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## MASCULINE GENDERED SPACE

### ABSTRACT

*This paper draws on a programme of research examining the benefit of men's sheds in the Australian context. Firstly, the author clears some contentious ground regarding women's disadvantage and equality and acknowledges the position that has been made by feminists relating to the implications of unequal distribution of materials and resources and puts forward a case that uneven distribution of resources cannot only restrict many women but also some men. The author examines men's health status in Australia and drawing from a programme of research discusses the link between men's shed involvement and health and wellbeing benefits. The paper makes use of Sen's Capabilities Approach to put forward the case that men's sheds in the Australian context provide a space where enabling capabilities developed through meaningful activities can benefit men relating to health and wellbeing outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *gender, masculine, men's sheds, capabilities, friendship, health*

### MOŠKO OSPOLJENI PROSTOR – POVZETEK

*Članek izhaja iz raziskovalnega programa, ki proučuje prednosti moških lop (men's sheds) v avstralskem kontekstu. Avtorica najprej obravnava nekatera sporna vprašanja o slabšem položaju in neenakosti žensk, upošteva stališče, ki so ga povezano z implikacijami neenake distribucije materialov in sredstev vzpostavile feministke, ter predvideva, da neenakomerna razdelitev sredstev ne omejuje samo številnih žensk, ampak tudi nekatere moške. Avtorica se ukvarja z zdravstvenim stanjem moških v Avstraliji ter na podlagi raziskovalnega programa razpravlja o povezavi med udeležbo v moških lopah in prednostih za zdravje in počutje. Članek uporabi Senov zmožnostni pristop, da predstavi moške lope v avstralskem kontekstu kot koristen prostor, kjer omogočanje zmožnosti, razvitih prek pomenljivih aktivnosti, lahko koristi moškim v povezavi z zdravjem in počutjem.*

**Ključne besede:** *spol, moškost, moške lope, zmožnosti, prijateljstvo, zdravje*

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines the role of Australian men's sheds in the engagement, lifelong learning, health and wellbeing benefits that these spaces can provide for men who are often disadvantaged. The paper draws from a programme of qualitative research undertaken

over several years across Australia to explore the impact, engagement and benefits informal learning in community contexts can have on men's health and wellbeing. The paper explores the notion of men's sheds as gendered masculine spaces and the importance of these spaces as a resource to facilitate positive outcomes for men.

There are some feminist positions on inequity and disadvantage which broadly agree that some masculine structures and hegemonies not only impact the capacity of women to achieve equal rights and citizenship but also render some groups of men as equally disadvantaged (Courtenay, 2000). Indeed, according to Courtenay (2000), contemporary feminist theorists are concerned equally with differences among men (and women) as they are with the differences between men and women. Arguably some of the differences involving men are dependent on what position/s they hold in social structures, in other words, how much power they possess and their capacity to access resources.

When embarking on a discussion about men's disadvantage, it is important to identify potential concerns that some commentators may have when identifying men's disadvantage. These concerns relate to the potential to reduce the focus off funding or support for programmes to address women's disadvantage and inequality, and in turn women's participation in education and training more broadly (Golding, Foley and Brown, 2008; Foley, 2014). This paper<sup>2</sup> acknowledges the position that has been made by feminists relating to the implications of unequal distribution of materials and resources and puts forward a case that the uneven distribution of resources can not only restrict many women but also some men, those who do not fit the hegemonic stereotype, from achieving full and equal citizenship (Nussbaum, 2003; Fraser, 2002).

## MASCULINITY

Male privilege has been recognised and debated for decades and is characterised in most contemporary societies by men's institutional privilege (Messner, 1997, in Flood, 2003, p. 458), such that men in general receive a surplus of resources, which Connell (1995), describes as a 'patriarchal dividend.'

For Connell (1995), the notion of masculinity or male dominance is played out or enacted in various ways, from hegemonic dominance to subordinate or less powerful configurations of -male-gendered practices such as those of subordinate masculinities. Accordingly, hegemonic masculinities refer to masculine norms, those norms that are desirable and therefore considered to be the idealised form of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities are represented by particular idealised male stereotypes about what it means to 'be a man'; these stereotypes have in recent history included such things as being strong, unemotional, aggressive, providing for one's family and having limited involvement in household tasks (Monaghan and Robertson, 2012, in Mackenzie, Robertson and Nurmi, 2017). Masculinities

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2 This is an expanded and redeveloped version of a chapter in *Men Learning Through Life*, edited by Barry Golding, Rob Mark and Annette Foley, first published in 2014.

that might be seen as fitting into a subordinate position, those that do not fit the hegemonic stereotype, involve groups such as working-class men, black men, men with disabilities, and homosexual men. No doubt many older and less formally educated men also inhabit this subordinate position. For many men, particularly those who are disadvantaged and unemployed or who are older, this hegemonic measure can leave them marginalized, under resourced and impact negatively on their mental and physical health status.

