ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"There's No Sewing Classes, There's No Bedazzling Seminars": The Impact of Masculinity on Social Connectedness and Mental Health for Men Living in Inner-Regional Australia

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Abstract

Regional Australian masculinities are typified by 'traditional' values (e.g., stoicism, self-reliance) known to restrict social connectedness. Thus, these masculinities have been implicated in worsening men's mental health. What remains unclear, however, is how men living in *inner-regional* communities (i.e., townships on the fringes of major cities) might uniquely experience masculinity, social connectedness, and mental health. We interviewed 29 boys/men and one non-binary participant (M_{age} = 43.77 years) living in the Macedon Ranges (an inner-regional Australian community). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we generated three themes. Participants described inner-regional masculinities as traditional and rigid, and attributed the Macedon Ranges' comparatively high suicide rate to these masculinities. Conversely, migration from the neighbouring city of Melbourne was implicated in introducing more inclusive masculinities to the area that conflicted with existing masculine norms. Thus, Macedon Ranges men were framed as ultimately lacking a cohesive community identity. Proximity to Melbourne was described as encouraging local men to commute daily for work instead of working locally, thereby further weakening community identity. Overall, these phenomena were implicated in damaging the psychosocial wellbeing of local men via reducing social connectedness. Because men's mental illness is so pervasive within regional Australian communities, these findings have direct implications for policymakers. Namely, policies need to acknowledge that masculinities directly influence mental health and that inner-regional masculinities are impacted by unique place-based considerations distinct from men living in other regional communities.

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Akin to the U.S. and Europe (European Commission, 2018; United States Census Bureau, 2017), approximately 30% of Australian men reside in regional communities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019; Regional Australia Institute, 2021); that is, in towns and small metropolises on the fringes of major cities (Bourne et al., 2020; Rawsthorne et al., 2009). Recently, concerns have been raised regarding men's mental health challenges in these areas. For example, regional men are at higher risk for suicidality than men living in cities (Alston, 2012; Crnek-Georgeson et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). Existing literature suggests that mental health challenges for regional men are in part accounted for by a lack of social connectedness, such that men living in regional communities are at higher risk for loneliness and social isolation (Alston, 2012; Hurzeler et al., 2021). There is also evidence to suggest that these issues

are particularly pronounced for men in inner-regional Australian communities; that is, those located on the fringes of major cities (Boyd et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2010; Shand et al., 2015).

Some existing literature has examined how constructions of masculinity inform experiences of social connectedness and mental health for men. Traditional masculinity – that is, masculinity characterised by the expression of aggression, control, stoicism, self-reliance, and dominance – has been implicated in limiting social connectedness for men. For example, Blazina and colleagues (2007) found among 179 men from the United States that those who endorsed traditional masculine norms were lonelier than those who did not. This is perhaps because in attempting to demonstrate self-reliance and stoicism, men who perform traditional masculinities emotionally isolate themselves from potential support networks and thus come to feel disconnected from their friends, families, and partners (Keum et al., 2021). Traditional masculinity has also been implicated in damaging men's mental health. Across a sample of 2,431 young adults, Coleman (2015) found that endorsing traditional masculinity was longitudinally predictive of suicidal ideation. Likewise, Smith and colleagues (2022) found that for 1,794 older White men, conformity to traditional masculine ideals was longitudinally predictive of depressive symptomology. In sum, stereotypically traditional masculine values have been associated with social disconnect and mental ill health for men. The purpose of the current study is therefore to examine how constructions of masculinity and social connectedness contribute to men's place-based experiences of mental health in inner-regional Australia.

Constructing Regional Australian Masculinity

Prevailing societal contexts (informed by an interplay between gender, culture, and history) characterise how men embody and perform masculinities (Carrington & Scott, 2008; Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schlichthorst et al., 2019). Broadly speaking, regional Australian masculinities are typified by traditional values. For example, because regional Australian economies have historically depended on men performing physically demanding agricultural work, regional masculinities tend to idealise physical prowess(Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008; Bye, 2009; Carrington & Scott, 2008; Liepins, 2000) and knowing and controlling the natural environment. For this same reason, regional masculinities are also more likely to value gendered divisions of labour whereby men are expected to act as primary income earners (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008; Liepins, 2000). Finally, regional men are archetypally characterized as stoic and independent and able to withstand

financial instability (Alston & Kent, 2008). This may be particularly true for regional men in Australia, where increasingly common weather events (e.g., major floods, bushfires) routinely disrupt agricultural work (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008). In sum, while many men in regional Australia now work outside of agriculture, idealized regional masculinities may remain heavily informed by foundational agricultural norms that suggest men ought to adopt 'traditional' gender roles.

Regional constructions of masculinities might be more rigid than metropolitan masculinities because these areas are generally less exposed to ethnic, gender, and occupational diversity (Carrington & Scott, 2008). For example, in the early 2000s, the term *metrosexual* was widely used in Australian cities (and beyond) to describe a type of normative heterosexual masculinity in which fashion and grooming were revered. In Australian cities, men living metrosexually were allowed to engage in stereotypically feminine (i.e., not 'traditionally masculine') activities as part of a more inclusive masculinity (Carniel, 2009). However, these freedoms were place-based, with metrosexuality failing to permeate regional Australian cultures and masculinities.

That is not to say, however, that regional constructions of masculinity are entirely fixed. While traditional Australian cultures revere masculine norms of control, stoicism, independence, and strength (Schlichthorst et al., 2019), this archetype is only one of many adaptable and relational masculinities found in Australia. For example, we might consider regional Australian masculinities as being informed by specific place-based gendered norms distinct from those found in Australian cities. Population migration and economic restructuring across the globe have contributed to growing flexibility in regional constructions of masculinity (Bye, 2009; Herron et al., 2020). In Australia, professional skills and experience in administrative positions are now valued as aspects of regional masculinities as they have become increasingly integral for securing employment (Carrington & Scott, 2008). Further, regional masculinities may look different across unique places and contexts. Agricultural towns plagued by resource scarcity, for example, might construct masculinity as more individualistic and competitive than similar towns with an abundance of resources. Similarly, men may express more inclusive masculinities (i.e., allowing for more varied performances; Anderson 2009; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) at home with family versus in the workplace or at school (Creighton et al., 2017). In this sense, while regional masculinities are stereotypically more rigid and traditional than metropolitan masculinities, there is no one regional masculinity.

