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Respite, renewal, retirement and tensions: Australian Men's Sheds and the impact on significant others

Annette Foley^{1*} , Barry Golding¹ and Helen Weadon²

¹School of Education, Federation University Australia, Ballarat, Victoria, Australia and ²School of Business, Federation University Australia, Ballarat, Victoria, Australia

*Corresponding author. Email: A.Foley@federation.edu.au

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Abstract

The health and wellbeing benefits of Men's Sheds to the men who participate have had significant research attention for over a decade. However, there has been little research into the broader impacts of Men's Sheds, particularly in relation to the impacts on significant others in the lives of the men who participate. Our paper aims to redress this lack of research by focusing on the interrelated perceptions and experiences of men and those closest to them in four Men's Sheds in regional Victoria, Australia. The research shows that the partners and carers of 'shedders' reported that the men's participation not only benefited the men but also had benefits for their significant others. The study also showed that the partners of shedders in the study found that their individual and joint adjustment to retirement was in some cases assisted by the men enjoying the social and structured environment of the Men's Shed, while in other cases it was seen by partners as an over-commitment and impacting negatively on the marriage. The findings also shed some important light on some tensions experienced by the partners associated with carer burden and adjustments to retirement.

Keywords: Men's Sheds; partners; significant others; ageing; wellbeing; carers; retirement

Introduction

Men's Sheds started in 1998 with the first Men's Shed by that name in a community context opened in Tongala in rural Victoria, Australia (Golding, 2015). Men's Sheds were in the first instance a local, grassroots response to men's perceived social isolation in retirement and concerns about their health and wellbeing in later life. Men's Sheds have since spread across Australia and around the world to become established as well-organised national movements in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada and the United States of America (USA), as well as in Denmark (Golding, 2015), catering mainly for older men and those beyond paid work. These men typically self-describe and identify as 'shedders'.

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The term ‘Men’s Shed movement’ was first used publicly in 2005, when it was identified that what had been a community-based Australian movement had begun to spread rapidly across other parts of the world. There has since been a veritable ‘explosion’ of diverse, shed-based organisations in terms of their number, type and geographical reach. Evidence of this remarkable, grassroots spread confirms a perceived need for men beyond paid work, particularly during retirement, to self-organise and participate in diverse community settings beyond the home for their mutual health and wellbeing benefits. What has been missing is evidence of the impact of men’s participation on significant others, particularly on spouses and partners. Our current paper seeks to collect evidence to begin to address this lacuna.

This paper draws on research conducted with older men who participate in a Men’s Sheds in one of four Men’s Sheds located in the regional city of Ballarat Victoria, Australia and the surrounding rural areas, and their significant others. The study used a thematic analysis approach to identify themes derived from the data that informed the central research question that underpinned the study, which was: What impacts are there for the significant others of men participating in Men’s Sheds?

It is important to acknowledge that this research was conducted on white European Australian men and women in heterosexual relationships and therefore the paper and its findings do not speak to the significant relationships of those who identify as gay and bisexual or in same-gender relationships. Nor does the paper speak about significant relationships of men from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Background

Men’s Sheds are, importantly, all different, but in essence, are community-based, grassroots organisations which create workshops or spaces designed to cater for the mainly ‘hands-on’ interests of mainly older men who have retired or who are beyond paid work, or have life situations that lead to them experiencing loneliness and or isolation from friends and the community. Men’s participation in Men’s Sheds has been shown to support such men through the sharing of skills and knowledge, and through the development of friendship and camaraderie, while at the same time working together on community-based projects (Golding and Carragher, 2015).

Men’s Sheds have been found to benefit greatly older men’s learning, social interactions, community connection, and general health and wellbeing (Golding, 2014a). Indeed, Sheds have many functions and particular Sheds tend to cater for and service the different and diverse needs of the mainly older men (median shedder age approximately 70 years in Australia) who participate. Golding (2014b) reminds us of Shed diversity and the multifaceted nature of individual Sheds. He also points out that Men’s Sheds are *not* about addressing deficit, that is only

...targeting men’s perceived need for learning, education, training or employment during issues of health, retirement, unemployment, depression or dementia; seeing them as a convenient place for ‘tacking on’ top-down services and professional to

address men's perceived need for socialisation, psychological support or nutrition; or as an alternative to community corrections. (Golding 2014b: 116)

Golding (2014b: 116) notes that while all of these are possible through Men's Sheds, there are many more other, positive interventions and outcomes, including encouraging activity, fun, relationships, friendship and giving back to community.

Most older shedders are retired or unable, for a multitude of reasons, to obtain paid work. According to Golding *et al.*,

Older, retired men who participate are significantly more likely to be living with a partner and have experienced significant recent changes in their lives in terms of their health, wellbeing, security, and financial status than younger single men who participate. Men not living with a partner tend to be somewhat younger, less likely to be retired and more likely to have experienced significant and recent difficulties with their health and wellbeing. The support of a partner appears to provide a buffer to support older, retired men against debilitating changes – including when work finishes and/or health deteriorates – in ways that are not available to many separated and isolated younger men. (Golding *et al.*, 2007: 7)

Some Men's Sheds are available to both men and women as participants; however, this is in the minority (Golding, 2015). One of the Men's Sheds in this current study was such a Shed, where both men and women were regarded equally as participants. Despite the majority of Men's Sheds catering largely or exclusively for men, women have also typically played an important and valuable broader role in ensuring the Shed runs smoothly but have been deliberately 'standing back' from the Shed's workshop-based activities (Golding, 2015) in order for the benefits to be maximised to their husbands or partners.