## **MEN'S HEALTH STATUS IN AUSTRALIA**

Research indicates that men who are economically inactive comprise a large and growing proportion of men in Australia. This lack of economic activity has a significant impact on men's health and wellbeing and men's capacity to contribute or participate in community more broadly (Lattimore, 2007). Coupled with this, there is growing evidence that the very men who are most in need of accessing adult education or vocational education and training are the least likely to access it due to a reluctance to commit to education programmes or a feeling of inadequacy or exposure to ridicule (Woodin and Burke, 2007). Arguably, this is because of preconceived ideas about adult education being for women (Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown, 2008), and in part because of their negative experiences of schooling. Either way, commentators have argued that men's health behaviours and life choices are intrinsically connected to gender construction.

The notions of hegemonic masculinity, power and social inequity are important when considering men's unhealthy behaviours and give an insight into how these behaviours undermine men's attempts to make health choices in their lives (Courtenay, 2000). Accordingly, because of the social, gendered and dominant pressures placed on men, men's behaviours, including their health behaviours, are widely considered to be socially constructed in line with hegemonic pressures (Verdonk, Seesing and de Rijk, 2010) that constitute health behaviours as feminine or weak. Living up to these dominant idealised pressures can see men at risk of experiencing mental and physical health issues because of their desire to live up to the idealised stereotyped form of maleness as powerful.

## **ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

It has been broadly recognised that adult community education (ACE) both in the UK and Australia provides people with benefits not only associated with education but also provides them with health and wellbeing benefits through social interactions (Golding, Kimberley, Foley and Brown, 2008; Foley, 2007; Lewis, 2012; Courtenay and Truluck, 1997) and has a social purpose. Despite these benefits, research shows that in the Australian context, "older women are more than three times more likely to participate in adult education than men" (Beckett and Helm, 2001, p. 54).

In Australia the history of neighbourhood houses, and ACE more broadly, involved women coming together under the then Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) in the 1970s to re-skill. The main themes coming from community houses and learning centres back then

was the empowerment of the individual and providing a safe and nurturing environment for women to re-skill back into the workforce after staying home to care for their children. A significant factor under the AAP was funding that provided to the neighbourhood houses the provision of childcare, enabling the women to leave their children to be cared for in the centres and houses whilst they had the opportunity to learn (Foley, 2005).

At that time neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Australia tended to be part of a grassroots movement that grew according to the needs of local people. Many of the programmes included computer skills, general education classes such as literacy and numeracy, and pathway courses such as the Certificate of Liberal Arts. The success of neighbourhood houses then, as now, is associated with the informal, drop-in nature of the houses and centres where people can make friends in an informal setting, learn together and feel “comfortable and unintimidated” (Foley, 2005).

Foley, Golding and Brown (2008) in Australia and McGivney (2006) in the UK examined the reasons why men are reluctant to take up education opportunities in ACE settings. Findings from these studies indicate that negative previous experiences at school, feelings of failure, attitudes about ACE learning centres being feminised, and men’s view that work is more important to male identity than learning all contribute to men’s absence in ACE centres. McGivney (2006, p. 94) argued in her research addressing some of this reluctance that in the case of older men reluctant to engage with learning, there is no easy or short-term solution. She notes that issues of engagement involve:

...[p]sychological risks (of possible failure or ridicule); the social risks (of acting contrary to family or cultural norms) and financial risks (endangering welfare benefits and getting into debt) where there are no guaranteed employment or fiscal returns from learning. (McGivney, 2006, pp. 94-5)

The Australian men’s sheds movement has significant parallels to the grassroots development of the neighbourhood house movement in Australia in the 1970s. According to Golding (2015) in his recent book, there are men’s sheds now located across Australia, the UK, the Republic of Ireland, New Zealand and a very small number of sheds in Europe and North America. The strength of men’s sheds is associated with its offering spaces that cater for men. Indeed, data taken from the 2013 Men’s Sheds in Australia study for beyondblue and the Carragher’s Men’s Sheds in Ireland study consistently agree, according to Golding (2015, p. 350), that in both Ireland and Australia:

...virtually all men who participate feel at home in and enjoy participating in the Men’s Shed. It is a powerful multiple benefit. Men overwhelmingly ‘really enjoy’ what they are doing, meeting and making good friends in the Shed, while giving something back to the community and feeling better about themselves.

Other benefits that were identified in the studies included “access to health information, wellbeing, confidence and social skills [which] are valuable icing on the cake” (Golding,

2015, p. 350). Despite the benefits identified, there continues to be mixed commentary about the value of men's gendered spaces.

