Men Together
Questions of Men's Experience in Sheds

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The behaviour of men has long been under scrutiny in academia, focusing on the outward action of men throughout history without trying to understand the underlying psychological experience behind these actions. What is needed is to listen to the experience of those males who have come together in groups to seek out friendship and to instil meaning in their lives after a time in which the men-only group was deemed politically incorrect and the dangerous world in which misogyny and homophobia are born. What is presented here is a brief glimpse into the world of the Australian Public Men's Shed, a place for men to gather and socialize as well as work and organize for the greater community. Also presented are possible health benefits to the individual males as well as the community in which the sheds are present. By looking behind-the-scenes at the experience of the world of males, it is hoped that we will gain a better understanding of their fragile psychological and biological life. This in turn will allow for a more understanding discipline of study based around the complete human life. In the place of the Australian Men's Shed we begin to ask questions of what in

the world men are experiencing.

Key Words: men, men in groups, men's experience, men's sheds, male studies

It has been said, "Men in men's groups are men in bad company." Unfortunately, misandry[1] of this type is prevalent in literature regarding males meeting in groups. Sociological theories dominate the field of men's studies, observing the behaviour of males but never delving into the realm of their experience. A search of scholarly journals finds a strong divide between those who think that men in groups are responsible for war, rape, murder and a majority of the ills of civilization, and those who think that men's groups can be used to "cure" men before they do these things. Neither is a positive position for males and moreover groups of males have rarely been asked about how they see the matter. In these rare occasions of inquiry, ill-equipped observers or analysts have alienated males with research methodology and clinical practices originating in our apparent culture of misandry (Ashfield, 2011). Contrary to popular belief, males will talk about their personal experiences of the world but in a non-hostile environment and with people who are there to understand them. Frankenstein's Monster could hardly tell us what he was experiencing when the aggrieved community had already made their own determination of his intentions and the tools of understanding him were a pitchfork and a torch.

Misinformed by the bias these sorts of ideologues introduced (Nathanson and Young, 2001, 2006, 2010), in our western civilisation, men-only groups have become politically incorrect to the point where they are either disallowed or paradoxically, only allowed to operate if they include women. How can one allow males their own meeting space when the next despot is sure to arise from its depths? With this in mind it is perhaps beneficial to present evidence (hard evidence rather than psychological projections) that males in groups can not only be civilized and social, but also offer benefits to each other and their communities. In the seemingly unique setting of the Australian community men's shed, we may have found such evidence.

The community men's shed is said to have originated from the backyard shed or farm shed of rural Australians. The rural or individual shed was a space where a man was his own master, where he could retreat from his paternal, occupational and social responsibilities, where he could take solace in his own company or with that of a few, usually male friends, and engage in largely positive pursuits, tinkering, mending or building things. The shed is said to offer men "...a safety valve that allows the pressure of organisation, appearances and expectation of daily life to be released." (Thompson, 2002). The community shed, defined as a "...workshop type space in a community setting ... [that is] a focus for regular and systematic, hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men" is a space where typically older men gather to engage in workshop activities such as woodworking and perhaps most importantly for the company of other men (Golding et al., 2007). It has been called a place "...where retired men take advantage of the quietude to work yet not work" (Thompson 2007), in the company of other men. The homosociality of males – or "male bonding" as Lionel Tiger coined the term in *Men In Groups* (1969) – in such spaces may in fact benefit the community, since these settings offer the potential for the improvement of male social and emotional wellbeing, of physical and psychological health and for community (re)engagement (Fildes et al., 2010, Misan and Sergeant, 2009, Ormsby et al., 2010) The understanding of males' experience in these places may also lead us to further explore the oft misunderstood realm of men's intent or experience. This will require us to let Frankenstein's Monster speak for himself.

Who are the men in these sheds? The most useful profile of them was compiled in the Golding surveys of 22 men's sheds throughout Australia (Golding et al, 2006). A look at the report reveals that 89% of the respondents were 45 years of age or older and 47% were 65 years of age or older. Other important data indicate that 63% were currently married or with a partner, while 81% had been married or with a partner at some point; 79% were fathers and 57% were grandfathers. In terms of education, 39% had completed Year 9 or lower with Year 10 being the most frequent level of education (28%) attained. Upon leaving school 35% of the men had completed an 'apprenticeship or traineeship' while only 14% had completed a 'university or higher degree.' Most of the men pursued careers outside of further education, with 41% being qualified tradesmen, while others joined the military as 20% were returned servicemen. In general, sheds cater (but are not exclusive) to older men who had chosen careers that did not require higher education and who had eventually settled down to have a family. This provides us with a good beginning to understand something about the men who meet at sheds.

