

MEN'S SHEDS

Debbie Mulligan

dmull02@gmail.com

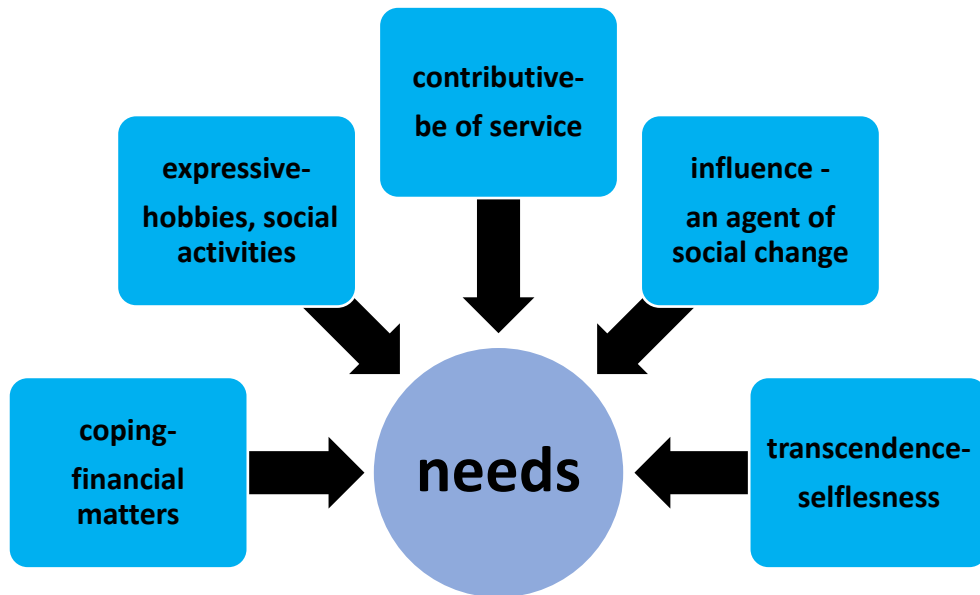
“Time to find a new freedom”: TOMNET and Men’s Sheds - Meeting older men’s contributive needs in regions within South East and South West Queensland, Australia?

Background

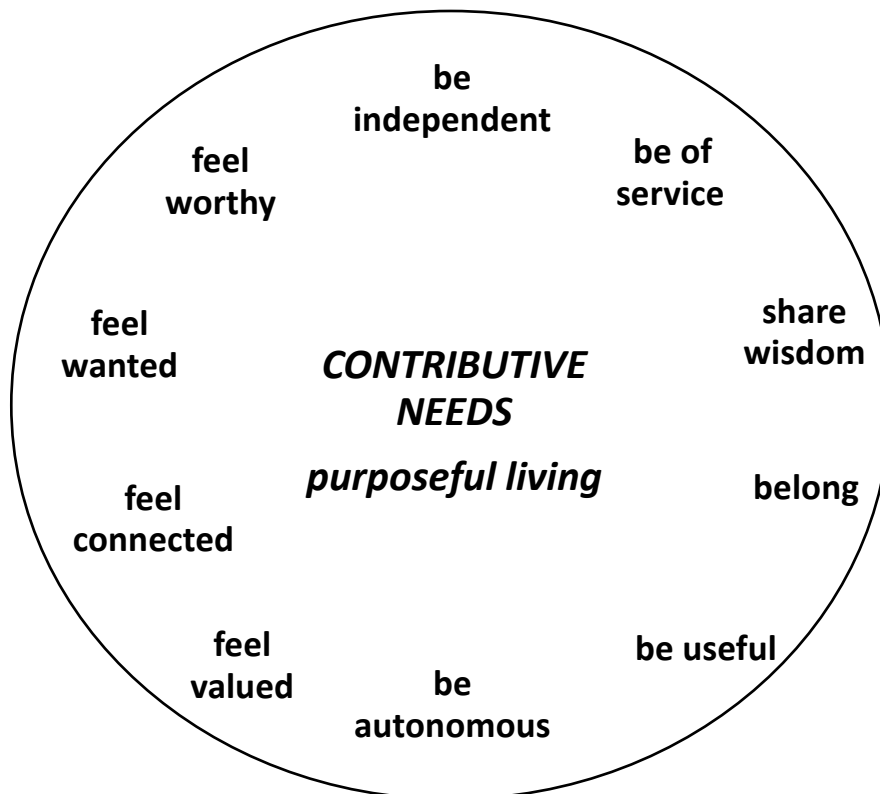
- Every day in the year 2016, more than two Australian men aged over 50 took their own lives (n=806). Every day in the year 2016, more than one Australian man aged over 60 took his own life (n= 464).
- Globally, men over 85 have the highest suicide rate of any demographic (mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-suicide/facts-and-stats, 2017, n.p.). I refer to these as ‘**silent statistics**’.
- It is possible, and indeed probable, that suicide ideation is inextricably linked with the unfulfillment of an older man’s contributive needs.
- The aim of the research was to uncover the relationship between these two factors – i.e., suicide ideation in older males (men over 50) and how this may be related to their contributive needs not being fulfilled.

