

6 Researching Men's Sheds in Australia: Reflections from the Antipodes: A European female visitor and an Australian male guide¹

Małgorzata Malec Rawiński and Barry Golding

6.1 Introduction

In Australia community learning takes place in different contexts to those in Europe, due to different sociocultural, ethnic and environmental conditions. Community Houses and Men's Sheds were "invented" in local communities in Australia to overcome the exclusion of local people of both sexes and to give freedom to actively shape and create new places that meet their particular interests and needs (Golding et al., 2008). We, European female researchers, Sabina Jelenc Krašovec and I, were interested to explore those communities. In 2017 we went to Australia to conduct research. Barry Golding as a resident Shed expert guided us and shared knowledge with us about the Men's Sheds. Our goal was to document, analyse and compare patterns of living and learning in different communities in rural and urban contexts in the state of Victoria, Australia. We were particularly interested, given our research interest in older men's learning, in the phenomenon of Men's Sheds as novel learning communities and sites of informal learning in Australia (Foley et al., 2008; Golding, 2015a; Golding et al., 2014; Schugurensky, 2006).

This chapter presents some findings of our research focusing mainly on presenting experiences of being visiting female researchers in a Shed community dominated by men. However, the part of the chapter, "Background and context of the research into Men's Sheds in Australia" is mainly based on Barry's Golding local research experience and knowledge. Thus, in the chapter we will draw attention to gender issues and also to the specifics of different communities (Men's Sheds) regarding social inclusion and learning, and especially in relation to Indigenous Aboriginal communities.

This chapter presents the results of the extensive five-week terrain research on community learning in Australia. The focus will be on multidimensional, life-based

¹ We acknowledge Sabina Jelenc Krašovec, Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. It is incredible sadness that Sabina cannot express her own experience and write her part of this chapter. Nevertheless, we will try to present it in this chapter as accurately as possible. Many parts of this chapter are based on Sabina's ideas.

learning, initiated and being present in everyday problem-solving and struggling for the better quality of life of community members. In our research we used an ethnographic approach, with the active participation of researchers and observation techniques, strongly linked with other qualitative methods (Hammersley, 1990). Data were gathered with the methods of visual ethnography, where we used ethnographic photographs of community life, based on different contexts and realities, and the personal life stories of older men.

Thus, the chapter is structured into three parts. The first part presents an objective perspective using knowledge and theoretical framing, based on a literature study on community learning in Australia with an emphasis on Men's Sheds – this part is written in collaboration with Barry Golding. The second part presents the findings from the collected data from visited Men's Sheds and other communities in Victoria, Australia and the third part covers a subjective, autobiographical perspective and the reflections of two European female researchers.

6.2 Men's Shed Movement as inspiration and frame for the research

Firstly, it is important to explain the meaning of “shed” in this context. As Golding (2015, p. 6) states, a shed in English-speaking countries refers to a building, room or garage, typically used by one man. The community version of Men's Sheds in Australia refers to places where men gather in groups and do things together. It involves a workshop space or a place where a man can go, typically managed as a stand-alone local community organisation, though sometimes in an auspice arrangement with another organisation. Men's Sheds on the Australian model are places and spaces for older men beyond paid work, where they can share their knowledge with others, learn new skills or improve old ones (Golding, 2015b). It is important to emphasise that many of the men involved in the activities are particularly lonely, marginalised and older. Some are from diverse cultural backgrounds or Indigenous, in non-hegemonic social, cultural and economic positions, but are equal and active as much as they want to be in the Men's Shed setting.

