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## Men in social work : a qualitative exploratory study of the male experience

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James Flood  
Men in Social Work: A Qualitative  
Exploratory Study of the Male  
Experience

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines male gender identity in social work. The purpose of this study was exploratory in nature and asked how men in social work construct and reflect on their male identity. The investigation is based on the perspectives of 12 male licensed social workers from across the country. Further, the study explores influences of male gender identity construction, the male experience in social work education and the male experience in social work practice. The most compelling findings were that while men tend to be the numerical minority in social work they still occupy more positions of privilege; that men's awareness of their gender identity correlated with a desire to end gender oppression; and that men who go into social work either fit their concept of identity to fit the context of social work, or fit the context of social work to be in congruence with their male identity. Implications for social work education and practice highlight a need to further understand masculinity in order to end gender inequality in social work.

**MEN IN SOCIAL WORK: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE MALE  
EXPERIENCE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

James Flood

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2014

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the various people in my life who supported me. This thesis is dedicated to them. To my mom and George who were always available for my phone calls, provided perspective and gave their unconditional love and support. To my Aunt Linda and Uncle Tommy who gave me a home-away-from-home. To my siblings, Emily and Matt, who like to remind me of the parts of myself I overlook and of where I come from. To my best friends – Omid, Jeremy, Marc and Becky – who ground me and lighten my heart when I need it the most. To Geoff and Sarah who continue to give their love and support, even from across the country. To Sammy whose playful companionship, while sorely missed, is forever remembered.

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

This research study exists in the realm of men's work and masculinity theory. Specifically, this study attempted to understand more deeply what factors (family context, social forces, unconscious motivations, specific events/rituals, role models, etc.) influence the construction of the masculine identity in male social workers. The purpose of my research topic is to understand the male identity in relation to an individual's life course and to the field of social work, specifically. For the purpose of this study, the term "male" is used as a gender description (e.g. male social worker, etc.), while "masculine" and "masculine identity" are terms used to describe the overarching concept of "male-ness," to which male role norms and male identity ascribe. To that end, the overarching research question for this study was: How do male social workers construct and reflect on their male identity?

Ultimately, this research relates to social justice work in relation to gender studies. By deconstructing the factors that influence the male identity and the norms associated with it, it is my hope that this research will contribute to the larger conversation of the cessation of gender-based oppression and inequality in social work. After all, despite the fact that women make up nearly 79% of the membership in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States, there is still a large gap in gender equality within the profession (Pease, 2011). It is in this context that this research is of particular need. I assert that work towards ending oppression and gender inequality must come not only from understanding multiple perspectives on theory and individual experience, but also from a commitment from those groups and individuals in power to end oppressive practices. Furthermore, in order to end oppressive acts, those in power must better understand how their identity functions in a potentially oppressive

way. Therefore, understanding the male identity and what factors contribute to it may lead to a better understanding of gender inequality and oppression. I can see this as relevant to social work practice, especially as it relates to the social activism arm of practice.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to address the question “How do male social workers construct and reflect on their male identity?” To begin with this review will examine masculinity and the male identity by reviewing theoretical frameworks and empirical research. The content of this review will highlight the area in which this thesis intends to explore – that is, male gender identity construction through the lens of male licensed social workers.

**Theoretical and conceptual literature.** In review of the theoretical literature, three articles seemed best to summarize the current discourse on theories of masculinity as they relate to the male identity. Some of the key concepts and theories on masculinity from the literature are notable for the following: that certain life circumstances influence an individual’s identification with masculine norms (Bennett, 2007), that masculinity exists as a field within which subfields of dominant and subordinate masculine identities exist (Cole, 2009) and that gender inequality exists within the field of social work (Pease, 2011).

Each of these articles defines masculinity in terms of gender norms with which individuals would identify. For instance, some of the common threads of the masculine (hegemonic) norm are: confidence, self-reliance, toughness, daring, etc. (Cole, 2009). In this way, openness, vulnerability and emotionality, for instance are regarded as deviant from the masculine norm. This is helpful when considering how to operationalize the concept of masculinity for this research, even in its harshly dualistic viewpoint. In both cases, however, one of the underlying assumptions about masculinity is that gender, a social construct and sex, a biological construct are intertwined and inseparable. Neither article truly resolves the issue of those who identify as male in gender, but not in sex, for instance.



Hegemonic masculinity, according to Coles (2009) is a construct of “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (p. 31). In this way, masculinity as a theory can be divided into sub-groups of dominant and subordinate masculinities. Furthermore, masculinity according to Bennett (2007) is “a constantly changing collection of meanings we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other and with our world” (p. 348). In both cases, the social construction of masculinity is apparent. The implication is that every individual will likely have a subjective relationship with masculinity. Some males might experience themselves as more masculine, while others experience themselves as less-so. Within the realm of social work specifically – a female-dominated profession (Pease, 2011) – it would be interesting to explore the subjective male experience of masculinity. That is, the theoretical literature at this point begs the question of whether male social workers will identify with more hegemonic masculine traits, or not.

A counterpoint to the theory of masculine identity and masculinity itself was in Becky Francis’ (2002) article. The author presents the view that contemporary theory on gender identity itself, still serves to locate identity at a fixed point, whereas post-modernist and feminist theory seek a more fluid description of identity (Francis 2002). In this way, the very notion of masculinity theory as a concept reinforces the idea that gender is fixed. This leaves further room to ask how gender identity is constructed and understood in the field of social work. Pullen and Simpson (2009) mention “gender itself is a social practice that both defines and is a product of social relations between men and women rather than indicative of the properties of their fixed identity positions.” In this way masculine identity in social work, a female-dominated profession, is constructed in the context of the relationship between men and women in the field.

Overall, the literature presents masculinity theory in a way that is more dynamic, perhaps less fixed than I had previously assumed and this is an important concept to keep in mind in moving forward with this research. A general summary of the literature thus far is that masculinity is both an identity with commonly-understood, if not easily-defined norms that exist within dominant and subordinate fields; and also that masculinity as a concept still operates within the realm of identity as a fixed point within a dualistic social construct. I am still curious to find out, specifically how male social workers construct and reflect on their masculine identity. For the purpose of this research “male identity” will be defined as any individual who self-identifies as ‘masculine,’ ‘man,’ or ‘male.’