Certainly, the evidence of men coming together in men's sheds, learning informally from each other and gaining value from their connection to programmes in the shed is clear through the significant expansion of shed-based programmes both in Australia and internationally. There is a strong argument to be made and supported by the beyondblue and the Carragher's Men's Sheds in Ireland studies as well as Golding's extensive portfolio of work on the men's sheds movement, that men's sheds or men's learning spaces and programmes provide men with the choice to participate in an environment that allows them to feel comfortable, better connected to their communities and develop capabilities which in turn makes significant contributions to their overall wellbeing. Indeed, despite some resistance to the measurable benefits of men's sheds to men's health and wellbeing (Wilson and Cordier, 2013), according to Golding (2015, pp. 375-376):

...no one can read about men's sheds experiences in Creswick Men's Friendship Shed's *Tales from the Shed* or Dubbo Community Men's Shed's *A Shed Load of Stories* and not be moved by the transformational nature of their experiences. It is a very high level of proof to be convinced of and transformed by the positive effect on their own lives, health and wellbeing, expressed in their own words.

Health, wellbeing and community participation are clearly an important and desirable requirement for citizens, both male and female, young or old. Being healthy and connecting with community bring about individual agency and are arguably a fundamental human right (Sen, 1997).

## **CAPABILITIES FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Learning and its positive impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals has received significant attention from the Australian government over the past decade. For Field (2009) wellbeing is understood as providing a satisfaction for life, feelings of happiness, being fulfilled and contributing to community (Field, 2009). According to Field (2009, p. 4), wellbeing is:

...associated with such social qualities as confidence, optimism about the future, a sense of influence over one's destiny, and social competences that promote satisfying and supportive relationships with other people – and not simply with an absence of diagnosed illness, disability or dissatisfaction. [...] It also, critically, involves the resilience needed to deal with hard times as and when they occur.

Adult educators have consistently emphasised the re-creative function of informal learning and the importance of personal wellbeing through the gathering of resources for

capabilities (Field, 2009) such as resilience, social and community connectedness and civic engagement for the health of individuals. Indeed, as Golding (2015) has argued, informal learning, such as participating in men's sheds or citizens' involvement in community or leisure activities, is what I would argue as connected with what Sen (1997) describes as human capabilities.

The idea of rights, according to Nussbaum (1997), has been debated by governments and international agencies on a regular basis. Moral questions about human entitlements are fundamental questions and are often related to what is meant by the notion of rights, what basic human rights are and how these rights and entitlements are understood and distributed. Nussbaum (1997, p. 274) writes:

When we speak of human rights, do we mean, primarily, a right to be treated in a certain way? A right to a certain level of achieved well-being? A right to certain resources with which we may peruse one's life's plan? A right to certain opportunities and capacities with which one may, in turn, make choices regarding one's life plan?

Nussbaum, an eminent philosopher, thinker and researcher who has written extensively on human rights and human capabilities, argues that political philosophers and thinkers, when considering the idea of equality and human rights, have tackled the question by asking whether the idea of equality involves the equality of resources, the equality of wellbeing and opportunity or the equality of capabilities (Nussbaum, 1997). Nussbaum draws from the extensive work of Sen (1997) and his ideas involving personal wellbeing, agency and freedom through his pioneering work on the capabilities approach and its importance in debates concerning quality of life.

Sen (1997) argues that an individual's worth is not evaluated merely as economic activity, but rather by recognising the diversity of humanity and drawing attention to the disparity that exists for individuals, such as by gender, race, class, caste or age. Sen's work focuses on embracing human agency and participation. He achieves this by emphasising the role of making choices and acknowledging that different people, different cultures and different societies may have different aspirations and values that make significant contributions to an individual's wellbeing: that a person's wellbeing is related to their capabilities. Human capabilities, he argued, reflect a person's real opportunities and positive freedoms through a choice of lifestyles. Sen argues that to achieve human capabilities, there needs to be intrinsic value if subjects were able to act freely and have the capacity to choose. For Sen, these are the features of a 'good life' (Clark, 2007 in Foley, 2014).

At its core, Sen's argument is centred on the development of an individual's agency: on what an individual "can or cannot actually do" (Sen, 2010, p. 261). People's agency and capacity to be able to do things can be hindered by factors or barriers such as social and environmental conditions, access to resources, sense of identity, age, gender and so on. Sen also acknowledges the external barriers that impede an individual from converting

resources, or commodities. These resources and commodities can come in the form of education into capabilities for disadvantaged groups, such as for men not in paid employment who may have mental and or physical health barriers, or pre-constructed, negative ideas or barriers to education or indeed issues with fitting into the hegemonic stereotypes discussed earlier. For Lewis (2012, p. 526) barriers may also include “income deprivations as well as ‘adaptive attitudes,’ since people’s expressed preferences may be conditioned by acceptance of restricted agency due to discrimination or disadvantage.”