Most important we want to understand why men would want to come to a shed. Men are generally stereotyped as loners, who, by virtue of the power of their rugged individualism, are able to overcome any task thrown their way. Is this true, or is it a view of men that is produced by sociologists who describe males who seem to be that way? A look at an important facet of why men meet at sheds may provide a clearer understanding of what is going on in general with them. According to Golding, during the five years before joining a shed, 55% of the men had retired; 45% had had a major health crisis; 30% had experienced a new impairment or disability; 27% had experienced "an inability to get paid work"; 19% had separated from a partner, 11% from the family home, and 10% from their children; and 19% had experienced a financial crisis. Obvious overlaps occurred between the crises, but what the data tell us is that a majority of the men who came to the sheds had experienced a crisis or what in psychological terminology we refer to as an 'existential change.' An aspect, or multiple aspects, of their life and identity had altered substantially. After the experience of a crisis there is evidently a desire among men for male companionship such as that provided by a men's sheds.

This is not to say that a crisis or major change is needed for males to seek out the companionship of other males. This is most likely rooted in their evolutionary history. There is evidence that males have been forming groups since the proto-hominids and continuing on to the species *Homo sapiens*. It is very likely that males formed groups for the purpose of hunting when conditions required them to supplement the diet of their tribes or clans in addition to sustenance from vegetative sources. The wordless communication that men have between one another may also have developed on the hunt since they needed to keep quiet around prey and show others how to hunt simply through doing it. We see examples of this in the hand signals used on the sports field or in the case of one man showing another how to use a piece of equipment by taking charge and performing the action, instead of asking if he needs help.

Tiger (1969) makes a case for these hunting parties being the initial groups that over time formed the basis of our political, religious, sporting, and other groups. Thus, from an evolutionary perspective, it may be surmised that the formation of male groups is rooted both in the biology of modern males and from those original all or mostly male hunting groups (Marlowe, 2007). These traits perhaps also provide clues to the development of the sexual-division of labour and the need for both males and females to have segregated spaces or activities that corresponded with these divisions. Tiger has said that the process of male bonding or the way in which males choose their workmates is "analogous to sexual selection" and "that the bond established generates considerable emotion" (Tiger, 100). We see this in the (recently forgotten in the West) initiation/coming of age/manhood ceremonies that have existed for millennia in some cultures around the world for

males, which are similar to courtship rituals between males and females. This would postulate a similar function between a courtship ritual such as dating, where males and females begin the process of getting to know one another as well as ensure viability as a mate, and hazing, where males in fraternities or the office place tested whether incoming members could stand up to the rigors of either environment. Examples of the intimacy that developed between males in unisexual environments are usually from the military, prison, or even whaling ships, and abounded for a time in American 19th and early 20th century literature (Armengol-Carrera, 2009). These unisexual bonds were the "glue" which allowed for ever more complex groups to form within society. Tiger postulates that these groups were the "spinal cord" of society that provided the structural foundation for the beginnings of culture.

As noted above, recently much emphasis has been placed on the destructive things that males do in groups. We are sure to find literature that describes the corruption of all-male political groups or the violence of gangs of young males. Certainly these groups do occur and they do have negative effects upon communities both small and large. Women too have been shown to be corrupt, to bully and to demonstrate antisocial behaviour in groups but to characterize females in such a negative way is socially unacceptable and poorly tolerated.

There are corrupt political parties, usually comprising predominantly males, but that they act this way is an affectation of greed, avarice, the desire for power and the perception that collectively they are above the law, not because they are male. To say that the conduct of such aforementioned groups is a result of groups being comprised of males is sexist. Political office is a service to the public, but politicians are representative of our (collective) ignorance, not only our good intentions. Yes, there are male gangs but there are female gangs too. Gangs often are comprised of youths who are rejected by a social and educational system that is unwelcoming and prone to medicate or incarcerate rather than to graduate. Their actions are consequential of their environment not of their sex or gender. The criminals society spawns are the criminals it deserves, especially when we perceive an entire sex to be criminals in waiting. Yes, we are angry at Frankenstein's Monster, but we have remained ignorant of what created him. We have ignored the complex relationships between males and females of our species that began millions of years ago, preceded by an evolutionary process that began with life itself (Sykes, 2004). To ignore this in favour of purely sociological theories of male behaviour is to study a tree without studying the soil that it feeds upon, the light that shines on it and the atmosphere that it breathes.

