



# Relational gendered dimensions of emotions in heterosexual cisgender Men's intimate partnerships

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## ABSTRACT

Illuminating relational gendered dimensions of emotions in heterosexual cisgender men's intimate partnerships, this study addresses a significant knowledge gap in masculinities, emotionality and health work. Thematic analyses of individual photovoice interviews with 92 men from diverse locales and ethnocultural backgrounds revealed a trilogy of men's practices regarding emotions. *Emotional restraint* was embodied by men withholding rather than freely expressing emotions, wherein participants justified diverse practices as the by-product of not understanding women partners' emotionality and working to balance emotions in the relationship. In *coached emotions* men spoke about needing to unlearn suppressing their emotions while relying on women partners' expertise for becoming more emotionally expressive and available. This included work around reading and accommodating their partner's emotions. *Emotionally orientated* men positioned themselves as relationship ready, whereby they were equally or more emotional than their partners. This emotionality was claimed as an asset and strength integral to building contemporary intimate partner relationships. The findings highlight most men as operating across the three themes, revealing how wide-ranging socially constructed emotions are influenced by gender relations and a plurality of masculinities. Also afforded by these results are directions for working with heterosexual cisgender men to advance gender equity in heterosexual intimate partner relationships.

## 1. Introduction

Gender roles, relations and identities diversified during the 2000s with shifts in social norms regarding cisgender men's participation in heterosexual intimate partner relationships (Oliffe et al., 2023b). Much of the research addressing masculinities and intimate relationships has theorised men's emotions, drawing wide-ranging perspectives about gender differences and norms. Herein, debates regularly respond to long-standing depictions of heterosexual men's emotional restraint as an embodiment of masculine rationality, and the contrary positioning of women as emotional and, by extension, irrational (Kerr, 2021). These espoused differences draw diverse and oftentimes divisive sex-trait and

gender-state explanations for the origins, performativities and temporalities of men's and women's emotions (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Within gender studies there also exists varied viewpoints, assuaged somewhat by agreements that emotions are indeed relational and dynamic states, rather than individual traits (Ahmed, 2014). Conspicuously absent however in gender and emotions research are reports of relational practices in men's heterosexual intimate partnerships (Roy & Allen, 2022). Addressing this knowledge gap, the current study and article answers the research question, "What are the relational gendered dimensions of emotions in heterosexual cisgender men's intimate partnerships?"

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### 1.1. Masculinities and emotionality in men's heterosexual intimate partner relationships

While Connell's (2005) gender framework has highlighted the patriarchal characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, and the plurality of subordinate, marginalised, complicit and protest masculinities, the relational aspects of these positionalities are often implicit. This trend is particularly true of hetero-masculinity research wherein femininities are typecast in support roles, with little empirical attention paid to *their* emotional diversity or relational agencies (Schippers, 2007). This has, somewhat ironically, also been the case in studies focussed on men's emotions in heterosexual intimate partner relationships. That is, masculinities literature (and popular discourse) has presided to prioritise and problematise men's emotions as absent, managed, poorly expressed or advantageously concealed by differentiating free-flowing emotionality as a feminine norm and form (Shields, 2013). A consistent effect of this binary is that men who disclose or make visible their emotions, and/or are seen as emotional, map onto a continuum ranging from emasculation (emotions as vulnerabilities and weakness in men) through emancipation (the manly strength to feel and express emotions authentically). Here, commentaries and empirical work consistently position men's estrangements from, and embodiments of emotionality as contingent on *their* alignments to, and distance from, hegemonic masculinity (Chu, 2014; Way et al., 2014). This trend has given rise to two discrete angles of vision in Western masculinities and emotions research: 1) men's emotional restraint, and 2) men's strength-based emotions work.

Work describing men's emotional restraint includes specificities about what is withheld and the gendered dimensions of those redacted states. Classifying sadness, anxiety and hurt as vulnerable emotions, Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) suggest that men who identify with hegemonic masculinity and pursue power over others, interpret and experience exposures to such vulnerable emotions as weakness. This in turn works to shame and silence men, increasing the potential for expressing anger and diminishing opportunities for emotional intimacy (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Relatedly, Robinson and Hockey (2011) position men's deliberate control and management of their emotions as protective against emasculating threats. Seidler (2005) further delineates heterosexual men's emotional dependence on women and inability to do emotions work in intimate partnerships as driven by alignments to hegemonic masculinity. Feminist critiques argue men's emotional restraint amounts to patriarchal control embodied through hegemonic masculinity to manage the emotionality of women partners (Pease, 2012). A position, Pease (2012) asserts, is informed by heterosexual men's emotional attachment to privilege which renders them out of touch with their feelings and vulnerabilities. Urging against emotional restraint, Pease (2002) further prefaced the negative impacts on men's intimacy, with Connell (2000) suggesting that overcoming such emotional illiteracy was requisite for men achieving higher levels of intimacy with women partners. Men's emotional impairments and disconnects are also recursively linked to maladaptive alcohol and drug use (Mahalik et al., 2015), distressed and disrupted intimate partner relationships (Oliffe et al., 2023a) and poor mental health outcomes including depression and suicide (Courtenay, 2011). In sum, men's emotional restraint is often tied empirically and/or by gender theory, to hegemonic masculinity in describing negative individual and relational impacts that serve to alienate men from their feelings and partners.

