



# Men's re-placement: Social practices in a Men's Shed



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## ABSTRACT

Transitions into retirement can be difficult at the best of times. Many men find themselves having to reflect on who they are and what their lives are about. Their access to social supports and material resources are often disrupted. Men's Sheds offer a space where retired men can actively pursue wellbeing, and respond to disruption and loneliness through emplaced community practices. This paper draws on ethnographic research in a Men's Shed in Auckland, New Zealand in order to explore the social practices through which men create a shared space for themselves in which they can engage in meaningful relationships with each other. We document how participants work in concert to create a space in which they can be together through collective labour. Their emplacement in the shed affords opportunities for supported transitions into retirement and for engaging healthy lives beyond paid employment.

## 1. Introduction

Men spend a large proportion of their lives in paid employment, where identities are developed, material and psychological resources are secured, meaning is often found, and social networks are developed (Barnes and Parry, 2004). Paid employment often provides patterned social environments through which men become emplaced and bound with others (Allen, 2011; Thrift, 2000). A job typically provides opportunities for monetary remuneration, societal contributions and the structuring of daily life (Barnes and Parry, 2004). Paid employment also provides many men with crucial social spaces and structure(s) that offer a sense of purpose and belonging within society. Positive paid employment can be approached as an arena within which men can experience social support, form attachments, and experience emplaced belonging (Barnes and Parry, 2004; Ormsby et al., 2010). Although some men may look forward to ceasing labour obligations tied to employment when they retire, doing so can mean walking away from settings and structures that grant men access to social, health and material resources (Barnes and Parry, 2004; Nicholson, 2012; Pease, 2002). For many ageing men, retirement can bring about disruptions to their relationships and identities.

This paper explores the ways in which a group of older, retired men (re)construct personal, yet shared selves through emplaced and embodied social practices at a Men's Shed in Auckland, New Zealand. As communal spaces, Men's Sheds offer settings where men can meet regularly to socialise and work on projects—typically wood-

work and metalwork (Ballinger et al., 2009; Golding et al., 2007), while learning from and supporting each other (Golding, 2011), and contributing to local communities (Morgan et al., 2007; Vallance and Golding, 2008). The social makeup of individual Men's Sheds often reflects the grassroots nature of the Shed movement. Each Men's Shed tends to be established in accordance with the needs of the communities in which they are developed (Glover and Misan, 2012); thus each differs in structure, purpose, and activity (Golding et al., 2007). The sites themselves come in a range of forms and may take the shape of church halls, barns, learning centres (Golding, 2006), unused school classrooms, or purpose-built workshops. Men's Sheds provide space, tools, and equipment with which to complete projects, and usually an area to socialise in (Golding, 2011). For many participating men, Men's Sheds are places they can enjoy the company and camaraderie of other men, and make new friends (Ballinger et al., 2009; Golding et al., 2008). By participating in Men's Sheds, men come into contact with a diverse range of people that they might not otherwise encounter or choose to associate with, and many enjoy doing so (Ballinger et al., 2009; Golding et al., 2008). Such Sheds comprise safe spaces for positive gendered interactions in retirement, and comprise responses to men's desires for connection and companionship with other men in later life (Golding et al., 2007; Skladzien and O'Dwyer, 2010). Men's Sheds can be approached as community responses to older men's disenfranchisement in retirement by offering spaces where older men can address issues such as loneliness and social isolation through shared practices. We document how men who participate in a

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particular Men's Shed reflect on their past experiences of paid employment and related identities whilst engaged in material practices that draw on skills they obtained through previous employment. We demonstrate how these men re-anchor themselves in the world of retirement and in doing so make a new place for themselves. The men who participate at the Men's Shed North Shore call themselves 'Sheddies' and will be referred to likewise in this paper.

In order to conceptualise the study, we draw on related scholarship in the areas of social practice (Dreier, 2009) and the dialectics of place (Massey, 2005). In recounting the significance of the Shed and the experiences of men located within it, we invoke a nexus of social practices that exceed the materiality of the place, the material objects used and created, and the men that populate it. Social practices comprise routine and shared forms of human action that encompass the use of particular material objects (Dreier, 2009). For example, objects such as tools exceed their instrumental purposes becoming implicated in how men come to see themselves, their purposes and place in the world (Hodgetts et al., 2017). Tools and the practices within which they are entwined become metonymic markers of work histories, skills and identities. We will document how, through their use of specific objects in the Shed, retired men can realise themselves as purposeful, interconnected and emplaced beings in retirement (cf., Heidegger, 1927/1973). Through their interactions with material objects, retired men can cultivate agentive strategies for responding to disruptions that come with retirement and literally co-recreate a place for themselves to be together. As a place, the Shed is personally and collectively constructed dialectically through social practices of occupancy, cooperation and dwelling, and the relations of the men who populate this place (cf., Massey, 2005). We are interested in how men become embroiled within and create the Shed for themselves.

