

# 'How men are worked with': gender roles in men's informal learning

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## Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to explore gendered roles associated with men's informal learning in community organizations in Australia, and in particular the role of women as coordinators and participants in community organizations where men comprise the significant majority of participants. We attempt to briefly open up the complex and sometimes uncomfortable discussion of men's community spaces by building on Lyn Tett's (1996) *Theorising practice in single-sex work*. While our paper does not have the scope to properly theorise gendered spaces, we have used evidence from community men's sheds which men have recently claimed in Australia (Golding, Foley and Brown, 2007a) to identify what it is about the way some women participate and work with some men in these sheds that is effective, and also ineffective for men who participate.

In Australia men comprise around one quarter of all adult and community education participants and ten per cent of participants in neighbourhood houses. However men predominate in most volunteer fire brigades, many sporting clubs, and most community men's sheds. The issue of what role women do and should play in these organizations has been of considerable interest to us for some time, given the complex and contested issue of whether gendered spaces and programs, particularly for men, are appropriate in community-based learning organizations. Golding (2006) identified the importance of recognising where men are (and are not) involved in informal and lifelong learning in Australia as McGivney (1999; 2004) did in the UK. Given that men not in work comprise around one third of all adult Australian men (Lattimore, 2007), it is critically important to their wellbeing that they have access to a third place (Oldenburg, 2000) other than work and home as an anchor to their social and community life.

Our exploration into the role of women is timely in the light of findings from our research into Australian community-based voluntary organisations (Golding, Harvey and Echter, 2005) and community men's sheds (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson, 2007) that men not in work, though most in need of opportunities to learn informally by means of community connection to other men, are significantly more likely not to want to participate and learn alongside women. Our research has identified a broad spectrum of opinions about women's involvement as participants in community-based sheds. One third of male participants (and shed organizations) agreed that it should be a 'men only' shed; one third agreed that women should be welcome to participate in a minority if they 'behaved like blokes' ('bloke' refers widely, colloquially and stereotypically to adult men in Australia) and tolerated men's 'blokish' ways of working and interacting, while one third were relaxed about having women as equal participants.

Consideration of women's roles in what are recognised essentially as men's organizations forms part of our wider and ongoing international research (Golding, Foley and Brown, 2007b) into the important, informal learning role these organizations play for men. Our research has similarly led us to question and compare men's roles in organizations that have been recognised as feminised such as neighbourhood houses (Kimberley, 1998;

Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown, 2007) as O'Rourke (2007) has recently done.

## **Method**

Our paper is based primarily on Australian interview data with participants and people in positions of responsibility in community-based men's sheds. For simplicity we have described these responsible managers, coordinators and mentors (who includes some women) as 'practitioners'. We also cite gender-related survey data collected from men who participate (Golding, Brown, Foley *et al.*, 2007). We acknowledge that what men say and how they might respond, is likely to be affected by gender, but we have not distinguished gender of the interviewees in the transcripts cited.

### Literature review

#### *Previous single sex work*

The role of women in deliberately shaping adult learning contexts for and with other women is critically important and relatively well theorised in research. These theories are worthy of brief examination because of the way they inform gendered inclusion and exclusion in adult education practice in the less well theorised field of men or women working in mainly single-sex, adult male learning contexts.

Tett (1996), for example, theorised contexts and proposed two broad frameworks in which women work with women: 'a liberal, equal opportunities' framework and a 'radical, anti-sexist framework' (pp.55-61). Tett based the liberal perspective around the discourse that women and girls are disadvantaged because they lack the confidence and self-esteem to participate fully in the dominant forms of work and social life. Adult education in this framework would be seen as a form of intervention focussed on *access*, in order to redress perceived disadvantage and underachievement, on the assumption that females need access to the same kind of education as males. Tett saw women as missing from existing provision or not adequately participating in it even when present.