It seems that the notion of males who meet in groups for what are deemed more "noble" purposes, is generally met with hostility from some outside observers. "Even (profeminist) men's groups have oftentimes been accused of excluding and/or ignoring women, thereby promoting more *male bonding and sexism* (emphasis mine)" (Armengol-Carrera, 200). He continues: "Predominantly heterosexual, anti-sexist men's groups have also been confronted at their national Men against Sexism conferences by gay men accusing them of heterosexism and of doing little to undermine gay oppression" (Armengol-Carrera, 201). It would seem that to their detractors the intention or aim of a male group is not questioned and that the outside perception of all-male (mostly or completely heterosexual) groups is negative regardless of whether they are gangs of hoodlums or feminist men looking to change the concept of masculinity. The stereotype prevails in either case, "men in bad company" indeed.

Misandry is prevalent in Western culture, although it is well-disguised. History was "*his*tory," or so it seems. More likely it is the story of a few groups of powerful men, men who have become the straw men, the affectation of which all males burn to this day. It is forgotten that society itself would not exist without the initial male bonding of hunting groups, the establishment of monogamy, and

the creation of the father. Fatherhood (Zoja, 2001) and monogamy are at risk of disappearing under a torrent of ill-informed criticism, along with the society that they created. Groups of males created and preserved civilization, (Gilmore, 1990) which in the West now allows the meek to survive by virtue of what the "strong" do. It is mostly groups of males that are sent to war to preserve human rights, democracy or freedom, who fight and die thanks to males and females who have chosen leaders who seemingly willingly send them to their doom. Groups of males sustain civilization through their work in the most hazardous professions, including law enforcement and emergency services or in industries that provide us with the creature comforts that are now often taken for granted. Ironically, groups of males also created the reproductive technology that allowed women to begin feminist movements around "My body, my choice." Yet some of these groups criticize that very technology and the men who freed them to effectively control the conditions of reproduction and make their criticisms in the first place. A more balanced view of how the sexes have interacted throughout the years will be beneficial to all (Farrell, 2001).

All this requires a study of macro as well as microscopic proportions, which is beyond the scope of this paper. What can be offered here is a statement that seems obvious in the experience of most people, that men in groups are more often than not a good thing – not only for the large-scale implications such as described above, but for also for benefits for community that come from men who group together in the space of men's shed.

Before exploring the experience of the men themselves, impact upon the community will be briefly assessed. Exploration into the benefits of the sheds for the larger community will have to be carried out on a larger scale as the shed movement grows, but initial small-scale reports are promising. "Sheds are seen as a community resource by many stakeholders. The sheds offer support for school resisters, young children, and men with disabilities both mental and physical" (Misan, 2011). Things made within the sheds go towards helping the elderly as well. Projects have been done for schools, libraries, childcare centres, hospitals, and aged care facilities. They have also organized local community events such as barbecues, tourism events, and local pageants. Interviews within the community of shedders revealed a mostly positive outlook:

- "...draws in people that are lonely, bored..."

- "...community more healthy..."

- "...great work done..."

- "...they do things for old ladies, provide help around town where needed..."

- "...community garden well known in the town ... sell flowers/vegetables..."

What of the positive experiences of males in groups? We have plenty of questions about male behaviour in groups and hopefully these will revive interest in questions of male evolutionary history and biology, but more importantly we need to ask questions about what males are experiencing. Until we allow males to speak for themselves and discover what it is that they are experiencing we will only continue to (mis)understand them in terms of questionable theories and projections. In Atticus Finch's famous plea for empathy he let us know that we will never understand someone "until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." If this is so then we have committed an egregious error against males, continuing to vilify them under false assumptions of patriarchy, male power and hegemony. In the so-called "war of the sexes" only one side showed up and dominated the conversations about sex and gender. It is now time for males to speak up and for all of us to listen.

We don our empathic shoes in the men's shed. The history of the shed offers us clues to the place it holds in the world of Australian men.

> In Australia a shed can be anything from a 'dunny-size' construction to an aircraft hangar covering an acre or two. A shed might be defined as a building outside or away from the main domestic living space. However, this doesn't go far enough; a rumpus room can demonstrate shed-like qualities, even though it's part of the house. Perhaps what really makes a shed a shed is the value placed on it by its owner (Thomson, 2002).

The key ideas to take from this are that the shed exists apart from the domestic living space and that it becomes a shed by virtue of the value the owner gives to it. We should keep this in mind as we move forward from the individual shed of Aussie blokes to the community sheds.