**Empirical literature.** In review of the empirical literature on masculinity studies, one of the apparent themes that jumped out to me was that the articles focused on and identified masculine role norms (Coles, 2008; Hammer & Good, 2010), how they might be different across nationality (Tager & Good, 2005), how identifying with norms outside traditional male norms increased the likelihood of childhood peer victimization (bullying) (Song, 2003), and the dynamic of hegemonic masculinity (Coles, 2008) and the influence of peer groups on the formation of masculine identity (Sherriff, 2007).

Tony Coles’ (2008) article was a qualitative study of the strategies men use to negotiate masculinity of the course of an individual’s lifetime. The author found that men reform their definitions of masculinity to fit in with hegemonic ideals and subfields of masculinity. Coles found that many men are comfortable with their masculine identities, even if they do not conform, or fit with the hegemonic ideal. This is relevant to my study in terms of how men in social work will relate to their own male identity. If men reform their definitions of maleness as

inherently masculine, then men in social work will also define their male identity as congruent with hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, the literature addressed the effects of conforming to hegemonic masculine norms. Hammer and Good (2010) found in their quantitative study of 250 men between the ages of 18 and 79 that men who endorsed more traditionally-masculine norms (e.g. risk-taking, dominance, primacy of work and pursuit of status) had higher levels of personal courage, autonomy, endurance, and resilience. In other words, they found a positive psychological benefit for men who endorsed more masculine traits. This is relevant given that men in social work are in a female-dominated profession and thus it is interesting to see how men relate to their male identity and whether this is a positive, or negative relationship.

The literature also addressed cross-cultural differences in masculinity. Tager and Good's (2005) quantitative study of 152 Italian male students reported that participants endorsed less traditional views of masculine norms than American male counterparts. In other words, the notion of hegemonic masculinity was found to be both socially constructed and culturally-bound. This is relevant to the current study in that it gives a general conception of masculinity across different nationalities. If men in the United States endorse more male norms, then male social workers in the United States, by extension, also endorse more male norms. This impacts the perspectives male social workers have about masculinity in social work.

Also of interest is the effect and experience of male identity in childhood. In Song's (2003) qualitative self-report data on bullying and gender nonconformity were collected from 202 male undergraduate students. The study found that physical and verbal peer victimization was associated with male students who had low interest in traditionally-masculine activities, and who subjectively reported being physically "weaker." Interestingly, gender nonconformity and

“feminine” interests were not associated with victimization in this study. This directly relates to how some male social workers relate to their male identity experience in childhood and adolescence. Specifically, how peer victimization played a role as a type of social consequence for being perceived as “not male enough,” and that this is an influence in how the male social workers in my study construct and reflect on the development of their identity.

Continuing with the theme of experiences in childhood as an influence on the development of one’s male identity, Sherriff’s (2007) mixed methods study looked at the impact of peer group culture on the construction of masculinity. The study gathered data from a questionnaire administered to 331 students and interview data from 34 students and found that intergroup bias and other social psychological mechanisms are an important influence on the development of the male identity; that the stronger a male student identified with their peer group, the more intergroup bias was shown; and that social identity theory is useful in understanding boys’ masculinity in school groups. This is a useful understanding for how male social workers reflect on their earlier experiences of male identity development.

In reviewing the literature, I also came across a Smith College School for Social Work Master’s thesis entitled, *The Influence of Life Events on the Construction of Masculine Identity as Conveyed in the Life Stories of Elderly Men* (Morrissey, 1993). Morrissey’s research assumed that masculine and feminine characteristics fall along a continuum and that over a lifetime, different experiences would contribute to an ongoing reconstruction of one’s idea of masculinity. Morrissey qualitative study found that there was evidence that gender norms became more integrated (of both masculine and feminine characteristics) over one’s life. In relationship to my study, this is useful to understand how male social workers may shift their understanding of the male identity as a result of their life experiences.

The literature also addressed masculinity and male identity in the context of “feminized” work. Pullen and Simpson’s (2009) qualitative study of 25 male nurses and primary school teachers in the United Kingdom found that men are in a position of “otherness” in relationship to their female colleagues and that men navigate this dynamic by both subverting and maintaining masculinity. This is especially relevant to men in social work, another female-dominated profession. How the men in my study navigate the dynamic of being in numerical minority – being an “other” as Pullen and Simpson’s article identifies – is of important investigation in my study.

Finally, the literature addressed the experience of masculine identity in male social work students. Giesler’s (2013) qualitative study of 35 participants, male, female and faculty in a large Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program found that while male students were in numerical minority (6.00% of this program’s student population), they negotiated their identity in ways that maintained and affirmed their dominant status as males, throughout the program. Again, understanding the contradictory dynamic of males as numerical minority, yet still retaining gender privilege, is a paramount of my research study of male licensed social workers.

In analysis of the above review, one of the key strengths was in the identification of masculine norms. The limitations for the above results is in the fact that they do not demonstrate the origin, or mechanism of construction, or experience of masculine norms and masculine identity. Put together, the above research encompasses a broad characteristic range in population sample. This literature samples men from different ages: primary school age (Song, 2003; Sherriff, 2007), college-age (Giesler, 2013) and through adulthood (Coles, 2008; Hammer & Good, 2010; Tager & Good, 2005) to post-retirement age (Morrissey, 1993). It also samples men from different countries: Australia (Coles, 2008), United Kingdom (Sherriff, 2007), Italy (Tager

& Good, 2005), and the United States (Hammer & Good, 2010; Morrissey, 1993). One of the obvious strengths in this range of sample demographic is in its ability to be generalized to the larger population. However, one of the apparent limitations of this sample is that it draws from predominantly Western populations.

What was missing from the empirical literature found thus far, was something that my thesis topics will attempt to answer: what is the male social worker experience of the masculine identity? Are there particular masculine norms to which this group of males ascribe, despite individual variation of life experience? What are the forces and experiences in the lives of male social workers that contribute to their masculine identity? More than simply naming masculine norms (Coles, 2008; Hammer & Good, 2010; Tager & Good, 2005; Morrissey, 1993), or whether identifying with masculine norms comes with a cost/gain in social capital (Song, 2003; Sherriff, 2007), I want to explore how male social workers experience their masculine identity.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodologies**

#### **Research Formulation.**

This study is an exploration of masculinity and the male identity through the lens of male-identified social workers. The study focused on male social workers' gender identity and their conceptualizations of masculinity. I conceived that male social workers have both a unique experience of masculinity – or at least, a unique ability to unpack masculinity – and a unique ability to reflect on their own gender identity, compared to men in general. This was a qualitative exploratory study aimed at asking male-identified social workers how they have constructed and reflected on their own gender identity, masculinity in social work, and masculinity in general. I explored masculinity and the male identity by interviewing male social workers. The overarching research question was: How do male social workers construct and reflect on their masculine identity?