The alternative, radical perspective identified by Tett (1996) holds that gender is constructed through roles that are defined by men within a patriarchal culture. It recognises and encourages discovery and struggle for and by women for power and control, including in education. It presupposes female-centred curricula, which validates their own subjective experiences and creation 'a space for women in which the process of such discovery and learning builds up their confidence and the empowering of themselves' (Hughes & Kennedy, 1985, pp.74). Tett (1996), unsurprisingly, found it difficult to theorise men working with men from this radical feminist perspective, given the associated presupposition that 'men's work with men' will be unable to address inequalities which are clearly within men's interests to maintain. Tett contends that this feminist presupposition is tied up with negative stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity (and presumably all men) as aggressive, sexually active, work orientated and unemotional.

The closest Tett (1996) gets to acknowledging the context in which we are engaging and theorising is her evidence from interviews that male practitioners recognised 'pressure from female colleagues' as an incentive to work with males: in effect to do something separately for young men as well as for young women. Tett noted that such male practitioners were neither influenced by nor understanding of feminism and were influenced by '... their own personal change which involved considerateness for women,

emotional openness and the rejection of mainstream hegemonic masculinity' (pp.54).

### *Men's sheds gendered rationale*

While men's sheds in community settings tend not to come out of any particular academic or political 'men's movement', we suggest that the gendered rationale underpinning most shed-based organisations can be usefully considered using Karoski's (2007) recent Australian four-part, men's movement typology. When men's positions are analysed using our research data from community sheds (Golding, Foley and Brown, 2007a), men participating are not accurately or easily described in Karoski's terms as 'Profeminists' (male activists working in support of feminism), 'Father's rights' advocates (with a focus on divorce and custody) or 'Mythopoetics' (with a focus on personal healing for men through men's ritual), though a small number of men interviewed held and espoused variants of this mythopoetic position as we cite below. On balance we propose that as a group, men's shed practitioners come closest in their narratives to espousing views consistent with what Karoski's (2007) calls 'Inclusives', accepting that ...

It is essential to the well-being of the whole society that men make themselves healthier and more fulfilled. They also argue that until men make themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, the whole society will not function well because men still hold the hegemonic position in society. (Karoski, 2007, pp.216)

Men's sheds practitioners and participants interviewed did not attribute their own problems to women generally or to femininity in particular. However they did perceive that socialisation in a pre-feminist era had created something of a dilemma for them in their lives, and if partnered, in their relationships, particularly in the absence of a regular, paid work role. Married men who use community sheds typically acknowledge the tendency to feel 'underfoot' at home in retirement and relatively more at home through regular hands-on activity in the community men's shed. Single and separated men who are not in work tend to experience significant disconnection and loneliness. Neither group has been attracted to (or been encouraged to participate in) adult education programs. What both groups of men say they experience in community men's sheds is the joy of working and talking 'shoulder to shoulder' with other men. Hooks (1992, pp.565) notes that while most poorer, older, working class men (who tend to use sheds) have been socialised by the sexist ideology of male privilege, in reality they have had few, if any such privileges bestowed on them, particularly once beyond paid work and permanently in retirement at home. As Karoski (2007) puts it,

Poor working class men, more than any other, are caught up in the contradiction of masculinity. They have been brought up to adhere to the masculine ideal but are not able to live up to it. (pp.93)

Or as Donaldson (1993) puts it, '... working class men have basically one asset to market – their bodily capacity to labour - and their bodies are, over time, consumed by the labour they do' (cited in Connell, 2000, pp.187). In essence, as Karoski (2007, pp.92) explains,

Working class men have experienced the masculinity crisis most acutely because of their strong adherence to traditional masculinity. ... Now working class men feel alienated, frustrated and angry because they no longer feel secure with themselves as men.

## Results

As joint male and female authors of this paper, our contention is that the negative and hegemonic, universal stereotype identified above is a bleak but appropriate place to start listening to what men and women actually say in their shed-based narratives. Our evidence is from some of our participant and practitioner interviews from the Australian men's sheds research. Our intention is to unravel some of the complex, gendered strands in the narratives in order to identify positive alternatives for male-gendered spaces and programs that might be less negative and prescriptive of all men.

