

Opportunities for generativity in later life for older men

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The changing social and economic landscape across European Member States and beyond has had a disproportionate effect on older adults. Nowhere is this more keenly felt than among the “buffer generation” of men caught between the silent, strong, austere masculinity of their forefathers and contemporary society—progressive, open and individualistic (Wyllie et al., 2012). In most countries, men have shorter life expectancies than women and higher mortality rates from most common causes of death. This imbalance arises from issues broader than disease related mortality, with post-industrial society seen to have reduced opportunities for men with regard to work and full time employment, further compounded by dispositional barriers to learning (European Commission, 2011). This paper presents findings from a mixed methods study of 297 older men participating in community-based Men’s Sheds in Ireland and particularly explores the contributions generativity through Men’s Sheds makes to the well-being of older men. The findings show men giving back to the community in different ways, including through the sharing of skills and experiences. It is argued that community-based Men’s Sheds provide opportunities for generativity, with identifiable health benefits for older men, holding important lessons for policymakers to enable greater visibility of men’s perspectives.

Keywords: *older men, informal learning, generativity, well-being, men's sheds.*

Introduction

The 2010 Global Burden of Disease study led by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation confirms that, in most parts of the world, health outcomes among boys and men continue to be substantially worse than for girls and women, yet this gender-based disparity in health has received little attention from policy-makers or service providers (Wang, Dwyer-Lindgren & Lofgren *et al.*, 2012). The study highlights how women had a longer life expectancy than men throughout the period from 1970 to 2010, having increased from 61.2 to 73.3 years, whereas male life expectancy rose from 56.4 to 67.5 years. The European Commission's report on *The State of Men's Health in Europe* (EC, 2011) draws attention to marked gender differences in health which confirm that men's health disadvantage is not simply biological but also shaped by culture and socioeconomic conditions. It argues that the strong gendered dimension around lifestyle choices and risky behaviours of some men which increase their risk of ill health relative to women must be seen within the context of economic, social, environmental and cultural factors. In all Member States, men who live in poorer material and social conditions are more likely to smoke, eat less healthily, exercise less, be overweight/obese, consume more alcohol, engage in substance abuse, and have more risky sexual behaviour. Gendered patterns were also found for depression and other mental health problems, with women much more likely to acknowledge problems and seek help and men more reluctant to discuss problems and less likely to ask for help. One consequence of this is that, although more women in Europe are diagnosed with depression and anxiety, more men commit suicide and engage in behaviours which are detrimental to their health (EC, 2011).

Previous research confirms the relationship between low socio-economic status (SES) and higher prevalence of depression in men. Longitudinal evidence, compiled over a seven year period, found that a lowering in material standard of living is associated with increases in depressive symptoms and cases of major depression (Lorant, Croux and Weich, *et*

al., 2007). When comparing unskilled manual workers with skilled non-manual workers, occupational class was found to be strongly associated with the onset of depression in men (Kosidou, Dalman, Lundberg *et al.*, 2011). Looking specifically at differences in risks between men and women, Kendler and Gardner (2014) found perceptions of deficiencies in caring relationships and interpersonal loss to be the strongest predictors for depression in women while for men, failures to achieve expected goals relating to employment, financial and legal issues were found to pose the greatest risk. On balance therefore, it seems that for some men having an occupation gives a sense of meaning and purpose, and the feeling of being useful. Yet surprisingly limited attention has been given to the implications of this in terms of interventions to preserve meaning and purposefulness for men, especially during times of transition such as from paid work to unemployment or retirement.

The present study uses Eric Erikson's concept of generativity to examine the role of community-based Men's Sheds in supporting the well-being of older men. In 1950, Erikson's framework of human development outlined eight stages from infancy to late adulthood. He theorised that all human beings go through these same eight life stages and that each stage has two opposing outcomes. Of central importance here is the seventh stage of development, said to occur between 40 to 64 years of age. According to Erikson (1982:67), the opposing outcomes of this stage are concerned with *generativity vs stagnation* or '... a widening commitment to take care of the persons, the products, and the ideas one has learned to care for'. Where individuals failed to develop a concern to become a productive or creative member of their community, Erikson held that "a pervading sense of stagnation, boredom and self-improvement" would result (1968:138). While remaining the dominant concern of middle adulthood, Erikson accepted that the generative desire to be a productive or creative member of society continues throughout the remainder of the lifespan (Fleming, 2004).