The four Men's Sheds included in the current study were diverse in that they catered for the different needs of men in different community contexts. It is important to note, however, that all the men who participated in this current study were white Australians, who had in most cases been employed and had in most cases been married over their lifetime. Despite the emerging national and international body of research promoting the benefits of Men's Sheds participation for older men. There is a need to acknowledge the potential of a narrow demographic in Men's Sheds that could result in 'promoting another "boys club" which excludes and limits its true potential' (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2017: 1233). It is important to also acknowledge the lack of research into sexual, racial, Indigenous, younger men, ethnic diversity, and men with mental and physical disabilities, and their place in and opportunity for Men's Sheds participation. The need for a larger discussion about men's relationships, masculinity and gender roles, and how Sheds can cater for a broader more-diverse participation is needed.

The Sheds in the study were located in both regional and rural areas with different demographics and socio-economic status. One Shed included women as equal participants, as indicated earlier; one Shed was funded through the local Community Health Service, one Shed was totally owned and administered by the shedders themselves, and one catered mainly for older, retired, professional men. Many of the men participating in these Men's Sheds had significant others, typically spouses or

partners, but also carers, friends or family members who were identified by the men as being supportive of, assisting or facilitating their participation.

All Men's Sheds, being essentially grassroots and initiated locally at a community level are subtly different. Golding's (2015) research on Men's Sheds internationally confirmed that regardless of peak body policies, local Men's Sheds and the participating shedders tend to exercise agency and take on the broad characteristics of the local communities in which they operate and are embedded. In our current study, aside from the small inclusive Bush Men's Shed, the three Men's Sheds organisations located in the suburbs of the Australian regional city all made the decision that it was to be a 'men-only' space and organisation. Beyond this common element, each Shed in the current study was somewhat different in terms of context, profile and background of its participants, as summarised in Table 1.

There has been scant research on the broader benefits and impacts of Men's Sheds to significant others. The importance of this study is to acknowledge that behind most shedders who participate and benefit directly, there are spouses, partners, family members or carers who also benefit directly or indirectly from the men's participation. This study goes some way towards beginning to address the need to explore and document these poorly identified broader impacts (both benefits and dis-benefits) beyond the shedders themselves for spouses, partners and other significant others. Certainly, we know that gender plays a significant role in the lives of older people, including couples, as they negotiate retirement. Women and men have different patterns across their lifetimes in relation to employment, friendships and social networks, along with different caring roles in the family (Barnes and Parry, 2004). Men experience stronger occupational attachments and fewer non-work activities than women, leading to transitions to retirement that can be more 'problematic', including frustrations in the domestic sphere. Relationships often come under intense scrutiny during this period of readjustment to both being at home, 'resulting in polarised positive and negative outcomes' (Barnes and Parry, 2004: 214). This adjustment to retirement and the associated gender differences can create what Barnes and Parry (2004: 214) describe as 'the development of a new set of social contacts'. The opportunity to recreate a higher degree of freedom to socialise is taken up more by women than by men. 'Women are more likely to replace the social contacts they established at their place of work with new relationships and activities' (Hedegaard and Ahi, 2019: 78).

As indicated, there has been very little research that has taken place on the broader benefits and impacts of men's participation in Men's Sheds. Our research attempts to pick up on this gap in the research. One of the only similar studies researching spouses and partners of men participating in Men's Sheds was undertaken in Denmark and New Zealand by Hedegarrd and Ahl (2019). They found that for partners and spouses, men's participation in Men's Sheds can empower women and offer them a sense of 'freedom and independence'. It is important to note that Hedegaard and Ahl (2019: 76) based their study almost exclusively from interview data from one Danish *Meands Modesteder* organisation (literally 'men's meeting place' in Danish, an approximate 'Men's Shed equivalent') combined with just one group interview in a New Zealand 'Blokeshed'. We anticipate likely different perspectives of women's participation in Men's Sheds in Denmark

Table 1. Characteristics of the four Men's Sheds in the current study

Characteristics	Mountain Men's Shed	Town Men's Shed	Health Men's Shed	Bush Men's Shed
Role of women	Not involved	Not involved	Not involved	Included
Broad socio-economic status	Middle	Middle to lower	Lower	Lower
Auspice support	Rotary Club	Independent	Health Service	Local government
Location	Outer-urban	Mid-suburban	Mid-suburban	Rural
Membership	Medium	Large	Medium	Small
Shed space	Medium	Huge	Large	Small
Broad pitch	Retirees	Retirees	Not in work	Inclusive

and New Zealand to Men's Sheds in Australia. We acknowledge important nuances in terms of the perceived benefits or otherwise of creating men-only spaces and places in these very different cultural contexts.

Whilst Carragher and Golding's (2016) research in Ireland provides evidence that there are benefits to *some* men from participating in *some* men's communities of practice, we anticipate that not all men or women will benefit or be affected in the same way. There is also a range of opinions amongst shedders as to the desirability or need for women to play a role in the Shed. In broad terms, previous Australian studies show that men most likely to be experiencing anger, grief and alienation in relation to a previous or current partner or wife were less likely to seek the company of women in the Men's Shed itself (Golding, 2011).

