

## **Learning to deal with freedom and restraints: Elderly women's experiences of their husbands visiting a Men's Shed**

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### **Introduction**

Men's Sheds are community-based workshops that offer men, primarily men beyond paid work, somewhere to go, something to do, and someone to talk to. Men's Sheds started in Australia in the early 1990s, and quickly spread to other Anglo-Saxon countries, including New Zealand, Ireland, and the UK. Lately, Sheds have been established in Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Germany, Malta, France, China, Kenya, and the Scandinavian countries (Ahl, Hedegaard & Golding, 2017; Golding, 2015). Men's Sheds constitute a social movement that is growing rapidly; with a yearly increase of approximately 20 per cent. In 2015, there were over 1,400 Sheds around the world (Golding, 2015) and two years later, there were over 2,000 Sheds (<http://mensshed.org>; <http://menzshed.org.nz>; <http://menssheds.ie>; <http://menssheds.org.uk>). The Sheds have been found to greatly benefit older men's learning, health and well-being, and social integration. 'Shedding' has been shown to be of importance to the development of a positive male identity which focuses on responsibility, care for others, as well as for oneself (Carragher, 2013; Cavanagh, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2014; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson; Golding, 2011; Golding, 2015; Haesler, 2015; Morgan, Hayes, Williamson, & Ford, 2007; Wilson, Cordier, & Wilson Whatley, 2013). The keys to their success, from an organisational perspective, are (i) Sheds offer men practical, gender-stereotypical activities, (ii) Sheds are organised from the bottom up, so service providers are kept at arm's length, and (iii) no women are present in the Shed (Ahl, Hedegaard, & Golding, 2017; Golding, 2015). There exists a fair amount of research into the effects that membership of a Shed has on the men who attend them. However, we wish to raise the following research questions: *What impact does the attendance of men at a Shed have on their spouses? What do Sheds mean for the spouses, in terms of opportunities for learning and development? What impact on* to do, and someone to talk to. In this paper, we explore the opportunities that do become available for women as a result of their husbands' activities in Sheds, with special attention paid to the notions of 'empowerment', 'gender-as-performative' and 'well-being'. In our study, a spouse becomes synonymous with a woman, since all our interviewees were women, and all lived in heterosexual husband-wife relationships.

With respect to 'married elderly people', previous studies have found that there is, for this group of people, a decrease in the number and frequency of social contacts for both women and men, when they retire from work (Alwin, Felmlee, & Kreager, 2018; Wruz,

Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013; Zhaoyang, Sliwinski, Martire, & Smyth, 2018). Instead, what has been observed is that increased interaction between the spouses takes place (Kulik, 2002). However, previous research has found that the elderly experience a higher degree of freedom with respect to their choice of whom they want to socialize with, compared to younger people (Pinquart & Schindler, 2009; Van Solinge, 2012; Zhaoyang, Sliwinski, Martire, & Smyth, 2018). This opportunity to exercise one's choice regarding social friends and acquaintances seems to be more widely-used by women than by men. However, it may be the case that women use this opportunity in a different manner. Women are more likely to replace the social contacts they established at their place of work with new relationships and activities (Cedergren, King, Wagner, & Wegley, 2007; Felmlee & Muraco, 2009; Okamoto & Tanaka, 2004). Loscocco and Walzer (2013) even discuss a 'role conversion', such that older men become more family-oriented, while older women become more focused on their own empowerment and self-fulfilment. Marchand (2018) examines the notions of 'retirement-freedom' and 'restrained retirement', and reports that women seem to experience the former to a larger extent than men. This state-of-affairs may be conceptualized as 'a return to a more youthful stage' for women, in that they find themselves fairly free from certain role obligations and other restraints on their social life. Compared to an earlier period of their lives, women now (in their retirement) enjoy more opportunities to focus on themselves and to explore their freedom (Arnett, 2015; Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenburg, Frank, & Verma, 2002). This is, for example, reflected in the fact that elderly women participate significantly more than men in adult education (Jenkins, 2011). For men, ordinary forms of adult education can be an obstacle to their participation (Williamson, 2000), since many of them prefer self-directed, flexible and informal activities without teachers, teaching or a schedule (Golding, 2015). Another way of describing the situation that women of this age find themselves in is to say that these women's well-being is now more subject to the operation of internal factors (for instance, their own activities), while elderly men's well-being is influenced by external factors to a greater degree (for example, by their wife's activities) (Schimmack, 2006).