#### **Research Method and Design**

Much of the empirical research literature focused on the male identity at one specific point in time, or development (middle age, or retirement age, or 18 years+) (Coles, 2008; Hammer & Good 2010; Sherriff, 2007; Song, 2003; Tager & Good, 2005), with the exception of Morrissey's work, which gathered qualitative data from a sample of men who recalled experience of male identity throughout their lives (1993). Additionally the qualitative literature addressed experience of masculine identity in female-dominated professions (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). Further, much of the quantitative research – while useful in its concrete descriptions of masculinity and the male identity – falls short to explore the depth of individual experience with masculinity and the male identity.

Given that this study intended to explore masculinity and gender identity as concepts from personal experience in the social work profession, a qualitative design was considered most appropriate. My research investigated participants' personal experience via qualitative semi-structured interview. This research design, by definition, gave me more latitude to explore particular experiences in-depth through open-ended questions about male identity construction, the experience of male identity in social work education and in social work practice. Using a semi-structured interview format allowed for additional exploratory and follow-up questions (included in Appendix E). The research question was explored: How do male social workers construct, reflect on and understand their male identity?

### **Sample**

Participants in this study were male-identified licensed social workers, primarily employed at Veteran's Affairs (VA) hospitals and clinics across the United States. Specifically, my sample drew participants from Texas, California, North Carolina, and Massachusetts. Participants were between the ages of 32 and 74 years old and had at least two years of experience working as licensed social workers. Additionally, participants held varied positions within the VA – clinical social workers in various departments and multidisciplinary settings, program coordinators, directors, and chiefs of social work. Finally, while participants varied in race/ethnicity, position, years of experience, age, locality, etc. each was able to read and speak English fluently and either was able to conduct an in-person interview, or had access to and a proficiency to conduct a telephone interview. Individuals who identified as female were excluded from the study. The sample size totaled twelve participants.

This was a nonprobability sample, accrued primarily through snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Initially, I had obtained the public list of licensed social workers on the staff roster at my internship placement agency – a VA in the Southwestern United States. This



roster was not robust enough to deliver a sufficient sample size so I changed my protocol to include Skype/Telephone interviews in order to reach contacts and potential participants outside my agency and state. From the initial social work service roster, which contained publically-available e-mail contact information, I sent a recruitment e-mail (included in Appendix C) to potential participants. The recruitment e-mail briefly explained my study, inquired about general interest in participation, stated the voluntary nature of participation and provided my contact information and asked potential participants to respond, if interested. Once potential participants responded to the initial e-mail, I fielded any subsequent questions about the study and details about the requirements of participation. After one participant completed an interview, he offered to refer his colleagues to my study and forwarded my initial recruitment e-mail to them. These potential participants were given my contact information and those who were interested contacted me by e-mail, or phone to inquire about participation in the study. Those individuals who expressed a willingness to participate received a copy of the study's informed consent via e-mail and scheduled an interview date. Interviews were completed at a date and time that was convenient for both the researcher and the participant.

### **Data Collection**

Participants signed the informed consent either in-person at the site of the interview, or in advance and then mailed it to the researcher prior to the interview date. The informed consent clarified the details and criteria of participation, length of time for the interview, and the potential benefits and risks of participation. Depending on the participant's location they scheduled either an in-person interview, or telephone interview. In-person interviews were scheduled to take place in a mutually agreed upon location that was quiet and private – all of these interviews took place in either a participant's office, or in a previously reserved room on

the VA campus. Telephone interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon date and time, at which point I called the participant's preferred contact telephone number. In both cases (in-person and telephone) I used an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-510M to record the audio of each interview session. In the case of a telephone interview, I placed the call on speaker phone to capture the audio and record the interview. All participants agreed to be audio recorded and signed a consent form.

The interview length of time varied between twenty and forty-five minutes. The interview was semi-structured, with an interview guide (included in Appendix E) consisting of seven open-ended questions. Follow-up questions were asked as needed for clarification. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, which identified participants' age, race/ethnicity, years of experience as a licensed social worker, job position/title, and highest degree received. Upon completion of the interview, participants were reminded of the withdrawal date deadline, which was April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

Recorded audio files were exported from the digital voice recorder and stored on a separate, secure password-protected external hard drive to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, the interviews were transcribed by myself (the researcher) and those files were stored in a password-protected file on an external hard drive. For the purposes of data analysis and transcription, participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Any places and other names mentioned throughout the interviews were changed as well. Audio files and interview transcript files were used solely for the purpose of this research. When the information is no longer needed, and after a period of three years, the recording and transcription files will be destroyed as required by the Federal guidelines for Human Subject Research. Signed informed

consent and demographic data sheets will be maintained by the researcher in a secure location separate from other materials. This information will be destroyed similarly after three years.

The Smith College School for Social Work appointed me research advisor, who had access to the thesis data only after identifying information had been removed. I used my school email for the purposes of this study and all emails were deleted after the purpose of setting up the interview. All data will be reported in an aggregate format to illustrate thematic patterns discovered in the data and quotes used to illustrate specific findings will be presented in such a manner that they cannot be traced to an individual participant; in this way, individual-specific data will be unable to be traced back to any participant.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using theme and content analysis, which entailed looking at trends throughout the data, in individual transcripts as well as across the transcripts. Comparisons between the construction of the male identity and the experience of masculinity were drawn to the reported literature. Also, analysis looked for unique individual experiences as well as experiences that were shared among participants. The study primarily focused on the data collection of male identity formation and experience with masculinity. Findings of this study will be compared to the literature reviewed for the purpose of further discussion and practice implications.

One of the limitations, especially when compared to quantitative designs, is in the lack of objectivity of the study data. Additionally, the data collected from a qualitative design is less generalizable. This is especially true in the case of this study, as I recruited participants using convenient and snowball sampling. Another limitation is that the study only addresses the male experience of masculinity in social work practice, leaving room for further study on masculinity

and the male identity from perspectives other than male-identified social workers. The key findings from the data analysis will be discussed in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Introduction

This chapter contains findings from qualitative analysis of male-identified licensed social workers' conceptualizations of their male identity and masculinity. The findings were collected from recorded interviews in which each research participant discussed personal experiences in the construction of their male gender identity, their experiences with masculinity in social work education and in social work practice. Analysis of responses demonstrated themes inherent in the construction of male gender identity, male gender norms and roles, and how these function in social work education and practice. The data is organized in the following four sections: (1) Demographic data; (2) male identity formation; (3) male identity in social work education; (4) male identity in social work practice.