Social Connectedness, Gender, and Place

Social connectedness through the bonding and forging of close ties with others (Inagaki, 2018) is integral to men's mental health (McKenzie et al., 2018). For example, social connectedness can protect men against adverse outcomes after stressful or emotionally painful experiences (Åslund et al., 2014; Maulik et al., 2010; Raffaelli et al., 2013) and buffer the onset of men's mental ill-health (Kleiman et al., 2014; Panagioti et al., 2014; Teo et al., 2013; Richardson et al., 2022) even found that social support acts as the lone protective factor against the transition from suicidal thoughts to suicide attempts in men. Greater social connectedness has also been associated with increased life expectancy (Giles et al., 2005), life satisfaction (Ambrey et al., 2017), and well-being (Brown et al., 2012), and decreased suicide ideation in men (McLaren & Challis, 2009). Improving social connectedness could therefore be one avenue through which we might improve mental health outcomes for men living in regional communities.

Australian men are both significantly less socially connected than women (Flood, 2005; Franklin et al., 2019; Franklin & Tranter, 2008) and significantly less likely than women to engage with help-seeking services to combat loneliness (Franklin et al., 2019). Perhaps this explains why adverse mental health effects associated with loneliness are generally more pronounced for men. For example, Christensen et al., (2013) found that thwarted belongingness predicted suicide ideation for men but not women. In light of these findings, local and federal governments across Australia have worked together to establish over 1,000 Men's Sheds (i.e., physical spaces for men to congregate and work on projects together). Men's Sheds have proven effective in improving men's mental health by increasing experiences of social connectedness (Australian Government Department of Health, 2020). However, while these sheds are popular among older men, younger men (i.e., those at greater risk for loneliness, depression, and suicidality; Australian Government Department of Health, 2019) are unlikely to engage with Men's Sheds (Beyond Blue, 2013). As such, there is still a gap among policy-makers insofar as understanding and catering to the experiences of Australia's most at-risk men.

Literature examining whether place (i.e., regional versus city living) influences social connectedness in Australia is mixed. While research suggests that overall regional Australians feel more socially connected than those living in cities (Stone & Hulse, 2007; Wulff & Dharmalingam, 2008), there is also evidence to suggest that *men* living in regional communities experience less social connection than women or men living in cities (Alston, 2012; Hurzeler et al., 2021). This is perhaps because a heightened valuation of

independence and stoicism among regional men contributes to unique experiences of disconnection via diminishing the importance of social relationships (McKenzie et al., 2018). Other individualistic factors may also influence the relationship between place and social connectedness. For instance, sexual minority (Power et al., 2014) and ethnic minority (Wickramaarachchi, 2020) Australians report lower levels of social connectedness when living in regional communities. Because loneliness is a risk factor for a myriad of mental health issues including suicidality (McClelland et al., 2020), it is integral we understand how place-based considerations might influence social connectedness for Australian men.

The Present Study

The Macedon Ranges Shire in Victoria, Australia is an inner regional area with a population of just under 50,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The region has a comparatively high male suicide rate relative to state rates, and increasing family violence rates and alcohol-related harms for men (Crime Statistics Agency, 2020; Public Health Information Development Unit, 2021; Turning Point, n.d.). Responding to these trends, local stakeholders identified the need to research attitudes and behaviours of men and boys in the region. The present study was produced as part of *The Human Code Project* – an initiative funded by the North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network (NWMPHN) aimed at contributing to the identification of healthy masculinity-focused approaches to reducing male suicide in the Macedon Ranges (https://www.benetas.com.au/health-care/macedon-ranges-health/the-macedon-ranges-suicide-prevention-trial-site).

Initially, *The Human Code Project* did not intend to explicitly examine social connectedness for men living in the Macedon Ranges; rather, the project focused solely on masculinities and mental health (i.e., how attitudes and behaviours of local men placed them at risk of doing or experiencing harm). However, during the interview process we found that participants felt social connectedness played an integral role in the relationship between masculinities and mental health, and that broadly they spoke at length about experiences of social connectedness. As such, the present study sought to address place-based connections between regional Australian masculinities, social connectedness, and men's mental health.

This is of interest for two reasons. Firstly, as aforementioned, social connectedness plays a pivotal role in mental health (e.g., (McClelland et al., 2020). As such, social disconnection may be contributing in part to the growing mental health crisis among men in the Macedon Ranges.

Table 1 *Participant Demographic Information*

	Total % (*n*)
Total *n*	100 (30)
Mean age (SD)	43.77 (16.42)
Age groups	
16–25	16.7 (5)
26–40	30.0 (9)
41–60	40.0 (12)
61+	13.3 (4)
Sexuality	
Heterosexual	90.0 (27)
Gay	10.0 (3)
Relationship status	
Single/never married	16.7 (5)
Partnered	16.7 (5)
Married/de facto	56.7 (17)
Separated/divorced	10.0 (3)
Employment Status	
Full time	53.3 (16)
Part time	13.3 (4)
Casual	3.3 (1)
Not looking for work	6.7 (2)
Retired	10.0 (3)
Student	10.0 (3)
No answer given	3.3 (1)
Education level	
Some high school	10.0 (3)
High school	10.0 (3)
Trade/cert/diploma	36.7 (11)
Undergrad degree	13.3 (4)
Postgrad degree	30.0 (9)

Secondly, the Macedon Ranges is unique in its proximity to a major city in Australia, being only an hour-long drive from the major city of Melbourne (population 5.1 million as at 2022). This means that men who live in the Macedon Ranges often seek employment in Melbourne and commute daily for work. It is therefore unclear whether other constructions of regional masculinity aptly apply to men who live in areas like the Macedon Ranges, as time spent in inner-city Melbourne may expose them to more diverse constructions of masculinity. It is also unclear how participating in daily commutes might influence social connectedness for men in the Macedon Ranges.