However, there is another side to the coin. Compared to elderly women, elderly men often fail to adequately maintain their social relationships, their health, or their well-being. As a consequence of this 'self-neglect', women's well-being and overall life-satisfaction is affected negatively, because they are often concerned for their husbands (Carr, Freedman, Cornman, & Schwarz, 2014). Elderly women's concern for their husbands and their well-being is not a unique phenomenon. In many marriages (and in society at large, for that matter), women are often endowed with the epithet "relationship expert" (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Sanderson & Kurdek, 1993), which leads to certain demands and expectations being made on them, especially regarding taking responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects of the marriage or relationship (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Boerner, Jopp, Carr, Sosinsky, & Kim, 2014). Using Butler's (1988) concept of "performativity", we argue that the formation of gender roles in powerful institutions, such as the institution of the family, are reproduced through the interaction between historical behaviour (gender roles

throughout history) and the present discourse on gendered-positions and roles in the context of the family. Furthermore, when we take into consideration the fact that women are also often responsible for managing interactions with the medical system (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), the unequal distribution of responsibility for the socio-emotional work between husbands and wives becomes apparent (Iveniuk, Waite, McClintock, & Teidt, 2014). In the case of older married couples, this is shown, *inter alia*, by the husbands' evaluation of their marriage based on what they feel their wives do for them. In contrast, elderly wives base their perceptions of the state of their marriage on what they feel they do for their husbands (Boerner, Jopp, Carr, Sosinsky, & Kim, 2014).

As a consequence of the above, when the husbands of elderly women begin to visit Sheds, we might conclude, with good reason, that some of the socio-emotional burden that is carried by these women, will be taken from them. However, we ask whether this is really the case? The present study adds to our knowledge about how elderly women's well-being and overall life satisfaction is affected by the activities that their spouses engage in. Moreover, by using Men's Shed as an example, this article also adds to our knowledge regarding the effects that the Men's Shed has on family dynamics and on those individuals who are most closely related to the men who attend Men's Sheds.

### **Conceptual framework**

'Empowerment' (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) is the first of three concepts that constitute the conceptual framework that informs the present study. 'Empowerment' refers to an individual's ability, and the opportunities that are afforded to the individuals, to exercise determination in and about his or her own life. (Rappaport also mentions organisations and neighbourhoods as being potential subjects for an analysis of empowerment, but in the present context, we focus solely on empowerment from the individual's perspective). Empowerment is considered to be a process, rather than a goal; it is one's striving to gain determination over various aspects of one's life that is of special interest when empowerment in practice is examined (Rappaport, 1987). The focus on empowerment as a process, rather than a goal, directs our attention towards structures that enable, or prevent, empowering processes from being realised (Zimmerman, 2000).

With our attention directed towards structures, 'empowerment' thereby becomes compatible with the examination of 'gender'. In this case, we draw on Butler's (1998) view of gender as *performative*. This view argues that gender is something that is 'done' or 'enacted', with reference to both a person's/group's social- and historical contexts. With regards to 'gender identity' and 'gender roles', these concepts are understood via the repetition of acts over time. 'Gender transformation' is enabled by means of the arbitrariness of these acts. Thus, by acting in a non-confirmative or norm-breaking way, gender identity and gender roles can be challenged. They can, of course, also be reproduced when a person acts according to established norms. Non-confirmative or

norm-breaking gender performance is linked to empowerment, since such a performance (of an act) can be seen as part of an empowering process in which a person's gender identity and gender role (as prescribed by the social- and historical context) is challenged.

