalist positionalities were untroubled. Rather, as Flood et al. (2021) report, participants' backlash and resistance to gender equality mapped across a continuum with some men differentiating contemporary heterosexual intimate partner relationship norms. The mental health promotion challenge herewith is to help move neo-traditionalist men from these predominately pre-contemplative and contemplative states to actions that build gender equality and gender equity in their intimate partner relationships.

The large number of *egalitarian masculinities* in the current study might reflect the relatively rapid culture changes that have [re]normed and diversified gender identities, roles and relations over the last two decades. In line with Inglehart et al. (2017) observation about the widespread acceptance of gender equality, egalitarian men reported comfortabilities with deliberately distancing themselves from traditional masculine norms. As King and Elliott (2021) report, restrictive gender norms are problematic for the mental health of men and their families, and within this context gender equality was positioned by participants as a wise contemporary masculine value with multiple beneficiaries. This positionality plays to men's protector roles but the caveat here is that while many participants embodied egalitarian masculinities, there were some problematics for operationalizing gender equality. The primary risk for distress resided in men's literal 50-50 counts for quantifying who did what and when in the partnership. As Greig and Flood (2020) caution, gender equality needs to consider the

structures that influence men's behaviours (and behaviour change). To this point, it is interesting that egalitarian men were focused on *their* masculine-self, but shied away from what Greig and Flood (2020) call anti-patriarchal social actions. Chandler (2021) has pointed out the silencing power of traditional masculine norms, and participant's somewhat private gender equality allegiances can manifest cognitive dissonance and mental health challenges. To smooth these tensions, Salazar Torres et al. (2012) suggest gender equality training programs tailored to boys and young men can be especially beneficial.

Progressive masculinities might be idealized as somewhat of a utopia for heterosexual intimate partner relationships wherein men's active agency for gender equity and social justice resound as normative. For these men, gender equity demanded a strong work ethic for empathy to understand and support partners, as well as transitioning their own introspections to cordially express what they needed from the partnership. These gender equity actions can be framed as playing to masculine provider ideals wherein men prioritize their self-health and the mental health of their partner as arterials to optimize the relationship. Indeed, atop the drivers for gender equity, Connell (2003) highlights the eminence men assign to their relationships for the health and quality of their lives. Recognizing power as unevenly occupied by men, and promoting social justice in the everyday did however demand ongoing work for undoing gender (see Butler, 2004). As Flood et al. (2021) warn, men who emphasize progressive gender attitudes and identities can still enact traditional masculine norms. Moreover, speaking up for change and against traditional masculine norms still (and perhaps especially at this point in history) risks ostracism and isolation from traditionally masculine men and those complicit in sustaining those practices. The resultant potential for overtly not belonging to traditional masculine norms is a well-known risk factor for men's depression and suicide (Oliffe et al., 2019). As such, progressive masculinities, as in-progress states, might also benefit from coaching and affirmations to normatively placate men's self-reliance with interdependence, strength with vulnerability and stoicism with empathy, and meaningful exchange to nourish (and sustain) men's partnerships and mental health.

From a gender theory viewpoint, the indexing of masculinities across diverse settings with Connell's (2005) meta-schema of gender relations and power has advanced understandings of men's mental health and illness. The current study by grounding men's everyday heterosexual relations and lives as masculine typologies beckons consideration of the malleability of those states. Of course, risks and opportunities permeate these intersecting, shifting masculine typologies. A key prospect amid this messiness is to build gender-transformative and gender-responsive programs to move men toward gender equity to gather mental health gains and reduce IPV and suicide. With this in mind, we might also be so bold as to suggest that there is significant mental health promotion potential for readers of this article to reflect on (and thoughtfully map) their own intimate partner relationships, past, present and future. We might also purposefully engage men with these reflexivity's and conversations about their intimate partnerships as more constructive approaches than pathologizing or blaming them for distressed relationships.

Study limitations include the absence of participants' current and previous partners' accounts, and the reliance on men's experiences for exploring what is clearly a gender relations issue. The cross-sectional study design also limits insights to the temporal dimensions for men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships, and the shifts experienced in distressed and disrupted romantic partnerships. To address these limitations, longitudinal research inclusive of couple-dyad data might usefully build on the masculine typologies and findings shared in the current study.

In conclusion, masculinities and contemporary heterosexual intimate partner relationships demand ongoing health research and policy with the goal of norming gender equity. While gender equality and gender equity gains have been claimed in work with young men (Rice et al., 2021; Salazar Torres et al., 2012), there is a strong need to engage men across the life course to finesse and norm those practices in heterosexual intimate partner relationships.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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