Method

Study Background

Ethics Approval (for the ethical treatment of human participants) was obtained from The University of Melbourne (Ethics ID: 2,057,593). Data collection for *The Human Code Project* ran from September 2020 to August 2021 and involved a community-wide survey, interviews with community stakeholders, and interviews and focus groups with local men and women. The present study utilises data from interviews with local boys and men.

Participants

Twenty-nine boys and men and one non-binary participant ranging in age from 16 to 73 years-old (M_{age}= 43.77, SD = 16.42*)* completed individual interviews. Sample size was determined in consultation with the Project Working Group to ensure a sufficient number of participants across broad age groups (i.e., younger, middle-aged, and older men) were represented in the project findings. Most participants identified as heterosexual (n = 27, 90.0%), with the remaining identifying as gay (n = 3, 10.0%). Participants were mostly in a relationship (i.e., married, de facto, or partnered; n = 22, 73.3%). Most were employed in a full-time, part-time, or casual capacity (n = 21, 70.0%). Of 30 participants, 13 had completed either undergraduate or postgraduate level studies (43.3%), 11 a trade certificate or diploma (36.7%), and 6 high school or some high school (20%). Participant demographic information is summarised below (see Table 1). Average interview length was 51 min.

Procedure

Ethics Approval was granted by The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (2,057,593). Prospective participants were made aware of *The Human Code Project* through social media advertisements, local distribution of flyers, and through dissemination of project information through relevant community groups and professional networks. Individuals who completed the online survey component of the broader research project were presented with a short blurb regarding the purpose of interviews and invited to register interest by leaving a contact email address. Interested participants were then contacted by the second author (KT), who arranged a time to meet via Zoom video conferencing software (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2019) or phone to explain the study aims and obtain informed consent.

Prospective participants were also invited to take part in an optional photovoice component of the interview, which was explained at the same time as the general study aim. Participants who consented to the task were asked to take photographs in response to the prompt *'the stresses and successes of being a man in the Macedon Ranges'*. Twelve participants completed the task, providing between 1 and 6 photographs each (M_{age} = 2.67). Interviews for participants completing the photovoice task were scheduled at least one

week after their initial meeting with the researcher, to allow time for them to take photographs.

Following the provision of informed consent, all interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom by KT due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom facilitated ease of data collection given the geographical location of the area of interest, and lowered the time commitment required of participants. Participants were made aware of the requirement of a device and stable internet connection in order to participate in the research. Although there were no notable concerns raised regarding the use of Zoom in this study, this methodology has potential to disadvantage individuals who do not have access to the internet, particularly in regional and rural areas. The benefits and limitations of using Zoom have been discussed recently by Oliffe et al., (2021).

Semi-structured interviews focused on local influences on masculinities and the relationship between masculinities and mental health. Key interview questions included *'What comes into your mind when you think about being a man?'*, *'How has living in the Macedon Ranges made you the type of man you are?'*, and *'How does your understanding of what it means to be a man affect your mental health?'*. Questions did not specifically pertain to participants' experiences of social connectedness (as per our initial study design), though participants frequently spoke to these experiences. Demographics were obtained via a secure online form hosted on Qualtrics at the commencement of each interview. Participants were reimbursed $30 via electronic bank transfer as a thank you for their time and contributions to the study.

Interviewer Characteristics

All interviews were conducted by KT, a white Australian female in her mid-20s. The gender dynamics of a woman interviewing men about masculinity likely influenced the data collection and analysis (Pini, 2005; Seale et al., 2008). KT kept memos during the data collection process to ensure any presumptions or biases were discussed with the wider research team. The first author, SB, conducted the majority of data analysis for the present study. Therefore, her demographic information may also have influenced the way in which data were interpreted. SB is also a white Australian female in her mid-20s. The wider research team consisted of both male and female researchers with varying degrees of expertise in masculinities, allowing for a diversity of perspectives when looking at the data and increasing study credibility.

Data Analysis

We adopted two data analysis techniques for the present study. First, we used an inductive reflexive thematic analysis approach to analyse our transcript data. This analysis type is ideal for projects such as our own when code and theme generation commence at the conclusion of data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). We also conducted a complementary photovoice analysis to examine our photograph data; that is, photographs were used to inform code and theme generation throughout the research project, with particular photographs chosen to feature in the Results section of our publication to exemplify findings.

Overall, we used a six-step approach for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, KT conducted all interviews. At the conclusion of interviewing, transcripts were obtained. Photographs provided by participants were embedded in transcripts at points where they were discussed during the interview (i.e., photographs appeared in transcripts alongside associated text). Both SB and KT began to independently note their initial observations about the combined transcript and photograph data. Next, both authors separately coded the data, then came together to discuss the codes they had generated (including what they found most relevant to the research question). At this stage, the broader research team was also consulted regarding code overlaps and differences between SB and KT. Thirdly, SB developed initial themes (i.e., patterns of shared meaning, united by a central concept) for the data and decided on which photographs to include in the manuscript. She independently reviewed these themes and photographs and then asked the research team authors to review her choices. Finally, once a draft manuscript was written by SB, all authors again met to finalise themes and exemplar photographs.

Results

Participants spoke at length about their experiences of masculinity, belonging, loneliness, and mental health. From these data, we generated three themes: (i) *"Being Unique Here Is Not an Asset": Uniqueness As Disruptive To Social Connectedness*, (ii) *"We're Not Really Merged Yet": Conflicting Masculinities and Divided Communities*, and (iii) *"Working Away from The Macedon Ranges Takes Me Away from The Community"*. We summarise these three themes below (see Table 2).

