

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Men, masculinities, and infertility

By Jonathan A. Allan, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

The headlines remind us time and again that sperm are in trouble. An opinion column in *The New York Times* asks, “Are your sperm in trouble?” The *Daily Mail* headline reads, “Spermageddon: Mend your ways or face extinction?” Likewise, *Time Magazine* published an article titled, “The Silent Shame of Male Infertility.” And recent headlines have noted that COVID-19 may cause male infertility. It is against this backdrop that this study considers men, masculinities, and infertility.

### How the research was conducted

This project provides a cultural analysis of male infertility. As such, it draws on examples from

### What you need to know

One in six couples face infertility, and in a third of cases, perhaps even more, the male is the cause for infertility. Men’s infertility has become a growing concern for men in light of repeated news reports and scientific studies about the declining quality and quantity of sperm and sperm reproduction. This study, thus, asks about how men and masculinities are considered in the study of reproduction and infertility in particular.

popular culture, literary studies, and film studies. In particular, the researcher focuses on how stories of men’s infertility are told and represented across a variety of media.

### What the researcher found

This project sets out to understand how we put into words and images men’s experiences of infertility. To these ends, the researcher studied a range of texts, from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* through to popular romance novels, memoirs, and film across the twentieth century. The majority of these texts

are in English; however, the researcher also draws on material from Spain and Latin America.

The most obvious, and yet perhaps not obvious, is that men's experiences of fertility and infertility are compelling and nuanced. This research considers a range of texts that help to tell the stories of infertility. These stories range from the tragic and melancholic through to the comedic and hilarious. To provide one example, men's memoirs of infertility, of which there are not many, are told in at times hilarious ways—the horrors of “the room” in which a man must produce a “specimen”—to the touching and loving, for instance, when he and his partner have a baby.

But in all of the stories under consideration in this project, men's experiences of infertility are broad and diverse, and perhaps, at times, unexpected. The stories that are told about men's fertility and/or infertility call into question not only masculinity but also fatherhood, men's health, and how we think about the family. How do we think about men as infertile? How do men seek care and help for infertility? These kinds of questions are at the heart of this project.

While the study is invested in representations of infertility, it must be admitted that this study responds directly to growing anxieties and concerns about men's sperm production over the course of the twentieth century. In the final stages of the project, I also consider the future of infertility; for instance, what is the influence of COVID-19 on men's infertility? This is a question that many men are asking, and a question we will be thinking about for some time.

### How this research can be used

This project is being written for a general audience while still remaining scholarly. Ideally, the final product, a book titled *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities*, will be of interest to a range of readers.

### About the researcher

Dr. Jonathan A. Allan is Canada Research Chair in Men and Masculinities and Professor of English and Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies at Brandon University. In his role as Canada Research Chair, Dr. Allan is undertaking research on men's bodies and health, particularly with regards to the procreative realm.

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### Keywords

Men, masculinities, infertility, fertility, family, future, sperm

### Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Canada Research Chairs Program.

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services and by the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, Faculty of Education.

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