

Let the men speak: Health, friendship, community and shed therapy

*Annette Foley, Barry Golding and Mike Brown
University of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia*

Paper to AVETRA Conference, Adelaide, 3-4 April 2008

Abstract

Our paper is based on our recently published NCVER project on Men's sheds in Australia, *Learning through Community Contexts* (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007), which showed that men's sheds informally cater for non vocational, social, health, wellbeing and learning needs of mainly older men.

We deliberately used unedited transcripts from the NCVER project in the form of narratives or stories to give the men an opportunity to speak for themselves about the benefits of participating in men's sheds. The paper highlights some of the limitations of the methodology used in the attempt to allow the men themselves to make sense of the benefits they experience and enjoy from participating in men's sheds as conveyed through their own voices.

Introduction and context of the paper

Our paper deliberately uses the stories, words and direct opinions (narrative) of 'shedders' as a way of giving them the opportunity to 'speak for themselves' about how participating in men's sheds provides therapeutic opportunities for their health and wellbeing. In essence, we wanted to take the opportunity to make use of some of the rich data available from the transcripts of the responses of the men interviewed as shed participants in our recently published NCVER research project *Men's sheds in Australia, Learning through community contexts* (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson, 2007), which provided evidence that community men's sheds informally cater for non-vocational, social, health, wellbeing and learning needs of mainly older men.

Unlike in most academic papers we deliberately avoid a conventional post-script in the form of 'Discussion' and draw no 'Conclusions', from the narratives. Instead, we point to some methodological limitations and observations about presenting 'voices' in research. We have argued in our previous research, mainly using quantitative survey data, that the main benefit of community men's sheds is that they cater for the holistic as well as the specific, often acute, needs of an otherwise difficult to reach group of older and sometimes isolated men – who are typically experiencing complex and difficult changes in their working lives, status and identity, their physical and mental health, their relationships and identities as men. We have provided some qualitative evidence directly from the men as participants that engaging and participating in men's sheds significantly, in a positive way, contributes to the wellbeing

of men, their partners, families and communities in situations where paid work is either desirable but not available or not feasible because of retirement or ill health. What we have not previously done is let the men speak apart from our commentary and conclusions. Before we do this firstly we need to try and summarise what community men's sheds are, so you as the reader, have some idea of both the background to the research and the interview context.

Some background to men's sheds

There has been a rapid increase in recent years in the growth of community men's sheds, most particularly across southern Australian states with less growth in Western Australia and Queensland (Golding et al, 2007). These sheds are diverse in their nature and have been identified by Hayes and Williamson's (2007) Victorian shed typology as falling into five different shed types: occupational, clinical, recreational, educational and social with different functions and philosophies as well as instrumental and emotional support (Golding, Brown & Foley, 2007). A Victorian study by Golding and Harvey, (2006) identified many significant differences between community shed types and shed characteristics and the demographic backgrounds of men who participate in men's sheds programs. Despite these differences and the diversity of sheds, there are common issues facing men who participate in shed programs, these being: friendship, health benefits and a place to be away from the house (or in some cases, room). It is these common issues that are highlighted in this paper through the voices of some of the men involved in the 2007 NCVER research. We acknowledge and thank all men and women who participated in the research, the shed-based organizations for supporting it and NCVER for the foresight to fund it.

Rationale for departing from the standard academic paradigm

This section of our paper is an academic bridge into the body of our paper. It is in effect an explanation of what we are trying to achieve and an open and self-critical acknowledgement of the severe limitations of our attempt to let the men's sheds participants speak. We deliberately seek to depart some way from the paradigm of some of our previous research papers where we pose as the 'experts' responsible for professing knowledge about a phenomenon and mediating on behalf of participants that become the subject of our research.

We understand that we are so tightly bound up in the research process that truly letting the men speak themselves is impossible. We initiated our research and designed it in a standard, academically ethical way. We presented and interviewed men in men's sheds as academic experts using questions and survey items that essentially interested us and NCVER. While we had several hundred pages of interview transcripts we have mediated and edited the selection of transcript data for this paper and based it around themes we have purposefully selected.

