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Impact of Men's Sheds on Social Participation and Health Outcomes

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Abstract

This paper will explore the concept of a community-based organization, known as a Men's Shed. The purpose of the research is to determine the positive impacts the North Belfast Men's Shed has on social participation and overall health outcomes. The key factors observed in this study were the safe environment, camaraderie, social acceptance, and variety of activities the shed offers. The study included a sample of 11 men primarily over the age of 60. At the time of the study, all of the men were retired or unemployed and came from diverse occupational backgrounds. A set of semi-structure questions was used during the interviews to gather information regarding reasons for joining, specific activities, feelings of connectedness, relationships with other members, and impact of shed participation on health outcomes. A thematic analysis was used to break the interviews down into common themes and patterns among the participants. This analysis led to five categories: socialization, motivation related to self-care, self-worth and purpose, companionship, and enjoyment. All of the men in this study reported some positive benefit as a result of attending the Men's Shed in each of the five categories. This study's results displayed similar findings to other studies on this organization. As an understudied concept in the United States, more research needs to be conducted to provide further knowledge of the community-based model. Loneliness and depression are conditions that many older adults face, which is where this organization could be of assistance. Implications to occupational therapy practice include: provide a safe space for older adults to engage in meaningful occupations, find a common ground to make the therapy experience enjoyable and effective, and present an open line of communication to address health issues.

Keywords: Men's Sheds, North Belfast, social participation, health outcomes, occupational therapy

Introduction

Older men face a number of challenges related to help-seeking for health problems compared to women. These include social isolation, loneliness, and an unwillingness to share health problems with others. Research indicates men experience poorer health and well-being when compared to their female counterparts (White & Holmes, 2006). On average, women live five years longer than men, and this greater longevity may be due to heart attacks, cancer, and stroke, which are all more prevalent in men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). There are a variety of possible factors to address the disparity of health between gender. These factors may include, but are not limited to, males' perceived help-seeking behaviors, masculine traits, disinterest in their own health, and limited health literacy (Wilson & Cordier, 2013). Additionally, White and Holmes (2006) point out that women may have more social support systems when compared to men. Men are also more likely to lack necessary quality social connections as they age (Hayes & Williamson, 2007).

One of the most promising models for addressing these health factors is a community-based organization known as a Men's Shed. A Men's Shed generally takes place in a community setting that allows men to engage in a variety of meaningful occupations. These activities vary from each shed and may include woodwork, refurbishing old appliances, making items for charities, gardening, pottery, artwork, and various other social outings within the community (Wilson & Cordier, 2013; Moylan, Carey, Blackburn, Hayes, & Robinson, 2015). Men's Sheds typically attract older men, but can include any age range. As noted by Moylan et al., (2015) this concept originated in Australia, where there are approximately 650 sheds and an estimated membership of 125,000 men. A few other countries have since adapted the idea, including New Zealand, England, and Canada (Moylan et al., 2015).

Ballinger, Glenda, and Verrinder (2009) explain that the activities in a shed provide a sense of purpose and autonomy, connect men of all ages, transcend class and other social differences, and can become the primary source of activity for men. Men's Sheds are not for men to escape reality or get away from people, but they are specifically designed to increase interactions with other men (Hayes & Williamson, 2007). This concept is relevant since many men who participate in Men's Sheds are experiencing issues related to significant change, including aging, retirement, isolation, disability, unemployment, and other health related factors (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007). Men's Sheds offer a safe and reliable outlet for men to move at their own pace while engaging in desired leisurely activities. Past research, primarily in Australia and Ireland, has indicated that men look to enhance their psychological health, well-being, and social participation (Golden et al., 2007; Ballinger et al., 2009).

Although past research has indicated positive health benefits accruing from participation in shed programs, the exact mechanism that results in these outcomes has been understudied. The purpose of this study is to explore the specific factors associated with Men's Sheds that indirectly promote health and well-being. Of interest is the degree to which the safe environment, camaraderie, or social acceptance provided within the shed culture promote positive health behaviors and improved social participation.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in a Men's Shed located in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The Irish Men's Shed Association, which represents both Northern Ireland and the Republic, has grown rapidly to 350 sheds with approximately 10,000 men attending weekly (Belfast Telegraph, 2016). This study involved a convenience sample targeting men age 40 or older who spoke English. The Human Subject Institutional Review Board approved all

documents prior to initiation of the study. The director of the Men's Shed assisted with recruitment, announcing the study to participants and posting a flyer on the weekly bulletin board.

After signing informed consents, study participants were interviewed by one of three researchers. All members of the research team were trained related to the interview process, including confidentiality. A set of semi-structured questions was used during the interviews. These questions focused on reasons for joining, specific activities, feelings of connectedness, relationships with other members, and most importantly, impact of shed participation on health outcomes.

All interviews were manually recorded on paper for demographic information and audio recorded for more in-depth questions using the Voice Memos application on an iPhone. All interviews were uploaded onto a central file. The complete set of interviews was then transcribed onto a password protected computer, encrypted to avoid the release of protected health information. The grounded theory was used to analyze the data from the information received from the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, a thematic analysis was used, coding common themes and patterns among the responses of the participants (Trochim, 2006).