The *Meands Modesteder* peak organisation that oversees and promotes the Danish Men's Shed-type organisations as a men's health intervention in Hedegaard and Ahl's (2019) study dictates top-down that all such organisations are to be male-only Shed spaces in order to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits to the participating men. By contrast, whilst decisions in relation to women's participation (or not) in Australian and Irish Men's Sheds are made at a local organisation level, in most Men's Sheds in both countries it is mostly or all men who participate.

Social transitions and connections in later life for men

The health differentials between males and females have been well researched. Men generally have a shorter life expectancy and higher mortality rates from chronic conditions and cancers compared to women (Flood and Blair, 2013). Males are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours and have a higher rate of injury (Kelly *et al.*, 2019) compared to women. Men are also likely to have a poorer diet, smoke cigarettes more than women and drink more excessively (Imamura *et al.*, 2015; Wilsnack *et al.*, 2018). Men are also less likely to seek help for mental or physical health issues than women (Waling and Fildes, 2017). Male stereotypes that denote

masculinity as including 'able-bodiedness, stoicism and strength' (Waling and Fildes, 2017: 758) places men who are ageing to be less likely to seek help because of their 'fear of ridicule and scrutiny about their masculine identity'.

The traditional view about masculinity 'refers to established stereotypes and structures that influence how men think and act in relation to their view of what being a man means' (Connell, cited in Mackenzie *et al.*, 2017: 1224). Such stereotypes see men as being strong, aggressive, having limited involvement in household duties and providing for the family as the breadwinner (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2017). For many men, ageing and retirement finds them no longer fitting into the gender stereotype as breadwinner or head of the household and also sees them removed from the social relationships developed in the workplace.

It is well documented that men benefit from social relationships, but have more difficulty maintaining these after their working life has finished (Golding, 2015). The majority of research on Men's Sheds has focused on the social benefits to and for men who participate (Taylor *et al.*, 2018), but there have been other studies (Brown *et al.*, 2008; Flood and Blair, 2013) that have highlighted broader benefits, including physical and mental wellbeing. Not surprisingly, an established body of research has demonstrated a positive association between leisure engagement, such as participating in a Men's Shed, and health outcomes among older adults generally (Adams *et al.*, 2011; Nimrod and Shrira, 2016). The social intimacy inherent in certain activities appears to be a very important, if not the most important, aspect of engagement that influences wellbeing (Adams *et al.*, 2011).

For some people in mid- to later life, the transition to retirement involves a sense of loss and periods of uncertainty, especially if retirement is mandatory rather than voluntary (Picchio and van Ours, 2018) due to ill-health or job loss. Bassanini and Caroli (2014) determined that involuntary retirement affects both health and happiness, and the period of adjustment can often be difficult, exacerbated by a lessened ability to be involved in new leisure activities. For others who are satisfied in retirement, an opportunity to pursue 'human work' (Frieden, 1993), such as volunteering, along with engaging in social activities can make retirement a satisfying and positive time in a person's later life (Principi *et al.*, 2020).

Most, but not all, men who attend Men's Sheds are either retired or not in the paid workforce for health or other reasons. Men's Sheds have been recognised as providing significant benefits for men's health and wellbeing through providing a safe place where men can come together, engage in male activities while at the same time establish friendships with other men, share skills and knowledge, and give back to the community through community-based projects (Golding, 2015; Milligan *et al.*, 2016).

In Australia, as elsewhere, information about the joint retirement of couples is very limited. Warren's (2015) review of the available literature draws attention to the fact that there are very few studies that incorporate data from both members of a relationship (Van Solinge and Henkens, 2005). Many studies of adjustment to retirement focus primarily on individual motivation (Barnes and Parry, 2004). In other studies, adjusting to retirement highlights the interdependence that couples experience (Haug *et al.*, 1993; Mock and Cornelius, 2007; Moen *et al.*, 2007) without considering synchronous data of both partners. The literature does indicate that it has traditionally been uncommon for the female partner to continue to work once a male partner has retired, however, in many nations it is increasingly

expected and economically more necessary for women to continue to work as employment opportunities for women expand (Cooley and Adorno, 2016).

Transition from work to retirement typically brings about several changes for the retiring individual as well as his or her partner that involve adjustment for both (Van Solinge and Henkens, 2005). Principi *et al.* (2020) conclude that there is no universally accepted definition of retirement adjustment but do claim that the quality of family relationships is a particularly important element for retirement satisfaction or dissatisfaction. What is known is that married couples experience different needs and challenges at different stages of their lives, including during retirement (Shiota and Levenson, 2007). Interdependence theory applied to Rusbult and Van Lange's (2008) research observed that a couple's behaviours are intertwined and that decisions made by one partner will affect the other. The literature about couples retiring supports the notion proposed by Van Solinge and Henkens (2005) that whilst most older people approach retirement as a member of a couple, the step to retirement is not always synchronous.

Van Solinge and Henkens (2005: 18) explored the adjustments that couples make pre- and post-retirement. They posited that there is a 'strong gender difference with regard to adjustment' and concluded that women in relationships experience 'greater problems adjusting to retirement' (Van Solinge and Henkens, 2005: 18). They attribute this finding to the fact that for most women, retirement for either partner does not alter their ongoing family or household responsibilities, making the notion of retirement a less-attractive proposition than for their male partners. Picchio and van Ours (2018) also noted that if a woman's partner retires, she typically experiences a growth in happiness, but if the woman retires the opposite is often the case. Muller and Shaikh (2018) discovered a study that male health tends to be unaffected by the retirement of his partner, but that a female's health tends to be negatively impacted by the retirement of a male partner. This notion is not supported by the work of Picchio and van Ours (2018), who claim that the retirement of a man affects various happiness and health indicators of both himself and his wife. Women's retirement also pivots around relationships with partners and family members, as well as around significant life events (Karpen, 2017).