Evidence of the significant contributions older people make to communities through volunteering and civic engagement (Gonzales, Matz-Costa & Morrow-Howell, 2015) and the importance they place on recognition of their contributions (Lee, 2006) would certainly seem to support Erikson's supposition. Nonetheless, the level of social connectedness varies significantly by gender as do perceived benefits. Compared with men, women have larger social networks, are more

emotionally involved with members of their network, and are more sensitive to adversities experienced by their network (Kendler & Gardner, 2014). By contrast, Kendler and Gardner conclude that men are more emotionally involved in occupational and financial success and are more sensitive to perceived failings in these areas. In addition, men have less experiences of socialising outside the home, except with regard to socialising in the local bar or attending football matches or other such events, leaving them with less well-developed social networks in later life (Carragher, 2013).

Older men have lived their lives largely according to traditional masculine values of breadwinner and provider and have been socialised to be self-reliant, making it more difficult for service providers to engage with them and gain their cooperation (Walsh, O'Shea & Scharf, 2012). The majority of social groups and organisations that offer opportunities for people to be creative and to flourish have been established largely by women and are used largely by women (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Available evidence on membership of active retirement groups suggests they are dominated by women and the activities provided are of little interest to men (McKenna, 2009; Ni Leime, Callan, Finn & Healy, 2012). The one documented departure from this status quo has been the development of the Men's Sheds movement. This has seen an increasing number of men coming together to participate in activities in a social space. So what are Men's Sheds, why do men participate and what do they get out of it?

The Men's Sheds movement started in Australia in the mid-1990s and spread rapidly to other countries, including Ireland where the first such organisation opened in 2009. Men's Sheds are community based non-commercial organisations that provide "a safe, friendly and healing environment where men are able to work on meaningful projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men" (AMSA, 2016). Men's Sheds typically have a workshop space for tools and equipment and a social space for "tea and a chat" (Carragher & Golding, 2015). In this social space, men commonly participate in wood-work activities and, to a lesser extent, in other activities such as painting and cooking. Activities are decided by the men and largely provided by them through the sharing of skills, unless a particular skill-set is not available and in this case an outside tutor is sourced (Carragher, 2013). The Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA) argues that, although activities provided in

Men's Sheds are not typically formal training programmes, '... men gain new knowledge and skills from taking part [in them and although] ... not a health programme ... health and wellbeing does improve for men taking part, by keeping them physically, mentally and socially active; connected to their community and the world' (IMSA, 2013:3).

The model underpinning activities in Men's Sheds shares a similar ethos with a social action understanding of community education. This "values and draws on the lived experience of participants in the learning process...builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based" (AONTAS, 2013). Yet in practice, community education programmes have not attracted significant numbers of men. Indeed, men account for just 25 per cent of participants of community education in Ireland (Community Education Facilitators' Association, 2014) and similar patterns have been identified elsewhere (McGivney, 2004; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007). By contrast, the number of Men's Sheds is increasing in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, Scotland, England, Wales and Denmark. The present study is thus timely and will add to literature which seeks to support a better understanding of this male phenomenon. It explores Men's Sheds in Ireland, currently standing at 400, which is a higher density per head of population to that found in Australia (B. Golding, pers. comm.) and the importance of generativity through Men's Shed for the well-being of older men (aged 50+ years).

Method

To overcome the limitations of a single method alone (Ponterotto, Mathew & Raughley, 2013) and to give a voice to participants, a mixed methods design was used, involving questionnaires and focus groups. The addition of focus groups was intended to ensure that the findings were grounded in real life experiences (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). The survey design and research protocol were shaped by similar research in Australia (Golding *et al.*, 2007; Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey, 2009), with minor changes made to suit an Irish context. Two survey instruments were used; one to elicit information about sheds, such as location of Men's Sheds, funding source, management etc.; the second to elicit information about participants of Men's Sheds, such as the reasons for and outcomes of participation.