Firstly we shall look at the importance of the shed being away from the domestic space or main household. Being rural in origin, the shed has since made its way into the lives of Australian men from all walks of life. Males, whether they work on the farm, in a factory, or in the city, spend most of their waking time outside of the home. Traditionally, the home, domestic or private part of life, was the domain of women. When men returned from working all day it was to a world that may have been foreign to them, a world of routine they were not directly privy to, as well as to relationships with their children that were not as close as that of the mother who had spent more time with them. It may be an underestimated psychological factor that the men who returned from long work days away from home may have felt like strangers and alienated in the house. It would be a mistake however, to think that the shed was a way for a man to completely escape his family, for although it is his domain it remains close to the family unit (Thomson, 2002). Thus the shed could be that sanctuary from the stresses of the public work place and the alienation of the private home space. That the shed exists away from or outside of the home is psychologically fascinating, since it represents a different place of being in the world for the male.

The shed is a middle ground between the public and private. It is representative of a male attempting to maintain his individuality in the face of its loss in both spheres, for each shed is as unique as its owner. The lone shed, not quite here or there, full of spare parts of no seeming consequence save to its occupant and full of an apparent chaos that only he can discern with any understanding, is his world. It is a shaman's hut on the outskirts of town where when some piece of equipment or appliance needs repair, he can heal it with a method only he knows as a product of his creativity and ingenuity and then safely return to work in the mundane world he seeks respite from. It is also a proving ground, but not to others, since he answers only to himself there. He proves to himself again and again through his agency that he is different from the women and children in his home, and that he is not dependent upon them for his survival, as he was when he was his children's age. He has made it sacred ground. To others it may be a room full of junk, but to him it is one of the most valuable parts of his world. (Thomson, 2002)

If this romanticisation has not turned you sour then we are perhaps making progress in our understanding. The sheds most pertinent to this paper are the communal sheds that men attend. The history of the sheds, with their rural and individualistic origin, must be kept in mind as a vital part of their psychological history, but they have taken a new form in the present day. The community sheds were established by grassroots organizations in their respective communities and are diverse in their development, structure and function. They have a common purpose in that they provide a space for men (Misan, 2011). As was stated above, the sheds provide a safe space for men who have undergone drastic changes in their life, but also for men who are looking for camaraderie. Groups of men have always been important to society and no doubt have been important to the men who com-

prise these groups.

In a study of sheds in rural South Australia (Misan, 2011) several factors were found to be nearly ubiquitous among men's reasons for visiting a shed. Most of these reasons coincided with a desire to improve their social and emotional well-being. Social well-being could mean anything from feeling more accepted in the community to actively working towards improving the community through shed work. Emotional well-being was measured by categories such as "get[ting] a sense of belonging" and "feeling better about oneself." The interest of the study was to see if sheds could promote better health in males. Given that social connectedness, security, and control over ones circumstances are important social determinants of health, it is not a stretch to see that the improvement of male social and emotional health is a benefit to the community at large. One of the key observations of the study was the literature positing a correlation between a lack of social connectedness and morbidity and mortality.

Of significance to the Men's Shed movement, is a growing body of evidence to support the premise that lesser social connectedness is associated with poorer health outcomes. Conversely, having increased social supports is associated with better mental and physical outcomes. For example in a 10 year follow-up of The Australian Longitudinal Study on Ageing (Giles et al., 2005), investigators found that stronger friendship networks are associated with lower levels of mortality. Similarly, having close friends and relatives was found to be predictive of better physical functioning in older women in the American Nurses' Health Study (Michael et al., 1999). Likewise, greater social networks and the corresponding improved emotional support improved cognitive function in older men and women in the MacArthur Studies of Successful Ageing (Seeman et al., 2001).

These findings are important for the many older retired men or unemployed men, where social networks are limited and the resulting social isolation can lead to diminished social and emotional well-being and reduced physical and psychological health and where coming together with other men in a shed environment may promote friendship and social support (Misan, 2011).

Mentioned previously was the concept of existential change and how men who had experienced a crisis or major shift in their experience of the world had sought out the camaraderie of the sheds. This is consistent with the Golding et al. (2008) report. Others who joined the sheds expressed a desire for camaraderie as well. Consistent with this desire is a need to be validated as a human being and to have purpose in one's life. From an existential viewpoint these two factors are important in maintaining one's psychological and physiological health. The medical evidence that is in the study supports this (Misan, 2011).

