

Men, Mates and Sheds

Sheds, Volunteering and Retirement

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This paper is based on the *Men's Shed Volunteers* workshop at the *Men's Shed Conference*, at Lakes Entrance on 11 November. The starting point was previous work I had done on volunteering and retirement; the ideas were further developed in the discussion and debate during the workshop and my reflections on this material after the conference.

Abstract

Men's sheds are becoming more and more popular. Men from across Australia are working to build new sheds in their own town or suburb. What is it about sheds; why are they popular and what do men get out of them?

The research into men's sheds is just starting, but there are studies that have looked at what motivates men to volunteer for other community groups and organisations. This presentation will bring together the findings of some of these studies, together with my own research into men's volunteer and community activities. It will give some suggestions as to what it is about sheds that so many men enjoy.

There will also be suggestions and tips for people trying to get more men involved with their existing shed on how to market the good things you're doing in a way that will bring more men in the door.

Why are men joining sheds – there are lots of reasons – but one thing to consider is that it helps men deal with some of the difficulties of retirement.

Why do men join sheds?

There is very little research literature around about men and sheds. Rick Hayes and Barry Golding, from Latrobe and University of Ballarat respectively, are looking at men and sheds, but there is very little published at the moment. There has been some work done around the motivations of people who give their time to organised volunteer work and this might offer some ideas.

Importance of Work

Work is an important part of men's lives. Leaving paid work, through retirement or retrenchment, can pose a crisis for many men. Work provides us with many positive factors; participants in the workshop compiled the following list of benefits that work gives:

- Identity – it defines you as a person
- Money
- People – friends and support
- Satisfaction
- Feel valued
- Make a contribution
- Social standing / status (there is a stigma to not working)
- Keeps you busy
- Opportunities to learn and grow
- Direction in life
- Control
- Being productive

Not surprising there is research that agrees with much of this. There is a lot of evidence that suggests that for men our identities as people, the sense of who we are, often comes from our paid work ¹⁻⁴.

Work is also a place where men make friends and form social connections. There is research which confirms this ⁵ which means that in retirement men who have left work are at risk of not making new friends.

Feeling in control of one's life and destiny, as well as maintaining a productive role is important to our overall health and wellbeing. Maintaining these feelings of being productive and in control of life is important in retirement. The MacArthur Network on Successful Aging Longitudinal study has shown that older people who are engaged in activities they perceive to be of value and productive, have higher feelings of being in control and having a healthy self-concept ⁶.

Retirement

Even though work gives us these positive things, those of us still in paid employment do fantasise about stopping work! In the workshop those participants still working were asked what they thought their retirement was going to be like – this is the list they came up with:

- A time of freedom and empowerment
- A less stressful time
- Time for Golf, Fishing and Travel
- Time in the shed!!

In short a time for leisure and relaxation, and underlying all of these plans is the assumption that we will have enough money in our retirement to pay for them! These expectations of what retirement will be like are very similar to what Elizabeth Fudge found when she interviewed newly retired men about their expectations of retirement ⁴.

Crisis of Retirement

So it could reasonably be assumed that a happy retirement is one where these pre-retirement expectations are met. Unfortunately for many people things don't always go to plan – retirement can present us with challenges that we didn't expect, such as:

- We become sick
- We become a carer because someone close to us is sick
- Family and friends who we thought we'd spend a lot of time with, get sick, move away, or die
- Financial Problems – there isn't enough money!!
- We become bored

Men can also be dissatisfied in retirement when it is seen as a period of “enforced idleness” and a time of disappointment and frustration when men see themselves as “no longer being in control of their destinies”⁷. In short when they realise retirement is not a 20 year holiday!

We also have to think about the most obvious aspect of retirement. It is when working stops. If work provided those positive aspects we discussed earlier of friends, money, a sense of being in control and being productive, and a source of meaning and identity. Where do we find these things when we're no longer working?

There is also much evidence that suggests the loss of meaning and identity associated with work exacerbates the crisis of retirement for many men^{1,4,8}.

This crisis places some men at risk of depression, despair and isolation, as the following quotes from “Keeping the Balance”² show:

... at work your opinion is sought and you're asked to make decisions. That no longer happens.

All my life I've been mixing with a lot of people in my job and always had plenty of company. And all of a sudden in my retirement I find that for about 10 years now I'm becoming more and more isolated.