Demographic questions were designed to identify common characteristics of those who typically attend Men's Sheds. In addition to age and educational background, this included questions about participants' personal lives and relationships; marital and cohabitation status, family make-up (e.g. father, grandfather) and significant life events experienced in the past five years (e.g. separation, unemployment, retirement, a significant loss, a major health crisis, a new personal relationship, a new child or grandchild). Closed-ended questions were used to elicit information about the learning activities in Men's Sheds (e.g. "If more learning opportunities were available through this shed, would you be interested in taking part?" "Yes/No"). Multiple choice questions were used to determine preferences for learning (e.g. "If yes, which type of learning would you be interested in?" "A course to get a qualification; Special interest courses; In a small group; Field days or demonstrations; In a class; Through the Internet; By taking on responsibility; Through preparation for further study; Where I can meet other people; [and] Individual tuition").

Additional questions were presented as statements and invited respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements, from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. These were not mutually exclusive but rather were designed to identify reasons for participation in Men's Sheds (e.g. "I am doing what I really enjoy; To be with other men; To get out of the house; To learn new skills" etc.) and outcomes from participation (e.g. "a place where I belong; I get access to men's health information" etc.). Multiple choice questions were added to explore learning in Men's Sheds (e.g. "There is too much emphasis on learning things I can already do; "My skills are already good enough for me to be able to take an active part in this organisation; "There is too much importance placed on formal learning" etc.).

The approach to fieldwork was deliberately "interpretive and naturalistic" with focus groups held in "natural settings to help make sense of phenomena and the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:3). In all, a series of five focus groups were held in different Men's Sheds on completion of survey analyses. These provided valuable opportunities to observe the activities and interactions in Men's Sheds, how men engage with each other and how they share skills with each other. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and collectively involved 40 consenting adults, with conversations recorded

and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were used to aid transcription and proved important for clarity of transcriptions when more than one person spoke at a time. Ethical clearance was granted by the researcher's institution before fieldwork commenced. All Sheds registered with the IMSA were invited to participate, but the actual number of surveys distributed were determined by the coordinators of Sheds in line with membership. In all, 445 questionnaires were distributed.

Results

Some 347 questionnaires were returned out of a possible 445, including 50 incomplete questionnaires. When the incomplete questionnaires were excluded, the sample size was 297, giving a response rate of 65.2 per cent. All respondents were male, with the majority aged 50+ (71%, $n = 210$). Most were married (70%, $n = 207$) or had previously been married and 58 per cent ($n = 172$) were currently living with their wife or partner. Nearly three quarters were fathers (72%) and nearly half were also grandfathers (45%). The majority were retired from paid work and in receipt of some type of pension (53%), with just 15 per cent currently in paid work. Just over half had no formal qualifications (51%) and were educated to primary or secondary school level only. In a separate question, 45 per cent identified themselves as a current or former tradesman.

Evidence of generative acts

Generativity means generative behaviours which include "creating, maintaining, or offering" (McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992:106). This creation or offering represents an extension of oneself, rather than being merely an act of altruism alone (De Medeiros, 2009). In the context of Men's Sheds, the hands-on learning through sharing skills and experiences, and the giving back to the community through voluntary work, reflects the generative concerns of older men for both future generations and their own individual legacies. In keeping with this interpretation, taking part in activities in Men's Sheds in the company of other men encouraged creativity, with woodwork and metalwork consistently providing opportunities for older men to experience creative tools and to be productive. For many, the skills to make and repair were as important as their ability to think creatively. The top preferred activities were related to men's hobbies, including woodwork

(75%) and technical trades and crafts (68%). The confidence with which respondents took part in related activities was succinctly expressed by one man in the following way:

I could take an engine out, pull it apart and throw it over there and come back next week . . . and put it back together again. And I learnt all of that myself. I never went to school to learn any of that. I never read a book about it or anything.