One of the crucial aspects of successful ageing, according to Rowe and Kahn (1997), is active engagement in later life. It will typically involve active decisions to become increasingly involved in established activities that were undertaken before retirement or the pursuit of new activities. Selecting the 'right' leisure activities can be beneficial in successfully adapting to ageing (Standridge *et al.*, 2018). This is supported by a study undertaken by Price ([2003] 2003) in the USA who indicated that retirement, unemployment or under-employment can lead to depression, and a loss of a sense of purpose and identity for both sexes. Price described the phenomenon of 'underfoot syndrome' where husbands were seen to get in the way of their spouses by interfering with her household routines. Price highlighted the need for couples to have opportunities for separate space away from each other, including engaging in individual hobbies and separate leisure activities. The interview data from this research suggest that men's activities in the Shed provide necessary space for both partners to engage in leisure activities away from each other which is beneficial for both their health and wellbeing.

As people age and leave the workforce, they possibly experience shrinking social networks and support networks (Lang and Carstensen, 2002) and might specially

depend on spouses for interactions and support (Li and Fung, 2014). Older men tend to have less-established social networks than women (Ruxton, 2006) and men who join Men's Sheds often do so because of limited support networks (Carragher and Golding, 2016).

Past studies about Men's Sheds have typically concentrated on the health and wellbeing of and for men who participate in the Sheds post-work and not on the significant others of those men, including spouses, partners and carers of the shedders. This study is an attempt to address this gap.

Method

Our paper reports on a project that involved conducting four focus group interviews with men, all of whom were not in paid work and were participating in one of four Men's Sheds. The paper also reports on individual semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of between 30 and 60 minutes with significant others, 14 wives and two carers, of the men who were participating in Men's Sheds in the regional city of Ballarat and the surrounding rural areas.

In total, four shedder focus group interviews (total 24 participants) and 16 individual interviews (total 16 participants) were conducted with significant others. The interviews were conducted by the three authors of the article. The interview questions explored the men's and significant others' perceptions of the impact of their participation in the Men's Shed.

Thirteen interview participants were recruited by shedders who were their spouses, partners or carers. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants and the Men's Shed organisations involved in the study. The names of the Men's Sheds for the purposes of the paper are Mountain Men's Shed, Town Men's Shed, Health Men's Shed and Bush Men's Shed. The relationship, age range and ethnic background details of the men interviewed and the significant others, including carers, who were interviewed in the four Men's Sheds are summarised in Table 2.

We adopted an approach based on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which involves searching across the dataset to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82), a theme is a 'patterned response or meaning derived from the data that informs the research question'.

The thematic analysis process was employed consisting of six steps: (a) familiarising ourselves with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report/manuscript (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The data were sorted manually which included 'a process of sorting and defining the transcripts and defining and sorting of collected data ... applicable to the research' (Glesne, 2006: 21). The sorting process consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts, identifying reoccurring words, ideas, patterns and themes generated from the data. The transcripts were read and reread and themes were highlighted. Within each transcript, concepts and ideas emerged through re-occurring words, messages and meanings. Corresponding codes were used to identify themes and from this three categories in the data were identified, each with corresponding themes.

Table 2. Relationship details, by Men's Shed, of significant others who were interviewed and focus group interview details

	Mountain Men's Shed	Town Men's Shed	Health Men's Shed	Bush Men's Shed
Significant others:				
Partners:				
No. interviewed individually	4 females	4 females	3 females	3 females
Relationship	Married	Married	Married	Married
Age range	60–75	60–75	45–70	60–75
Ethnic background	White European	White European	White European	White European
Carers:				
No. interviewed individually	–	–	1 female	1 male
Age range	–	–	55–65	55–65
Ethnic background			White European	White European
Men:				
No. interviewed in each focus group	7	6	8	3
Age range	65–75	65–75	65–75	65–75
Ethnic background	White European	White European	White European	White European

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the Federation University Australia. Participants were invited to participate in the study and informed about the objectives of the study, data collection methods, and that their participation was voluntary and they could decline to answer questions and withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were informed that their interview data would be managed to ensure, as far as possible, their privacy and anonymity by way of the use of pseudonyms. All participants signed a written consent form before taking part in an interview or focus group.

Findings

As indicated, common themes which made reference to important points in the study relating to participants' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about men's participation in a Men's Shed were identified in the data (Ely *et al.*, 1997). These themes were categorised into three sections. Under these three sections, themes were identified and can be seen in [Table 3](#).

Benefits for the men

Socialisation and friendship

Having the opportunity for Shed participants to develop friendships with other men was a common response identified by partners when asked about what benefits there were for men participating. Partners expressed the view that not only socialising away from home, but also forming durable friendships beyond the home and former workplace with other men was an important component of why men participated. Sarah suggested that 'men like being with men'. Adele responded that 'He gets away from me ... he enjoys the space ... and he enjoys the company of other men.' Adele also said that going to the Shed allowed her husband to get away from her and from the confines of the family house. Kim's response not only included the perceived importance of her husband enjoying the company of other men, but also her perception that:

They're interacting with other men and he benefits a lot from it, he's learning how to do things and he's very handy with his hands and that, yeh, he learnt a new project last year.