Results

The study involved 11 men primarily over the age of 60. The average approximate age of the participants was 65 ($M = 64.82$, $SD = 10.87$). Of all the participants, four were married, two were divorced, two were single, and three were widowers. Regular attendance rates at the shed ranged from 2-5 per week. The average time of attending the shed was 18 months ($M = 18.0$, $SD = 10.98$) at the time of the study. Participants had diverse occupational profiles, both blue and white-collar jobs such as construction work, machinery, baking, welding, council work,

journalism, and tattooing. All of the study participants were retired or unemployed at the time of the study.

Thematic analysis of responses from participants of the Men's Shed resulted in the following categories: socialization, motivation related to self-care, self-worth and purpose, companionship, and enjoyment.

Socialization: Prior to attending the Men's Shed, majority of the men conveyed feelings of loneliness or social isolation. Lack of socialization was tied to widowhood, retirement, unemployment, or simply general discontent with their life. Due to attending the shed, many of the men reported a substantial improvement in conversational skills, as well as increased confidence in social settings.

"Men do not talk about their life or problems with other men like women do, so this place is a wonderful organization to truly open up to others."

"I feel that I am better at socializing now. I was an alcoholic and did not want anything to do with others – now I am a member of a church, and I enjoy talking about my problems and helping others."

Motivation for Self-Care: Shed participants are indirectly motivated to live a healthier lifestyle. This motivation can result from any of the factors in the shed, whether it be the social participation, variety of activities, camaraderie, or others. Regardless of the reason, several men reported that the shed was a significant source of motivation to better their lives.

"I have lost a lot of weight since I started attending the shed. I exercise with a few men from the shed."

"...just coming to the shed and using my hands again. It allows me to stay active both mentally and physically."

"[Men's Shed] opened me up to a lot of new activities. It's a significant portion of my time since retirement. I have two other very close friends at the shed now. It made me want to continue staying active."

Self-worth and Purpose: Retirement, widowhood, or other losses, may result in a loss of worth or purpose for older adults. These events often lead to depression, which was a common condition among the shed participants. The Men's Shed appeared to provide a meaningful role for members thereby increasing their self-worth and purpose in life.

"...truly gave me something to live for."

"[Men's Shed] brought me back to life. I am able to enjoy life again. I was not in a happy place in life before coming here."

"It gave me a sense of well-being and self-worth. It made me realize there is a whole new world out there when you are retired."

Companionship: Having social bonds with others is an important component of health, especially for older adults. Due to fewer social connections and supports, older men, particularly single men, are at a higher risk of isolation and depression (Wilson & Cordier, 2013). The shed offers these men a chance to create and foster relationships with other members and the community, that have improved their feelings of connectedness.

"It assisted me in developing social skills and coping skills with others. [We] are able to discuss problems with the men at the shed."

"...emphasizes the importance of being a member of a friendly community. It has allowed me to meet such a wide range of individuals."

"...allowed me to feel connected with others. I have friends in the shed and talk with a few out of the shed as well. I go on walks with other members. It gets me out of the house to talk to other people."

Enjoyment: Craic is an Irish slang-term that is interchangeable with enjoyment, or fun. Whether it was something he enjoyed prior to attending, or a new hobby, most men find a familiar occupation to engage in at the shed.

"[Men's Shed] provides good laughs with others and craic. I enjoy engaging in different activities with others."

“...very helpful in meeting new people from different backgrounds. I see a lot of other men having fun and engaging in healthy conversations together while also participating in activities.”

Discussion

This qualitative study primarily focused on benefits received from the Men's Shed, related to social participation and overall health. All the participants in this study reported some positive benefit as a result of attending the shed. These results are consistent with other studies that have found improved health and well-being linked to shed participation. For example, Moylan et al., (2015) thematic analysis found similar themes such as Men's shed as a conduit for providing social contact and interaction, and contributing to a man's sense of purpose and usefulness.

The results of this study are closely related to the field of occupational therapy. Implications to occupational therapy practice include: provide a safe space for older adults to engage in meaningful occupations, find a common ground to make the therapy experience enjoyable and effective, and present an open line of communication to address health issues.

This research had its share of limitations, including the cross-sectional nature of the study. Future studies could benefit from a more rigorous longitudinal design, including following individuals from the onset of the shed participation. In addition, generalizations to male populations are difficult to the small sample size. This study was conducted with a sample from the United Kingdom and may not apply to United States populations.

As an Australian and European concept, little is known regarding Men's Sheds in the U.S. The U.S. has demonstrated consistent struggles with health factors related to social and mental health conditions, as well as substance abuse. With concern of these issues, a Men's Shed could provide a safe and reliable outlet for those in need. Men specifically, because they are

often more likely to abuse different substances, accounting for nearly 70% of all the substance abuse admissions in 2010 alone (American Addiction Centers, 2017). Moreover, Americans have increasingly developed a sense of loneliness, which frequently leads to depression. According to an AARP study, out of those aged 45 and older, one of three are chronically lonely, which may also relate to the rates of depression among adults, around 16.1 million in 2015 (Edmondson, 2010; National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). These rates account for a significant percentage of the American population. This research, and those related, could serve as a source of knowledge for those suffering to reach out and receive help. Community Men's Sheds have the potential to positively influence factors of social participation and other health outcomes.

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