Motivation for the social process involved in generative behaviour and generative acts is important. The findings suggest that for men participation in Men's Sheds is driven by a need to be doing meaningful activities in the company of men. This was expressed as a need "to get out of the house" (95%), "to be with other men" (95%), a preference for "hands-on learning" (71%) as opposed to "learning in classroom situations" (29%), and by a desire to "improve skills" (94%) through "more learning in Men's Sheds" (97%). As one man said:

... the benefits I get from this shed is health ... meaning I'm not down in the house vegetating, I'm here vegetating. But at least when you're here vegetating you can talk to somebody.

For a significant number of men (83%), access to male health information was also an important motivation for participation. In addition to organised health talks and leaflets, the men offered each other mutual support and health advice as the comments of this man suggest:

You'll get a man who'll say, "I'm taking a tablet [medication]," and you say, "I'm taking the same", and he'll say, "What are you taking it for? Once one starts ..."

The findings point to generative acts through Men's Sheds to communities which also foster generative networks and mental well-being. Mental capital has been described as 'a dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively ... build positive relationships with others ... and contribute to their community' (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008). Thus this study found that over three-quarters (79%) of Sheds surveyed were involved in charitable or voluntary activities beyond their main purpose or activity. This made respondents feel productive and valuable to their community and they expressed this as "I feel better

about myself" (97%), "I feel happier at home" (74%), "I can give back to the community" (97%), "I feel more accepted in the community" (86%) and "I have a place where I belong" (95%). In contrast to the low participation rate of men in traditional social groups in the community and in community educational programmes, the findings shows that older men regularly participate in Men's Shed-based activities, with the majority (91%) taking an active part in the learning opportunities, sometimes on a daily basis (12%), sometimes *several times a week* (29%) or *at least once a week* (50%).

Evidence of stagnation

Where generative concerns or acts are prevented or not enabled, it is likely that older men will give up on being productive or creative, with stagnation prevailing over desires for generative behaviour. Evidence of stagnation was found with respondents complaining that opportunities for learning elsewhere in communities were limited (70%), that there was no place locally which they considered a good place to learn (79%), that there were not enough learning situations where men were encouraged (68%), not enough male tutors (57%), and nothing that men really wanted to learn (91%).

The findings confirm that few men had attended any sort of formal learning programme in the past year (19%), and two-thirds (66%) reported having negative educational experiences in school. This was expressed in different ways, such as '... so far as school is concerned it never taught me very much at all' and 'I left school at 14 and what I know now I learnt it along the road'. For some men, school taught them the basics but life taught them the important things ... 'when we were there we got the basics, as I say the reading, writing and arithmetic'. One man referred to his learning from the 'school of hard knocks', commenting that 'you have so many knocks in life as you came along that you were taught by your knocks, you were taught by experience. If you walked along and you fell down that road you won't do it again'. Collectively the men had experienced a range of recent, debilitating major life events, including a significant loss (24%), a financial crisis (23%), unemployment (41%) and depression (23%).

Limitations of the study

This is the first study of Men's Sheds in Ireland and, as it is a recent

phenomena in Ireland, it is conceivable that those Sheds that have been open longest may have been more motivated to take part in this study. However, this study nonetheless provides important information on why men participate in Men's Sheds and what they get from their participation, paving the way for further studies including more qualitative cases studies.

Discussion

The findings from this study arguably demonstrate the need to further explore the emergence and impact of generative acts and behaviours in the context of Men's Sheds. Until recently, men showed relatively little interest in availing themselves of opportunities to engage in learning. Yet as we have seen, men are now engaging in learning, in being creative and in giving to communities through the Men's Sheds movement in ever increasing numbers (Golding, 2015). So why are they doing so and what does it mean for policymakers and services providers? The findings from this study suggest the appeal of Men's Sheds is first and foremost that Sheds offer men a productive environment that validates their role and recognises their contribution. They offer peer support and foster peer social networks through hands-on activities as they share and reapply life skills and resources with each other. It is noteworthy that while almost all Sheds (97%) agreed that their members were "mainly men", the sample for this study comprises only men. Quite simply, Men's Sheds provide meaningful spaces for men to be with other men and to be productive through activities that they can relate to and take pride in.

