

## How the Men's Shed idea travels to Scandinavia

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*Australia has around 1,000 Men's Sheds – informal community-based workshops offering men beyond paid work somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. They have proven to be of great benefit for older men's learning, health and wellbeing, social integration, and for developing a positive male identity focusing on community responsibility and care. A Men's Shed is typically self-organized and 'bottom-up', which is also a key success factor, since it provides participants with a sense of ownership and empowerment. Men's Sheds are now spreading rapidly internationally, but the uptake of the idea varies with the local and national context, and so too may the consequences. Our paper describes how the Men's Shed travelled to Denmark, a country with considerably more 'social engineering' than in Australia, where Sheds were opened in 2015, via a 'top-down' initiative sponsored by the Danish Ministry of Health. Using data from the study of the web pages of the Danish 'Shed' organizations, from interviews with the central organizer, and from visits and interviews with participants and local organizers at two Danish Men's sheds, we describe how the idea of the Men's Shed on the Australian model was interpreted and translated at central and local levels. Preliminary data indicate that similar positive benefits as exist in Australia may result, provided that local ownership is emphasized.*

**Keywords:** men's sheds, institutional theory, informal learning, masculinity, gender, older men's well-being

### **Introduction**

Commencing in the late 1990s, by late 2016 around 1,000 community Men's Sheds had opened in community settings across Australia, with a further 350 now open across Ireland, 300 in the UK and 70 in New Zealand (Golding, 2016). A community Men's Shed is a physical place and organization which offers men, mostly older men beyond paid work - retired, unemployed, or with a disability – somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to, as conceived by the late Dick McGowan in Tongala, Victoria in the very first *Men's Shed* in 1998. The most common activity is wood- or metalworking, but can also involve whatever activities men decide upon, such as game playing, cooking, gardening, singing or working with computers. Men's Shed organizations typically also contribute to their local community by, for example, building playgrounds for children.

Men's Sheds in Australia, and to a lesser extent also in Ireland, have been well researched, and found to greatly benefit men's health, wellbeing, and social integration, through informal, practical, and social learning in a local community (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007;

Carragher, 2013; Cavanagh, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2014; Golding, 2015). Sheds have shown to be health promoting: participating in social activities and practical tasks has positive health effects in itself, and participants further encourage each other to take care of their own health to a greater extent by, for example, better diet and exercise habits (Williamson & Ford, 2007; Morgan, Hayes, Wilson, Cordier & Wilson Whatley, 2013; Haesler, 2015).

Other studies have found that Sheds work well for integration of men from different ethnic enclaves, or for reaching excluded groups (Misan & Sergeant, 2009; Carroll, Kirwan, & Lambe, 2014). Boys at risk have found refuge among older men who have acted as mentors (Cordier & Wilson, 2014). Sheds have also been shown to develop a positive male identity focusing on responsibility and care for others and self, making men relinquish the idea that masculinity necessarily equals strength and invincibility (Golding, 2011; Haesler, 2015).

There is, hence, solid evidence of positive individual as well as group level effects. Cited studies indicate success factors on the organizational level. The first factor is the relative absence of women, which for the older men participating in Sheds creates a relaxed, open, and forgiving atmosphere. The second factor is the focus on informal, practical and social learning as opposed to formal learning with teachers and a curriculum. The third factor is that Sheds are typically organized 'bottom-up' that provides participants with a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Golding's analysis of Men's Sheds globally to 2014 (Golding, 2014b, cited in Golding 2015:403) concluded at a mega level that Men's Sheds:

... are in part about older men working to build a more human and democratic society without exploitation and exclusions; ... affirming older men as learners and active beings in the process of becoming; ... creating spaces of dialogue and participation and the construction of popular power through democratic organizations and coalition.

Men's Sheds are at a practical and community level organizations that have the ability to informally recreate salient aspects of men's former workplaces, which for many ease the sometimes difficult transition from paid work to retirement (Gradman, 1994). Studies focusing directly on organizational aspects of Men's Sheds are few, however. An exception is an Australian study of the Men's Shed coordinator's role, which showed that the provision of functions such as scheduling, recruitment of volunteers, peer training and development, or the maintenance of health and safety standards was instrumental to the many positive benefits that the participants reported (Cavanagh, McNeil, & Bartram, 2013).