There is a danger as mediators in any research project, quantitative or qualitative of researchers' distorting subject meanings and narratives. In some senses researchers are plagiarists. While we work with strict research ethics, those ethics allow us licence to collect and distil hundreds of people's personal stories and write our own story based around our own preconceptions, using our own theoretical lens (in our case usually slanted towards

education and training) and in our own academic words using a standard and formal researcher 'recipe'. The structure and format of this research paper is dictated by academic (including AVETRA) conventions that we subscribe to, which require us to mediate and write as researchers and authors rather than simply presenting men's narratives without introduction or further comment. We are expected to observe standard conventions about what constitutes admissible research evidence and what is ethical to reveal (or not) to the reader about our sources and informants. This particular discourse is written to academic rules that apply to education, training and learning research so as to be familiar to like minded researchers. It is possible to argue that the academic discourse which we normally and deliberately adopt is designed more to ingratiate ourselves with our academic colleagues and governments - that inevitably fund most research - than to communicate back to our research participants and organizations, often putting our research products beyond the reach of most readers including in this case, the men who are speaking.

Our theoretical framework in this paper

One of the standard academic rules is that academics show their hand in theoretical terms when undertaking and reporting research. The theoretical perspective that we adopt in this paper is close to that adopted by Garfinkel, who as Heritage (1984, p.34) summarises, '... rejected absolutely the view that the ordinary judgements of social actors can in any way, be treated as irrelevant or epiphenomenal [a secondary effect or by product that arises from, but does not causally influence a process] in the analysis of social action or social organisation.' This so-called *ethnomethodological* perspective holds that there is a 'body of common-sense knowledge and [a] range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves.' (Heritage 1984, p.4). We therefore regard the men who participate in men's sheds as able to make sense of and explain in their own words the way sheds work and the benefits they experience and enjoy from participating. What we do claim is, between us, to have visited enough, diverse sheds across Australia, seen and heard enough diverse participants and coordinators and analysed enough surveys to be able to select narratives that are both respectful of and in some ways representative of what stories they have told us. We also have the academic advantage of being able to select this theoretical perspective over others and to write in a way that other academics will understand. We always, optimistically hope and expect that some of what we write is accessible and useful to practitioners and positively influence policy and practice in a range of fields (research, education, training, health and wellbeing). If it were not we would not continue to do what we are doing.

Narrative research relates to interpretative qualitative studies, in which stories are used to describe human actions. Narrative inquiry enables narrators, in this case the men, to tell the stories of their lives and experiences. According to Chase (2005, p.658), the narrative approach can be used to highlight narrators' 'identity work', 'as they construct selves within specific institutional, organisational, discursive and local cultural contexts'. We go further in this paper to claim that the men who narrate below are doing more than naively telling us their stories as shed participants without our intervention. Similarly, we are doing more than

passively listening. The men we interview are also actively locating themselves in and responding in narrative to our own (sometimes different) theoretical presuppositions about what sheds are and what their function is. It is possible that we have accurately interpreted what the men would have spontaneously told us about health, friendship and community in the shed. It is also possible that we have, through our three different academic interests and presuppositions, in effect created and selected sheds, interviewees and narratives that suit our individual purposes and that match our presuppositions.

The narratives that follow are therefore selected by us and divided into four themes which were identified as commonly occurring across all of the interview data. These themes are: Health Benefits, Community Contribution, Friendship and Shed as Therapy.

Health Benefits

My wife looks forward to me coming here because it does make a difference when I go home ... she reckons it's a great thing for all of us. ... I am a member on the Committee of the Association and my job is actually as a Committee member, but I have been organising functions throughout the year and I try and get the group together, whether it is like a fishing trip that we had last month, golfing which is basically this month.

One of the main comments I would like to make, hadn't it been for the Men's Shed me personally I wouldn't be here, going to the Doctors, going to see Psychiatrists, Psychologists and health professionals is only one small part to a problem. Like coming to the Men's Shed it has opened our eyes to normality, the fellows have been able to come back from isolation to a normal working environment or a normal environment to know how to behave.