Contrasting emotional restraint, empirical work has claimed that strength-based approaches to men's emotions reveal transformative gender practices that contest the utility of negative traits associated with hegemonic masculinity (Lomas et al., 2016). This includes evidence of emotional reflexivity among men, defined as understanding and responding to one's own and others' emotions, an optimistic finding suggesting heterosexual men's caring emotions might garner gender equality in their intimate partner relationships (Holmes, 2015). Hetero-masculine men's acknowledgments and expressions of emotions

have also been described as courageous (Donovan, 2007), and linked to contemporary masculine norms encouraging men to articulate what they feel within intimate partnerships (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). Further, men's emotions after an intimate partner relationship break-up can reconcile what was felt in and after their partnerships to garner self-growth (Oliffe et al., 2023a). Benefits for men's emotions work also include empathy enhancements for acknowledging pain in others (Thompson, 1992), improved mental health (Oliffe et al., 2022) and reduced intimate partner violence (Neilson, Gulati, Stappenbeck, George, & Davis, 2023). Across men's strength-based emotions work there are emergent gender theories that masculine norms (and thus notions of hegemony) are shifting to be more inclusive (Anderson & McCormack, 2018), and that being in touch with and expressing emotions greatly benefits men and their intimate partner relationships (Oliffe et al., 2023b).

### 1.2. Relational masculinities

Underpinning men's emotional restraint and strength-based work for interpreting and expressing what is felt are binary alignments to, and disaffections for hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). There is however accord that the remedy for restraint, and drivers of men's strength-based emotions work rely on relational masculinities. Indeed, the relational turn in the social sciences has been gathering pace for some time (Donati, 2010), seeking to examine what emotions are generated in relation, rather than being qualities of one or another contributor (Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016). Beckoned here is the use of relational analytic categories that move beyond static features of individual actors (e.g., of men, women, masculinities) to a view of emotions as wave-like, arising and subsiding in constant movement across and through interactions. Relationality also situates the expressions of emotions in their entangled contexts to ask what relational processes are evident and emergent, and what gendered forms do these emotions make possible? The current study offers empirical advances to a somewhat theory-heavy field by describing the relational gendered dimensions of emotions in heterosexual cisgender men's intimate partnerships.

## 2. Methods

Following university ethics approval (#H22-00872), English speaking men 19 to 44 years-old were invited via social media (Instagram and Twitter) to participate in a virtual photovoice study regarding their experiences of, and perspectives about, intimate partner relationships. Purposefully maximizing variation in the study sample, recruitment was inclusive of all ancestries, locales and sexual identities. Within this context we focussed on young men (born 1978–2003), sampling across a 25-year span to collect information from an age-specific cohort who are typically trying to establish and build intimate partner relationships. Potential participants contacted the project manager via email and were invited to attend a brief eligibility/intake Zoom meeting and receive additional study details including the research objective and procedures. After completing a Qualtrics hosted consent, demographic and survey data, and uploading 5–10 photographs to illustrate their experiences of, and perspectives about, intimate partner relationships, an individual Zoom interview was scheduled. Interviewees were sent a \$CAD100 (or equivalent) e-gift card to acknowledge their time and contribution to the study.

### 2.1. Participants and data collection

The travel cost-savings of conducting virtual photovoice interviews enabled us to include 110 geographically diverse men with varied ethnocultural backgrounds (Oliffe et al., 2023c). The current article and findings are drawn from 92 participants who self-identified as heterosexual, cisgender men. We focussed the current gender relations analysis

on the men’s emotions in diverse intimate partnerships with women to distil patterns and contextualize variations across this sub-cohort of participants. A manuscript describing emotional intimacy among participants who self-identified as sexual minority men (n = 16) is under review elsewhere (Fernandez et al., 2024).

Ranging in age from 19 to 43 years-old (M = 28.6; SD = 6.3) most participants were partnered (n = 63; 68.5%) and just over half resided in Canada (n = 48; 52.2%). Men from 14 countries and diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds took part in the study (see Table 1 - Participant Demographics). Individual semi-structured digitally recorded Zoom interviews ranging 40–150 min (M = 79 min; SD = 20.7 min) were conducted by six Canadian-based researchers (four male and two female) July through December 2022. Interview questions including “How do emotions influence the quality of your relationship?” and “How do you read and react to emotions in your partner?” were asked to prompt participants to elaborate on their experiences. Transcribed interviews were accuracy checked, anonymised and imported to NVivo 12 for coding. A written summary including participant contexts and key insights were made to aid researchers’ recall and orientate analysts to the large dataset. We also inductively derived the research question, “What are the relational gendered dimensions of emotions in heterosexual cisgender men’s intimate partnerships?” during the data collection and cleaning processes.