The third and final concept that informs our theoretical framework is 'well-being'. Schimmack's (2006) division between 'internal well-being' and 'external well-being' enables us to study well-being that is derived from, in this case, the elderly women's acts that are primarily expressions of an ambition to focus on themselves (internal well-being), but also a well-being that is derived from acts that mainly focuses on their husbands (external well-being), but increases the well-being of the women nevertheless. Consequently, internal well-being has a strong connection to empowerment and also to a performative gender that is none-confirmative or norm-breaking. On the other hand, external well-being is linked to a performative gender that is norm-confirmative.

### **Method**

The data used in the present study was collected in New Zealand, in January 2017, and in Denmark, in January 2018. We conducted five focus-group interviews with elderly women, one focus-group interview in a Shed in New Zealand and four focus-group interviews in Denmark at four different Sheds. In Denmark, eight individual interviews with elderly women were also conducted. The five focus-group interviews and the individual interviews included 26 participants in total. Two of the participating women were still gainfully employed, but were close to retirement. The remaining 24 women were retired and were over 65 years of age. The focus-group interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, while the duration of the individual interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis. Quotes that were originally in Danish were translated into English by the authors.

### **Analysis**

The data that was collected was analysed by means of a concept-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) which was guided by (i) the concept of 'empowerment' (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000), (ii) Butler's (1988) theory on 'gender as performative', and (iii) the concepts of 'internal well-being' and 'external well-being' (Schimmack, 2006). This concept-driven content analysis was then used to identify overarching themes regarding the elderly wives' experiences of their husbands visiting Sheds. The primary interest in the analysis was to interrogate the well-being of the women. By searching for expressions of empowerment and changes in, and reproductions of, gender performance, we identified aspects that could be said to influence the internal- and external well-being of the elderly women. More specifically, the concept of 'empowerment' enabled us to focus on aspects of freedom that were expressed during the interviews. Using the theoretical lens of 'gender as performative', we were able to pay attention to expressions of the novel ways the women demonstrated responsibility for the socio-emotional work that was being performed in their marriages.

Furthermore, we were also able to examine how the women prioritized themselves and were thereby empowered to transform their gender identity and their gender roles.

The analytical process was directed towards the latent content present in the data (Krippendorff, 2004), in which the examination of the underlying meaning of the expressed statements was made a priority. Statements which could be linked to expressed feelings of self-fulfillment, independence, freedom, relief, and similar emotions were interpreted as expressions of empowerment and also as expressions of transformative gender performance. Statements that could be linked to (i) a high degree of involvement in their husbands' activities in the Shed, (ii) continued concern for their husbands' well-being, and (iii) signs of self-sacrifice became expressions of reproductive performative gender. At the next stage of the analysis, we employed the concepts of 'internal well-being' versus 'external well-being' (Schimmack, 2006) in order to identify salient aspects of well-being in the initial results of our analysis, and in order to further categorize and connect 'well-being' to gender as performative and to empowerment.

## **Results**

The results of this study indicate that both the notions of 'self-fulfilment' and 'self-sacrifice' are central to properly understand how the elderly husbands' activities in the Shed affects their wives' sense of empowerment, well-being, and their gender identities. This section is divided into two parts; the first part is concerned with the notions of 'self-fulfilment', 'independence', and the transformative and empowering aspects that the husbands' attendance at a Shed realised for their wives. The second part of our discussion of the results of this study focuses on the aspects of self-sacrifice and gender stereotype reproduction for the women which can be associated with their husbands' attendance at a Shed.

### ***The Men's Shed as an enabler of self-fulfilment, independence, and freedom for elderly wives***

The sense of self-fulfilment, independence, and freedom experienced by wives when their husbands attended a Shed can be understood as a result of (i) not having their husbands at home all the time and, above all, (ii) not feeling guilty when they themselves left the household. Since the overwhelming majority of the women who were interviewed had many different activities to attend to, the biggest relief that they felt was that they were able to leave home feeling certain that their husbands would have somewhere to go, something to do, and someone to talk to. Below is a statement taken from one focus-group interview regarding the relief that was felt because of the reduced feeling of concern for her husband:

- (1) You know they are not at home and are bored.
- (2) Yes, exactly.