Friendship

I would suggest that blokes sometimes don't seem to have the same social networks that women have which I think is a draw for them in the first place. They know that there are like-minded blokes here, there's a BBQ, they can have a few beers, they can tell a few blue jokes and it's a nice environment in which they can feel comfortable. But ... if they wish to they can take it to the next level as well and provide something meaningful for the community which is I think something else which is important for them too. Another thing for blokes ... is that a lot of guys, at least in my Dad's vintage, had difficulty in expressing their needs especially in terms of medical or emotional means or anything else like that. It's easier to do that, to sort of be a little bit vulnerable when you have got hands in the sawdust and a team of other blokes around you doing much the same, they seem to relax a little bit more and allow a little more of the gender side, as I say their vulnerable side to actually come to the fore, they feel that they are still doing 'manly things'. On many numbers of occasions I have experienced as a part of conversations out the back on a whole range of topics, not just health or anything

like that, but even on questions of faith, and is there a God, and how will God treat me, even things like that that you probably wouldn't talk in general about or you would need to know people relatively well before you entered to that sort of level of discussion, at least when you are in the pub and you have had a half dozen beers for example ... so the guys seem to become a lot more intimate in that respect than they might normally, so there's a whole new environment which seems to develop.

I enjoy coming here because I have met a few people and they have taught me how to use a few power tools I didn't know how to use and its pretty enjoyable coming here, and coming and building things and taking home things.

I find in this place you get to meet a whole lot of very interesting people, especially the 'work for the dole' blokes because they're rotating all the time. I do stir everybody up which is really good fun. The other volunteers here are all very intelligent tradesmen, people who have been in the workforce for a long time and they actually pass their knowledge around between them, so there is no such thing as something that is too hard to do ... you just set the camaraderie in the place it's real good.

It's like joining another family, I didn't know any of these blokes ... but now they dive to the depth to defend you sort of thing ...

The main thing is the companionship just coming on a Tuesday morning, do a bit of wood work and have a yarn and discuss what you are doing and so forth.

I think there is a bit of a gap in the retirement years because when guys retire quite frequently they like to do things but they don't always know how and he is too busy at work to really have a shed of their own or tools that they like, but they don't know where to start and if you have got this available to them, they could come and make their own projects and they would learn and that would lift them up the ladder, but we haven't got that sort of facility, there is a bit of a gap.

Community

I was in the bank for 23 years and then I went to a furniture factory for 10 years but that was more the administration side. I did do a bit of wood machining and that so I am really learning as I go along as well, it's something new and I really enjoy it ... I mean I am designing new toys and that's because it is so different I guess ... and I make little toys for my grandchildren as well as I go along. The other thing I get out of it, I have raised three sons of my own and I just find that I think I relate pretty well to the 'work for the dole' lads and am able to talk to them about other things in life and hopefully help them along the way with life skills and give them some advice ... not just the woodwork side of things, I get into discussions with them and problems that they have in life and I feel I can pass a bit of that on. Then on the Friday when I come in we work with the Primary School children, well that's something special because they're children

and they have problems, I don't know that we will solve their problems, but on the day you feel that you are doing something good, hopefully something good will come out of it because they do slip back to the wrong way of life at home I think because they have problems at home a lot of them.

The VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning Year 11/12 school program] started with the Neighborhood House and they approached me [in the shed] and they had about 10 or 12 students and they were mixed boys and girls and I said 'Yes'.... the VCAL students are about 16 or 17 years of age ...When these kids started they had a lot of issues ... They wouldn't go to school, so they did have a lot of issues and a lot of the problems ... When they started the first week we didn't do much work at all, and the second week the same thing, they were down here for a day and they started to say things ... and I told them a bit about my history about being ex-prisoner ...

[The way we] support the younger generation is in the form of toys, toy trains, toy block pits, toy rockers or whatever and are given to (1) the orphan's school, other are pre-schools and primary schools and kindergartens. The guys do this because they see the end product of their work and where it goes and the benefit that those people get out of it enhances their enthusiasm to come in each week to produce these items. The other major contributor to this is the wheelchair project ... it's an idea from a man from Queensland Rotary Club, it's a simple construction of a box and frame made out of wood and two wheels and a dolly wheel, the wheel is held on by the rear part of a bicycle, an old bike. These wheelchairs aren't designed for Australian standards but they are manufactured by a number of different Rotary Clubs to go to third world countries ... third world countries the most recipient one is Cambodia and they're the children that have suffered land-mine fatalities and have had their legs blown off. From there they have branched to Timor for the same problem, and also with polio victims and I was told recently that they are going to Africa and Sudan for aid victims and also polio victims. The demand on this product, this wheelchair, is enormous, and I mean they want thousands of these things made. They are given to these people free. Rotary will subsidise the parts which we have to buy, as in wheels and nuts and bolts, and the timber is gathered ... it's a structural timber so it's bought cheap and our participation is to supply the bike part taken from bicycles that have been discarded in the community. This also involved the community as in the police, railway, Councils and just people living in the community to donate their bicycles to us knowing the cause that it is used for. So we have a storage area for the bikes which provides that part and we have also a new member come on board, Wattyl Paints, who now supply the fire engine red paint which covers the board so that they don't deteriorate so much overseas. The design is under refurbishment at the moment to a more streamlined product of just metal etc. The enquiry rate for this product is huge and we are constantly getting calls from the community who want (a) either to participate in some way as in the gentlemen who have heard about it and either want to do painting, mechanical, pull wheels apart or just people who