2.2. Data analysis

Guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2008) thematic analysis approach, three authors (Anon, anon, and anon) read and re-read the interview data to abstract all that was directly shared about, and contextually relevant to emotionality. Reading the data in the emotions coding run, sub-codes were made to begin to define and differentiate participants’ relational practices. Working with these analytics to fracture the data a coding schedule was drafted to label discrete emotions and emergent patterns for how men experienced emotions, and read and responded to their partner’s emotions. Through iterative, reflexive processes we derived five descriptive codes: 1) emotional men, 2) learners, 3) protectors, 4) mediator/managers, and 5) readers of partner’s emotions. Based on our appraisal of the data and preliminary interpretations of the most heavily weighted codes, preliminary interpretations were discussed and theorised in fortnightly researcher team meetings using Connell’s (2005, 2014) masculinities framework. The framework was used to conceptualize masculinity as socially constructed whereby men (and women) relationally respond to structural systems and power

differentials to forge gendered practices across settings, contexts and time. These analytic processes privileged men’s narratives about emotions within their relationships while holding the framework as referent for reflexively and conceptually advancing the findings. Through these analyses the “protector” and “mediator/manager” codes were combined, and the “readers of partner’s emotions” data were threaded across the three remaining codes. As analyses progressed, data in the three codes were discussed to define and differentiate category labels and pre-empt the thematic findings: 1) *Emotional restraint*, 2) *Coached emotions* and 3) *Emotionally orientated*. While a few participants predominantly resided in one of the three themes, most men operated across the three patterns based on specific contexts and circumstances. As such, the themes represent a trilogy of practices embodied by participants to varying extents in the relational spaces of their intimate partnerships. Each thematic finding includes illustrative quotes linked to participant demographics and a researcher assigned pseudonym.

3. Findings

3.1. Emotional restraint

Emotional restraint was characterised by men withholding rather than expressing what they felt within their intimate partner relationships. Many men idealised, and purposefully embodied, traditional strong, silent-type masculine identities, highlighting that they felt and/or expressed emotions less than their partner. In this context, specific gender relations were levers for participants’ emotional restraint. This included participants suggesting that their restraint was learnt by observing other men, wherein self-control was deeply valued as rational and resolute for the everyday, and intimate partner partnerships. Sam, a 26-year-old man living in Canada who had been with his partner for 5-years, idealised emulating his father’s decisive action orientation for problem-solving, rather than publicly expressing painful emotions:

*Men are expected to take on a lot of stuff without showing emotion. There is some value to that. And my example comes from my dad. He’s the kind of person when my grandparents died, and everyone is wailing, especially his sisters, and the women around him. He’s a guy who is a shoulder for everyone to lean on. He gets things together, gets everyone together, figures out where the funeral is going to be, what everything’s going to cost, and kind of coordinates everyone ... the point is you need someone to do that. Like, not everyone can be a wailing mess for forever ... your parent is dead but the problem at hand is that you need to figure out the funeral ... So seeing my dad - that was a more masculine role to take, to kind of process the death that way. And to me, that’s what I see being the more masculine kind of perspective.*

Sam lauded his father’s ability to focus on arranging the ceremony to publicly honor cherished lives passed, and the manly strength to do that work amid much internalized ache. These masculine rationalities also made room for women to openly grieve in culturally normative feminine ways. As Connell (2005) suggests, normative masculinities are about doing (rather than feeling), and Sam went on to caution men that “being emotionally attuned to things can be counterproductive.”

Emotional restraint as a learnt practice prevailed in men’s intimate partner relationships, and participants often strategically positioned themselves as having less emotionality than their partner. Ahmet, a 33-year-old Turkish man in a 1.5-year relationship, foregrounded that his partner “sometimes gets angry ... because she’s a bit emotional,” in detailing his tactics for controlling and concealing his emotions:

*I know that I will do very stupid things if anger gets control of me. I am aware of that because I’ve done some stupid things before, years ago, but that was a good lesson. And I know that I have to stay cold in any condition ... I can stay cold for a long period of time if there is something wrong ... we can also maneuver to humour, like that’s a good point of*

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]

*escape for us because I can crack a joke about something stupid, I do that to change the topic instantly to make her laugh.*

Confirming that “you have to improvise” Ahmet spoke to managing his anger as requisite to avoid reacting to his partner’s emotionality, with humour affording distraction to ease any would-be quarrels. Anger, a shaming yet normative masculine expression, was highlighted by most men as the emotion to restrain. In these contexts, emotional restraint was employed to cool anger relationally and prevent regrettable emotionally charged arguments with partners. The risk however was that participants did not necessarily examine and/or reconcile the emotions driving their anger. Instead, avoiding impulsive reactions to more helpfully respond (without musing on all that was transiently felt) was the strategy. Sam, a 26-year-old Canadian-based man who had been living with his partner for 5-years, delineated the process:

*I don't express my emotions. I usually express them by recognizing them, but it's a bit different from indulging in them.*

The limits of Sam’s introspections reflected his focus on escaping the potential entrapments of the emotions that emerged out of his relationship. This can be understood as protective for eschewing vulnerabilities synonymous with having and/or poorly expressing emotions. Relied on here were hegemonic masculine ideals, the likes of which Kerr (2021) characterizes as the embodiments of rational men who conceal their emotions. Positioning emotions work as indulgent also illustrated Sam’s resistance to the disablements of feeling too much and/or overthinking what was felt.