There are at least 2,700 diverse Men's Sheds around the world, and now approximately 120 Women's Sheds (Golding, 2021, p. 397), one half of which are in Australia, with another one thousand or so in the UK and Ireland. They cater for various men in diverse communities with different needs and goals (Golding, 2015b). Each of the Men's Sheds has a unique and individual agency, profile and mission. However, almost all Sheds are oriented towards practical, ‘hands -on’ skills and

activities with an underlying concern about men's health and wellbeing beyond paid work. Barry Golding (2015), in his book, *The Men's Shed Movement: The Company of Men*, provided a profound and comprehensive coverage of the Men's Shed Movement. The book was on the one hand an inspiration, and on other hand a theoretical framework for our research into Men's Sheds in Australia. The number of Men's Sheds open in Australia when we undertook our fieldwork (around 950) and the history presented by Barry Golding in his book made us, the female researchers, curious to explore this field. While reading "every man needs a shed" (Golding, 2015b, p. 104) we started to wonder: What does this mean in practice, and what is hidden behind this need?

6.3 Background and context of the research into Men's Sheds in Australia

An ethnographical approach was the best way to explore and gain an understanding about Men's Sheds in Australia, and answer our three underpinning research questions: "What kind of problems do the Men's Sheds face?", "How are they organized?", and "Who are the men who come to a Men's Shed?" However, beside those research questions, this chapter is driven by one more aim which is to present/share the experiences of being female researchers in a community of practice dominated by men.

We travelled to Australia for one month to conduct the auto/ethnographic research from the end of January till the beginning of March 2017. With Barry Golding's help as an expert on Men's Sheds in Australia, we were able to visit and research 12 Men's Sheds, mainly in the state of Victoria, which is the most densely populated but smallest state on the Australian continent. The state was inhabited by approximately 25 separate Aboriginal Nations until the White (mainly British) invasion and colonisation in the 1830s. Now less than 1% of Victorians identify as Aboriginal. As the "gate opener", Barry Golding introduced us to a wide range of Victoria Men's Sheds, mainly in rural areas around Ballarat and Melbourne, and also made it possible to spend several days researching the community and Men's Shed in the small rural town of Beechworth.

During our visit to Men's Sheds and various communities, we actively participated and observed. We combined discussion with unstructured interviews. We took field notes and photographs that become our main data sources. In the light of visual ethnography and visual sociology, photographs are important data for analysis. Photography as the mirror image of reality is used in anthropological and

social projects, which aim at showing differences between individuals and groups objectively (Banks, 2007). Photography was used to document a phenomenon or situation, or as a visual aid in the interviews, as is often used in field studies (Banks, 2007). The rich collected photographic data (around 400 images) allowed us to keep the field notes comprehensive, to provide some findings and reflect upon research experiences as female researchers of Men's Shed organisations and associated communities.

We visited/observed 12 Men's Sheds in Victoria: Beechworth Men's Shed, Creswick Men's Shed, Clunes Men's Shed, Newstead Men's Shed, Castlemaine Men's Shed, Melton Men's Shed, Brimbank Men's Shed, Hobsons Bay Men's Shed, Ballarat East Community Men's Shed (BECS), Buninyong Men's Shed, Sebastopol Men's Shed and Nazareth House Men's Shed. However, one community and its Men's Shed impressed us the most, Beechworth. One reason is that it was the first community and Men's Shed we visited and researched in rural Australia. The other more important reason is that our guide had organised for us to engage in the Beechworth community and its Men's Shed independently and deeply. Therefore, we briefly present Beechworth to provide background.

6.3.1 Beechworth community and its Men's Shed

Beechworth is a historical town located in the northeast of Victoria, where the major growth was during the gold rush days after the mid-1850s. It is a relatively advantaged, semi-rural community, recently identified as a good place for retirees from Melbourne to move to for what is called a "tree-change" (as distinct from the more common "sea-change", moving to the coast) in Australia. Several local Beechworth communities and projects cooperate with each other. One of them is Quercus Beechworth, established in 1985 by the Beechworth Neighbourhood Centre in partnership with Indigo Shire, Beechworth Correctional Centre (a low security prison), Beechworth Health, the Changing Mind project, the Men's Shed and Beechworth Urban Landcare and Sustainability. Another such project is the Community Kitchen Garden, which encourages people to come together to share food and conversation at Community Sharing feasts. In the neighbouring building is Quercus Community Bookshop, selling second-hand books, donated by the community. And next door there is a place for a Community Food programme helping everyone in Beechworth when organising events, like the Harvest Festival Dinner, the Flea Market, Lifelong Learning classes and workshops. It is open every day and supervised on a volunteer basis. In cooperation with all of those communities is Beechworth Men's Shed, a place which is deliberately male-gendered,