For Mary, the benefits of friendship were linked to her husband's recently diagnosed dementia:

His short-term memory isn't good ... he benefits from going to the Shed and socialising with men, it gives him something to do and it's keeping his mind active ... and giving him that friendship, companionship.

When asked about health benefits, again the partners reported that they perceived that the Men's Shed had many health and wellbeing benefits for their partners or significant others. These included being involved in more physical activities through Shed activities, getting out of the house, having something to look forward

Table 3. Categories and themes identified in the data

Benefits for the men	Benefits for the women	Transitions and tensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialisation and friendship • Sharing skills • Broader benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respite, space and freedom • Feeling 'happy for him' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing ageing and retirement • Feeling like a 'Shed widow'

to, gaining friendships and sharing skills that helped with feeling more useful. Sandra summed up some of these benefits when speaking about her partner since attending the Shed:

...the benefits are huge ... when we downsized, he was lost. When we got here, he happened to come across the Shed and he's full steam ahead ever since. He's got a place to go now because I feel he misses work, so now he has a new lease on life, he's busy and he loves it.

Anne was a participant in the Bush Shed which, unlike the three other Men's Sheds, was open to both men and women equally. Anne was also the carer of Ben, a 20-year-old male with an intellectual disability. As anticipated earlier in the paper, Men's Sheds are diverse and the Bush Shed catered for specific groups and the needs of the men who participated. Aside from welcoming men and women as equal members, it also welcomed a broad age range as well as participants who identified specific mental and physical health issues. Anne was already a member of the Bush Shed and, as Ben's carer, anticipated that bringing him to the Shed would assist him with making friends, socialising while learning new skills in an accepting and nurturing environment. Wilson *et al.* (2017) identified in their recent paper examining intergenerational mentoring, the important place Men's Sheds have in the Australian context in providing a community resource through formal and informal mentoring for young people with intellectual disabilities. This formal and informal mentoring was seen through the caring relationships, and through the Shed participants sharing their skills and knowledge with Ben.

When asked about health benefits, Anne perceived that for Ben, coming to the Shed:

is helping him with his interpersonal skills because he doesn't communicate very well. A lot of the people that come here like to engage him in conversation and [here] he's got to engage in conversation with them.

Like Anne, Sam was a carer for Darren and they together participated in the Health Shed in town. When asked about the perceived health benefits, Sam reported that Darren

...enjoys coming here. It gets him out into the community, and he has a good time ... when I'm here with him we both meet different people and discuss different things. He has made friends and also makes stuff here.

Learning skills

Learning and sharing skills were mentioned by many of the spouses, partners and carers across all four Men's Shed locations.

Helen's husband, John, was described as being more confident with projects at home since participating in the Health Shed in town:

He's had a stroke so can't use some of the machinery, but since being at the Shed he's learnt things from the men and is more confident.

Coral's husband, Steve, has been coming to the Health Shed in town for seven years and described him as being 'dedicated' to coming. Coral disclosed that Steve has cancer, and that coming to the Shed 'has been extremely good, it gives him a purpose ... He has never been a gardener, but he started up the garden side of the Shed'.

Mary, whose husband was recently diagnosed with dementia, reported that since he had been participating in the Shed, he had learnt welding and woodturning: 'Because of this it makes him feel good, because he's still got a purpose ... and not giving up.'

Broader social and community benefits

All respondents reported that each Men's Shed contributed positively to the local community. These contributions were typically associated with working with local schools, kindergartens and other community organisations, fixing fencing and gates, and general community maintenance. Some Sheds were involved with fund raising for the community through local 'sausage sizzles' (barbecues), and in one Shed the men volunteered as parking marshals in town.

In the majority of responses about Shed benefits, the respondents were very positive and perceived that Men's Shed participants benefited not only in relation to social benefits, but also in relation to increasing self-confidence, facilitating new skills, and giving back to the local community through maintenance projects and fundraising activities. For some of the participants, the community work of the Sheds was of importance in how the men felt about themselves in terms of their sense of pride. For one participant, when describing her husband feeling proud of his contributions in the local community, she described how he 'likes to show the grandchildren the projects he has done in the town'. For the partners, the men's pride was wound up in their feeling of 'giving back' to the community and, in turn, this had direct benefits for the partners through the men's better mental health status, which was beneficial for the relationship.

Benefits for partners and carers

Respite, space and freedom

A common response when asked about the benefits for partners included responses that partners felt that they had more freedom and space to 'do their own thing'. For Carol, there were health benefits relating to her mental health:

It's not that I don't want him home, it's just nice to have ... I feel like a teenager a little bit ... that freedom. It's just that nice feeling that he's doing something that he likes to do, and for me it's a feeling of, gee, I'm free for the day.

For Mary, when asked the question about benefits, she acknowledged there were benefits for her, elaborating that:

When I'm trying to clean the house he does tend to get under my feet, and wants my attention so I can't just get a clear run, and so I like to, on a Tuesday, do my floors and vacuum that I find hard to do when he's around ... The Shed allows me to have space and freedom to do my own thing.

Mary's comments are aligned with Van Solinge and Henkens (2005) who conclude that there is a gender adjustment at retirement and women tend to experience greater problems with the adjustment in relation to their continued ongoing household and family responsibilities, making retirement for these women less attractive.