Within these practices there was prominent focus on establishing and maintaining balance in participants’ partnerships. Here, men’s drive for upholding emotional restraint was a response to what they routinely described as their partner’s over-emotional (read feminine) states. Stereotyping femininities as hyper-emotional and irrational, Mason, a 32-year-old Canadian father, married for 5-years, explained his approach:

*Women, they like to rant, they like to talk. They like to pour out their mind all the time ... So, the very first thing, I think, is patience. And two, you have to be able to control your emotions. Sometimes, I can be emotionally down ... I don't try to make it too obvious because it affects my relationship with my partner and the child inside the house.*

Mason outlined the way feelings were fostered relationally in his household, which included cultivating patience for his wife’s expressiveness whilst concealing his own emotions. Uncontrolled emotions as irrational states within these relational gendered dynamics, drew Mason’s efforts to balance his partner’s unstable affect with his stable (and stabilizing) mood. In line with Holiday and Hanselman’s (2020) suggestion that men are idealised as stoic and analytical, many participants positioned themselves as rational agents in deliberately managing emotionality (and irrationalities) in the relationship.

Most men’s efforts for balancing emotions did not however fully engage, read or understand their partner’s feelings. Kevin, a 29-year-old Canadian-based man in a 7-year relationship, foregrounded himself as “more rational” than his partner who had “more emotions ... feelings for more things” in conceding his long-standing puzzlement and learnt avoidance for trying to curb her emotionality:

*I try to learn her emotions ... but there are a lot of things that we just, I'm just not capable of like having those feelings ... not capable of thinking in that way ... I think from my experience it's never a good thing to try and stop it [women's emotions].*

Relying on essentialized traits, Kevin considered himself incapable of particular things, and his partner as inherently capable. So static and enduring were these individual differences that Kevin situated these in-relations emotions as belonging to his partner. Similarly, Deniz, a 34-year-old living in the Netherlands with his wife of 4-years, removed himself from the emotions generated in his relationship, “women are

much more emotional ... They have ups and downs ... and expect you to understand the reason without giving you a clue.” Such incomprehension’s were entwined with many men’s resignation for their partner’s irrefractable emotionality. Fisher, a 32-year-old father living in Hong Kong with his wife of 6-years, conceded the possibility that his approach to relationship emotions may not be the only, or best approach:

*I just give up. The wife always wins, so that settles it ... I think it's a personality thing, so I rather avoid the trouble. I guess my experience would be just listen to your wife and let it go and do what she says, make her happy and then you'll be happy again. I don't know if that's a good strategy. This is good enough for me.*

Fisher also detailed that both he and his partner worked full-time with childcare provided by a live-in nanny. While alluding to some tensions around work-life-family balance, wherein labors for coordinating and directly providing additional childcare defaulted to his partner, Fisher stressed the outcome (partner moodiness/emotionality) rather than elaborating on the likely relational contexts for his wife’s overwork and fatigue.

For some men, their puzzlements were less embattled in that they idealised their masculine strength for supporting their partner’s emotionality. Andres, a 26-year-old man living in Canada with his girlfriend of 3-years, suggested, “being the man of the house simply means that you should be the shoulder on which your partner cries.” Evident in Andres’ account was an acceptance of his partner’s emotionality and the pride he felt in upholding emotional restraint to support her.

There were some contentions about men’s emotional restraint wherein a few participants mentioned how their partners had lobbied them to be more emotionally available. Rory, a 20-year-old Canadian-based man, explained some related tensions in his 1-year relationship:

*A problem that we actually have in our relationship (is) that she [partner] thinks I'm really cold. I make a deliberate effort to not be reactive and I believe it's a good thing if you want to handle things effectively. If you want to handle stress effectively, you should be less reactive, but she, I guess she wants to see more emotion out of me, and we sometimes have conflict on that point.*

Rory’s account featured his uncertainties about showing emotions, and the risk for vulnerability and lost control; yet simultaneously he suspected it might be integral to sustaining his relationship. Ironically, in the lobby for more emotion from Rory, conflict flared to heighten the distress in the partnership.

In summary, emotional restraint was predominately positioned in terms of its relational qualities (i.e., balance, support) amid illustrating the problematics of essentializing differences to explain what was differentially felt, expressed and withheld by men and their partners.

### 3.2. Coached emotions

Many men positioned themselves as having coached emotions whereby processes for relationally learning from partners and/or within intimate relationships were strongly evident. These participants’ narratives were emancipatory in that they purposefully distanced themselves from hegemonic masculine ideals for not having and/or suppressing emotions. Justin, a 31-year-old Canadian man who was in a 2.5-year relationship, explained his father’s stoicism and his mother’s compensations for that debility state as translational practices he had observed growing up:

*My dad is very emotional but has extreme difficulty expressing it ... he doesn't have the words for it. He wasn't given the words to express those emotions. My mom often translates for him.*

Describing his parent’s dynamics, Justin critiqued his father’s reliance on his mother’s lead for expressing emotions as a stereotyped dynamic, decidedly at odds with the man he wanted to be and how he needed to operate to sustain his own partnership. Relatedly, Gabriel, a



24-year-old man living in Canada, discussed his 4-year relationship, highlighting the in-progress nature of his emotionality work, “I’m reacting the same as my dad, but I’m trying to not do that, so I’m trying to get further away from what he is (never feeling anything).” Consistent with Butler’s (2004) ‘undoing gender’ work – emotions as relational masculine capital for successful contemporary intimate partnerships were contingent on many participants unlearning emotional restraint. That said, participants’ progress most often hinged on their partner’s ability to coach their emotions. Highlighting the difficulties with which many men related to emotions, Walter, a 24-year-old Canadian-based participant in a 4-month relationship, discussed having been lobbied by a number of partners to be more emotionally intimate:

*I never really found a need to share much with people ... I had several partners tell me that they felt like I was closed off. They felt like they didn’t really know me. I opened up, you know, slowly. It was a transitional period, but I think I’m getting there slowly.*

Walter confirmed his emotions as relational practices that had needed to be coaxed and coached by women partners. Self-labelling as a solitary man later in the interview, Walter spoke about his emotions as incrementally learnt, and needing to be drawn out in relation to partners. As argued by Scheer (2012), emotions-as-practice are contingent on engagement with others, and many men positioned women as experts in feelings, with proficiency to nurture their emotional growth in the relationship. Underlining the way emotional reality exists in relation to others, Justin, a 31-year-old Canadian man in a 2.5-year relationship, rhetorically asked, “How do I take this feeling, this energy that I have in my body and put it into a way that can be understood by someone else?” He elaborated that a previous partner had coached him to both manage and express his emotions, and these learnings were foundational to the success of his current partnership:

*I’ve done a lot of work on learning how to express my emotions ... and that was done a lot with my first partner, long-term partner, and we joke, me and [current partner], that like my ex did so much of the work that [current partner] doesn’t have to do now. To help me learn to express myself better and to manage these feelings that come up.*

Drawing further attention to this backstage arena of women’s work in coaching men’s emotionality, Logan, a 42-year-old Canadian man in a 10-year relationship, said, “she [partner] is extremely good at communicating and also incredibly patient.” He attributed his progress to the feminine nurturing embodied by his partner. Such expertise also extended to some men accepting partner directions to get professional help to better manage their emotions. Frank, a 25-year-old Canadian-based man in an 8-year relationship, explained:

*I was starting the clerkship, I was feeling really, really burnt out and very discontent, and unhappy about where I was. And she [partner] was very blunt, ‘You are having these outbursts, and it doesn’t seem like you. And I think you should speak to a therapist about this.’ And I took her words to heart. I started seeing a therapist ... And it was really helpful ... But she was able to identify that for me, and then help me manage those emotions.*

Frank underlined his partner’s ability to read and report on his emergent emotions in their relationship in effectively triaging and directing him to external help. Here, feminine ideals for knowing emotions, and being their man’s primary health care advisor co-existed with his partner rejecting normative femininities that routinely excuse, tolerate, absorb, and/or take responsibility for men’s poorly managed emotions as previously reported by Bottorff et al. (2014).

Most men suggested that they experienced improved mental health through coached emotions. Henry, a 25-year-old Canadian man in a 4-year relationship, claimed that when he “changed the perspective of keeping things to (himself)”, he “felt like a free man” who was able to open up to his partner. Sinan, a 22-year-old Turkish man in a 2-year relationship, suggested “sharing (my emotions) makes the process (overcoming them) much easier and much faster ... it’s a better way to solve your

problems.” Henry and Sinan’s coached emotions were claimed as emancipatory, a positionality in line with Monaghan and Robertson (2012) who suggest hetero-masculinities are increasingly embracing these healthful practices. Fundamental to men’s coached emotions was trust for sharing emotions with their intimate partner. Mustafa, a 24-year-old Turkish man in a 7-year relationship, said:

*Intimate thoughts and feelings ... in a relationship, you need to trust your partner that he or she won’t exploit that, don’t label you as weak, don’t just show them as a weakness.*

Paramount to Mustafa and many men were assurances that their emotionality resided exclusively in and was protected by the relationship. Building on this, Jamal, a 24-year-old Canadian-based man in a 5-year relationship, foregrounded his trepidation for confiding his feelings as “being scared that she [partner] would react differently”. Illuminating the relational conditions and caveats for men sharing their emotions with intimate partners, Jamal’s concern underscored expressing emotions as a vulnerability risk, whereby feelings in the relationship were conditionally shared with the understanding that they stayed in the partnership.

In addition to being coached by partners, many men aspired to engage relationally so as to know something about their partner’s emotions. Reciprocity required understanding the validity of emotions, as Ali, a 26-year-old Turkish man in a 4-year relationship, explained:

*There were times when my partner felt bad about things ... I kind of ignored them ... I didn’t know the way I should have acted and so I kind of remained ... silent or passive ... I realise now ... I should have listened to her emotions and respected them ... I feel like she was disappointed ... that taught me the importance of respecting each other’s emotions ... I learned that all emotions are natural and valid. And they are not to be judged ... they are normal ... If your partner needs your support, physical or emotional, you try to provide whatever they need.*

Ali reframed his partner’s emotions as warranting his attention and engagement with broader reaches for embracing the reality of relationality wherein emotions were part of, and essential for, reading that terrain. As Kerr (2021) suggests, rupturing the fiction of emotion as irrationality legitimates the critical need to respond to what emerges in relation to the other as purposefully felt. Elaborating on this, Logan, a 42-year-old Canadian man detailed his efforts to “see between the lines” in his 10-year relationship:

*It was all trial and error ... that learning ... how to be supportive ... A lot of things can set that [emotionality] off for her [partner] ... she learned a long time ago that this was something that she had to deal with herself ... and I’ve learned that is mostly true, but that there are gestures that I can do to calm her down when she’s feeling a little overwhelmed ... I’ve tried to become more conscious of when those things are happening ... I’ve tried to learn when there are windows to be able to offer up assistance that she does, that she will accept. And I’ve learned that really is appreciated by her.*