The present paper focuses on how Men's Sheds have travelled to Denmark. More specifically, we compare the organizational conditions for Sheds in Denmark and Australia, and highlight the experiences of the Danish participants. Denmark has a different institutional set-up from Australia, which will most likely create different conditions for the organization of Men's Sheds than experienced in Australia. Gender roles may also be differently configured in the two countries, which might have consequences for the idea of a separate Shed for men. Denmark has a Scandinavian (bigger) welfare state, with considerably more of 'social engineering' than in Australia. Even if all Scandinavian countries have been affected by neoliberal

influences, Denmark's welfare state model is still social democratic in Esping-Andersen's (1990) terminology, in which the state (as opposed to the market in the Anglo-Saxon, liberal model, or the family in the conservative model) takes the main responsibility for welfare provision for its citizens (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Men's Sheds in Denmark were initiated from above by the Ministry of Health, rather than from below, which is actually anathema to the success formula for Sheds as developed elsewhere. As Glover and Misan (2012:71) put it, 'men come together in men's sheds not to be corrected or fixed, but to be able to express themselves to other men while not having the fear to be judged.' The establishment process being mainly bottom up makes the experience both empowering and transformational for men.

Our paper asks several related questions related to international translation, including: 'How is the Men's Shed in Denmark organized?', 'Which of the original ideas have travelled and transferred well?', 'Which ones were changed?', 'What Danish circumstances have necessitated such a change?' and 'Are the effects and the success factors the same as in Australia?' By studying Men's Sheds from an institutional theory perspective and in a trans-national context, we aim to make a valuable empirical contribution to organizational research on the Men's Shed Movement, and, by implication, on the organization of older men's informal learning and wellbeing.

The paper is organized as follows: We begin by presenting our theoretical framework including a description of some of the salient organizational and contextual factors of Men's Sheds in Australia which will serve as the base line for comparison. We then detail the method and the material. The results section then describes the organization of the Men's Shed in Denmark, along with information on key institutional differences between the countries. The paper concludes with a comparative analysis as well as conclusions and implications regarding the resilience of the Men's Shed model in different institutional and national contexts.

## **Theoretical framework**

We interpret our material using institutional theory (Veblen, 1926; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Douglas, 1987; Selznick, 1996). An institution is an action pattern with a normative explanation, which provides an interpretative frame for thought and action, both inhibitive and enabling (North, 1990). Scott (1994, 2001) divides institutions in three components: The *cognitive* dimension consists of taken for granted views of "how things are". In Sheds, this might be ideas of meaningful activities for men or women, or old or young. The *normative* dimension consists of social norms and values. Examples in the Shed might be norms on how to relate to each other, or about how to organize a Shed. The *regulative* dimension consists of laws, rules and policies, but also of control and evaluation systems, and how these are created and maintained. Danish regulations may, for example, force the Sheds to change the original design in order to comply. Institutional theory would say that Sheds in such case become *co-opted*.

Whereas institutional theory is generally interested in why things tend to stay the same (Selznick, 1996) Scandinavian institutionalism has instead focused on change (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). It holds that institutions travel and spread through a process of *translation*. The theory predicts that when an idea travels from one context to another, the idea will change depending on how the local actors (re)interpret it, but the idea will also change the local actors (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Consequently, we study how the Men's Shed and the movement travelled to Denmark and how it has been translated in the Danish institutional context. To further clarify the interpretative framework: an institution is not an organization. The institution decides the 'rules of the game', the organization and its members are its 'players' (North, 1994). But the organization may, while playing the game, change the institution.

Consistent with institutional theory, gender (or masculinity/femininity) is seen as an accomplishment (Butler, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987), or even an institution, with cognitive, normative as well as regulative dimensions (what a man "is", what a man "ought to do" and possible accompanying regulations).