maintaining an open-door policy and not rejecting anyone on the basis of race, disability and religion. The Shed was actually officially opened with Barry Golding officiating in November 2011. It provides a woodworking and hobbies workshop facility and “drop-in” centre for men of all ages, as well as a safe physical and supportive social environment. The rights, decisions confidentiality and privacy of the participants are respected, and the Men’s Shed provides referrals to other services when appropriate. The men who participate in the Shed work mainly with wood, making some wood products, which give some money to help run the Shed, but also to spend their free time together.

Chris Brett, Secretary of the Beechworth Men’s Shed, has been there since the first informal discussions over a decade ago. Chris tells the story of how the Shed “ticks” as the Shed approached its tenth anniversary in September 2021:

Beechworth Men’s Shed began in 2011 in an auspice arrangement with the Beechworth Neighbourhood Centre, supported by the vision and commitment of its then Coordinator, Judy Lazarus. Our initial shed location was in rented premises of the former Ovens and Murray Hospital. In May 2014, after securing a building site and assistance from the Beechworth Hospital, a purpose-built (276 square meter) shed was erected in the hospital grounds. The shed construction marked the start of a very successful, mutually beneficial partnership between the Hospital and the Shed. Our Shed complex now consists of a large, fully equipped woodworking workshop, a recreation and games room with kitchen, billiard table, library and office, including computers available to members and for computer training. The toilets, washroom and shower facilities are all disability compliant. A large vegetable garden and a metal working area have been added since.

The Shed is managed by a member-elected committee. There is a workshop manager and a garden supervisor who oversees the garden beds, berries, grape vines and fruit trees. Several men with a disability regularly participate in the Shed, being fully included in all Shed activities and often driving the Shed’s agenda. Our Shed is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings from 9am to 1pm. While we did (unsuccessfully) try opening on Saturday mornings, revisiting this is under consideration as an opportunity to increase our membership with relatively younger men.

Our diverse, all-male 2021 membership is 40 plus. Some come just for a chat and to play a game of pool. Others do serious woodworking or gardening. Members pay a A\$50 annual membership, plus a gold coin attendance fee for tea, coffee, biscuits and usually a BBQ lunch twice a month. Fund raising is achieved through

activities that include repairs for locals (donations accepted) and making timber goods like chopping boards, animal shelters and 'Lazy Susan's'. We also make and sell fire poker sets and plant stands and construct items for land care groups including possum boxes. Recycling wooden pallets into kindling, sold through the local supermarket, is actually our main fundraising source, providing funds to meet a significant portion of our expenses.

We do valuable work in close collaboration with the local Corrections Centre via two main programs. The first, the Prisoner Integration Program, established via a Memorandum of Understanding with the Shed, aims to assist with the integration of inmates back into the community and society. Up to four prisoners attend our Shed each morning, and either make or assist members with various supervised tasks and activities. The second program involves supporting the prison community 'work gangs', who use the Shed and our facilities as their external base during the day. They also assist us with various skill-based tasks and have proven to be fundamentally important in our Shed's operations. Past prisoners often keep in touch with Shed members and express their gratitude for their time at the Shed.