Emphasizing the value of learning to read his partner’s emotions and management to adjust his strategies for supporting her, Login did not try to control or solve what was felt by his partner; rather he worked to understand her emotions as self-managed but also assist-worthy states. Espousing the simplicity of this work, Musa, a 28-year-old Turkish man who was in a long-distance relationship for 3-years recommended other men similarly engage:

*I believe they (men) have to recognise that women are not really as complicated as you think ... you just have to listen.*

In summary, coached emotions included men learning to feel, express, read and support emotions in their intimate partner relationships. While men’s agency toward reciprocity for knowing their partner’s emotions was consistently evident there was a potential paradox to coaching as a relational mode that both challenged and reproduced

heteronormative masculinity as emotionally ill-equipped.

### 3.3. Emotionally orientated

Participants who saw themselves as emotionally orientated suggested that being in touch with their feelings pre-dated their intimate relationships, with the net effect that they were equally or more emotional and expressive than their partners. Regularly referencing childhood origins of their emotionality, many men recalled growing up with, and comfortably into, their emotions. Tacitly framing relational family dynamics, participants spoke about being socialized to express themselves in their formative years. Jeffrey, a 23-year-old American man in a long-distance relationship for 4-years, highlighted his sisters' influence when he was growing up:

*A lot of people talk about how it's harder or doesn't come naturally to guys to open up about their emotional heartaches and difficulties ... but I always felt that that was not a particularly difficult thing for me ... I have two older sisters. And one sister who was only two years older than me, who I grew up with being really close friends with. I think having that kind of experience lets you have a good idea of like, yeah, how girls are just people too.*

Jeffrey explained the benefits of being connected to his own feelings, and relationally knowing femininities outside gender stereotypes that confine and contrast men and women. Evident also was Jeffrey's differentiation of his masculine identity as rationally expressive and relationally knowledgeable of, and empathetic to women's feelings. Emotionally orientated through these family gender relations, Jeffrey's skills translated well to his intimate partner relationship. Canadian 19-year-old Nathan, who was in a 3-month relationship, similarly credited his upbringing for being free to feel, express and interpret emotions in his partnership:

*The majority of my childhood, it was not very like binary gender expectations on her [sister] and I – you know, boy and girl. So, I was out there, I had girls' toys that were hers that we played with. I watched all of the girlie rom-coms from the early-2000s. I've learned to not be ashamed of any of those things, right, and to enjoy things that are more feminine, which other men may struggle with admitting.*

Nathan spoke of traditionally socialized men, who by denying themselves feminine qualities could become estranged from their emotional life. Freed of such restrictions, Nathan saw himself as better equipped to be an intimate partner, differentiating his emotionality as a strength and asset integral to his masculine character and identity. As Shields (2013) notes, emotionally expressive men can be revered both in terms of feeling, and the courage to separate themselves from men who conceal emotions. These liberties and strength-based assertions aside, gender stereotypes were both relied on, and rejected by Jeffrey and Nathan. In terms of reliance, the socializing agents of their emotional orientations were women, while their practices explicitly rejected the restrictions of hegemonic masculinity.

Emotionally orientated participants spoke to the range and depth of their emotions being equal or greater than their women partners. Thomas, a 34-year-old American man, declared himself more expressive than his girlfriend of 1-year who had 3 children from a previous relationship:

*I am more emotional, but I guess I think I'm more openly expressive of it, like I'm the one that's crying at every single movie, every single TV show, but she's [partner] the one who's like, being strong for her kids all the time.*

Building on these everyday sentimentalities, Thomas elaborated that he wrote poetry to process feelings about his mother and their estranged relationship, in affirming the comforts he drew from processing and expressing his emotions. Thomas also positioned his partner's relative emotional restraints as contextually informed by her purposeful

protective parenting style. It is important to note that Thomas positioned both his, and his partner's differing emotionality as strength-based practices that worked well in their respective lives, and relationally for the partnership.

In discussing particularly intense emotions, men suggested that it was entirely reasonable that they express their emotions through tears and crying. Jackson, a 34-year-old from Canada who had been with his partner for 11-years, positioned the longstanding 'boys don't cry' trope as irrelevant:

*If something's really bugging me, I feel more inclined to cry, like I, it's not that I ever thought that like a guy crying was bad, or like not manly or something.*

Similarly, Lamonte, a 43-year-old man in Ghana, critiqued, and advocated for society to end its restrictive gender stereotypes:

*There's a saying that a man doesn't cry, a man doesn't do this, a woman does that. The idea is to create a platform where we will begin to question some of these notions to be able to peel off this whole thing that people talk about as men and women ... how these things can even put us at risk.*

Denouncing rigid gender norms, Lamonte called for easements to reduce the risks associated with the gendered policing of emotions. Diversity, equity and inclusion underpinned Lamonte's lobby with his call to move beyond individual responsibilities to interrogate and contest patriarchal systems enforcing those gender divisions. Lamonte's viewpoint reflects and perhaps extends Anderson and McCormack's (2018) inclusive masculinities frame to encourage and validate the existence of relationally mixed emotions. There were however caveats for emotionally orientated men whereby some participants recognized their high demands for emotional support on partners. Timothy, a 25-year-old Canadian man who often felt overwhelmed by his emotions, was reflexive about how depending on his partner's assistance might ultimately challenge their relationship:

*I kind of look towards motherly figures ... like, have somebody to protect me and, like, care for me, and that's something I've had to be sort of suspicious of in some ways, because I think ... that can lead to unhealthy relationships sometimes, if you're expecting all these things of your partner, expecting them to be this sort of ideal, strong, supportive person.*

The potential for Timothy to unfairly burden his partner was linked to the need for vigilance in managing some of his own emotions. Here, the tensions for expressing all that was felt versus triaging what most needed to be conveyed in the partnership were evident. The entanglements of men's emotions and mental illness symptoms also emerged as a risk for emotionally orientated men. Kerem, a 28-year-old man living in the UK, described how his girlfriend of 1-year provided him with emotional care:

*I: The emotional support is important, you're saying?*

*P: Yeah. I really appreciate it. I usually have like anxieties and stuff like that. My girlfriend always supports me and talks me through it, even when they are really silly stuff. Yeah. I really respect that.*

Kerem's emotions flowed to and from, and likely operated within, his anxiety. This nexus risked the pathologizing of Kerem's emotions as disorders. Inversely, there were potentials for mental illness symptoms to draw emotional support from partners.

The reciprocity and relationality for reading each other's emotions were key to the functionality of emotionally orientated men. David, a 30-year-old American man in a 1-year partnership, spoke to relational knowing for achieving gender equity in his relationship:

*I think I am more of a communicator when it comes to my feelings. So, we deal with ... annoyance differently. I always like to talk about it and why I feel this way, and ... she's like, takes 10 minutes, forgets it, comes back all new ... I think that's been one of the pushes and pulls within our experience ... I try to come to a point where I can notice that's the space that*

*she needs. And therefore, I provide that to her. But afterwards, if we need to have a conversation for me to get across my whatever it might be feelings, we also have that ... So I think in terms of communication around those moments of disagreement ... we've sort of tried to play into each other's processing styles which I think if one of us pushed too hard, it would certainly reverberate back and cause greater conflict. And I have done that once ... but that wasn't me trying to be equitable, that was me trying to put my feelings ahead and saying this is what I need in this moment.*

David highlighted how emotionally orientated relational work extended beyond himself and his partner to know the dynamics in their partnership. Also, situating emotions as most challenging in and around conflicts, David spoke about paying attention to the why, as well as what, how and when emotions were explored in the relationship. The gender equity piece here reflected broader social justice and fairness as core values in David's interview, and the basis of his relationship.

In summary, emotionally orientated men had pre-intimate partner relationship experiences of, and values for understanding their feelings and the feelings of others. Positioned as strength-based and normative, there were potentials for some men to burden partners for emotional support; however, participants' reflexive practices for knowing themselves and working with partners to relationally advance emotions was consistently evident as gender equity driven practices.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The study of masculinities has often suffered from the very difficulties it seeks to ameliorate. That is, to focus in on persons, rather than pan out to the interdependencies and diverse relational contexts that (re)generate feelings and emotional connections. Contemporary critical masculinities studies have emphasised, as we seek to build on here, that entanglements and emergence are not only more effective ways of articulating the emotional lives of men *in-relation* but are critical to better understanding the field. In conceptually advancing the findings in each of the three themes, directions for strategically addressing emotion problematics with tailored interventions are also offered in the discussion that follows.

*Emotional restraint* has long featured as a masculine norm and centrepiece of men's stoicism. The risks associated with emotional restraint feature in the academic literature—especially in men's mental health research (Ogrodniczuk et al., 2023)—with consensus that men, and those around them, would significantly benefit from men's reflexivity for knowing and thoughtfully expressing what they feel (Oliffe et al., 2019). Yet, akin to Hearn's (1992) public – private masculinities proposition, there are possibilities that men's emotional restraint, as a revered and policed feature of public masculine performativities, has real costs in private domestic spheres including estrangements from intimate relations. Alongside calls for strategic emotional restraint, stoicism, with its rich history in ancient philosophy, has re-emerged in contemporary masculinities as a valued state for mastering self-control (Pigliucci, 2017). The endgame, perhaps especially in the current “cancel culture” era, for many men is to show less of themselves (and their emotions) in public arenas (see McElroy, 2022). The potential for men extending their rational-rich public identities by upholding emotional restraint in intimate partner relationships is not offered here as excusatory. Nor is it to deny the power and control that can be (and often are) exerted by (and negatively experienced as a result of) men's efforts to counter and conceal emotions in their relationships (McQueen, 2017). Further, the drive for relational balance via emotional restraint in the current study trades on gender stereotypes including men's low investment in emotional labour. That said, perhaps there are opportunities for rethinking the potential benefits of forging dualities that differentiate (and resist reproducing) men's public and private emotionality. This would rely on contextually delinking longstanding connections between men's emotions and vulnerabilities to ease emotional restraints

to differentiate and engage private relational intimacy enhancing emotions. That participants' perceptions of emotions in relationships were so deeply invested to difficult affects, that happiness, joy and gratitude were absent from their emotionality narratives is also problematic. The challenge (and opportunity) here is to have men sit with challenging emotions to open up new narratives and possibilities for transforming those feelings into something positive. Influencing this concession call for some differentials to forge men's emotional intimacies is Chandler's (2021) reminder that most men *still* battle to publicly break with, and speak out against dominant discourses of masculinity.