- (1) And that was one thing I was worried about, how it would go, when he stopped working, because he lived and breathed for his work.

Besides the relief that was felt (as a consequence of not worrying so much about their husbands and their well-being), the elderly women also expressed satisfaction about being on their own and having the freedom to do whatever they wanted *without having to show consideration for their husbands*. In another focus-group interview, the opportunity to focus on themselves was expressed:

- (1) It is good to have a few hours for yourself.
- (2) Ha ha, that is lovely.
- (1) You see, I also have my leisure activities.

It was quite difficult to get the women to talk about themselves in reference to their husbands attending a Shed, but when they did, the women's feelings of relinquishing guilt and having more time by, and for, themselves were apparent in the interviews. This was confirmed in the individual interviews, in which the women expressed what can almost be described as gratitude towards the Men's Shed:

I have almost forgot how it was before [my husband] started visiting the Shed. Previously, he was always at home and did nothing except watch television. Now he is away 3-4 days a week, which gives me almost all the time in the world to do what I want in our household.

Another woman stated the following when the future of the Shed came up:

It has to go on! I have become used to having more time with myself and I cannot imagine going back to how things used to be. Well, I think that my husband also wants this to continue by the way [laughter].

Thus, the opportunities that the Men's Shed has offered the wives were greatly appreciated and it was quite clear that the experienced benefits were extensive. The women did not seem to encounter any major problems learning to deal with the new opportunities that emerged; quite the contrary. They obviously learned to act in a non-confirmative gendered way, which allowed them to focus on empowering themselves. They, thereby, exploited their new opportunities in a manner that clearly increased their internal well-being and self-fulfilment.

### ***The Men's Shed as a reinforcer of gender stereotypes for wives***

Besides creating new and desirable opportunities for the women, the husband's attendance at the Sheds also created opportunities for wives to act in accordance with how they had previously acted within their respective marriages/relationships, or, to put it other words – they were able to act in a gender norm-confirmative way, i.e. self-sacrificing. Self-sacrifice can be understood as a result of the women's high level of

engagement and involvement in their husbands' activities in the Shed. The Shed activities provided new situations where the women practically, as well as emotionally, prioritized their husbands and their new experiences in the Shed. Below is a discussion about how the men's experiences in the Shed constitute a large proportion of the topic of conversation at home:

- (1) He has so much to tell me when he comes home.
- (2) Yes, I have a hard time getting a word in edgewise.
- (1) Ha ha, but it is so nice, and it has lasted for a long time.
- (3) Exactly. I actually think that the longer [my husband] visits the Shed, the more he has to talk about.
- (2) Ha ha, how will this end?
- (1) But it is so nice, and I am happy to listen.
- (3) Exactly, it is so nice for them.

In addition to investing time, energy, and emotion when listening to their husbands and their experiences at the Sheds, some of the women are so committed to the Shed movement that they even engage in further recruitment of more members to the Men's Shed. Below is an example of a recruitment strategy that was used by one wife:

- (1) I am trying to help out as much as I can.
- (2) In which way?
- (1) Well, I think they have a hard time recruiting new ones.
- (3) Yes, they have.
- (4) Yes.
- (1) Yes, although we sometimes stand down by the culture centre and always bring with us information sheets wherever we go; it seems to be a little bit hard to get more men to come here.

The engagement in their husbands' activities in the Shed and their well-being was also shown by the fact that some wives were very much involved in trying to come up with new activities for the men to devote themselves to when attending the Shed:

- (1) I have some ideas sometimes.
- (2) What kind of ideas are they?
- (1) Well, I sometimes say to my husband, "You can visit a museum or something, try something new".
- (3) I have also done that, well not a museum, but an excursion or something like that.
- (1) But it is not easy because it is always [NAME] and [NAME] who handle everything.
- (4) It is the same people always, who make it work.
- (1) But it is hard for them.
- (3) Yes, they cannot manage everything by themselves in the long run.