Table 2 *Definitions And Examples of Each Theme*

Theme	Description	Exemplar Quote
"Being Unique Here Is Not an Asset": Uniqueness As Disruptive To Social Connectedness	Examines how men in the Macedon Ranges who fail to conform to rigid traditional masculinities are excluded and ostracised within the community.	*"I have to be a certain type of thing to fit in. And that's okay, to some degree. But that's the limiting factor as a male human being is I have to be certain things which I really never practiced being as a younger man. I never practiced being the car guy or the muscle building guy, or the gun guy, or the big drinking guy. The going to the footy and yelling, and punching on guy, I never really practiced being that."* (Participant 21)
"We're Not Really Merged Yet": Conflicting Masculinities and Divided Communities	Examines how tree-change migration (i.e., men immigrating from the city) has disrupted or challenged some elements of rigid masculinity within the Macedon Ranges, and how this disruption has contributed to conflict and disconnect among local men.	*"It comes down to that divide, I think… The society here's quite, in some ways, disjointed. There's the old school country people, and the farming community and so on, and then there's so many new people that have come from the city, bringing a different way of life and a different perspective. And they haven't gelled yet…"* (Participant 38)
"Working Away from The Macedon Ranges Takes Me Away from The Community"	Examines how the Macedon Range's inner-regional geographic location contributes to some local men's experiences of social disconnect via work-life estrangement, and how this in turn fosters community-wide poor mental wellbeing.	*"I think a lot of people around here have big commutes. There's some stat about… I can't remember the number but it's a very high percentage of people who live in the Macedon Ranges and are employed somewhere else. Usually Melbourne. They work somewhere not in the Macedon Ranges. … Squeezing those things that you need to do to live well and you need to do to keep your job, into the day, is tough."* (Participant 27)

"Being Unique Here Is Not an Asset": Uniqueness As Disruptive To Social Connectedness

This theme broadly reflects how men in the Macedon Ranges feel pressured to conform to rigid and stereotypically traditional constructions of masculinity. Several participants in the present study pointed to these constructions as place-specific – that is, they acknowledged that while masculinities in regional communities were slowly becoming more inclusive and diverse, ultimately dominant masculine cultures were still comparatively narrow and exclusionary (versus in bigger cities).

> P21: "It's slightly different when you go to the city than when you come back to town. People expect you to be blokey … You got to have a ute [utility vehicle], you might even have a few guns, might like to shoot, definitely like to drink, you used to play footy [football] or you play footy."

As a result of local constructions of masculinity, participants reported feeling as though they had to 'mask' as more traditionally masculine in the Macedon Ranges or hide parts of their identities in order to fit in with the majority of men in the area. In other words, while participants did not necessarily identify with dominant masculine cultures in the Macedon Ranges, they were often complicit in these cultures in an attempt to form and maintain local friendships. Men in the Macedon Ranges who failed to censor their 'true selves' were framed as targeted for social exclusion.

> P28: "Acting in a way that's outside of the norm would make people feel like they're at risk of being outed from the group or being ostracized … so it's better to keep those thoughts, emotions, and feelings to yourself, kind of live a lie so to speak, and play safe because you know you're going to be accepted."

Often, participants described feeling as though they were required to have a specific masculine aesthetic or 'look' in order to be included in the community. Evident in these observations was the fact that participants resented and critiqued this sameness, and by extension the lack of freedom available to them when it came to physical appearance.

> P32: "There's a lot of mirroring in terms of dressing styles. There's a lot of men who try to have the same haircuts as other men, dress up the same way as other men. And I find that a bit strange… I don't think that's healthy"

Ultimately, clothing was framed as a means through which men might conceal particular parts of their identities from the community. This uniformity is exemplified by a photograph provided by Participant 46, entitled *"Oh, the places we could go if only we were brave."* In this photograph, Participant 46 highlights the tension between needing to 'belong' in the Macedon Ranges community (as represented by their boot) versus needing to feel true to oneself (as represented by their slipper).

P46: "The pink fluffy slipper represents the life I have here that I don't take off the property. How I present in Macedon Ranges is in the… boot. How I live my life is in the pink fluffy slipper … This is me curtailing my identity based on fear and shame and stigma."

In this example, Participant 46's slipper was framed as symbolic of their queerness. They went on to explain how clothing uniformity among men in the Macedon Ranges is reflective of the systemic homophobia (i.e., local men feared ostracism if they dared to 'dress queer') evident in pockets of the community. More broadly, participants spoke to the fact that some Macedon Ranges men (but arguably not community members of other genders) stigmatised and socially excluded sexual and ethnic minorities. For example, when asked to describe a typical man in the Macedon Ranges, Participant 41 (a gay man) claimed the way men in the area treated minorities was "bordering on bullying sometimes". He went on to clarify:

P41: "Some [men in the Macedon Ranges] just don't have filters … it's just racism and things like that. Any homophobic things. Yeah, that sort of macho crap thing that annoys the hell out of me, but that's the typical male that I see in the area."

Here, it's evident that restricted gender roles and identities in the Macedon Ranges work to exclude sexual and ethnic minorities from establishing social ties in the area (especially with men who are not also minorities themselves). As such, these groups are at-risk of feeling as though they don't belong in the broader Macedon Ranges community, even when they are able to find pockets of other minority men with whom to socialise.

P33: "I don't think I've ever even seen in passing any of the Aboriginal communities that are around here. I know they exist, but they're not really connected well into ... There's whole groups of men that are probably falling a little by the wayside just because they don't feel like they're part of every other man."

It was not only minority men who were described as excluded from Macedon Ranges society. Participants also described hobbies in the Macedon Ranges as inherently gendered, such that there are distinct hobbies (e.g., playing sport and drinking) men in the community are encouraged to engage with. Men who would otherwise 'fit it' (e.g., White, heterosexual men) but lacked interest or skill in stereotypically masculine hobbies ultimately described being alienated from male friendship circles because they felt unable to meet the expectations placed on them within these groups.