As with many volunteer-run organisations, our biggest challenge is attracting office bearers. Another issue is recruiting new members. The increasing age profile of our members and their associated health issues and disabilities (and eventual demise) means we are constantly attempting to renew our membership base. Our community involvement remains very strong. We work alongside Beechworth Cemetery Trust, including refurbishing the seating. We work with Montessori and Beechworth High Schools, assisting with furniture and shelving. We work closely with many local service clubs, businesses, the Indigo Shire and tradespersons. To further enhance our local contribution we only use, where possible, local businesses for trade supplies and services. (Golding, 2021, pp. 96-97)

The idea behind this introduction to the Beechworth community, including the Men's Shed, is to illustrate some fragments of the field research in more detail.

6.3.2 Sebastopol Men's Shed

To provide a wider picture of the research field we decided to add one more example of a Men's Shed we visited, Sebastopol Men's Shed (Ballarat, Victoria). Sebastopol is a suburb of around 10,000 people on the southern edge of the large regional City of Ballarat. A determined group of local men combined with

Ballarat Community Health to initially establish the Sebastopol Men's Shed (SMS) in a well-located, empty warehouse. Les Shimmin, the long-time SMS President and one of the key Shed founders, tells the story of where it all started and how it has progressed:

The warehouse we moved into was essentially an empty shell, complete with concrete floor and broken windows. Repairs and renovations followed, with generous community support to set up and fit out the Shed. Operating for over four years in this location was difficult, but it provided us with the satisfaction of starting a Shed from scratch, resulting in a high level of comradeship and fellowship, and growing our membership. In the meantime, Shed members and the Committee sought a new, purpose-built, permanent building of their own. State and federal parliamentarians provided strong support with grants, helping promote public awareness. Essential support came from the local network of established Sheds, plus local businesses, individuals and Crowd Funding after an appeal on local radio.

Designs for the new premises were largely driven at the Shed level, leading to the construction of a facility to cater for a range of activities: woodwork, metalwork, mower maintenance, gardening, vegetable and flower growing and meal preparation. The process of setting up and moving into the new shed actually took four years.

The Shed is organised through cooperation between the Shed's General Committee, Ballarat Community Health as the auspice body and Ballarat City Council, with the umbrella support of state and federal Governments and the Australian and Victorian Men's Shed Associations.

Adequately resourcing our operation remains a perennial challenge. SMS depends on grants as they become available, membership dues, fund-raising activities such as BBQs and produce markets open to the public, donations, delivering paid-up government programs, and completing tasks requested by members of the public. The Shed is to a large extent self-supervised, working within standard OHS parameters, and within government regulations and council requirements, the latter being especially relevant in food preparation.

All men over 18 are welcome. Clearly, the focus is on local men. SMS has a broad approach reflecting the Shed's mission: to provide a safe space for men whilst supporting their health and wellbeing. Most of our 60 financial members are over

50, although we encourage men of all ages to join. Fellowship is the central pillar of the Shed, where members pursue a range of activities while enjoying each other's company. Members are free to participate, offer their opinions, and share in the 'ownership' of the Shed. The Shed is open for 5½ days per week. The new building is continually in a state of refinement and development, which involves resourcing challenges. Our Shed is successful due to strong, consistent and systematic leadership toward a common vision over several years. A desire to connect with and remain visible to the local community is absolutely essential. (Golding, 2021, pp. 94-95)

6.4 Findings: What we found out about Men's Sheds in Australia

Based on an analysis of the collected data (field notes, photos, unstructured interviews with some men), we found that each of the communities and Men's Sheds have their own specifics. Both Neighbourhood Houses and Men's Sheds are grass-roots organisations, and their activities are diverse and "bottom-up", depending on the needs, interests and input of members of the local community. Most Men's Sheds are built and equipped and run voluntarily by the men themselves. Men respect their own work and follow the rules. Some Men's Sheds actually have individual uniforms such as caps and matching overalls, that seem to be very important for building social identity and belonging. Each of the Men's Sheds follows very strict rules concerning the prohibition of alcohol. A kitchen is a very important part of the social side of many Sheds. It is where men can gather together, drink coffee or tea and talk. However, there are very strict rules on how to use a kitchen, such as cleaning, bringing in food or even cooking. At the front or back of each Shed there is often a Shed garden. The size of the garden depends on the interests of the men (colloquially called "blokes" in Australia) or the area available around the Shed. Any vegetables and fruits that grow in these are used in preparing lunches for shedders or given to the community if needed.