Thus, the women's sense of responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects of their respective marriages is, to some extent, fuelled by their husbands' attendance at a Shed. It was easier for the women to talk about what the Shed has meant for their husbands, compared to their focusing on what the Shed has meant for themselves. We encountered many examples concerning the ways wives were socio-emotionally engaged in their husbands' activities at the Shed. During the interviews, it was revealed to us that the overwhelming majority of the women who were interviewed had been the active party in getting their husbands to first visit a Shed. This was highlighted during the focus-group interviews, but this point was made even clearer during the individual interviews:

My husband is not always so energetic, so I was the one who pushed and encouraged him to go there. [...] He does not need any pushing now, but in the beginning, he needed it. Now he pushes himself or his friends do it.

Another example of "being the active party" was described by a woman who saw an advertisement for a Shed in the paper and saw what potential opportunities this held for her husband:

It was an advertisement in the newspaper and I immediately thought it would be something for [my husband]. [...] He had not seen it, of course, and he was not particularly interested in the beginning. It really required some nagging from my part for him to finally become interested [laughter] and go over there.

The active part that the women took in getting their husbands to attend a Shed may, of course, be seen as selfish acts in that the women might have had hopes of getting more and better opportunities to focus on themselves and their internal well-being. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that this does reflect the traditional role of women as the person who assumes the main responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects of their respective marriages and/or relationships. Besides providing the women with increased freedom and independence, their husband's attendance at a Shed also resulted in a number of new restrictions, or simply new avenues along which wives could enact a traditional, caring femininity. This put a limit to their newly-won independence. Such a limit could have been even more restrictive had it not been for the Men's Shed. However, we found that the wives continued to enact a norm-confirmative gender position: they show continued concern for the well-being of their husbands by assuming responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects of their respective marriages. In so doing, it is primarily the women's external well-being that is affected, which is, in turn, contingent on the wellbeing of their husbands.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we asked what men's attendance at Sheds meant for their spouses. Was it a means for empowerment, well-being and did it offer opportunities to transgress gender



roles? Or were instead old, patriarchal gender roles recreated? The answer is, paradoxically, both. Moreover, the former was in part achieved by the latter, or conditioned by the latter. The women who facilitated the men's activities at the sheds and patiently listened to them talking about the Shed were rewarded by increased freedom when the men stayed away from the house. When men attended the Sheds if offered the women opportunities to devote themselves to their interests in a more liberating and empowered way without having a bad conscience towards their men. Simultaneously, it provided the women new ways to reproduce the gender typical responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects in the marriages that serve patriarchy. The freedom that the elderly women undoubtedly feel as a result of their husbands attending a Shed is not a matter of an unlimited freedom, or a return to a previous, more youthful stage of their lives, where they were subject to fewer restraints and demands (Arnett, 2015; Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenburg, Frank, & Verma, 2002). Nevertheless, this sense of freedom is of great importance to these women. The social practice of their (and their husbands) lives has undoubtedly changed via the activities that the Men's Shed offers to their husbands. It has made it possible for the women to engage in social and cultural activities outside the house as well as in formal adult education, and it has offered men opportunities for informal learning, all in accordance with what the two groups prefer when it comes to learning situations (Golding, 2015; Jenkins, 2011; Williamson, 2000). Furthermore, when elderly husbands become more socially active, then a sense of freedom is bestowed upon their wives. They are free to use their own time as they wish. In terms of 'well-being', the women appear to feel both internal- and external well-being (Schimmack, 2006). The internal well-being stems from their own experience of being free and able to enjoy new opportunities in life, and from a new sense of freedom that they have learned to exploit. The women included in this study, like many other older women, have a larger social network than their husbands (Cedergren, King, Wagner, & Wegley, 2007; Felmler & Muraco, 2009; Okamoto & Tanaka, 2004) and thanks to the Men's Shed, they now have more opportunity to exploit these social networks, without feeling guilty. As newly-retired husbands undergo a conversion to becoming more and more family-oriented (Losocco & Walzer, 2013), the pressure on their wives, 'to be available' for their husbands increases. However, when retired husbands start to attend a Shed, the pressure decreases, and wives are able to experience retirement-freedom, instead of restrained retirement (Marchand, 2018). Wives are now freer to focus on their self-fulfilment and other empowering processes outside the home. This is, in part, due to their responsibility for the socio-emotional aspects of their respective marriages (essentially their husband's socio-emotional state) decreases and, to some extent, is "taken over" by newfound friends at the Shed.