Contributive Needs

Howard McClusky (1974)



Older Men's Contributive Needs and Identity Framework (conceptualised by Deborah Mulligan)



Research Questions

1: How does the TOMNET and Men's Sheds' organisational leadership seek to implement the design of their programs and philosophies so that they best fit the contributive needs of older men?

2: How have the members of TOMNET and Men's Sheds experienced and engaged with their programs and philosophies vis-à-vis members' contributive needs?

3: To what extent are TOMNET and Men's Sheds important vehicles for the sustainable delivery of the contributive needs of older men in the community?

Data collection-

- 3 TOMNET groups and 9 Men's Sheds-
- survey, interviews, focus groups, archival documents, reflection journal, fieldnotes

Themes-

- ETHOS: male-only culture, grassroots organisation, anti-deficit positioning of older men, community capacity building
- STRUCTURE: aims and goals, leadership, program implementation
- MEMBERSHIP: wellbeing, connectedness

Research Question 1: organisational leadership

Both organisations **structured their programs around the needs and interests of their members.**

Both demonstrated a dedication to **supporting and empowering older men.**

Both emphasised the **need for a designated space of their own.**

Both exhibited a **common ethos of men working together.**

Both upheld a **commitment to connecting older men with their peers.**

Both fostered a **culture of connectedness and mateship.**

Both stressed **the importance of grassroots organisation.**

Both delivered **an alternative reality to the negative stereotypes surrounding older men.**

Both had **clearly defined philosophies and expectations.**

Both organisations **emphasised the cultural elements of caring, purpose, learning, enjoyment and order in their leadership styles.**

Research Question 2: members

Men's Sheds provided an avenue through which older men were afforded opportunities, and actively encouraged, to work together in an altruistic manner - helping one another, member to member, and helping the community at large through volunteer work.

Over 90% of respondents in each group indicated that they **felt comfortable** speaking with other members who understood their problems.

94% of Men's Shed members indicated that their knowledge and experience were **valued** by their group.

99.5% of Men's Shed respondents indicated that they felt welcomed in their groups.

Over half of the respondents from both groups felt that they were **ignored by their communities prior to their membership of that group**.

Almost all of the respondents indicated positive responses to **feeling that they belonged** and to having their contributive needs met through their participation in these groups.

The importance of the psychology of allowing new members to take the time to become acquainted with other members was acknowledged.

82% of Men's Shed respondents felt that they made **useful contributions in their community**.

Some respondents were concerned about the **lack of contact between groups set up for older men**.

Men from the same generation were able to share **commonalities of values** within their group.

75% of the respondents from Men's Sheds indicated that the **community understood** the purpose of their organisation.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they **understood why their group was formed**.