Interview questions were grouped under the aforementioned data sections and responses were analyzed to show common themes. For section 1, demographic data from the participant information sheet will be listed. For section 2, male identity formation will be detailed in subsections: (1) Understanding the male identity (2) Recognition of the male identity and (3) Influences of male identity recognition. For section 3, male identity in social work education will be described in subsections: (1) The male experience in social work education and (2) Influences of the male experience in social work education. For section 4, male identity in social work practice will be outlined in subsections: (1) The male experience in social work practice and (2) Perceptions of male identity, compared to men in general. Illustrative quotes are included with each section to reflect participant perspectives.

## **Summary of Demographics**

This study was comprised of 12 male licensed social workers. Geographic regions include: California, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Texas. Participant age ranged between 32 and 74 years, with a median age of 56.5 and most (n=8) aged 50 years and above. The majority (n=9) of participants identified as Caucasian, while one participant identified as Hispanic and two identified as having multiple ethnicities (Caucasian and Hispanic).

Experience as a licensed social worker varied in range from 2 to 42 years, with the majority of participants having at least 10 years of experience (median level of years as licensed social worker was 25.5 years). All participants, except for one, had a Master's degree in social work, while one participant had a Doctorate in social work. Finally, participants reported their job position, or title. The sample represented a split between participants who worked in a leadership, or administrative capacity (n=5, or 41.67%) and those who worked in clinical/non-leadership roles (n=6, or 50%), with one social worker who previously held a leadership position, but currently works in a clinical/non-leadership capacity. Leadership/administrative roles were identified by a title, or position as "chief," "associate chief," "program coordinator," or "director." Participants who worked in non-leadership roles were those who identified their title as "clinician," "clinical social worker," "social worker," et cetera.

## **Male Identity Formation**

**Understanding of the male identity.** Participants were asked, "What is your understanding of the male identity?" The theme identified for this question was that male identity is not a universally-defined concept. Half of the participants (n=6; 50.00%) responded that the male identity is socially constructed. Harvey's response highlights this finding (names and locations have been changed to ensure confidentiality):

My understanding of the male identity is, well it's a social construct as I understand gender to be, so it is a set of beliefs about what it means to be a male, to have the male sex and how you should act, how you respond, how you see yourself in relationship to other people and other genders in the world.

Four of these six participants (33.33% of the sample) identified that the male identity was dependent on male sex, as well as, male gender norms. Victor speaks to this finding:

I think it's somewhat social constructed and varies from culture to culture. I guess the definition of the term is 'that which a culture ascribes to the majority of men – biological males, or male-identified these days. People . . . that society expects of them laying out of expectations and which involves roles, power dynamics.

Five participants (41.67%) described their understanding of the male identity by listing hegemonic male role norms (e.g. assertiveness, leadership, stoicism, etc.). Examples of this finding as follows:

David described:

I think there are certain behaviors that people associate with being male – being more aggressive, or being more assertive, willing to take charge and make decisions. . . Of course there's the easy ones like the outward having a beard, dressing like a male. . . Being able to make quick decisions.

Joey voiced:

The understanding of the male identity – well, I would say that most people think of the male identity as being more outgoing than say, the female identity . . . more of the leadership type role. . . Males, in general, are fixers.

Finally, one participant (8.33%) responded to this question by addressing gender identity, not only as a social construct, but also a fluid concept – that gender identity, and by extension the male identity, changes and defies rigid definition over the course of an individual’s lifetime. Brian’s answer summarizes fluidity of gender identity:

If you’re talking about my view, is an identification that speaks to physical traits, anatomical traits, though I know that can be fluid for people. It speaks to a different way of viewing the world – often much more as an instrumental, rather than facilitative way. These are all generalizations and I guess as I think about it I find that it’s not a particular comfortable question to ask because I think of identity more than the male identity. I think of identity as being comfortable with who one is and how one conducts one’s self and interacts with others . . . but I see that those values and the sense of self could be the same for somebody who is female. . . So, I think that it’s a very fluid term.

**Recognition of the male identity.** Individuals were then asked, “At what point in your own life did you recognize your male identity?” Their responses suggested a theme that males recognize their identity at different points throughout life and development – that it is not fixed to a particular age, or period of development. Four individuals (33.33%) reported recognizing their male identity in early childhood (before age 5).

Matthew remembered:

I guess very young. Growing up in the family I grew up in it was pretty well-differentiated. Males and females, what our roles were, what our expectations were. I would say school age – maybe 4, 5, 6 – around that age.

Another four individuals (33.33%) stated that their recognition developed during latency (between ages 6 and 11).



Daniel mentioned:

Probably all along. As even a young kid. You know, I had a sister, so for a while there, my mother and father were in the home, so I kind of recognized, ‘hey they’re girls, I’m a boy.’ So, early childhood, I would say.

One individual (8.33%) recognized his male identity in adolescence (between ages 12 and 17). Two individuals (16.67%) stated early adulthood (between ages 18 and 25) as the time they recognized their male identity.

Brian indicated:

I would probably say sometime in my early twenties, and I can’t attribute it to a particular event, or situation. But at some point in my twenties – I think early twenties – I found myself feeling comfortable with referring to myself as a man, which was something that was earlier . . . it was an identification with which I was not comfortable.

Finally, one individual (8.33%) stated that he “[doesn’t] remember a time *not* being male” and that his recognition goes “as far back as [he] can remember.”

Joey stated:

Well, I mean, my father was always a big outdoorsman and a big hunter and into the male type of things, so the behavior that was being modeled for me from a very young age. I don’t think there was any particular time . . . the roles were always understood.

**Influences of male identity recognition.** Individuals were then asked the follow up question, “What influenced the discovery/recognition of your male identity?” Despite individual variance of particular influences, three common categories, or themes of influences emerged out of the responses. The most common influence of the male identity, endorsed by 11 individuals (91.67%) was family. Of those 11 individuals, six (54.54%) mentioned that their father was the

most profound influence on the development and recognition of their own male identity, while the other five individuals (45.45%) mentioned siblings, other parents, or family in general.