The purpose of the Men's Shed is to provide a safe, supportive and friendly environment for men of all ages to gather. The voluntary work gives them a sense of being useful, helpful, and needed. The blokes often play double roles, as informal teachers and informal learners. Each of them brings diverse but well-practised skills and a lifetime of experience to the Shed that can be shared with others. Anyone can teach or help others to develop skills. Some blokes simply come to a Shed because they are looking for fellowship with other like-minded men.

We discovered that a pool table, even a small one, is a “must” in many Men’s Sheds. It is a place around which men gather, talk and tell stories. One of the blokes (Beechworth Men’s Shed) said: “My experience was that a man, while we were playing, told me the whole story of being involved in a war [a] few decades ago, and how he later on escaped from that area.”

Most men, however, are not so keen to talk about their lives or experiences. As Barry Golding said in 2007 in his keynote address to the first ever national Men’s Shed Conference in Sydney, Australia, using words that have been adopted as the Men’s Shed mantra across many shedding nations, “Men don’t talk face to face, they talk shoulder to shoulder”, usually shortened to “Shoulder to Shoulder”, the title for Barry Goldings’ (2021) book. We can add that men talk when they want to share and when they feel comfortable without pressure. Storytelling happens “incidentally”, when men feel safe, and the story of hidden, unresolved worries and pain is told in some natural way.

We discovered the Shed means a lot to the men. They feel truly at home. It gives them a sense of purpose to achieve small goals on a regular basis. The social engagement of older men after their retirement from paid work, particularly with other men, is crucial to mental and physical health. As one of the blokes (Beechworth Men’s Shed) said:

Men love building things and solving problems; when a group of men work together, the collective group intelligence is huge. We can all learn from each other’s life journeys. Mateship and camaraderie are important to keep us all happy and feeling loved. Our wives love us being engaged in useful activity and enjoy the peace when we go to [the] Shed.

We found out that men learn a lot by being together and doing things together in the Shed. Learning in the Shed is based on problem-solving, and quite often is experimental. For some men, they claim the Shed “saved their life” after the death of a spouse. The Shed becomes the place where they can go, where they can talk with someone, do something and be with someone, not just sitting alone at home. In many cases, the home in Australia is still run in the traditional way: women usually take care of a household. When a man’s wife or partner passes away, he quite often is not able to cook or take care of the house. Some of the men felt lost without a sense of a future in life. In the Shed, they found that they could learn new skills, some of which were reserved only for women in their prior lives, like cooking, ironing, gardening, and, most importantly, to learn how to take charge of their lives, health and wellbeing and care for themselves. The Shed is a “safe island” for men where they feel equal and where their voices can be heard, or they can be silent if they need it.

While ageing, masculinity can be called into question by family members, friends or in the wider society. However, there is not just one form of masculinity. As Connell (1995) has argued, the concept of masculinity is played out or has been recognised in various ways, from hegemonic dominance to less powerful configurations of masculine practices, such as those of subordinate masculinities. In the Shed, the men's masculinities are reshaped by being and doing things together. The men share their worries, happiness, and sadness with others. In their own individual ways, they reflect upon their life experiences and give new meaning to their lives. We found out that the comradeship that the men build up in the Shed gives them a feeling of belonging and solidarity with other men. They support each other and create space where all men feel comfortable and at home. The rules of the Shed, sometimes the identity created by the uniforms the Shed provides, and also by the activities they engage in, are based on men's needs and interests, in turn empowering their social identity and masculinity. The Men's Shed encourages them to truly care for themselves as men, and also for each other, and in the process undertake countless good deeds for the community.