### **Key organizational features of Men's Sheds in Australia**

The most important features in Australian Men's Sheds are, according to Golding (2015:13), the following:

- *First*, by using gender stereotypical activities, they attract men, particularly older men and men beyond paid work, to help them become empowered and look after themselves, each other and their community.
- *Second*, the service provider is put at arm's length. The men are active and equal *participants*, they are not patronized as clients, customer, patients or students, by service providers, teachers, (or women).
- *Third*, they are organized informally, and bottom-up, which, according to Golding, can be 'anathema to increasingly top-down, outcome driven service organizations and governments'.

In essence, the formulae is: no (or very few) women, no (or very few) authorities, and a relative absence of predetermined target goals, prescriptions, or measurement. In terms of adult learning, the pedagogies are distinctively and deliberately informal, without teachers, curriculum or assessment but involving informal mentoring in men's communities of workshop-based practice, leading Golding (2014a) to playfully but purposefully propose and define the term *shedagogy*.

There are other movements that have become transnational in adult and community education and turned out to become gendered. Mechanics Institutes and Workers Education Associations (WEAs) both started in Scotland in the 1820s and later became very popular in Australia, mainly for men. More recently, the 1970s neighbourhood houses and community centres have proliferated within Australia, in practice catering mainly for the interests and needs of women. The U3A Movement began in France with an academic emphasis in 1973 and has since been

translated into quite different, community based self-help organizations in many countries, again mainly for women.

Men's Sheds are different from these earlier movements in that they unashamedly have a clear and overt gender dimension. Whilst in Australia, the decision about whether and how some women might be involved (or not) is made at the organization and community level, the participants of most Australian Men's Sheds are only or mainly men. In Denmark, the authority that has created the *Mænds Mødesteder* model has decided it is a men's only place and space.

The development and proliferation of Men's Sheds and the associated movement as an informal community intervention, in Australia and in other mainly developed Anglophone nations to 2015, need to be understood in the context of the general failure of institutional and community-based adult education to reach some men. McGivney (1999, 2004), researching in the UK, was the first to seriously suggest some groups of men were effectively excluded and missing from adult and community education and to suggest an adult learning gender divide. Golding, Mark and Foley (2014) identified particular issues for mainly older men beyond paid work, and concluded that 'Certain forms of education can (and do) have the unintended effect of turning men and boys away from learning, thus adversely affecting men and their families' (p.256). Further, they concluded (p.256) that men of all ages who stand to benefit *most* from lifelong and life-wide learning are those least likely to access it, particularly if it is packaged and presented in a way which is overly formal and patronising based on deficit models of provision.

*Some* organization is, of course needed to get a group together around a common activity, and there are both state and national associations providing advice, support and group insurance for Men's Shed-based organizations in all countries where Men's Sheds and a national movement are firmly established, specifically in Australia, Ireland, the UK and New Zealand. The Western Australian (state) Men's Shed Association (WAMSA, 2016) has the following advice for anyone interested in starting a Men's Shed: First, gauge the local interest, for example, through a local newspaper article. Then advertise a local meeting, in cooperation with, for example, the Local Government Council and a Rotary Club, and form a steering committee and later an incorporated association with the people who attend. Look for funding from your local council or from any of a list of charitable or interest organizations. That's about as far as the advice goes. The rest, finding a Shed, fixing it up, raising the funds and organizing the activities is completely up to the local members to find out and do. As will be discussed below, the Danish Men's Sheds followed a quite different route.

## **Method and material**

We use a case study approach, piecing together a rich description by using information from several different data sources (Stake, 1995). Our data comes in part from the study of the web pages of the Danish 'Men's Shed' organizations (*Mænds Mødesteder*, that roughly translates into English as 'men's meeting places'). We also draw on interviews with the central organizer, and from visits and interviews with participants and local organizers at two Danish 'Men's Sheds', here

labelled Shed 1 and Shed 2<sup>1</sup>. The authors spent a day at Shed 1 and at the newly opened Shed 2 in October 2016, accompanied by the Danish national coordinator. One of us also visited Shed 1 along with the national coordinator just after it opened in September 2015, and have maintained communication with the coordinator since then.

At the Sheds, we had informal conversations/interviews with the participants, with the local chairmen, and with the municipal contact persons. We were further given the opportunity to observe the activities taking place during our visits. Conversations were not recorded, but notes were taken and observations were discussed among the researchers.