Examples of family as a major influence as follows:

Daniel responded that his father was a major influence:

Yeah, probably through my father and partly my mother too. . . And I grew up in the South, so there's kind of a strong cultural male role, I guess – as far as boys do this, and girls do that. . . Mainly, like sports and through T.V. and stuff, males were macho and into sports and females are less sports-inclined and more into, you know maybe kids and homemaking and stuff like that – those were the messages I got.

Harvey spoke to the impact of family-of-origin:

I guess probably initially, the experiences you have as a child. I guess in your family of origin – what males you're exposed to. . . I definitely think school, I definitely see that. I have a child - I have two daughters, but I see how both male and female genders are pretty heavily prescribed as kids grow up and get into elementary school. You know, marketing, the sort of consumer culture we live in – there's a lot to identify what is male and what males should like. . . Certainly, I think when we start to be in more intimate relationships it brings up a lot about what it means to be a male and male sexuality of any orientation.

Another category of influences came from others (peers, partners, colleagues and professionals) with whom the individual shared a personal relationship. Eight (66.67%) individuals mentioned others as an important influence on the recognition of their male identity.

Patrick's response highlights the influence of peers:

I think what I realized . . . when I became aware of my sexuality. . . And thinking back, differing gender roles in grade school. You know, the kids would play those out and tease one another . . . make comments as to their gender roles and how they fit, or didn't fit.

Victor noted the impact of peers and others:

I remember that there were things that boys were allowed to do and things that boys weren't allowed to do. And same for girls. And that there were consequences for not living up to those expectations – particularly from family members, and . . . definitely from peers as well. So, I became aware of [my male identity], in a way, when I tended to violate it. I guess, through shaming, or having it being pointed out to me. That always made me aware of which ways I wasn't living up to the male identity, even as a child.

The third category of influences, cited by nine individuals (75.00%) in the study, was cultural and social expectations. Of those nine individuals, five (55.56%) reported that cultural male role expectations came from their experience of and/or relationship to competitive and physical activities, while broader cultural influences (e.g. consumerism, church/religion, 'southern' vs. 'northern' male culture, environment, etc.) were mentioned in this same category by another five individuals (55.56%).

Examples of broader cultural influences on male identity development as follows:

David spoke about the connection between competitive activities and the male identity:

Around that age I played baseball, so playing sports, the group was all males. . . I just remember being involved in baseball, in sports in that way. I didn't play for all that many years. And that was like a thing [my father] and I did as a 'male' thing that we did. . .

That helped shape my thinking about what guys do.

Matthew explained the influence of religious practice:

I guess just being told how a male acted, how a male carried himself, how a male walked and talked, what their expectations were to the family. We were a very religious family, so our religious affiliation was kind of incorporated into that – what our roles were at the church.

Ronnie identified environmental influences:

I guess, probably kindergarten – boys had on blue and girls had on, like red, or pink. I remember that. And throughout life, there's men's bathrooms and women's bathrooms. . . Definitely environmental. . . Maybe my dad's work. If I identify anything male, not that my mom didn't work as hard, although she stayed at home to raise us – it was my dad's hard work. What it meant to be a man, in that perspective, or the male perspective, was my dad was always respectful of my mom. . . Those sorts of things.

### **Male Identity in Social Work Education**

**The male experience in social work education.** Respondents were asked, “What was your experience of your male identity in your social work education program?” Nearly all respondents (n=11) mentioned the experience of being a numerical minority in their education program. The one exception (8.33%), Matthew, mentioned attending a small social work program with “even representation of genders.” Additionally, of those 11 respondents that experienced being in the numerical minority in their program, nine (75.00% of the sample) reported that despite this, males were still the power majority – their professors, deans and administrators were mostly male, for instance. Harvey's response best highlights this dynamic:

I did think it was interesting though that, again a small sample, the director of the program was male. . . And the dean of social work school I went to was male. And in the internships that I did while I was in my education program, the people that were typically

doing the hiring, with one exception, were male as well. So, even though it was a minority experience and I did feel like I was one of just a few, the positions of power in social work, I didn't feel like that was done mainly by women. . . I certainly never felt oppressed. I felt in the minority, but not in a position of less privilege.

**Influences of the male experience in social work education.** Respondents were asked the follow up question, "What are some of the influences that affected your experience as a male in social work education?" When respondents elaborated on their experience, 11 of them (91.67%) talked about their conceptualization of differences between genders, how identification with certain gender norms (male, or female) led them to choose a social work education program, and how those norms affected their individual experiences in the program. Examples of gender differences in the decision to choose social work and the experience in the program, as follows:

Terry stated:

I don't ever really remember someone asking the question, "Why are you, as a man, pursuing this degree?" I do think that in some ways a social work degree is considered effeminate. I think that there is some discussion that it would be an advantage to be a male in a social work program, because you would have a better chance to advance in terms of administration.

Daniel mentioned:

I think I have a lot of my mother's qualities, as far as, focusing on family and kids and emotions and stuff like that, so I would always kick around that I was partly androgynous. . . So I kind of noticed that in the program.

Harvey spoke about male traits in the classroom:

Some of the things that I've seen that I've still felt, more often than not . . . from the student perspective, myself included, I've felt that males were more comfortable speaking up in class, sharing their opinion, being vocal. And so, they were I think, often more easily identified as getting concepts, or understanding something because of the way in which they learn and express their learning in class discussions. That was one thing I noticed and I'm sure there's research about how men are enculturated in this 'speak up,' 'stand up for yourself,' 'say what you think,' you know, 'show some initiative.' All those sorts of things.

Four respondents (33.33%) mentioned that their previous career experience was an influence.

Andrew said:

My first job out of college was as a juvenile parole counselor for juvenile boys who had a lot of parole from state institutions for various misdeeds. And it was in that role that I actually got interested in getting my MSW.

Three of these four (75.00%) worked in self-described and traditionally masculine professions (law enforcement, military and construction/contracting).

Ken described:

When I went to social work school I was 36, so it was kind of a mid-life thing. . . When I talked with women who were doing social work, they were all just kind of touchy-feely and they were going to go out and save the world. I had already been out in the world. I had been in the military, I'd been to war. . .

One respondent of these four (25.00%) worked in special education and mentioned that he was "primarily surrounded by females." Brian brought up his previous career experience in another female-dominated profession as an influence:

I don't think it's ever been an issue for me. Before I went into social work I was a special ed teacher. And so I was primarily surrounded by females. . . So, my involvement in my identity has always primarily been with women . . . so much of my identity has always been feminine. My male identity has never completely fit for me. But, neither has a feminine identity. And I've never found a word to describe how I really feel reflects my identity... But, if I had to choose, I much more see myself as a man . . . a man with many, many female traits.