P20: "I have a sense that masculinity around here probably has a fairly... Comes within a narrow range of expression. … Certainly as a non-sporting male … I have always felt like I never met the fundamental expectations of masculinity or did not expect to be socially embraced into basically any group of men because I couldn't demonstrate those basic... Couldn't relate on those basic levels."

On the other hand, other participants described their lack of interest in masculine hobbies as rendering them unable to form ties to the community because ultimately there was no place for them to go to do so; that is, their hobbies physically alienated them from other community members. For example, Participant 46 commented:

P46: "Men only really gather in the pub. I mean, there are some sporting groups, but fuck I hate sports. There's no sewing classes, there's no bedazzling seminars."

Participants also felt that the gendered nature of hobbies within the Macedon Ranges worked to stifle cultural change and unique expressions of masculinities within the community, such that men were seldom introduced to new perspectives or types of people. In this sense, gendered hobbies and rigid traditional constructions of masculinity were seen as having a bidirectional relationship whereby each one encouraged the presence of the other in the Macedon Ranges.

P28: "They'll stay insular and drink at someone's shed, and then there's not really an exposure to new

people, new ideas, new behaviours, new concepts, anything like that."

Beyond hobbies, participants adopting what might be considered stereotypically feminine roles at home (e.g., stay-at-home dads) or in society (e.g., men who do volunteer work) felt ostracised by the Macedon Ranges community as well. Again, this ostracism was framed as both physical and emotional, such that men who failed to engage in stereotypically masculine social roles struggled both to feel accepted by their peers and to establish networks consisting of men in similar positions to themselves.

> P35: "My wife has always been... the main income earner … [She'd] quite often be at work or doing things and I'd be at home with the kids. … And we both always had the suspicion that, that caused an angst with other couples within our social network, because their expectation was, the women would be at home doing that."
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> P38: "If you want to volunteer, it's typically women that are accepted and embraced in the role of volunteering around the schools. There's always that stigma of, 'Oh, what's a man want to do there?' … In some places in some cities, guys have got little groups together of at home dads and so on, and in the Macedon Ranges it doesn't exist to my mind, I haven't seen it at all, of a network to go to, to be a part of."

Finally, participants touched on mental health consequences associated with constructions of masculinity within the Macedon Ranges. The homogeneity of masculinities in the community meant that many participants felt their self-expression lacked authenticity, causing feelings of mental unease.

> P32: "Trying to create an image for yourself and it's not a true reflection of who you actually are as a person… your mind is going to start fighting that in the long-term and it's going to cause issues like depression and anxiety… because you're not one with your mental self. You're trying to create a new version of yourself for other people, which is not healthy at all, I don't think."

Likewise, participants felt that men who did not abide by societal norms were unable to assimilate into the community and that this contributed to the relatively high suicide rates in the region. In this sense, being 'different' as a man in the Macedon Ranges community was framed as a risk factor for suicidality.

> P46: "There is a one-way, one-shape cookie cutter format you're supposed to be up here, and that's the guys ... the guys who can't fit that are the guys who [die by] suicide."

"We're Not Really Merged Yet": Conflicting Masculinities and Divided Communities

This theme examines how recent tree-change migration (i.e., men moving from Melbourne city to the Macedon Ranges) is encouraging more inclusive masculinities to slowly perforate the Macedon Ranges, and how this cultural shift has contributed to a culture of conflict and disconnect among local men. Newer, progressive masculinities in the Macedon Ranges were described by participants as generally fostering an open-minded approach towards what constitutes masculinity (e.g., vulnerability and emotionality) and emphasising the importance of respecting women, sexual minorities, and people of colour. Several participants directly contrasted these broader constructions of masculinity with the dominant, traditional masculine culture in the Macedon Ranges (i.e., as described in our first theme), noting that these dichotomous masculinities often conflicted and clashed with one another.

> P36: "The Macedon Ranges broadly, has two demographics. That's the old world rural culture and a new world tree changers, commuters, that kind of thing. That's really simplistic to divide it in two like that, but broadly speaking, I think there's a certain amount of truth to that. I think the old rural values are more conservative and more geared towards a view of masculinity and manhood that is something I feel is pretty antiquated. Whereas, I think that the tree changer lot is more urbane and contemporary, I guess, in its values about that kind of thing."

While most participants acknowledged that more inclusive and progressive masculinities were still new to the Macedon Ranges, several felt that societal changes brought about by these masculinities were already notable. While these changes were ultimately described as beneficial by participants, several also spoke to how moving away from the 'status quo' had resulted in the fracturing of community interests and values in the Macedon Ranges. That is, the Macedon Ranges was framed as going through a 'teething process' whereby the community lacked cohesion and sense of belonging was challenged for some residents. This was exemplified by Participant 38 - a volunteer at the Country Fire Authority (CFA). When asked to describe *'the stresses*

and successes of being a man in the Macedon Ranges', he provided the following photograph and explained:

P38: "[The] CFA's one of the last refuges to just be a blokey bloke, but on the flip side you have to be able to make it an inclusive workplace … And as a bloke that really wants that progress to be made, and gets quite frustrated that it hasn't been, it's a mixed world of mixed pressures. You sort of find yourself on the one hand living [in] a new world where women captains and lieutenants are really common. And then you turn around to the next situation [station], and it's all men, and they're really being quite blokey, … So it's a turmoil."

The turmoil described by Participant 38 was also noted by several other participants, who went on to suggest that by generating conflict and confusion, the introduction of new masculinities in the Macedon Ranges actually served to generate loneliness and isolation among local men. In turn, loneliness and isolation born of conflicting masculinities and a divided male community were said to contribute to growing mental health crises in the area (e.g., the Macedon Ranges' high suicide rate).