In males who have experienced an existential change, whether it is loss of job, retirement, death of a partner, or divorce, there may be a need to establish a new way of experiencing the world with the assistance and camaraderie of other males with whom they can share experiences. In the case of employment related issues, a man can have been so associated with his profession or workplace, that upon losing it, he may have difficulty adjusting to life and himself outside of this association. This could be exacerbated by an increase in hours spent in the household, difficulty integrating into the routines of the partner and children, as well as social isolation caused by a loss of friendship networks from the workplace. The man may become an obstacle in the way of domestic life and feel increasingly alienated from his partner and the home that they share. This may lead to becoming more closed off or adopting a silent and serious demeanour.

With respect to the ramifications of losing one's partner through divorce or death, males have been shown to fare far worse than females. It is evident that since females are more likely to have strong social networks, they can deal with the loss of a partner more easily than a male who has depended solely on his wife as his social and emotional network (Zwicker and DeLongis, 2010). Even for males who are seen as "hard" emotionally, the impact of losing one's partner should not be underestimated. Even if the emotional side of life was minimal, a partner and children represent who he has worked for throughout his life as provider. The loss of a person with whom his experience of the world was so firmly tied may leave him feeling lost or even more alone. Especially among older males it has been shown that if the partner dies, the man is soon to follow (Bowling, 2009). An inability to cope with change and its stresses, especially later in life, may have negative repercussions for the health of males.

The change of experience in the world and a sense of purpose in the sheds along with the mutual validation of males possible there may be the greatest benefits they provide. As was seen in the report by Misan (2011), socialisation was perhaps the most consistent reason voiced why the men attended a shed. The most valuable part of this socialisation is the ability for the men to establish or maintain an experience of the world with other men that is more in harmony with how they feel, without having to play roles, such as "Employee" or "Boss" or "Father." In this case I think that "boys being boys" is the best scenario for them. In interviews with some shedders various thoughts about benefits were voiced:

- "… reason to get out of bed in the morning …"

- "… makes you feel useful again…"

- "… gives you a feeling of self-worth …"

- "… feels like I'm back at work again, but better …"

- "… sense of pride …"

- "… sense of achievement …"

- "… sense of belonging … to something good, useful …"

- "… gives me something worthwhile to do …"

- "… am doing something for/giving to the community …"

I think we would be well served by trying to understand the subjective experience of these males while being a part of the shed community and how it can lead to better health. Our understanding will be further deepened by studies into how the social determinants of health, such as losing one's social network, affect the male. We can see that in male-friendly environments such as the sheds the dissemination of health information to men is easily achievable, dispelling notions of males not caring about their health. Further understanding of the link between emotional well-being and health will be useful for further study. Examples of the shedders speaking for themselves are few to find at the present moment, but studies such as those of Misan (2011) and Foley, Golding, and Brown (2008) are good places to start to read about men's experience in sheds. The benefits of the individual shed to Australian men are documented and stories of alienation and the darker side of the individual sheds also exist (see stories such as "Men and their sheds: the dark side" in Thomson, 2002). As sheds move into the wider community and as they gain interest in other countries such as the United King-

dom, Ireland, and New Zealand we will have to begin a new study of the benefits of sheds and the experience of males who visit them.

Questions remain. For example, what does the start of this shed movement signify in the lives of men who know about it? Males in the Western world since the end of World War I have been subjected to some of the world's worst horrors on the battle front as well as being marginalized in the home front. Our culture, from politics to the media, is filled with misandry, sending messages of "not welcome" to males both young and old. The male, lonely and alienated, may be awakening once again to the possibilities of his banding together with his fellow men. As we heard from Tiger, males have banded together since the dawn of Man and it was their engaging in an aggressive process that built, maintained, and at times partially dismantled civilization. In the banding together of males in various groups such as the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (Bly, 2004) and College Men's Groups in North America (Kellom & Groth, 2010) as well as the Men's Sheds in Australia, we are seeing males young and old coming together once again for the company of other men. They come together not to be corrected or fixed, but to be able to express themselves to other men while not having to fear being judged.

It was not my hope that this small essay would answer many questions, but only lead to raising questions, in turn leading to exploring more diverse avenues of thought. The study of the male has only just begun and in studies such as those of Misan, Golding and Tiger we are just scratching the surface. It is fitting then that we end with another question. As civilization continues to falter, what is it that brings males together to work and play beside one another as they did when they were boys?

Footnotes

[1] Misandry is the hatred of men. The more well-known counterpart is misogyny, or the hatred of women.

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