### **Male Identity in Social Work Practice**

**The male experience in social work practice.** Participants were asked, "What is it like to be a male in the field of social work practice?" An overarching theme in the responses, identified by most of the respondents (n=10), was that males are a numerical minority in social work practice, which is similar to their experience in social work education. In addition to this, four participants (33.33%) said that being male was an advantage, something positive, or additive to the field of social work.

Victor mentioned feeling safe and also at an advantage:

There are certain situations, where I'll say [being a male is] a slight advantage, because we're underrepresented, but our clients are not. . . So, I think there are ways in which . . . I was going to use the word *safe*. It feels safe somehow. . . The fact that I work in a department that's mostly women is comforting that their values dominate, not the male competitive values. It's a very warm and accepting kind of place.

Daniel speaks about male identity as additive to social work:

It's great, because it's nice to feel like you're kind of in demand. It's not a male-dominated profession, so it kind of makes you unique, or special. Where you wouldn't be

if you were maybe a male engineer, or something like that. . . I like working in a field like social work, especially like working with females too . . . they're a lot of times more insightful, or understanding.

Three participants (25.00%) mentioned that the minority experience was isolating, or that being a male came with certain feelings of discomfort.

Terry spoke about discomfort related to stigma of being a male in social work:

I think that there is maybe a certain amount of discomfort with that. . . I think that when I introduce myself to people in public, for the longest time I introduced myself as a clinical social worker, which somehow sounded better than just being a social worker – almost as if I'm apologizing for being a social worker and not something that was more socially acceptable. . . I think personally, that there is not a lot of social prestige, social acclaim, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense that you have a viable profession . . . and for a man in social work . . . in some cases people have a real difficulty with that.

Two participants (16.67%) spoke of having a gender-neutral experience in the field of social work. Another two participants (16.67%) had contrasting experiences of male- versus female-dominated leadership positions within social work. Of those two, one (8.33%) said that his experience was that women held more positions of authority than men. The other participant (8.33%), and the only participant to mention this out of the sample, stated that his experience was that leadership positions within social work are primarily held by men.

Examples of other participant responses as follows:

Brian elaborated on the effect of outward appearance on experience at work:

Your whole question is about being a male social worker in a primarily, heavily female-based profession . . . and that has never been an issue for me at all, because so much of



me is feminine. . . I think that people clearly experience me as masculine. As feminine as I am, quality-wise, people very much experience me as masculine. And I'm very much into how I present myself and how I dress – clothes are important. What goes with that is the ways in which people often call me to fix things. . . So, I guess there's a way in which I'm feeding into the masculine stereotype. . . It just happens to be the ways in which my masculinity gets pegged by others.

Andrew described a gender-neutral experience:

My social work practice was primarily with the VA, which is kind of a male culture, since the clientele is mostly male. Although, in the social work departments I worked in, we had a fair number of females . . . but, it was all social workers trying to do our best for the clients we were serving, so I really didn't see much of a difference there. . . The other thing I like about the federal government is that the jobs pay the same whether you're a male, or female.

**Perceptions of male identity, compared to males in general.** Participants were asked, “How do you see your male/masculine identity compared to other males, who are not social workers?” Five participants (41.67%) reported that they perceived their male identity to be congruent with males in general. Two participants (16.67%) described that their male identity deviates from stereotypical males, or hegemonic masculinity. Four participants (33.33%) stated that their social work and male identities were separate and distinct. One participant (8.33%) mentioned that he feels, “more of an appreciation of life, than the average male.”

Terry talked about not feeling less masculine, because his male identity is separate from social work:

I don't really. . . I've never felt any loss. I've never felt in any way that my masculine identity is diminished because I'm a social worker. I've always been pretty comfortable with that. I think that when people look down on what I do, when they look down on the profession, I usually think that they don't understand what I'm doing. They don't understand my activities. But, I've never tied that to masculine identity.

David defined social work as masculine and therefore congruent with his own identity:

I think, personally, that it's a very masculine quality to take care of people. . . I think it's a very masculine thing to be able to work with people and take care of them and have them trust you and you provide competent services to them and make them feel better. I don't necessarily see that as a feminine thing. . . My guy friends, who are not social workers . . . some of them have nothing to do with helping professions, but I don't see them as more masculine than me.

Joey described how his maleness gets justified to other men, as he works as a social worker:

I think my sexuality and my identity, I have no problem with that. And I don't think any other male does as well. . . They may think you automatically work with females, but when they find out I served in the military, I've got 21 years working for the prison department, they realize it's not all about female roles. . . And then they're okay with me. When they realize that you've spent that much time in law enforcement and the military, they're okay with that.

Harvey spoke about deviation from stereotypical/hegemonic maleness:

I think that there's also . . . a sort of a predisposition that maybe biased towards being interested in going into social work. So, you might be someone that is already aware of gender dynamics and thus more willing to join a field that is more traditionally female

and associated with tasks of caring and being of service to other people and being empathic. . . I already was somewhat aware of gender dynamics and didn't see myself as a typical male.

Matthew said the two identities (social work and male) are distinct:

I'm not really sure how to answer the question. I guess, because I don't really tend to see . . . I don't tend to divide the world that way – in terms of those self-concepts. I guess it would depend on [the other males'] professions. . . Like nursing is another profession that is heavily female-dominated. And male nurses . . . they seem to struggle quite a bit, in terms of moving up organizationally to leadership. You don't see many male nurse managers, or male executives – they're primarily female. And they're probably the one group that I would compare to us. . . You hear more from male nurses about societal comments about being a male nurse. We don't really hear that about male social workers. So they get a little more . . . their profession is not seen as something that a male would take on traditionally.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented findings from eight interview questions asked to 12 male licensed social workers. The purpose of this study was to explore how male licensed social workers construct and reflect on their male identity. Upon investigation, a key finding was that the male identity is not a universally-defined concept – that some social workers perceive it as a social construction, while others define it in accordance with hegemonic role norms, yet others find it to be a fluid and non-concrete concept evading attempts at any definition. Another key finding was that males were a numerical minority in both social work education and social work practice settings, but that males still held more positions of power in both settings. In fact, being a male in

social work practice was a perceived advantage in some cases, specifically because males are in the minority. Further discussion and implications for social work education and practice, as well as, limitations of the study will be discussed in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore male gender identity through the lens and personal experiences of male licensed social workers. The question of how male social workers construct and reflect on their masculine identity was explored and some of the findings were congruent with existing literature. Participants reflected on the various ways in which their male identity was constructed, the influences of this construction, and how their male identity influenced their experiences in social work education and practice.