P49: "Look, I know the Macedon Ranges has one of the highest suicide rates and it's that sort of question. And I think there are a few things contributing factors there, is that we are a mix of a rural and urban type environments. So how do you get those two different sort of communities to mix and work together?"

For local men who ascribed to more traditional and conservative masculinities, cultural change brought on by the introduction of new masculinities contributed to a sense of being less able to openly share their thoughts in the Macedon Ranges, given that these once acceptable perspectives were now labelled as politically incorrect. These residents

felt they were given less freedom to simply 'be themselves' as a result of tree-change migration, and, in a few cases, described feeling shamed for simply being men. As a result, these often long-term residents described feeling socially disconnected from a community that once served to provide them a strong sense of belonging.

P37: "The roles of men are changing to a sense that … I've become very aware that I'm a man because I've been constantly told I am. And that's the difference. Before, I was just a person, part of the community, get involved. I didn't go banging my chest and saying I'm a man. It was just a person. But now … 99% of men now have to be aware that they're being observed, and they have to be careful with what they say, how they say, where they say."

P49: "With gender equality and everything, the pendulum swung back to the middle or is swinging back to the middle, but in some situations it's swung to the far side, it's actually, there's a lot of people I've heard talk about it … There's a lot of mild shaming that goes on these days … they [women] play the gender bias card and put down men … So it's just unfortunately one of those things.. they're [men are] walking away from community groups for that reason … and saying, well, we don't really feel part of the community anymore. So we'll just get up in the morning, do whatever we need to do at home, go to work, come home and do whatever we need to do at home and not get involved in the community. So, therefore, the community is no longer the community that it was. It's just a whole lot of people that live in boxes and go off and do their own things."

For other residents, conflicts emerging between masculinities in the Macedon Ranges discouraged them from making or maintaining connections with men in the area. That is, men who recently moved to the Macedon Ranges from Melbourne were described as often put off from making local friends because in order to do so they would need to 'bridge the divide' between their more progressive 'city masculinities' and dominant traditional masculinities in the area. Because of the Macedon Ranges' unique inner-regional location (i.e., only one hour away from Melbourne), these men often elected to retain their friendship circles in Melbourne at the expense of establishing 'difficult' new Macedon Ranges friendships.

P49: "Because so many new people have moved in, they don't actually form any bonds with the community … And that's becoming I think more prevalent. … [These men are] quite happy to drive them an hour

away to go back and play with the sporting teams that they were already involved with rather than transitioning them to a local sporting team. So, a bit of a divide there, or a bit of people, as I said, not engaging with their own community, but still having bonds to the previous communities."

Finally, when participants who described themselves as valuing inclusive masculinity *did* attempt to bridge divides between themselves and 'stereotypical' local men in the Macedon Ranges, they ultimately described these attempts as failures. For example, participants described facing ostracism when in the past they had attempted to open dialogue with friends surrounding how masculinity in the Macedon Ranges might be changing. In this sense, masculinities in the Macedon Ranges were not only described as dichotomous but also inherently fracturing, whereby men with different constructions of masculinity were often framed as unable to socialise together.

P30: "[I] made a decision a few years ago now to not be quiet about things. If I see something that I don't agree with, I will always speak up, whether it be racism or sexism or somebody saying … something about someone who's … transgender or whatever … I'll speak up for people. And I think a lot of times it makes me not very well-liked."

"Working Away from The Macedon Ranges Takes Me Away from The Community"

This theme examines how the geographic location of the Macedon Ranges contributes uniquely to men's experiences of estrangement from their local community, and how this in turn fosters poor mental wellbeing. Because prevailing traditional masculinities in the Macedon Ranges still encourage men to be the primary breadwinners for their families, almost all men living in the community are employed full-time. Of these men, a large portion work in Melbourne and commute long hours daily to and from their workplace. This is because the Macedon Ranges are uniquely located approximately 1 h from a major city - a phenomenon exclusive to inner-regional areas. As such, participants in the present study frame inner-regional communities as encouraging place-based negative psychosocial outcomes for men.

Firstly, the majority of participants emphasised that loneliness was a problem that exclusively afflicted men in the Macedon Ranges (i.e., not other genders) due to men's expected roles as breadwinners and subsequent daily commuting.

P20: "It was embodied for me by in the expression of one dad who I met at one stage, and he goes, 'Oh, my wife knows everyone. She knew everyone within six weeks. I know nobody. … It feels to me like women and or young mums in this community can find a lot of their social needs met within the framework of their daily running around and whereas for the commuting partner, there's certainly this dislocation between their social lives and their town and their home life … And without actively working against that, then it just says by default, isolation seems to be the destiny of so many middle-aged men."

Participants also emphasised that the effect of commuting was not only felt by men during the week (i.e., unable to socialise before/after work), but also on weekends. For example, because commuting men are absent from the home during the week and hence avoid childcare duties during these periods, these duties are often fulfilled instead over the weekend (i.e., to alleviate the burden placed on their partners). In this way, any socialising that might normally take place over the weekend is also neglected.

P33: "I'd say the average person is probably a dad, probably working at least three or four days down in Melbourne. So probably not really connected into the community during the weekdays, and probably focused on their family more, so they're not necessarily having the opportunity to connect into the community."

In line with this, female partners were described as gatekeeping men's social lives within the community; that is, men had to 'apply' for permission to socialise on weekends because of otherwise-prioritised family demands. In this sense, men's social needs were not only neglected but were also entirely out of their control. Participant 20 exemplifies this loss of control when talking about tree changer men attempting to maintain social connections in Melbourne after moving to the Macedon Ranges:

P20: "It might be that once a month, or once every six weeks, they [men] kind of applied for a leave pass in their head, that was their perception to go and stay in Melbourne for night and catch up with their Melbourne mates and have some big drinking night and then just be commuting, getting back in time to shovel down some dinner and go to bed."