Websites analysed were: Men's Health Society, which initiated Sheds in Denmark (MHS, 2016); The central web page for the Danish Men's Sheds, which has basic information as well all links to reports and other relevant websites (Sundman, 2016); Newspaper articles describing the movement's reception in Denmark; and, the sites of the two Danish Sheds that have built their own websites (linked from Sundman, 2016). The websites were visited in November 2016. General information on Danish institutions comes from official statistics and relevant literature, cited in the text.

## **Results: Men's meeting places in Denmark**

While the Australian Sheds were started by grass-roots initiatives, the Danish Sheds were initiated top-down, with a specific, instrumental purpose in mind. Motivated by Danish men's consistently lower life expectancy and significantly higher rates of depression and suicide (MHS, 2016), the non-profit organization *Men's Health Society* was started in 2004, with the purpose of developing knowledge about and organizing activities around Danish men's health. The society initiated a *Forum for Men's Health* which is a partnership with over 40 partners – professional interest groups, unions, businesses, patient organizations, research centres, counties, municipalities, and media organizations – all with an interest in improving men's health (Sundman, 2016).

Forum for Men's Health employs a small staff. They obtained a large grant from the Ministry of Health and other public sponsors to start Men's Sheds in Denmark. They developed a logotype consisting of two men in silhouette, standing 'shoulder to shoulder' (the motto for Men's Sheds internationally) and forming the letter M. They specifically targeted older, lower-educated men who, according to one of the initiators, psychologist Svend Aage Madsen, are likely to be single, have unhealthy life-style habits, and tend to avoid health care professionals (DR, 2016).

In December 2016, twelve Danish Sheds were in operation and five more were planned. Typically, the national coordinator would find a local contact person in a municipal care organization to help set it up. The local contact person would locate a suitable facility, often a municipal building no longer in use, or a privately owned

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sheds' and 'Men's Sheds' when capitalized are used interchangeably throughout our paper.

building over which they would take a lease. The municipal contact person would help recruit participants as well.

At Shed 2, the contact person simply put in an advertisement in the local paper. No one came, but after the second advertisement, the person to become the local chairperson and champion of the Shed showed up. 'What attracted you?' we asked. 'Well, the wife saw it, and thought that this might be something for me, so she sent me' he replied. This is a rather typical answer – some men need considerable encouragement to take the step and join a Shed. The members of Shed 2 planned to arrange an exhibition at the yearly 'cultural night' event in the municipality to attract more members. A local politician was also present during our visit. He said that the reason the municipality sponsored a Shed was to improve quality of life of its senior citizens while saving taxpayers' money. 'The cost of a Shed promises to be very low in comparison to what we can save on elder care,' he argued.

Once members and a facility were secured, the first task was to fix up the house. This is something that the men did themselves, using the skills and resources they had at hand. The fixing up turned out to be a major shed-based activity in itself, thereby creating many of the same positive benefits as in Australia – friendship, camaraderie, a sense of being useful and valuable, and a common community purpose and benefit.

Each Danish Shed is organized as a non-profit association, with a board, a chairperson, secretary and cashier. A pattern similar to the one in Australia emerged: one or a few very resourceful men saw great pleasure in organizing meaningful activities for other men. The person responsible for setting up a web page in Shed 2 said that he and his wife were members of many different societies, but the other ones did not offer him the opportunity to take responsibility for a meaningful task – they were perceived as "mere socializing".

The chairman at Shed 1 is a former project manager of a large industrial company who spends more than 40 hours a week volunteering for the Shed. He has raised considerable sums for the Shed in sponsorship money from local businesses or organizations, which has paid for the restoration of the building and for a very well equipped workshop. But other members were more on the receiving end. A member of Shed 2, old and rather frail looking, said that he was very happy to come to the Shed and just sit and chat.

In Shed 1, activities going on during our visit were aspects of woodworking – the men made outdoor furniture for day care centres. They also undertook computer training and played cards. A group of men were busy in the kitchen cooking lunch for everyone. Other activities on the schedule were painting, taking walks, fishing, excursions, or playing darts. They were also in the midst of constructing a petanque court for those not able to take long walks.