The sense of external well-being (Schimmack, 2006) that is felt by the elderly women is linked to their husbands' increased sense of well-being, since this tends to rub off on the wives. As shown in the result section, when men attend a Shed and enjoy positive experiences and provide new input for the topics of conversation at home, their wives gladly listen to them, even though this may negatively affect their own speaking space.

The fact that it was easier for the women to talk about what the Men's Shed has meant for their husbands than for themselves may also be an example of a sense of well-being that is influenced by the wives' environment (i.e., their men, in this case).

However, the sense of external well-being for the woman, as discussed above, may also harbour aspects that reinforce gender stereotypes. The women's extensive engagement in their men's Shed activities may be understood as these women still taking on the socio-emotional responsibility for their marriages to a considerable extent (Bloch, Haase, & Levenson, 2014; Boerner, Jopp, Carr, Sosinsky, & Kim, 2014). This responsibility has merely been relocated, from the homes on to the Shed. The fact that these women seem to enjoy a sense of relief from some of this responsibility by the other men in the Shed did not seem to reduce their inclination to take on extensive responsibility for their husband's well-being. It is reasonable to assume that the women would have had taken on even more responsibility without existence of the Men's Shed, but the self-sacrifice that the wives exhibit through, for example, their engagement in recruiting new Shed members may indicate that the wives still perceive that the quality of their marriages is based on what they feel they do for their husbands (Boerner, Jopp, Carr, Sosinsky, & Kim, 2014).

Thus, when elderly husbands had found somewhere to go, something to do, and someone to talk to, this empowered their wives and created opportunities for them to be more independent and to act in a non-confirmative gendered way; things which increased their sense of internal well-being. At the same time, it also offered new avenues for the wives to reproduce traditional gender roles with respect to taking on primary responsibility for the socio-emotional work that is to be done within their respective marriages, thereby focusing on their husband's well-being and their own external well-being.

### **Conclusion and future research**

We studied how men's participation at a Shed affected how their wives enacted gender, and the effects that their participation had on their wives' sense of empowerment and well-being. We were confronted with two contrasting results. First, when husbands spent time at a Shed, the wives experienced a new sense of empowerment, freedom, and self-fulfilment, since they were free to pursue their own interests when their husbands were otherwise occupied. These elderly wives relinquished some of the traditional feminine caring role and focused on themselves instead. On the other hand, we found that the women continued to care for their husband's wellbeing – they just re-located this caring responsibility to the Shed. They saw that it made their husbands happy and they thus made every effort to help make the Shed prosper and grow. The conversation at home was dominated by their husband's experiences at the Shed – the women sacrificed talking about their own new experiences in deference to their husbands' topic of conversation, namely the activities that took place at the Shed. We found a curious co-existence of normative and non-normative enactment of gender on the part of the

women, which was made possible by the traditional gender normative activities that took place in the Shed by the men.

Previous research has shown that the Men's Sheds offer men an opportunity to develop a more caring masculinity (Carragher, 2013; Cavanagh, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2014; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007; Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson; Golding, 2011; Golding, 2015; Haesler, 2015; Morgan, Hayes, Williamson, & Ford, 2007; Wilson, Cordier, & Wilson Whatley, 2013), and our research shows that it offers their wives an opportunity to develop a femininity that is characterized by 'taking the initiative' and a sense of 'independence'. However, in both cases, these features are contingent on the absence of the opposite sex. When both are together, it is business as usual – at least for this age group. This raises new research questions: *Is the absence of the opposite sex a prerequisite for trying out and learning new, perhaps more fulfilling, ways of enacting gender? Does this apply for any social group, and if not, what are the differences between social groups of various kinds – keeping issues such as age, class, culture et cetera in mind?* We suggest more research in this field.

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