Some participants emphasised how a lack of socialisation brought on by daily commuting negatively affects men's mental health. Namely, social disconnection among men in

the Macedon Ranges was framed as a leading contributor to the community's relatively high suicide rate.

> P20: "We had two men of about my age at the time, maybe early 40s who [died by] suicide, and I just kind of went, look, we can't, we can't let this go on. We can't let this go unaddressed. That this pattern that clearly happens that ... so many of them [men] were not addressing their social needs at all were totally ignoring their own social needs."

Participants not only recognised that men who commuted to Melbourne daily lacked social connection; they also emphasised that these men experienced a myriad of other negative lifestyle outcomes as a result of their daily commutes that also contributed to worsening mental health. For example, the loss of time available for exercise was exemplified by Participant 27. He provided the following photograph and accompanying narrative to explain his experiences as a commuter living in the Macedon Ranges:

> P27: "That's my bike on the V-line and I'm, at the moment one day a week, I get up a bit earlier, I ride that to the station, take the train in, and then ride the rest of the way to work. Which is good. There's a lot of wins for that. It doesn't cost me much in terms of opportunities, so I can still get home by about 7:30 and see the kids. I won't have dinner with them, but I'll be home in time to help put them to bed usually. If I'm not doing that, then that opportunity for that exercise just doesn't exist on a day to day basis because the commute takes up a huge amount of time so if you're doubling up time with exercise and commute, you're getting that benefit out of it. Squeezing those things that you need to do to live well and you need to do to keep your job, into the day, is tough."

Participant 27's account highlights how men who commute daily struggle to find time to fulfil practices they feel are integral to mental wellbeing; daily commuting not only takes a toll on men's ability to experience social connectedness but also directly influences other key variables necessary to maintain good mental health. Thus, the Macedon Ranges' geographic location serves to both socially isolate men and alienate them from coping strategies (e.g., exercise) that might otherwise serve to offset the psychological damage associated with loneliness.

Discussion

Findings from the present study broadly spoke to how men living in an inner-regional Australian community experience masculinities and social connectedness, and how these two phenomena interact to affect mental health. The first of our themes – *"Being Unique Here Is Not an Asset": Uniqueness As Disruptive To Social Connectedness* – detailed participants' accounts of rigid masculinities within the Macedon Ranges; participants described traditional masculine norms as being favoured and deviations from these norms as being punishable by social rejection. Conversely, our second theme – *"We're Not Really Merged Yet": Conflicting Masculinities in the Macedon Ranges* – described ways in which conflicts between these dominant traditional masculinities and emerging, inclusive masculinities are resulting in a fractured community and loss of social cohesion among some men in the Macedon Ranges. Finally, our third theme – *"Working Away from The Macedon Ranges Takes Me Away from The Community"* – examined how the Macedon Ranges' unique geographical location is also driving community disconnect; that is, men who undergo long commutes to work daily are subject to isolation and loneliness. Across all themes, masculinities were implicated in affecting social connectedness for men in the Macedon Ranges. This lack of social connectedness in turn was implicated in damaging men's psychosocial wellbeing and generating mental health crises such as increased male deaths by suicide within the Macedon Ranges.

Existing literature describes regional Australian masculinities as more rigid and traditional than city masculinities (Carrington & Scott, 2008) but acknowledges that this rigidity is softening over time (Hogg & Carrington, 2006; Pease, 2010). These trends are mirrored in the present study. In line with existing Australian literature, our participants described how being 'unique' was detrimental to their feeling of inclusion in the Macedon Ranges. For example, Whiteness (Waling, 2019), heterosexuality (Power et al., 2014), and engaging in archetypal masculine hobbies and social roles (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008; Carniel,

2009; Liepins, 2000) were framed as integral, albeit rigid constructions of Macedon Ranges masculinities. Deviations from these norms often resulted in ostracism, such that alternate masculinities were not only considered abnormal but were also largely unwelcome in the Macedon Ranges. Because of this, participants described engaging in what Connell would define as complicit masculinity (Connell, 1991; Tseole & Vermaak, 2020); participants performed dominant cultural masculinities and benefitted from them without necessarily *identifying* with these masculinities (e.g., queer men remained 'closeted', while other men played sports to establish social circles despite not being that interested in sports). Several participants suggested that this complicit masculinity accounted for the Macedon Ranges' comparatively high suicide rate, such that men were unable to express their authentic identities and thereby lacked meaningful social connections. This mirrors consistent links made between the role of thwarted belongingness in suicidality for Australian men (Christensen et al., 2013).

In an attempt to challenge and diversify what was framed as a stagnant and often harmful status quo, tree change migration from the city was portrayed as introducing the Macedon Ranges community to more inclusive masculinities (Hogg & Carrington, 2006; Pease, 2010). While the introduction of new masculinities was described as ultimately beneficial for the community (i.e., improved treatment of women and other minority groups), this shift was also implicated in causing conflict among Macedon Ranges men. Men in the area who ascribed to dominant traditional constructions of masculinity described feeling as though newfound sociopolitical changes in the Macedon Ranges challenged their sense of belonging, such that what was once accepted and celebrated in their community (e.g., conservatism) was now criticised and condemned.

Likewise, men who identified as more progressive and inclusive in their masculinities described being both unwilling and unable to 'break down the barrier' between themselves and more traditional men in the area, thereby failing to socially integrate. Conflicting masculinities were ultimately represented as a 'teething process' whereby men in the Macedon Ranges were struggling to learn to live and socialise with one another. This teething process was implicated in harming community identity. Even when individuals within a given community form social ties to particular subgroups, community identity (i.e., feeling connected to their community as a *whole*) is still integral in formulating an individual sense of belonging and connectedness (Puddifoot, 1995; Ratanakosol et al., 2016). As such, the lack of community identity evident among men in the Macedon Ranges likely has implications for local men's mental health.