88% of Men's Shed respondents were **proud** of their achievements since joining the organisation.

99% of Men's Shed respondents indicated that they **benefitted from the programs** offered.

The **sharing of problems** through formal and informal conversation occurred in both organisations.

The **significance of human contact** through informal conversations was highlighted in both groups.

The importance of **sharing life stories** and socialising was recognised by both organisations.

99.5% of Men's Shed respondents indicated that they **felt welcomed** in their groups.

The notion of **working together to help one another** was validated.

Research Question 3: sustainable delivery

BENEFITS

Men's Sheds **challenged accepted societal truths and assumptions** around what it is to be an older, retired man.

Both organisations provided an opportunity for older men to **interact with like-minded peers**.

Programs in each group were delivered with **flexibility**.

Both organisations allowed older men agency in **countering the assumptions of masculine stereotypes**.

Both organisations **recognised the importance of member input** to sustain interest.

Both organisations worked collaboratively to foster **visible and active volunteer engagement** in the wider community.

Both organisations provided two forms of community capacity building: **group fellowship** within the boundaries of the organisations' headquarters, as well as building **positive wider community relationships**.

The commitment to the shared vision and ideals ensured **continuity of core values and goals**.

Both organisations provided an avenue for **social bonding and a collective identity**.

Leaders in both organisations **enacted the core values** of each organisation.

Membership of both groups had the right to elect their board members or executives. This provided **flexibility of leadership positions**.

The importance of **lifelong learning** is recognised and validated.

BARRIERS

The **average age** range of both groups was 70 years.

Owing to the smaller member numbers of regional and rural affiliations, **membership may wane**.

Both organisations were prey to the **community's lack of understanding** and wrongful public misconceptions.

The prevalence of the political **'one size fits all' model of health promotion** affected the organisation.

Men's Sheds were susceptible to the **funding whims** of government.

Grant writing was a lengthy and complicated process.

Both organisations were **prey to political expediency** and the whims of governmental foci.

Some Sheds were not afforded cooperation from the local councils and encountered barriers in the start-up process.

Broad recommendations for policy

Rich data have been mined from Men's Sheds in Australia and globally but is it data that the men can use and/or are interested in?

- It is an exciting time for Men's Sheds in Queensland with the executive changeover in QMSA. This signals an evolutionary phase of Men's Shed that may take the membership in a new direction more suited to the community of Men's Sheds in Queensland and other states in Australia. Complimentary research needs to be conducted.
- It would be beneficial for governmental policy makers to direct public discourse away from the scaremongering rhetoric of portraying ageing as a medical problem and a drain on public coffers.
- Politicians should concentrate on the benefits of an ageing population and actively encourage older Australians to join community groups such as TOMNET and Men's Sheds.
- Local, state and federal governments could revise funding models in favour of these not-for-profit groups. Short-term, piecemeal, drip feed and trickle-down funding modalities mitigate against the optimum functioning of organisations relying on government assistance.
- Not all psychologists and social workers demonstrate understanding of how to go about interacting with older men. It is timely that these service providers were given specific courses on gendered and age appropriate counselling.
- More practical knowledge of gender differences should be included in university courses. Older men should be invited to speak in lectures and be engaged in online course interviews. Professional educators across all fields and disciplines should be encouraged to act as agents in the promotion of the awareness of older men's issues.
- This study is important for both genders as more women are taking up the challenge of a long career.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the men and women who have participated in this study.

It was such an honour to work with all the TOMNET and Men's Shed members and administrators, past and present, who contributed to the making of this thesis.

Thank you for your vision, generosity and spirit.

“IN THE END,
IT'S NOT THE YEARS
IN YOUR LIFE
THAT COUNT.
IT'S THE LIFE
IN YOUR YEARS.”

-ABRAHAM LINCOLN


FRANCISCAN
MISSION SERVICE