For Carol, when Craig goes to the Shed, she 'feels happy' which she acknowledged as being beneficial: 'For me I think there are definitely health benefits, it's good for [my] mental health, when he's gone, I feel less claustrophobic.' For Mary, the benefit involved her feeling less stressed, because 'he's happier in himself. This was similar for other respondents who reported that they felt less guilty when they knew their husbands or partners were happy doing something else. For example, Carol reported that 'It's just that nice feeling that he's doing something *he* likes to do.'

Feelings of having quietness and space in the husband's or partner's absence were also described. Sandra reported feeling 'energised' by the relative quiet: 'It feels like I have got space because I am very introverted, I like quietness. I energise with my quietness.' Sarah, who reported that 'I'm happy for him and it has benefits for me', also mentioned the value of the time without him:

I have freedom when he's gone. It's peaceful and quiet and I get on the phone and ring my friends and daughter. I'm busy; I've got things to do.

For Kim, she felt relieved she could do what she wanted to do when her husband was away; for Rebecca:

I don't want to kill him any more ... When Roger first retired, I had already gone through semi-retirement and I really enjoyed my time at home. When he retired, suddenly I couldn't do what I had enjoyed doing around the house, there was always somebody putting his hand in and wanting to be with me.

For the carers interviewed, Sam, Darren's carer, reported that coming to the Shed had also been pleasurable for him. He had learnt some new skills and had also made friends. Sam also reported that he thought there were benefits for him in knowing Darren was happy and enjoying his time in the Shed. It was a similar response from Anne, Ben's carer: 'It's good for me mixing with people as well and it has its social benefits ... because it brings me out.'

Other benefits reported by spouses and partners included that their relationship was better because of their husbands attending the Shed. An example of this was Kim, who stated that 'It's great for the relationship' and 'It gives me an opportunity to do other things. I can get out and socialise.'

Feeling 'happy for him'

When asked about the benefits for her partner, Craig, Carol was happy to report that Craig had become more sociable since participating in the Shed and that made her feel good for him. 'He's really come out of his shell ... it's really positive, it's great.' For Sarah, part of the reason she felt happy was the freedom she experienced while her husband was away; she also made it clear that his happiness was important to her: 'I'm happy that he's happy doing what he likes to do.' This was a similar story for Mary, who acknowledged that her husband had a brighter outlook on life and that he was 'happier in himself', which made her happy for him.

Sam, Darren's carer, reported that he thought there were benefits for him in knowing Darren was happy and enjoying his time in the Shed. It was a similar response from Anne, Ben's carer, who described attending the Shed as 'good for me [because I'm] mixing with people as well, it has its social benefits ... because it brings me out'. She also reported that she felt happy for Ben because 'I know he loves coming out here so much ... When he's happy, I can see it in his face ... I'm happy, I'm happy for him.'

It is interesting to note that when women were asked if they were involved in any way with the Shed, all women except those attending the Bush Men's Shed responded with general ambivalence and reluctance about being involved in any social or other activity with the Shed. Some women did report they attended the Men's Shed annual Christmas party but seemingly did so to make their men happy rather than through a desire to be involved in the Shed themselves. Indeed, many women described their desire not to have any specific involvement in the Shed as positive and saw it as being a place 'for the men'.

Transitions and tensions*Managing ageing and retirement*

Managing ageing and retirement was a persistent theme throughout the interview data. Retirement and preparation for retirement and issues relating to becoming used to being retired was a topic mentioned by several of the spouses and partners interviewed. For Carol, her husband Craig had difficulty getting orientated when he first retired:

I couldn't get him to do anything, he was on the computer the whole time. I can't say what he did for all that time, for around a year ... I wasn't going to push him. It's what he wanted to do really. He found out about the Shed through the local paper.

For Mary, being lost after retirement was perceived as an issue for her husband:

They are lost souls when they retire, so for my husband who has dementia, being able to socialise with other men in the Shed is good for him ... they treat him really well.

For Sarah, whose husband was from the same Shed, 'Men just like being with men ... he can get away from the house and enjoys the company of other men.'

Retirement was mentioned by Kim from the Town Shed as being planned by both herself and her husband. When asked about this, Kim responded that:

We've been planning for a long time for how retirement was going to look and I've been talking to Roger for probably about ten years ... you've got to develop some hobbies, you've got to have something else other than just doing house stuff and just doing stuff together. You've got to have something else when he gets to retirement, so he spent a long time thinking about that and he always planned on Men's Shed as being part of that.

Feeling like a 'Shed widow'

Not all of the respondents were totally positive about their experiences of their husbands or partners attending the local Men's Shed. For some of the respondents, Men's Shed participation was reported as being stressful for them because the Shed had effectively become a proxy job for their partners, which had in some cases tended to take over both their lives. This was particularly problematic for Anita from the Town Shed who had the responsibility for driving her short-sighted husband to and from the Shed virtually every day. This was seen as a problem for Anita who also explained that she needed to regularly visit her elderly mother at a nursing home close by. Anita admitted that for her husband, 'everything revolves around the Shed', and she described herself as 'his full-time driver'. Anita explained that her husband's 'obsession with the Shed' was annoying for her and she described herself and 'a Shed widow'.

Discussion

The focus of the interviews were on the impacts on spouses and carers when men participate in Men's Sheds. Many of the themes in the interview data confirmed the benefits that some men report when participating in a Shed and also for the community in their responses. These benefits have been described in a suite of research spanning more than a decade (Golding *et al.*, 2007; Foley *et al.*, 2008; Golding, 2011, 2015; Kimberley *et al.*, 2018). It is important to remember, however, that not all men who participate in Men's Sheds report these benefits and not all men seek to engage with or want to attend a Shed after retirement. It is also important to acknowledge that conclusions about shedders who have no or very few significant others in their lives outside the shedder community cannot be drawn from the current study.