In line with local constructions of masculinity, men in the Macedon Ranges were described as generally serving as primary breadwinners for their families. Because of the Macedon Ranges' unique location (i.e., inner-regional), most men were employed in the city of Melbourne and commuted to work daily. Participants noted that this place-based phenomenon contributed uniquely to local men's experiences of social isolation. Men were described as far less capable of making and maintaining friendships than women due to the time constraints associated with commuting upwards of two hours daily for work. Participants argued that this directly contributed to the area's relatively high suicide rate, such that the social isolation experienced by commuting men led to worsening mental health. This theory aligns with existing literature that suggests there is an association between greater commute time and poorer mental health for Australians (Milner et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Small-scale qualitative research only has the capacity to represent the experiences of specific, targeted groups of individuals. In this sense, the present study can only speak to the experiences of men living in the Macedon Ranges, to the exclusion of alternative genders and/or men living in other regional communities or cities. While this is not a limitation per se (but rather fundamentally part of the nature of qualitative research), it does still limit the generalizability of our findings and as such is worth noting. Furthermore, the interview guide used for the present study intended to address multiple research questions posed by our research team in conjunction with the project working group. As such, lines of inquiry directly pertaining to the present study made up only part of our total interview guide. Data collected for the present study may therefore have been limited by feasibility requirements during the interview process – multiple topics needed to be covered in a set amount of time during interviewing, meaning that perhaps at times participants were not afforded the opportunity to elaborate on certain discussion points pertaining to our research question (i.e., to examine inner-regional masculinities and men's mental health through the lens of social connectedness). .

The fact that findings from the present study often reflected the Macedon Ranges' proximity to Melbourne has implications for regional masculinities research conducted in Australia and globally. Namely, it suggests that (at least in part) the lived experiences of men living in inner-regional areas are distinct from those living further from major cities; that is, inner-regional masculinity cultures are more likely to be informed by norms in major cities and by the unique challenges faced by commuter-heavy populations. These differences ought to be acknowledged in future literature,

with inner-regional masculinities ideally being studied independently. Future research might continue to examine how conflicting masculinities and commuter populations both uniquely and collectively contribute to a loss of community identity in inner-regional areas and/or how this loss of identity subsequently impacts men's mental health.

As aforementioned, the present study was limited by its large scope. Thus, future research is needed to expand on our findings pertaining to social connectedness. Our research established that geographic proximity to Melbourne and inner-regional constructions of masculinity often contribute to place-based experiences of social disconnect for men living in the Macedon Ranges. However, most of our participants spoke about social disconnect for inner-regional men in the abstract or as a systemic issue; not as many shared their own personal experiences of loneliness or social isolation. We therefore recommend that future literature less limited by feasibility and time constraints expand on our lines of inquiry by seeking first-hand narrative accounts of inner-regional men's *lived experiences of social disconnect* (e.g., what does social disconnect mean to them, how does it impact them, what might policymakers do to better support them). It is through rich, complex, participant-centred narratives that we may come to better understand the experiences and unmet needs of men living in inner-regional Australian communities.

Practice Implications

Findings represent the experiences of men living in an inner-regional community in Australia, distinct from other regional communities in its proximity to a major city. Regional areas are undergoing rapid population expansion both in Australia and worldwide. Recently, concern has been raised regarding the pervasiveness of mental ill health among men living in regional communities (Alston, 2012; Crnek-Georgeson et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). Mental health risk is considered especially high for men living in *inner-regional* communities (Boyd et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2010; Shand et al., 2015). Thus, it is integral that we understand the unique challenges men living in inner-regional communities face. In assisting policymakers to implement tailored community support to inner-regional areas, the outputs of this research might serve as case study exemplars for application in similar contexts worldwide.

Participants in the present study spoke at length about how Macedon Ranges men were divided and disconnected. Notably, men who deviated from the societal 'status quo' (e.g., minority men or those interested in stereotypically feminine hobbies) were described as socially alienated and likely to experience mental health struggles as a result. As well as this, the Macedon Ranges' inner-regional location

was said to uniquely contribute to experiences of conflicting masculinities within the area, whereby participants felt that Macedon Ranges men lacked a cohesive community identity. As such, we recommend that policymakers in inner-regional communities pay special attention to implementing change that allows diverse groups of men to connect with one another and learn and grow as a cohesive community. If local councils in inner-regional communities made available more diverse recreational activities through well-marketed male-oriented spaces and places, men might be afforded the opportunity to get to know one together in settings that are more inclusive of alternative masculinities (e.g., a greater focus on developing infrastructure to support the arts). In addition, participants spoke to how long commute times served as a unique place-based contributor to social disconnect among Macedon Ranges men. As such, inner-regional councils may also wish to establish resources that allow men who are not always *present* in communities to still feel connected. For example, ride sharing initiatives (where men travel together) to and from work in Melbourne may serve as an avenue through which local men are able to form and maintain social connections with one another while not spending much time in the community itself. Overall, our findings provide policymakers place-based tailored recommendations for improving men's mental health in inner-regional communities both in Australia and worldwide.

Conclusion

In sum, this study examined men's experiences of masculinity and social connectedness in the Macedon Ranges – an inner regional community located approximately one hour out of Melbourne, Australia. We found that men living in this community uniquely constructed masculinities. While traditional masculine norms remain prevalent, the community's proximity to a large metropolitan city and subsequent commuter population has also meant that more inclusive and diverse masculinities are perforating the community. Changes to, and clashes in, masculinities within the local community have contributed to increased experiences of social disconnection among men. This is heightened by time spent away from the community (i.e., commuter population) and a lack of diversity prevalent among both Macedon Ranges men themselves (i.e., a lack of ethnic or gender diversity) and the recreation made available to them (i.e., a lack of diverse activities in which men are able to engage outside of sports and alcohol). Identifying the specific challenges men in inner-regional areas face allows us to move towards an understanding of how we might use policy to improve the experiences of men living in these communities worldwide.

Statements and Declarations

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