The around 40 participants, all men, were, as far as we could judge, retired from paid work. The chairman told us that being only men, and doing something together in a supportive and non-threatening environment, was instrumental to opening up themselves. 'The first day they stand shoulder to shoulder, working, with their

attention to the task at hand. The next day they continue, but start talking to each other, and the third day they see each other in the eyes and begin to talk like a woman', which in his interpretation meant talking about health and personal matters. Likewise, getting older men to visit a health care centre was difficult, he said, but when a nurse visited the Shed, they all lined up to get their blood pressure taken.

Some of the participants echoed this sentiment: they said that the Shed, after a while, allowed and provoked conversations about health and personal matters, perceived to be unusual among men. They could have conversations without the initial detour of 'talking about cars'. One of them pointed out that the Shed freed his wife of some of the responsibility she used to assume for her husband's wellbeing. The men in the kitchen cooking lunch said that they did not want women there. 'They would just take over and decide how to organize the pots and pans', they claimed. The women would thus, in effect, disempower the men.

The rules for the Danish Men's Sheds are available at the central web page. They state that *Mænds Mødesteder* are non-commercial meeting places for men over 18 years, where they can engage in meaningful activities, together, at their own pace and in a safe and friendly environment. Everyone is welcome and considered an equal. Men are invited to exchange knowledge and experience and to realize their potential together with others. Sheds are defined as being democratic, non-political and non-religious. Alcohol or drugs are not allowed, and smoking must take place outside. During our visit, we observed a brochure for Shed 1 that basically reiterates these rules, but in a friendlier and more inviting manner.

The non-drinking policy was particularly effective. Denmark has a strong drinking culture (World Health Organization, 2012), particularly among men. Socializing normally takes place around alcohol. Our interviewees reported that by socializing without alcohol, they learnt that this worked well, and the habit spread to other social contexts.

While our study is too limited to be evaluative, our conversations with the participants appeared to indicate similar positive results as reported in research from Australia or Ireland. They showed us, with great pride, the many different things they had built and designed. They obviously liked being there, together, and they were clearly proud of their Shed that they had so visibly transformed into a pleasant and well-functioning facility.

### **Comparative analysis and discussion**

Judging from this small case study, the Danish Sheds seem to deliver some of the same benefits as in Australia. But do the same organizational principles apply? The first principle, a men-only environment, applies in a very similar manner. This indicates that the institution gender, which we assumed would be different in Denmark due to its position as one of the most gender equal countries in the world in terms of factors such as women's participation in the labour market, in higher education, and in national and local government, as well as the generous parental leave system and fathers' up-take of this (UNdata, 2012), is not that different, after

all. Part of the explanation might be that the demographic that the Sheds cater to, older, former workers, (and most likely also their partners) were raised during a time when women had traditional, and secondary positions and roles. Most likely, they have also spent most of their working lives in gender-segregated jobs in mainly men-only work environments. Using the terminology of institutional theory, even if the regulative environment for gender relations had changed considerably since the mid-1900s, this does not affect retired men very much, and their cognitive and normative conceptions of gender tend to be conservative.

One could speculate that this might change in the future. Men's Sheds *might* be a time-specific solution, perfectly adequate for older men in Denmark at this time, but maybe not when today's young and middle-aged men grow old. While it remains to be seen, the gender order is typically resilient to change (Ahl, 2007).

The second principle, that the service provider is put at arm's length and that members are active and equal *participants*, and not patronized as clients, customer, patients or students, by service providers, teachers, (or women) seems to apply as well. This is very surprising, since the Danish Sheds are actually the result of a carefully planned men's health intervention, with health experts, national and local government, municipal health care and a host of other organizations backing it, clearly expecting a pay-off in terms of better health and lower health care costs. Unexpectedly, the national and municipal coordinators are women. A top-down initiative interested in a measurable pay-off is also anathema to the third principle, that Sheds be organized bottom-up and not be subject to any specified target goals.