want to donate bikes or people who want to donate money towards the cause. It is a very popular project because there again the end user is the most heart-warming of all the projects that we have taken on at this stage. It gets a huge response right through to Government agencies.

I think they feel we are doing something worthwhile as well, like I am able to do jobs at home now that I couldn't before, odd jobs, just with things I have learnt from the volunteers here ... we have got a couple of good cabinet makers and I have put some shelves in some cupboard units at home that I wouldn't have been able to do before. Another thing I have just thought of since I have been here I am more aware of other community activities in our community that I may not have known about before ... there's lots and lots of different community functions in this area that otherwise I might not have been aware of.

To help improve the lives of the people in the community. Most of the people that we get in here to help have had it pretty bloody rough ... well from our life experiences we can help them a little bit and if we can guide them in the right direction which is what we do here, we are helping them towards getting their confidence to get jobs, getting confidence to actually talk to other people. We have had people in the 'work for the dole' thing here, they wouldn't say boo to a goose when they walked in here, and we couldn't shut them up when they left. So we have got that sort of thing where it is an ongoing friendly environment and non-threatening, and that's what they enjoy about coming here.

The satisfaction of actually making something for the kids, just to know that you have achieved something in a day and that it has gone to a good cause rather than to nothing at all ... just good satisfaction.

Just the experience in doing something and the satisfaction that you know you are doing something for someone else, someone else in the community.

Shed (as) Therapy

Oh yes, it has been very good, it is so therapeutic for me. I have been able to do things that I had no idea that I could ever do. For a start I have grandchildren and I am working on a land rover at the moment for my grandson and I built a Billy cart, I have two grandsons over here, my little baby grand-daughter, I built a dolls house for her, they love them, they treasure them, I get a lot of kick out of that, apart from the fact that it fills up my day beautifully and I am learning to do things which I then go home to my house and find that I don't call the tradesman to do things. I do them myself. You can bring a project into the guys, there's so much knowledge here, because people have all kinds of trade skills for carpentry and Keith has quite a few projects. Sorry I am taking up too much time.

I found when I retired I found a lack of companionship that you have in the office, you have got friends and people that you meet everyday and once you retire that

disappears and you don't have those contacts any more. So the Men's Shed gave me the opportunity to work with people as I did during my working life.

The big thing that we have done, we have done quite a lot of jobs for the community groups, like we made some tables for the Greenwich Computer Pals. Up in the Senior Centre they have a carpet bowling thing, we made some cupboards for storing that. We also run some special microwave cooking courses for the older people and we made all the storage for that and tables for the art place and a number of the Retirement Houses of course. So each time we have done this we had got a bit closer to the Seniors Group and the Retirement Homes so now we have got a pretty good rapport and that's one of the reasons why this Christmas party has blown out because we now get people coming from the Charity Library place and the Toy Library.

There is no other organisation I know that cater for men that want to mix with men other than those who go to hotels and drink and long before this Shed started blokes that knew I was at the Community Centre approached me and said their mates had all passed on and they were home with their wives and they don't go to the pubs and they have got nobody to communicate with but they didn't want to be with the over 60s and the other groups that they have there. They wanted to mix more and have open discussions with men on men's issues and there was no way of doing any of that sort of thing that was available ... that is exactly why the Men's Shed was formed was to create an atmosphere where men could do things with their hands and still communicate.