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in the following order:

- 1) Key findings, including relevance to extant literature
- 2) Implications for social work education and practice
- 3) Implications for theory
- 4) Recommendations for future research
- 5) Limitations
- 6) Conclusion

### Key Findings

**Awareness of gender identity.** Participants held varying beliefs about the nature of the male identity – whether it is socially constructed, rigidly defined through hegemonic role traits, or fluid and defying concrete definition. This finding correlated with the conceptualization in Bennet (2007), in which masculinity was described as “a constantly changing collection of meanings we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other and with our world.” Each participant in my study had a varying degree, or subjective relationship with the male identity in both their individual experiences, and in their conceptualizations of the term

“masculinity,” or “male identity.” Despite this variance, however, most men in my study reported a positive relationship with their male identity. This was also congruent with a study done by Coles (2008), in which men, regardless of their identification and conformation to hegemonic male gender traits, reported similarly a comfort with their masculine identity.

What does this say about male identity awareness? For one, it appeared that the participants in my study who defined male gender identity as something socially constructed, or defying concreteness were the same males who endorsed an awareness that traditional, or hegemonic male role norms perpetuate systems of gender inequality. Additionally, these same men also tended to identify their own masculinity as distinct from the male hegemonic norm. In contrast and in the same way that Coles (2009) wrote that hegemonic masculinity “legitimate[s] and reproduce[s] the social relationships that generate their dominance,” some of the participants in this study, who inhabited positions of greater authority in social work, were men that tended to describe masculinity (both their own identity and masculinity as a general concept) according to hegemonic male traits (e.g. assertive, reliable, dependable, “someone you can count on”). It appears that awareness of gender identity correlates with greater awareness of systems of gender oppression and a desire to change these systems.

**Dynamics of males as a numerical minority in social work.** Another key finding of this study is that participants reported an experience of being in numerical minority, both in social work education and social work practice. The experience is that males are a minority in a female-dominated profession – that there are more women in social work, in general. This finding is congruent with previous literature which concludes that gender inequality exists within the field of social work (Pease, 2011). Further, an interesting contradiction exists, which was highlighted also by the participants’ experiences, in which men are numerically

underrepresented, yet still overrepresented in terms of positions of power in social work. That is, there are more men in positions of power within social work than there are women in those positions. Participants talked about how their deans, professors, directors, supervisors, people with hiring authority, etc. were primarily male. Moreover, privilege of the male identity operates to disguise itself in the merit of the individual. In other words, those who reach positions of power are assumed to have gotten there on their own skills and abilities, not because of their male gender identity. If this were the case, however, women would occupy more positions of power in social work, given that there are simply more women in the profession. In the case of social work, as in larger society, male gender identity is privileged and systems of gender inequality are overlooked as a contributing factor.

Additionally, participants mentioned experiences in their social work education programs wherein masculinity was favored in more subtle ways. One participant spoke about his experience that the students, both male and female, who were most vocal and most assertive in the classroom were the students that were considered most successful and most understanding of the class material. In this way, hegemonic male traits, like assertiveness, dominate over other methods of learning. Another subtle way in which masculinity is favored is in the curriculum content itself. For instance, clinical study is dominated by male theorists (Freud, Jung, Yalom, Kohut, Fairbairn, Erickson, Piaget, etc.). Pease (2011) highlights that in social work education, “male social work theorists and quantitative and masculinist approaches to research still dominate.”

This same contradictory power differential seems to hold true in social work practice, as well. My findings indicated that many of the men had experiences where the people in power within the field of social work practice were men. In fact, nearly fifty percent of my sample were

social workers in leadership, or administrative positions – a phenomenon that might be explained from a methodological standpoint of the study itself given that it was non-random. Indeed, the literature seems to support my finding as well when Pease (2011) states that males are overrepresented in “managerial and higher status” positions. And beyond the positions themselves, masculinity again dominates in more subtle ways within the profession. Both in the experiences of the men who participated in my study and in the literature, hegemonic masculine qualities (e.g. emotional distance, rationality, etc.) are the benchmark of what qualities are considered professional and necessary for social work practice (Pease, 2011). I would even go so far and argue that the use of the word “professional” is even a subtle way of hierarchically labeling qualities which are considered more favorable in social work.

It appears, as one of my study participants put it, that despite being in numerical minority men do not experience any less privilege within social work. Men tend to occupy more positions of power and authority – both in social work education and social work practice, and masculinity is favored in various subtle forms (e.g. theories, preferred qualities of clinicians, etc.) in general.

**Identity and career choice.** Participants talked about their experience of choosing a career in social work. It appeared that within the context of this study, men justified their choice either based on a conception that their identity is incongruent with hegemonic masculinity, or they redefined social work itself to fit their conception of male identity. In instances of the former, social work was still conceptualized as a gendered field, dominated by females in numerical majority, wherein identification with so-called “feminine” traits (e.g. empathy, warmth) was a strength that drew them into social work. In instances of the latter, men masculinized social work stating that their own male traits (e.g. assertiveness, emotional distance) were characteristic of social work and any female traits present in the field were



incorporated and renamed as male traits. For example, one participant mentioned that he perceives that the act of caring and empathy are actually male traits. In both cases, the gender conversation still depicts male versus female traits as dichotomous and rigidly defined, rather than fluid. Either male identity must be constructed to fit within a context, or the context must be redefined to fit the male identity.

### **Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

In both social work education and social work practice, the question of gender inequality needs to be addressed. My findings indicate that, indeed males are the numerical minority, but still hold more power and privilege, in general and in various ways – both subtle and overt. The implication is that addressing gender inequality is deeper than simply finding ways to draw more men into the field. Pease (2011) observes that arguments for drawing more men into social work are still structured around patriarchal sentiments. In his examination, common arguments include rationales for more males in social work that men are role models, men bring prestige to the field, and that gender diversity should be attained. In each case he deconstructs the arguments as reminiscent of larger patriarchal ideals – that men are only role models, if they're regarded to have some essential difference from women; that prestige is a construct of larger sexist social hierarchies; and that gender diversity “is not likely to break down traditional gender roles and will not challenge gender hierarchy in [social work].”

Additionally, as inferred from my findings, awareness of one's gender identity, specifically, awareness of their male identity correlates with an awareness of the ways in which masculinity dominates, which in turn correlates with a desire to end gender oppression. Thus, one implication for social work practice and education is in garnering awareness of the nature of masculinity and how it operates in the subtle and overt ways that maintain gender inequality.