So how come it seems to work anyway? The explanation might be that the staff from Forum for Men's Health began by visiting the International Men's Shed event in Ireland in 2014. Men's Sheds in Ireland had developed very close to the Australian model. This visit created a very clear understanding of the critically important fundamentals of Men's Shed organization. The Danish national and municipal coordinators are helpful at the start, but after the starting and member recruitment phase, the Sheds are expected to become self-sufficient. In effect, they have followed a similar formula as recommended by the Western Australia Men's Shed Association cited earlier. The coordinators further assume a background, service position rather than as leaders. They are not involved in the daily activities of the Sheds. Leadership and self-governance is expected from the participants. Sheds in Denmark are still in their infancy, and not all of them work as well as the two we visited, according to the national coordinator, so it remains to be seen if the organizations will become self-sufficient and sustainable in the long term. Given the organizer's primary motivation in finding an efficient, as well cost-effective way of improving men's health, it also remains to be seen if Sheds in Denmark will receive continued sponsorship should the expected benefits not materialize.

In terms of institutional theory, the regulative dimension was no obstacle. Denmark has suitable organizational forms for Sheds in the form of widely accepted, non-profit, voluntary associations, and also a purposeful system of public financing for men's health interventions. There are no legal obstacles for forming a men-only organization, and apparently no cognitive or normative ones either. But in terms of the cognitive and normative dimension, Sheds are a challenge to received ways of

organizing public health interventions. It is not done in the normal, top-down manner. Instead of changing the Shed concept, it might be that the carefully crafted introduction of the Shed in Denmark challenges accepted ways of how to carry out a public health intervention – at least for older men.

Men's Sheds in Denmark are new, and evaluative studies will be needed in this and other new national contexts to draw any conclusions regarding their effects as a public health intervention. This Danish study, the first in a non-Anglophone nation, has shown some promising results, however. Foremost, it has shown the importance of keeping the original Shed organizational model as intact as possible when adapting it to a new context. In essence, it is the organizational principles that make Men's Shed work.

Men's Sheds as a grassroots initiative, traceable back to the opening of one prototypical 'The Shed' in Goolwa in South Australia in February 1993 (Golding, 2015:49-58) and one Men's Shed in Tongala, Victoria, in July 1998 (Golding, 2015:114-27) has become a successful and still expanding international movement, first in Australia and more recently in Ireland, the UK and New Zealand and very recently to Denmark, Canada and Kenya. Golding (2015:34) examined evidence for the spread of Men's Sheds within and beyond Australia to 2015 and concluded that the same preconditions:

... population ageing perceived problems with men's health and wellbeing, disengagement of men from the community beyond their paid work lives, inability of conventional services to reach men and reluctance to engage in later life learning ... have encouraged subsequent adoption of Men's Sheds (including innovation and considerable reinvention) elsewhere in Australia and in other countries.

By late 2016 there were at least 1,800 Men's Shed organizations across the globe in at least 10 countries, with around one new Shed opening somewhere in the world on average each day. The initial success of this translation to Denmark as a non-Anglophone nation is an illustration that even without the iconic, Anglophone term 'shed' in the organization name, it is possible to at least start a small number of Sheds in new national and cultural contexts via an initial, short term, top-down national policy and funding initiative backed up by a strategy for medium and longer term independence and self-sufficiency.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Using the institutional theory metaphor of translation, we conclude that rather than translating the Men's Shed concept into something else as a result of its journey and translation from Australia to Denmark, it has travelled rather unchanged. The gender dimension travelled seemingly effortlessly. The other dimensions required adaptation on the part of the founders, and its travel might change the cognitive and normative dimension of the institution "how to design a public health intervention". The underpinning reasons why the Australian model has gained such traction appears to lie in the close fit between the social and wellbeing needs and interests of mainly older men beyond paid work and the grassroots fundamentals of the model.

It is difficult to predict whether and to what extent the Men's Shed model will be attractive and successful in other national contexts. However, concerning that men's health and wellbeing statistics in many areas of central Europe parallel widespread rural population ageing, low literacy in later life and low adult education participation rates for older men beyond work, it seems very likely that several other Men's Sheds interventions on the Australian model will follow beyond the recent Danish adoption.

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