The men

Themes emerging from the data of this study told the story of the men participating in the Men's Sheds as benefiting them through developing caring friendships and socialising with other men. Many partners and carers in the study described these friendships as meaningful and benefiting the men in terms of their health and the social benefits as well as the opportunity to develop their confidence through learning new skills and social activities beyond home. Some partners described the Men's Shed as a place where men could go after retirement, which provided for

them an important outlet to share their skills, gain skills from others and socialise. Some partners and both the carers involved in the study were adamant that the development of friendships with other men was of key importance to the men and also to the partners and carers themselves. The benefits for the carers included making friends themselves through their contact with the Shed, and also through the enjoyment of knowing that the men they were caring for were stimulated through the enjoyment of activities and friendships in a supportive environment. For Ben, his carer was pleased to see him developing language skills and confidence while they both attended the Shed.

For the spouses in the study, the benefits they reported involved having their partners occupied in the Shed and happy enjoying new friendships. This was seen as relieving the pressure for the spouses and partners, who in turn were able to feel more relaxed and 'less guilty' taking up their own friendships and activities during the day, knowing the men were happy. Another identified benefit for the spouses was the space made available to them when the men attended the Sheds. Many of the spouses commented that they enjoyed having 'the house to myself'. Price's ([2003] 2003) description of 'underfoot syndrome', where husbands were seen to get in the way of their spouses by interfering with her household routines, can be identified in the spouse's responses. Generally, the partners were in agreement that this space being provided to them by the men attending the Shed 'freed up' their house. In her research, Price highlighted the need for couples to have opportunities for separate space away from each other that in turn is beneficial for both their health and wellbeing.

Community benefits were also reported by the partners, when asked about the broader benefits. These perceived benefits included contributing to local community projects, which were described by the partners as being positive for the men and providing them with increased confidence and pride. The community benefits identified in the study are seen as an important aspect of the partners' benefits through the men's sense of increased pride at giving back to the community. This increased sense of pride had a direct impact on the partners by way of the partners responding that seeing the men happier made them feel 'good about the men' and gave them something to talk about together at home, which in turn has 'opened up our lives together'. An example of this was described by Chris, who reported that 'we have stuff to talk about now because of the community activities he's involved in'.

Benefits for the significant others

Themes emerging from the significant other responses were consistent regarding the perceived benefits. These benefits particularly involved respite for the women. When asked about the benefits for their spouses or partners, consistent in the responses were women describing feelings of freedom and space and peace and 'quietness' that their partner's participation in the Shed afforded them. The spouses and partners reported that their men participating in the Men's Sheds gave them time: to themselves, to undertake domestic work undisturbed and to spend with friends without feeling 'guilty'. Consistently, they reported both mental and physical health benefits in the form of lifting the pressure of

having their partners always underfoot in the house, feeling less 'claustrophobic' and more 'energised' because of the quietness and because they had something else to look forward to each week.

Managing ageing in retirement

There was evidence of considerable adjustment occurring as the couples negotiated their retirement and the Shed-home balance right. One partner described the Shed as taking over the relationship and becoming like a job for her husband. Another described the Shed as providing her husband with a pathway to retirement that had made life easier for both of them. One wife described how she had not enjoyed being at home after her husband retired and that it took them two and a half years to work out that they both needed other activities away from each other. For another wife, her husband attending the Shed was an activity that he found several years after retirement. Not 'pushing him and allowing him time to adjust to retirement' was seen as critically important. She also admitted that his adjustment to retirement was not easy for the relationship. She recalled feeling frustrated by him 'doing nothing all day in the house' and was pleased when he finally came home and reported he had found the Shed and decided to start participating.

A Shed widow

Not all responses were positive regarding men participating in the Men's Sheds for the spouses. For some women the unpaid 'work' the men were involved in when attending the Shed was seen as having replaced paid work and had therefore tended to become a burden for the women. One partner was particularly critical when asked about the Shed and reported that the Shed had taken precedence over everything, including organising medical appointments, family or other activities. For another partner, her husband's previous paid work was in a professional role where he managed staff and, according to his wife, he 'enjoyed his job'. Retirement was not an easy process for him and getting involved in the Men's Shed was great for both of them because 'he'd go mad at home', however, this partner reported that she felt her husband had 'over-committed' and all activities had to be organised 'around the Shed'. Arguably, the Shed had become her partner's substitute workplace facilitating for him a re/construction of his working gender identity (Oliffe *et al.*, 2013), creating friction in the relationship.

Connell's work on masculinities (cited in Mackenzie *et al.*, 2017) has been used by researchers to understand and theorise the gender performances taken up by some men. Masculinity frameworks can be used to understand gender in terms of social factors such as ageing and retirement (Oliffe *et al.*, 2013). Men's performances of masculinity and their alignment with masculine ideals associated with their working identity as, for example, the breadwinner, can be challenged when men age and transition to retirement. Indeed, according to Oliffe *et al.*:

Older men can face unique challenges concerning maintaining or remaking a masculine identity ... [E]specially when they are no longer part of the workforce. As a result, the psychological work of constructing positive gender identities on older

age and in transitions such as retirement tends to reside with the individual. (Olliffe *et al.*, 2013: 1627)

The social, health and wellbeing benefits for men who participate in Sheds while they adjust to retirement is well documented (Golding *et al.*, 2007; Flood and Blair, 2013; Golding, 2015). However, little is known about how this participation is experienced by partners of the men. In this small study, the impacts for some partners were mixed. Another example of these mixed impacts was highlighted by one partner who was keen to report that she felt she had the burden of becoming her husband's 'full-time driver' and that she resented the Shed because her husband had become 'obsessed' with attending most of the time, including weekends. In this case, the Shed involvement had become in her view obsessive and a burden, and was seen as disrupting some aspects of their relationship. However, this partner also reported that she did enjoy the freedom the Shed provided for her and described enjoying her own space when she was not 'driving him around'.