## 2. The present study: research setting and process

The site for this research was the Men's Shed North Shore in Auckland. The Men's Shed North Shore is situated at Elliott Reserve, Glenfield, on Auckland's North Shore. The 2013 Census data indicated that Glenfield's income, age, and gender statistics are largely reflective of the greater Auckland region (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.). The median income for Glenfield residents aged 15 years and over was \$29,300, compared to \$29,600 for the greater Auckland region, with 38% receiving an annual income of \$20,000 or less (compared with 39% for the greater Auckland region), and 25% receiving an annual income of \$50,000 or more (compared to 29%). In regards to age demographics, 10% (431) of Glenfield residents were aged 65 years or over (with roughly equal numbers of older men and women) compared to 11.5% (162,788) of the greater Auckland population, which is, again, reflective of the greater Auckland region.

The Men's Shore North Shore was inspired by the Men's Shed movement, which has provided social and health benefits to communities of ageing men (Golding, 2011). At Men's Sheds, construction projects are used to facilitate activities and social connections. Central to our ethnographic (Whitehead, 2004; Willis and Trondman, 2000), case-based approach (Hodgetts and Stolte, 2012; Radley and Chamberlain, 2012), the first author engaged in the material practices of the Shed, which provided an entry point and helped the first author to build rapport with Sheddies and cement his membership in the Shed space. Such an orientation afforded insights into processes of replacement and belonging in the Shed. Labouring at the Shed with others is not just about creating objects or achieving outcomes, it is about engaging in mutual practice, co-operation, and engaging with other men.

Fieldwork took place over a 14-month period (March 2012–April 2013). This work focussed on the first author's participation-observation and sustained social contact (cf., Willis and Trondman, 2000) to explore the taken-for-granted activities and engagements of participants' everyday lives at the Shed. Participant-observation notes were

**Table 1**

Participant information (at time of stage two of the research).

Participant	Participated in group discussion	Participated in interview	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
Dave	✓	✓	74	Employed part-time	NZ European
Deasy	✓	✓	82	Retired	NZ European
George	✓	✓	82	Retired	NZ European
Jerry	✓	✓	81	Retired	English
John	–	✓	–	Retired	English
Rat	✓	✓	67	Retired	NZ European
Ross Mc	–	✓	–	Retired	NZ European
Ross M	–	✓	–	Retired	English
Skip	✓	✓	67	Employed part-time	NZ European
Tuatara	✓	✓	62	Self-employed	NZ European
Mike	✓	–	–	Retired	NZ European
Fred	✓	–	75	Retired	South African

recorded in a journal by the first author at the end of each participation day. Themes and issues constructed from journal entries were explored in more depth through interviews and a semi-structured focus group discussion with twelve men (7 participated in both the group discussion and an interview; 2 participated in the group discussion only; 3 participated in an interview only). The first author conducted the interviews and focus group discussions. Actual names of participants involved in the group discussion or interviews were used where they requested we do so. Six participants requested pseudonyms and not all provided details about their age. Gleaning demographic information was difficult, as many participants did not return consent forms, preferring instead to provide verbal consent, which was audio recorded. The ages, ethnicities, occupations at the time of the research, and aspects of the research the participants engaged in, are presented in Table 1. Many Sheddies who participated at the Shed declined to take part in interviews or group discussion for this research, but were more than happy to chat informally and be observed in the Shed. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato.

In the initial stages of this project, the first author participated in the building of the Shed and witnessed bonds between Sheddies develop and grow through their participation. Fig. 1 shows photographs of the Shed at various stages of its development, from concrete slab to internal fit-out by a core group of Sheddies. The photographs in Fig. 1 represent a transformation of the Shed's physical space, the interior of which was completed by its members, the Sheddies. As the physical structure of the Shed took shape, it provided the material means by which Sheddies developed relationships. The photographs depict not just the evolution of a physical space, but also point to tangible evidence of the relationships that made it possible, and which endured long past the completion of the Shed. The Shed itself is not simply a product of Sheddie labour, but offers a visual demonstration of their solidarity and collaborative effort. The development and modification of spatial arrangements at the Shed renders visible the dynamic interplay between the social and material in the Shed, and their mutually defining nature (O'Donnell et al., 1993).

The internal physical space of the Men's Shed North Shore (see Fig. 2) houses the gathering of men interested in shared social and physical activity. The collection of machinery for woodwork and metalwork projects renders visible the expected material practice that takes place at the Shed. The open-plan setup and shared workstations in the workshop further imply the expectation of collaboration and open observation.

On visiting the Shed, one's attention is drawn to the objects (see Fig. 2) that are used to participate there both physically and socially. Such objects, associated practices and the Shed space, provide reflec-

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