## **Implications for Theory**

One implication for theory is in the realm of gender identity itself. I infer from my findings that some men in social work still regard gender as a rigid and dichotomous concept. Bennett's (2007) concept that the male identity is influenced by certain life circumstances substantiates my findings that men have varied influences that contribute to their understanding and construction of their male identity. Additionally, Francis (2002) argues that current theory on gender identity still serves to locate male and female identity at a fixed point. The implication is that despite the various influences on a male's identity, men are still drawn to define themselves in rigid terms. My study highlights this implication in that addressing gender from fluid and feminist standpoints serves to bring a more holistic view on the nature of identity itself. In relationship to the field of social work and social work theory, this could look like an examination of how masculinity dominates in theoretical realms – like clinical education and social work research. It is not enough to address gender inequality in practice alone, if the theories that influence research and action in the field are still coming from dominant masculinist perspectives.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is important to continue research on the male gender identity and male experiences in social work education and practice. For instance, this study did not inquire about male identity awareness, specifically, and how awareness can impact the cessation of gender oppression. Additionally, the question of why men go into social work may yield additional results for how to address gender inequality within social work and to do so without colluding with systemic patriarchy. Also, future research into the nature of social work curriculum and an examination of the extent to which masculinity dominates discourse, theory and pedagogy is needed. Finally,

future research into gender theory as it relates to the construction of gender identity within social work would elaborate on some of the concepts addressed in this study – namely, what are the forces and influences that encourage a rigid definition of the male identity and how do these forces impact the field of social work?

### **Limitations of this study**

My own perspective as an identified male might have had a biased effect on the data gathered. Perhaps the narrative questions I ask in the study were influenced by my perception of the influences of my male identity, but that don't necessarily have the same, or any effect on male identity for others in general. This bias in particular, has the potential to affect the reliability of my study. Given that qualitative data is inherently subjective and that the researcher's biases and participant characteristics are both visible, my own personal biases may affect the gathered data. As a result, attempts to replicate the study with different researchers might yield different results. One way to address this bias is to have narrative questions reviewed by other researchers involved in gender studies research. Another limitation is that the study only addresses the male experience of masculinity in social work practice, leaving room for further study on the female experience of masculinity in social work. Lastly, one of the limitations is inherent in the design of the study. By using an unstructured, exploratory interview, I feel that this leaves the study vulnerable to unstandardized responses

### **Conclusion**

The question of how male social workers construct and identify their male identity was explored. Key findings were that awareness of male gender identity correlates with awareness of gender oppression and inequality; that while men are in numerical minority within social work, they do not experience less privilege; and that men who choose to go into social work either fit

their concept of identity to fit the context of social work, or fit the context of social work to be in congruence with their male identity. From these findings it is apparent that gender inequality and oppression still operate within the field of social work. It is imperative that future research examines the nature of this dynamic and how to truly end gender inequality.

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**Appendix A**  
**HSR Approval Letter**



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

November 18, 2013

James Flood

Dear James,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

**Appendix B**

**Informed Consent Form**



**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study:** How male social workers construct and reflect on their masculine identity: A qualitative exploratory study

**Investigator(s):**

James Flood, Smith College School for Social Work, XXX-XXX-XXXX

.....

**Introduction**

- This study is being conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of how men in social work reflect on their male gender identity and the implications for their role as social workers.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as a male and work in the field of social work as a licensed social worker.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to ask social workers, who are men, how they understand their male identity in order to gain a better understanding of gender dynamics in social work practice
- This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher in which you'll answer a series of open-ended questions in addition to some background information that will help the researcher describe the study sample. The interview will be recorded with an audio-recording device. You should expect the interview to last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- As a descriptive, exploratory study, this study is considered low risk. Possible discomfort, in the form of negative thoughts and feelings while discussing personal identity with a stranger (researcher).

**Benefits of Being in the Study**



- The benefit of participating in this study is that you will have the opportunity to contribute to an area of research, which intends to expand upon the understanding of gender dynamics in the field of social work.

**Confidentiality**

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Audio recording information will only be accessible to the researcher and will be used strictly for the purposes of this research study. Upon completion of the study, the data will be erased from the external hard drive and the hard drive will be subsequently shredded. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
- The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master’s in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.
- The interviews will be arranged in a mutually agreed upon location that ensures maximum confidentiality and privacy.

**Payments**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time*. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify the researcher of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 30th, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]**

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Email

Greetings,

My name is James Flood and I am a social work graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently conducting research towards the completion of my Master's degree. My research is to explore the male gender experience in social work practice. I am interested in how men, who are licensed social workers, understand their own male identity.

I received your contact information from [*insert contact source*]. I am writing to ask if you would be interested in participating in my research project. I will be happy to provide details (including time commitment, nature of the research, etc.) on this voluntary project aimed at understanding masculinity through the lens of male social workers. If you are interested in hearing more and potentially participating in this research project, please contact me from the information below. Also, if you're interested in participating, please leave your preferred contact information in your response.

James Flood

Cellular Phone (XXX)XXX-XXXX

E-mail: XXXXXX@smith.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,

James Flood

MSW Candidate, Smith College School for Social Work

## Appendix D

### Demographic Questionnaire

### Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill this out with as much information as you are willing to share. This data will not be used to identify you as an individual, but will be used to describe the study sample in general. Your responses and this questionnaire will be kept separately from any data containing your identifiable information.

<b>What is your age?</b>
<b>How do you identify racially/ethnically?</b>
<b>How many years have you worked as a licensed social worker?</b>
<b>What is your job position/title?</b>
<b>What is the highest degree you have received?</b>

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions and Checklist

#### Interview Checklist for Researcher

Informed Consent \_\_\_\_\_

Demographic Questionnaire \_\_\_\_\_

Interview questions:

What is your understanding of the male identity? \_\_\_\_\_

At what point in your life did you recognize your male identity? \_\_\_\_\_

What influenced this discovery/recognition? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your experience of your male identity in your social work education program? \_\_\_\_\_

Again, what are some of the influences that affected this experience? \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt: Did your concept of masculinity/male identity shift as a result of this experience?

What is it like to be a male in the field of social work practice? \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt: Has your concept of masculinity/male identity shifted as a result of your experience?

How do you see your male/masculine identity compared to other males, who are not social workers?

\_\_\_\_\_