Consistent with the diverse range of men who participate in community sheds, including men not in work, many of whom are older and retired, we have located (and cite below) a very wide range of opinions and perceptions about the role of gender (and particularly about the role of women) in community-based sheds (that include some men-only sheds). Most of the opinions and perceptions put forward by men are informed by an extrapolation to men of Tett's (1996) liberal perspective about women that acknowledges some men's disadvantage. Some participant opinions in the transcripts are carefully and cautiously framed to avoid offence to women. Some of this care is about recognising and positively embracing the very small proportion of women (in around one third of the sheds) who participate equally with men. Some of the caution is also about recognising and valuing the women practitioners who are typically heavily involved in sheds through their professional roles in health, learning, wellbeing and aged care. Some of these female practitioners are fully accepted as shed coordinators and have typically played an important part in securing and managing funding for most sheds we have studied. However some of what some male participants say in interviews about the role of some women is sexist and deliberately gender-stereotypical. We consider this to be evidence of residual sexist stereotyping of some women, particularly by some older male shed participants.

In our attempt to understand why *some* men need and benefit in terms of their wellbeing from the company and community or practice of other men, we identify a 'liberal perspective' (somewhat analogous to that cited above by Tett (1996) in which women work with women). This need is exemplified in the words of a male shed practitioner in South Australia who noted that, while there are many activities geared to women in aged care centres

... such as folding serviettes or sitting at the table, ... there aren't many activities geared towards men. ... It's like trying to teach these old dogs new tricks and they wonder why they become upset.

A male shed coordinator in South Australia observed that men don't go to community centres because 'It's a women's world according to men. What the true community centres do is arty things and they sit in the chair and answer the phone which is not what any true blooded men might do. I think [a shed] denotes a man'. A male shed practitioner in the same shed, having dispensed with the sexist, throw-away line that 'Women are welcome if they bring along cakes and slices and leave it at the door and move out', confirmed his perception that the shed he worked in was indeed a *Men's* shed.

Women do understand that I think. We had a couple of women come to the door and they said they would love to be able to come into the shed but at this point in time we see it purely as a resource and outreach for men.

His rationale was that ...

Men seem to have been left beside the wayside while women go out and the men are left at home to find whatever around the garden or whatever, so we really thought that it was necessary for men to have something they can call their own.

Like several shed coordinators he did not preclude some women using the same shed facilities, but 'preferably on another day'.

Another South Australian shed practitioner explained that they had deliberately not called it a *men's* shed because '... we thought it might shade the women away'. As for around one quarter of all Australia sheds, there was a fear in some relatively conservative, rural communities of creating a sense of women's exclusion and of violating equal opportunity legislation by naming the shed space as male. Whilst the participants in this particular shed were almost all men, they '... decided to call (their shed) Bob's Shed ... it's anybody's shed ... it's not specifically for men. If women want to come and do a project, they can.' A participant in the same shed nevertheless perceived '... 'blokes over there and women over there' sort of thing' as the Australian way of life. This participant perception is backed up by recent OECD data that show that the Australian labour market is more highly segmented by gender than 23 of 24 countries examined. In the participant's view, 'The shed is sort of a man's domain ... it's giving blokes a place to run away and hide and get together and play. That's what we do.' This perceived importance of 'men's play' was confirmed in a Western Australian shed whose war veteran participants informally referred to the shed as 'Playgroup'. Their shed rules were typical of other community sheds across Australia. It was imperative to act and behave safely with tools in workshop settings and 'To behave yourself, no drink, no smoking'. As for most sheds we interviewed in, low level swearing was tolerated as typical and necessary male behaviour.