Sen’s capabilities approach has been criticised by some for failing to supplement his framework with a coherent set of capabilities (Nussbaum, 1988; Williams, 1987). Nussbaum’s version or extensions to Sen’s capabilities approach involve the development of a list of capabilities that she argues “isolates those human capabilities that can be convincingly argued to be of central importance in any human life, whatever else the person pursues and chooses” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 74). These capabilities involve ten principles enumerated under the following headings: (1) Life; (2) Bodily health; (3) Bodily integrity; (4) Senses, imagination and thought; (5) Emotions; (6) Practical reason; (7) Affiliation; (8) Other species; (9) Play; and (10) Political material control over one’s environment (Nussbaum, 2000). Many of Nussbaum’s principles arguably occur for the men who attend men’s shed organisations. Indeed, men’s sheds are designed to cater for and develop the capabilities of the men who attend them.

There is a clear argument drawn from the research on men’s learning and wellbeing (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey and Gleeson, 2007; Golding, 2015) that lifelong and lifewide learning, including incidental and informal learning delivered from learning spaces and learning opportunities that cater for the particular needs of particular groups of men, develop capabilities through men’s connections with learning. This occurs through friendships, social participation and learning new skills. What these learning spaces and places produce is considerable practical and economic value to the community with “benefits that are significant for partners, families and carers as well as to the health and wellbeing of men who participate” (Golding et al., 2007, p. 27). This benefit to men and their communities picks up on Sen’s ideas about the social good and wellbeing of society as a whole. For Sen, agency and wellbeing are intrinsically connected, making a lack of agency or freedom of genuine choice equal to disadvantage. It follows that if education or access to learning contributes to an individual’s freedom and capabilities, then education and learning are a key contributor to agency.

## **A SPACE FOR MEN’S HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Like many Western countries, Australia is seeing a growth in older people in the population. Governments are planning for a further increase in older populations into the future as we live longer. Policy initiatives are and will continue to be looking to develop strategies to maintain healthy, active and productive citizens as they age. Educationalists have also been paying attention to the growing number of older people who either access adult



education programmes or who are isolated and disconnected from their communities and would benefit from connecting through educational opportunities and programmes. There is growing evidence that lifelong learning and informal learning opportunities impact in a positive way on self-esteem, self-confidence, life choices and resilience. The quality and satisfaction for adults who participate in learning that engages them as non-threatening, and in the case of older men, is constructed in such a way that maintains their sense of masculine identity, is important for health and wellbeing.

The circumstances where older men not in paid work benefit from connecting with a work-like community space that is enabling and develops their capabilities for life benefits not only the men themselves but the broader community. For this particular group of men, the notion of work enables them to “meet the social norms of masculine attitudes and behaviours” (Gradman, 1994, p. 105). The men’s shed movement is an enabler of these characteristics through its capacity to provide a work-like environment for men from similar working backgrounds or with similar interests to engage through a socially supportive environment that develops their independence and autonomy. The Shed has been identified as a space where these enabling characteristics, previously connected to the workplace, can be created and experienced by men. Certainly men’s sheds have been identified as a site where positive, engaging and meaningful activities can occur (Ormsby, Stanley and Jaworski, 2010).

There is a growing argument (Golding et al., 2007; Ballinger, Talbot and Verrinder, 2009; Foley, Golding and Brown, 2008; Ormsby et al., 2010) to support the benefits that Sheds offer for particular groups of men. Sheds can provide a space that fosters social relationships that are meaningful for men’s masculinity and male identity. For these men a community gendered space provides the environment to develop their individual resources. Nussbaum describes these resources as a human-right “to develop a certain level of achieved wellbeing and the right to certain opportunities and capacities with which one may, in turn, make choices regarding one’s life plan” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 74). There is little doubt that through men’s sheds, particular groups of men, especially those men not in paid work, can gain opportunities and capabilities to enable better life choices. These spaces are the enablers of agency for men through their masculinised and tailored approaches that afford men the opportunity to practice and experience masculine attitudes and masculine norms.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has put forward the case that in certain circumstances there is room and significant benefit for the existence and support for gendered, masculine, community spaces for men. The argument being presented supports the notion that men’s sheds or (some) men’s gendered spaces have the capacity to provide an informal learning environment where men can let down their (hegemonic) guard, feel safe to expose some of their fragility/vulnerabilities without feeling judged, exposed or vulnerable. This paper goes some way



to argue a case that the men's shed movement through its diverse and accommodating spaces enables men to gather the resources through work-like activities, friendship and support to develop important health-giving capabilities.

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