[The shed gives us] a sense of belonging, you have to remember that most of them are just one person by themselves or they are there with their partner, and that's the thing if they were just sitting at home and not doing anything, so what they are getting out of it is, how I see it, is participating with their peers. A lot of them have not got a lot of knowledge, people who have been involved in this, some are structural workers, ex-builders, a lot of people in business, a lot of people with various trades, so they pass that knowledge on and there's always people who absorb that knowledge. When you get a group together like that they work as a team and that is all part of the rehabilitation process for veterans, and be they younger veterans or older veterans they still need that, particularly amongst their peers. Then out of that of course leadership comes out of that too, the cream always comes to the top, you always get that, so somebody may come in and you think 'Oh average bloke' and then suddenly he's not average he has got some qualities that he can pass on to people, so that's pretty important.

Limitations

As pointed out in our introduction, we have deliberately chosen to avoid discussion about what our interviewees have said and have not drawn any conclusions. Our expectation is that by this point readers will have come to common sense understandings and made judgements

about community men's sheds as therapy, particularly about the health, friendship and community benefits based essentially on participant narratives.

There are several limitations to our method and presentation apart from the necessarily selective nature of the transcripts and the order in which we have edited and presented them. The main one we identify is that readers have much less knowledge than us, as interviewees, as to the contexts or settings in which the interviews took place. All of these interviews were with diverse but real people and interviewed in diverse but real shed settings. How you as a reader judge the veracity of our transcript selection against our selected themes depends on what you understand and visualise a community men's shed to be, the setting for the interview and the prompt question/s that led to your perception or mental picture of the person giving his account.

Garfinkel (1967, p.32) specifically recommends that ...

Any setting whatsoever can be analysed so as to uncover the ways in which the actors' actions affect 'choices' which propose what the sense, factual status, objectivity, causal characteristics, etc. of the setting and its constituent actions are. These characteristics can, of course, only be located *within* the setting because they are products of the action which are produced within it.

Garfinkel would stress, in the case of our paper, that making sense of what people say can only be properly interpreted if we also have adequate knowledge and make sense of the setting within which the narratives were produced. The irony of our ethical rules is that you are not to be told which particular shed we are in or who we are actually interviewing.

We acknowledge that we could have added some permissible objective details for each interviewee and shed (eg retired welder, age in 60's, single; former Vietnam veteran, with a disability, limited formal education; interviewed in rural men's shed adjacent to neighbourhood house). In doing so would add several other layers of information for each person and context. Again the details we add are selective. For the same hypothetical man, we could have added 'recently separated, undergoing medication for manic depression and counselling for family violence, recently completed return to study course', all of which may change the likely reader interpretation of the words we select, the stories people tell and their attitudes towards community men's sheds.

What we have tried to do in this paper is to highlight to you as readers, through the men's voices, a universal, common sense theme that overrides shed diversity, shed location or shed philosophy. This clear and reoccurring theme is associated with the health and wellbeing benefits of shed participation. Over and over in the data transcripts these benefits were discussed and acknowledged by the men as being tied-up with the experience/s of being a 'shedder'. This common and reoccurring theme is the universal dynamic that exists amongst and within the diversity of sheds and the men that find friendship, support and solace within them. The men who participate in community men's sheds, 'voice' and make sense of the benefits they experience and enjoy from participating in men's sheds through the enthusiasm that only *their voices* can convey.

References

- Chase, S. (2005). 'Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices', in NK Denzin & YS Lincoln (eds), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, Sage Publications, Thousand oaks, CA.
- Garfinkel, H.(1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Harvey, J. & Gleeson, L. (2007). *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide, www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1780.html plus Support Document <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr5011s.pdf>. Accessed 21 January 2008
- Golding, B., Brown, M. & Foley, A. (2007). 'Old dogs, new shed tricks: An exploration of innovative, workshop-based learning practice in Australia', Paper to AVETRA Conference, 11-13 April. Melbourne.
- Golding, B & Harvey, J. (2006). Final report on a survey of men's sheds participants in Victoria, Report to Adult, Community and Further Education Board Victoria.
- Hayes, R & Williamson, S. (2006). *Evidence-based, best-practice guidelines for Victorian men's sheds*, Report for Office of Senior Victorians, School of Public Health, Bundoora: La Trobe University
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*, Polity Press, Cambridge.