In short there are 2 main things that contribute to a crisis of retirement:

1. We lose the positive things that paid work gave us
2. Expectations of retirement are often very different from reality

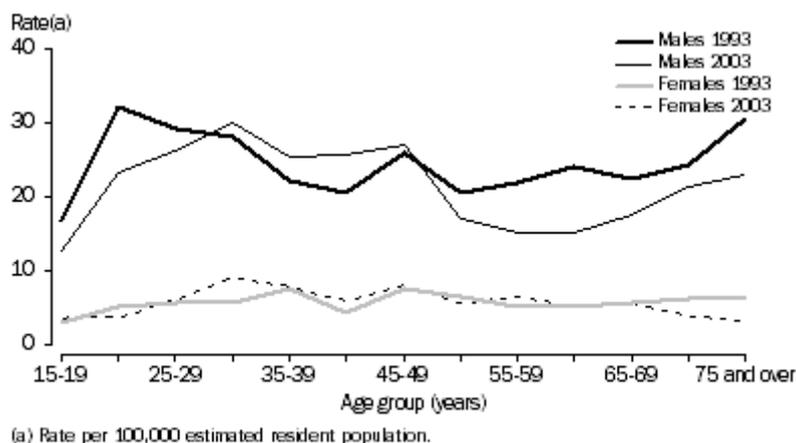
There was a lot of discussion in the workshop around the idea that retirement presented a crisis to many men. A lot of the retired men in the room spoke of their experiences and the difficulties they had in adjusting to retirement, as did some of the women present.

The question that needs to ask now is: how do men cope with the crisis of retirement?

Sadly some don't. The most recent suicide data released from the Australian Bureau of Statistics⁹ shows that there is an increase in the suicide rate for men over 60 (see Table 1). While this rate has thankfully decreased from 10 years ago – the rise after 60 indicates a trend that has been observed for a number of years now. The causes of suicide are complex and I'm not suggesting that retirement by itself is the cause of this increase in the suicide rate; but men who are unable to negotiate the crisis of retirement, and feel a lack of identify, lack of meaning, no sense of purpose – must

be close to despair. I speculate that additional negative life events, such as a health crisis or loss of their partner, make these men even more vulnerable.

Table 1: Age-Specific Suicide Rates 1993 and 2003⁹



Retirement, Volunteering and Sheds

Of course the majority of men do survive retirement, some even thrive. What's working for these men?

I believe that some men negotiate the crisis of retirement by becoming volunteers or joining community organisations. Almost 27% of men aged 65-74 are involved in voluntary work¹⁰, the unpaid work of these men has been valued at some \$15 billion per annum¹¹. So the contribution retired men make to the society and economy is significant. But what organisations do they join and why?

What does this have to do with sheds?

I suspect that a lot of men join sheds because it helps them through this crisis. Sheds are places where men come together and do something useful. They offer the opportunity to do something worthwhile, make new mates, and form a new retirement identity. Sheds have the potential for supplying many of the positive things that paid work gives men.

Some men have a real difficult time adjusting to retirement. Having a place where men can mix with other men, and being involved in a work-like activity may be an important motivating factor why men join sheds. Emphasising the aspects of being involved in a shed that give back the important things paid work gives men; like identity, mates, a sense of doing something worthwhile and being productive; might help in getting men through the doors of the shed.

For Further Reading:

Publications on Men and Healthy Ageing

Keeping the Balance, Older Men and Health Ageing

Discussion paper can be downloaded from the "Publications" page of the NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing's website: www.maca.nsw.gov.au or by calling (02) 8270 2154.

Older Men's Business; Valuing relationships, living with change by Jack Zinn, published in 2000 by Finch. www.finch.com.au

Volunteering Resources

Volunteering NSW

Level 2, 228 Pitt Street

Sydney NSW 2000

Ph: (02) 9261 3600

email: info@volunteering.com.au

web: <http://www.volunteering.com.au>

Volunteering Victoria

7th Floor, 388 Bourke Street

Melbourne VIC 3000

Ph: (03) 9642 5266

email: info@volunteeringvictoria.com.au

web: www.volunteeringvictoria.com.au

Contact Volunteering Vic or NSW for volunteer resource centres in your state or territory

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