There was nevertheless concern about unnecessarily putting women from health and wellbeing organizations offside, particularly those women managers who were responsible for funding and evaluation of shed organisations. A male shed coordinator described the way he negotiated with women in such organizations that support sheds, recognised by him to be female gendered. He described himself as the 'go-between' with women who get the money for the shed from 'small and feminine-type' organizations. '(T)here is a bit of distrust around these women telling us what to do, these women are getting the money'. His dilemma was getting the balance between, on one hand, letting women '... do what they want to do, don't worry too much' and on the other hand insisting they ...

Don't come to the shed and tell people that's the wrong colour, or that should be over there. We have got a very talented, hard-working group of ladies who are involved and they're fabulous and we wouldn't be here without them, but they have to learn to step back ...,

despite the women suffering 'a little bit of grief' in the process. The coordinator recognised the need to 'go through the processes' men who participate 'hate' such as evaluation in order to get continued funding of the shed from the health and wellbeing organizations. Our exceptionally high shed survey response rate (over 70%) suggests that some men may well have considered our research in a similar light.

We have copious evidence from shed- based practitioners that *some* men are disadvantaged because they lack the social skills, confidence and self-esteem to participate with other men in non-work contexts, particularly in retirement. A typical married and semi-retired older man had agreed with his wife that when he left paid work he

... wouldn't be sitting around getting under her feet while she still had chores to do at home. Sure I could help out there, but ... [this shed gives men] a place to go away from their wives to deal with other men. We can talk about men's issues. Ladies seem to have these women's issues and so it is obviously good that men can talk about their own issues and ... feel connected to the community ... and wanted and valued with their skills.

## Discussion

Adult education is understood by us, for this subgroup of men, as a form of gendered intervention focussed on *access*, in order to redress their perceived disadvantage and underachievement. Where our arguments differ from those of Tett's (1996) is that whilst some males need and access adult education of a similar kind to that accessed by women, we have firm and statistically significant evidence that men who are most disadvantaged and most disengaged benefit most from a male-gendered community of practice which works to enhance their quality of engagement. However we acknowledge that the ways in which women are able to work effectively with and alongside these men in community contexts where men comprise the majority of participants remains poorly understood and ripe for further theoretical investigation.

Our research has taken our 2007 SCUTREA paper (Golding, Foley and Brown, 2007a) somewhat further to suggest that there are a number of contexts and roles in which women strategically choose to come forward and others in which they tend deliberately to stand back in order to maximise opportunities for men to participate and learn informally with other men. Our interview data identifies some roles such as project management, procurement of funding, record keeping and community liaison that female coordinators tend to be particularly effective at and have their pro-activity accepted by men.

## Conclusion

We conclude that while community men's sheds are deliberately male-positive, practitioners and participants within them adopt a wide range of views towards women's participation, which range from equal inclusion to deliberate exclusion. While men involved as participants do not come from a single or coherent 'men's movement' position, both male and female practitioners tend to take a position that holds that until men make themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, the whole society will not function well. Most men who participate come for the regular company and friendship of other men and for the wellbeing that their participation produces for them, their wives (if married) and for their extended families. While few men have strong objections to women as a minority of participants, the presence of women in sheds as participants is more problematic for men who are less confident about themselves. Women participants have the potential to reduce participation by these men, whose wellbeing is most enhanced by the experience of being with other men.

Female practitioners generally leave the gendered participation issue for the male participants to decide and deliberately tend, unlike male shed practitioners, not to become involved in the hands-on activity alongside men in the shed. Female professionals from

adult education, welfare, aged care and health professions have played an important role in getting many sheds established (and particularly funded) and this contribution is widely appreciated and acknowledged by men involved in the grassroots shed 'movement'. However women have learnt that their contribution is most valued and most effective for men when they understand when to come forward and when to step back. Those women whose personal attitudes and values have not allowed them to do this have presumably self-selected away from this professional field. Those that persist have learned, as O'Rourke (2007) predicted in adult education generally, that it is how men are worked with, rather than whether women or men work best with and alongside men that makes the difference.

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