The fact that they are mostly older men aged 50+ years is also likely to be important. Men of this generation have a lot in common with each other and little in common with younger men. These mid-life and older men are "caught between their traditional silent, strong and austere fathers who went to work and provided for their families, and the more progressive, open and individualistic generation of their sons" not knowing which of these two very different ways of life and masculine cultures they should follow (Wyllie, Platt, Brownlie *et al.*, 2012:12). The pressure to live up to a 'masculine gold standard' which 'prizes power, control and invincibility' means having a job and providing for the family is central, especially for working class men. Wyllie *et al.*, 2012) suggest that personal challenges such as losing a job can have much more of an emotional impact on older men than might be the case for

women because, as the evidence confirms, women are much more open to talking about emotions than men of all ages and social classes. In the face of mounting evidence of men's health disadvantage relative to women, we can therefore no longer ignore nor deny the social, environmental and cultural factors which influence the lifestyle choices and risky behaviours of some men and increase the risk of ill health relative to women.

Services in the community have not reached out to men in meaningful ways, but the drive for gender equality and the introduction of national programmes for men in some countries suggest this may be changing. Ireland has just launched its second health strategy, the *National men's health action plan: Healthy Ireland – Men 2017-2021* (Department of Health & Children, 2016). Supporting men's health and wellbeing is also a part of Government's plan to implement the national framework for action, 'Healthy Ireland' (Department of Health, 2013) and of the 'Connecting for Life' Suicide Strategy (Department of Health, 2015). To this end, the 'Sheds for Life' initiative will receive €226,000 from the Health Service Executive in 2017 to promote men's health by working in partnership with statutory, voluntary and community organisations to strengthen men's health, knowledge, awareness and behaviours towards health. While such initiatives are a welcomed development, the fact that men in general tend to have poorer knowledge and awareness of health than women means we need to take a step back in order to adequately address this. To do this, we need to start the work in childhood, meaning that efforts to improve men's health must include schools where stereotypes about masculinity can be more effectively challenged to prevent replication.

Conclusion

Erikson's concept of generativity provides a framework for a better understanding of the appeal of Men's Sheds to older men. These male dominated spaces provide a sense of purpose and meaning for older men, most of whom are retired or outside of work and are vulnerable after the loss of friends and family, reduced mobility or limited income. Limited social networks and limited experience of engaging with services reflects lives lived largely according to traditional masculine values. For such men, meaning and identity are constructed around paid work and the transition from employment to retirement can be difficult. Erikson's concept of generativity provides a framework

for a better understanding of how older men find meaning and purpose in Men's Sheds and how this fosters creativity and promotes well-being. Within the Shed environment, surrounded by other men and working with their hands, older men draw on their life resources as they share skills and gain new ones. Working with their hands, alongside their peers, older men reapply their life resources in creative and productive ways which in turn promotes well-being and fosters peer bonding and peer social networks.

A related and equally important outcome concerns the meaningful conversations which take place between men as they engage in activities. The notion that men are largely disinterested in their health has been espoused by many, including health professionals. Often this transpires in comments which are "off-the-cuff" with no deliberate harmful intent but nonetheless serve to reinforce a perception which is unhelpful. This paper demonstrates that men are interested in their health and we need to recognise this and act on it. The findings show that men are interested in talking about their health and in accessing health information in Men's Sheds, which in turn provides opportunities for policy makers and service providers to deliver targeted interventions in Sheds. However, it is crucial that we do not lose sight of the importance of meaning and purposefulness, one of the main reasons why older men flock to Sheds in such large numbers. The benefits older men gain from participation and the generative behaviours which flow from this are at least as important to their mental well-being as they are to the creation of generative communities.

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