The *coached emotions* findings reflected gender dynamics and relational processes that go some way to explaining previous reports of men's emotional awareness and *new* masculinities that are inclusive of emotionality (Forrest, 2010). Specifically, requisite to men being coached by partners were conscious efforts for unlearning emotional restraint, as previously reported by Springer et al. (2012). Inherent to this undoing, men were coached by their partner to progress toward being emotionally reflexive, expressive, available and responsive in their intimate relationships. Men's openness reflects the uptake of shifting contemporary ideals for inter-relationalities in heterosexual masculinities and femininities (Howson, 2006). On the surface, there are clear reasons here for dually rejecting masculinities as rationally unfeeling and feminine emotionality as irrational to pave the way for men to experience, express and read what is felt relationally. Yet reliance on women partners assumes their expertise and willingness to perform this taken-for-granted unpaid labour in society (Erickson, 2005). In addition to the potential for burdening and fatiguing women, the presumption that women's emotional expression is the standard (Brody, 1993) relies on a leap of logic that can significantly compromise relationship quality (Plank, 2019). So, while men (un)learning restraint and building capacity in emotions can offer nonhegemonic masculinities (Roberts, 2013) and transform heterosexual gender relations (Pease, 2012) men's emotions work needs to be understood as relationally situated, emergent, and not necessarily having the same goals as their partner. There also needs to be ongoing attention on how men come to know their partner's emotions, and the in-relation patterns that inevitably shift across time and context. In terms of potential interventions, there may be benefits to positioning coached emotions as catalytic for leveraging men's self-work in forging their partner and relationship identities. In this context, Táíwò (2020) speaks to the possibilities of men's emotional compression as a masculine management strategy rather than naively presuming and promoting the need for men to develop expressive styles that are coded as feminine.

The *emotionally orientated* findings flowed from participants who self-appraised themselves as being equally or more emotional than their partners. Broadly, such assertions support arguments that sex differences in emotions are over-stated (Vogel et al., 2006) whilst responding to calls for empirical insights into gender emotion variations (McCormick et al., 2016). The emotionally orientated accounts debunk relational gender stereotypes for how emotionality is (and is not) done. However, it is key to note men's emotionally orientated practices were socialized in childhood predominately by women (see Hochschild, 1975). This finding, in and of itself, supports calls for men working with boys to be more emotionally aware and show empathy for the feelings of others (see Man Cave; Rice et al., 2021). In terms of cautions, there may be slippages between emotions and mental illness symptoms, and there were potentials for what some men positioned as their emotional traits to manifest as dependency on women partners. For example, women partners of men who experienced depression highlighted the “strain and drain” inherent to providing long-term emotional support – relational practices informed by alignments to, and embodiments of idealised feminine caring and nurturing (Bottorff et al., 2014). This is not to pathologize men's unabashed emotions as mental illness symptoms; rather, the point is to promote men's emotional labour as self and relational investments for knowing their own, their partners and nimbly adapting to shifting patterns of emotions in their intimate relationships.



On the upside, we can confirm some emotionally orientated evidence of gender equity connected to social justice and fairness, with clearly marked relationality work intent on growing the partnership.

In summary of the findings, it is fair to say that intimate partnerships move relational emotionality, with varied buy-in to idealised contemporary heterosexual relationships (Giddens, 2013). Perhaps one salient point to assert here is that by offering empirical insights to the realms of men's emotions (Ratele, 2013), the plurality within and across men's emotionality and the sum of those relational products might buoy some optimism for movements in the direction of gender equality and equity.

Study limitations include the absence of cross-cultural comparisons and/or explicit ethnocultural analyses. While residing outside the purpose of the current article, addressing these limitations might guide important secondary analyses and/or future masculinities research. As Connell (2014) observes, masculinities literature emerged in, and privileges the perspectives and findings of scholars in high income Western countries. Here, there might be value to rethinking, in light of global crises and disruptions, to splinter hegemonic and subjugated masculinities in fully reporting gender relationalities. Confining recruitment to social media chains may have also inadvertently excluded men with fewer resources and/or those living in equity-owed locales. The participant sample of cisgender, heterosexual men limits what can be said about men and masculinities more broadly (i.e. bisexual, queer, trans etc) while the cross-sectional study design does not account for intimate partnerships as they age and/or end. The reliance on men's perspectives in the current study also limits our knowledge about women's receptivity to, and interpretations of, their own and their partner's emotions. Future work might advance the field with longitudinal couple-dyad studies to address some of these limitations.

In conclusion, it is critically important to contextually map emotionality in intimate partnerships with an emphasis on gender relations. Such nuanced insights to relational practices and patterns builds on the interiorities for what is felt, toward understanding restraint and expression within and across heterosexual cisgender men's intimate partnerships. Afforded also are much needed insights to some agency and structure entwinements that could (and sometimes do) situate emotionality as a mutually-owed gender equity project within contemporary heterosexual relationships.

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## Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**John L. Oliffe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nina Gao:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mary T. Kelly:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alex Broom:** Writing – review & editing.

**Damien Ridge:** Writing – review & editing. **Zac E. Seidler:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Paul Sharp:** Writing – review & editing. **Simon M. Rice:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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