For these spouses, their partner's Shed participation had in some respects impacted on their quality of life through their caring responsibilities for their husbands. For one partner, driving him to and from the Shed, because of her partner's disability, placed what could be seen as a carer burden on the women. Dow and Meyer (2010) suggest that carer burden can have consequences for older carers that is associated with a high personal cost such as a lower level of wellbeing. Certainly, for these women, the Shed had become a mixed blessing where the women described some of their levels of stress and annoyance were associated with their caring role and facilitating the Men's Shed attendance.

In this study, we aimed to examine the impact of Men's Sheds for their significant others. The findings from this study have provided some important insights into the impact on significant others when their partners attend Men's Sheds. For many of the spouses and the carers, the men's participation in the Sheds was seen as beneficial. Most of the spouses in the study felt a sense of freedom, space and time to do what they wanted whilst their husbands were participating in the Shed. This included being able to socialise with friends and family, and have time to do the things they wanted, or the Shed made available to them time to do the household duties without the male partner being in the way.

Feelings were expressed by the spouses about the health benefits that were accrued to them when their husbands regularly participated in a Men's Shed. These health benefits were illustrated through responses that involved the spouses reporting that they felt less stressed and worried, and that they had a greater sense of freedom, which provided for them a sense of wellbeing and peace of mind.

It is important to note that some of the partners, although reporting feelings of wellbeing and freedom, did report frustration at the way the Shed was seen as sometimes taking priority over other activities. The findings of our study point to some evidence of carer burden taking place for some partners, which can have adverse health effects and impact on the wellbeing of partner carers. These effects can include psychological and physical effects and have been linked to higher levels of stress and depression (Dow and Meyer, 2010). Evidence from research into carer burden suggests that older people caring for another older person 'do so at a high personal cost to themselves' (Dow and Meyer, 2010: 649).

The findings also show that in some cases the Shed can become a burden for the partner in other ways. Moving from paid work to retirement requires considerable adjustments for many couples. Challenges for some men involving masculinity adjustment and masculine re-identity was arguably identified in this study through the Shed replacing the paid work environment (Oliffe *et al.*, 2013), which was seen by some women as a negative aspect of their partner's Shed involvement. Certainly some of the implications of men's participation in the Sheds on some of their partners require further exploration to look at ways in which Sheds might re/consider certain practices to accommodate spouse's needs better, *e.g.* opening times, transportation to and from the Shed, and also strategies that are aware of and cater to the wellbeing needs of spouses as well as the men participating.

The findings in this study reflected many characteristics of retirement adjustment. Transitioning to retirement is a significant and challenging circumstance for individuals and couples to a greater or lesser degree. According to Barnes and Parry (2004: 214), women and men often have different life patterns, roles, friendships and social networks, and different roles in the caring of children and the household unit; because of all of these variables, 'gender is therefore an important influence on the ways in which individuals adapt to retirement and on the achieved quality of life during this phase'. Men tend to have stronger occupational connections and fewer social networks outside the paid work environment, making retirement more challenging and therefore participation in the Men's Shed a work-like substitute.

These differences, according to Barnes and Parry (2004), create tensions which impact on the transition from work to retirement for men, sometimes causing frustration in the domestic sphere. This frustration was identified in the current study and reported by the partners particularly when they reflected about their partner's behaviour before participating in the Men's Shed, or their reflections associated with too much time being taken up at the Shed. These findings contribute to our conclusion, below, that participating in Men's Sheds can assist men with their transition to retirement, which in turn can provide clear and important benefits for their partner. However, there are concerns that have been identified in the findings relating to the risk of carer burden for some partners and the risk of the Shed becoming a surrogate job, which can cause anxiety for the partner.

Conclusion

This research contributes to a under-researched area examining the impact that women and other significant others experience when men attend Men's Sheds. The findings of this research, which interviewed men and their significant others in regional Victoria, showed that the men attending the Sheds, the partners of the men and the carers all identified substantial benefits when the men attended the Sheds. The findings also shed some important light on some tensions experienced by the partners associated with carer burden and adjustments to retirement and associated masculine renegotiations of identity and masculinity adjustments (Barnes and Parry, 2004; Oliffe *et al.*, 2013).

This research can be seen as a beginning into an important area of research. The authors of this study also acknowledge the limitations of the current study due to

the study having a primary focus on men in heterosexual relationships and likewise on their significant others who were all female partners. In addition, all of the participants were white Australians. The authors of the study acknowledge the lack of diversity in the participant group and do intend to expand the participant cohort more broadly to include gay and bisexual or people in same-gender relationships and participants from a broader, more diverse ethnic background, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The authors of the study also acknowledge the limitation of the study due its small scale, and the regional and Victoria-only location. The authors identify critical need for further research into the area.

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