6.5 Discussion

Our research has shown that the environment of Men's Sheds and their activities helps to sustain the participants' wellbeing and to stabilize their mental, physical and emotional health. We conclude that men need a place where they can (re) constitute their masculinity. There is not one pattern of masculinity. In different cultures, the social positions of genders differ. Considering masculinity in the context of culture, we argue that the pattern of older men's masculinity is as diverse as their life experiences and is connected with their cultural, historical, educational and social background. Our research also showed that men, especially older men, cannot simply be reduced to their experience of ageing. They also carry some continuously (re)negotiated struggles with masculinity (Malec-Rawiński, 2019). While older men have much life experience, they need to learn to adapt and cope as a consequence of radical changes as they age. However they are much less likely than women to participate in formal adult educational programmes designed to teach skills. In essence, older men tend to avoid programmes that patronize or shame them for their lack of knowledge. They are not students, customers, clients or patients in the Men's Shed. They are equal and active participants in a powerful and transformative community of practice. Off-the-shelf, vocationally oriented adult education and training programmes are often perceived by many older men to be unattractive and totally unsuited to them (Golding, 2015a). Older people have different learning needs: to cope with new non-working identities, changes in

mobility, health, financial, and living arrangements, as well as changes in personal and family relationships (Golding, 2015a).

As we observed and as our Australian field research confirmed, most men need and want to learn, but not necessarily in cognitive, literary, and formally contextualised ways. Older men in Australia generally prefer to learn in familiar places and spaces, working hands-on with regular groups, focused on what they know and can do and share with other men (Golding, 2015a). The men also need to find ways to maintain the sustainability of their Sheds. Some of the Sheds produce wooden items which are then sold, while others do gardening, that gives them the opportunity to cook meals for those who need it.

6.6 Conclusion: Female researchers' reflections – double and single voices

Together with Sabina Jelenc Krašovec, I spent one month in Australia conducting research. As women, who are generally not present in Men's Sheds, we were invited and welcomed to 12 Men's Sheds over that time. We had a "gate opener", Barry Golding, who took us to these inspiring and unbelievable spaces and places – Men's Sheds in different communities. While being there, it became clear that without him we wouldn't have been able to get all this priceless knowledge, experience or data. Being a female researcher, it is not easy to get access to places like Men's Sheds without a man to help. Sheds are men's places: they arrange the space and set the rules.

Through this journey we learned not only about Men's Sheds in Australia, but also about the culture and history of the land. In many ways, Men's Sheds are a reflection of the nature of the communities in which they are deeply embedded. Visiting different communities, we were welcomed, quite often with regional food, and the most importantly we had chance to observe how they arranged the common spaces they share. The people who we met were mainly men, but quite often also the men's wives. Many of them (men and women) told us different stories, quite often very personal ones. This journey allowed us not only to conduct research and learn about the Men's Sheds, but also transformed our perception about the communities in Australia, the country "down-under", and about the people living there. That gave us an insight into the life perspectives, realities and life-paths of older men. What's more, we made friends. We appreciated every meeting, every talk we had the chance to experience. Thanks, blokes, for sharing your stories with us and letting us come close to you! We took a lot with us.

A few years have already passed, and it's unbelievable, but though I'm writing this reflection alone, I feel Sabina's spirit with me. In all those wonderful memories and experiences from life down-under is Sabina. I sense her incredible energy and passion for life and research. Without her I wouldn't have gone to Australia to conduct this research and wouldn't get to meet all those people, men from Men's Sheds and other friendly people. She was an engine who inspired many researchers. Sabina's inquisitiveness and power that was visible in her research and everyday life taught me to do what you have passion for. She was a strong and sensitive as a researcher and as a woman, and that helped us to visit all the Men's Sheds and meet so many friendly people. I understood/learned, that being a female researcher you need to have a female research partner for researching Men's Sheds. It is a lesson, like many others, I learned from Sabina while working with her, that will remain forever. Thank you, Sabina, for allowing me to do research together with you, and to be your friend.

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