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(Re)constructing selves: Emplaced socio-material practice at the Men's Shed North Shore

An ethnographic case study

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ABSTRACT

Retirement can bring about significant disruption for men who spend a large amount of their lives in paid employment. When leaving paid employment, men also leave places where they have developed a sense of self, secured resources, found meaning, participated in social networks, and engaged in practices of health and gender. How men respond to such a challenging life stage by creating spaces for participating in positive and affirming practices, is largely overlooked. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which a group of older, retired men jointly (re)construct a sense of self through emplaced socio-material practice in the Men's Shed North Shore. Amid a dearth of literature on men's caring and supportive social relationships, this research contributes to an understanding of the ways men in Aotearoa, New Zealand come to re-know themselves and develop supportive relationships through a shared community project. The research is informed by an ethnographic case-based orientation that draws on participation-observation fieldwork, interviews, and a focus group with men who participate at the Men's Shed North Shore. Findings illustrate the effort these men put into the communal reworking of self, the maintenance of health and dignity in a disruptive life stage, their pragmatic approach to retirement, and their (re)production of place and space. A central focus in the analysis is the importance of socio-material practice in the Shed. In particular, the analysis explores the role of material practice as an essential relational practice in the Shed. Through construction projects, men connect with, and reproduce, the material essence of the Shed, and engage meaningfully with other men. The analysis also demonstrates the importance of material practice for these men in maintaining health and dignity in later life. The men agentively and pragmatically respond to displacement in retirement by (re)constructing a sense of self and re-replacing themselves through familiar and shared labour practices. The analysis also demonstrates how the daily material activities of the Shed reflect an ongoing enactment of wellbeing, enabled and demonstrated through social interaction and productive activity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
PREFACE.....	1
CHAPTER ONE Men’s Sheds and the Men’s Shed movement	6
1.1 The historical backdrop of contemporary shed culture in New Zealand.....	6
1.2 Contemporary sheds.....	11
1.3 Men’s Sheds and healthy aging	13
1.4 Chapter summary.....	16
CHAPTER TWO Conceptualising the Shed through self, relational being, emplacement, and material practice	17
2.1 Relational selves at the Shed	18
2.2 Emplacement and ‘fitting in’ through social interaction	19
2.3 The interaction between human and non-human ‘actors’ at the Shed	23
2.4 Chapter summary.....	25
CHAPTER THREE An ethnographic case study approach	27
3.1.1 Stage one: Participation-observation and journaling	27
3.1.2 Stage two: adding value to the ethnographic approach through a group discussion and interviews.....	31
3.2 Ethics and engagements in the Shed	32
3.3 Stage two participants	35
3.4 Analysis process	36
3.5 Chapter summary.....	38

CHAPTER FOUR The research site	40
4.1 Locating the Shed.....	40
4.2 A tour of some important objects located at the Shed	50
4.3 Chapter summary.....	62
 CHAPTER FIVE Reworking selves: Maintaining health and dignity in retirement, through socio- material practice	65
5.1 Responding to disruption through re-placement	66
5.2 The shared reworking of selves, and resistance to popular representations of retired life, through continued engagements	72
5.3 Reworking gendered identities	83
5.4 Chapter summary.....	89
 CHAPTER SIX Shed Camaraderie: Relational being through socio-material practice	92
6.1 Relational being through social identification and shared practice	93
6.2 The development of camaraderie across space	97
6.3 Project-mediated camaraderie	100
6.4 Camaraderie as an important element of building supportive and sharing networks.....	106
6.5 Chapter summary.....	113
 CHAPTER SEVEN Considering this research as a whole	116
7.1 Consolidating the research findings.....	120
7.2 Final reflections and moving forward	124
 APPENDICES	129
Appendix 1: Host information sheet.....	129
Appendix 2: Participant information sheet.....	130
Appendix 3: Group facilitator reference	131
Appendix 4: Interview guide	133
 REFERENCES	134

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Photographs depicting the physical construction of the Men’s Shed North Shore	42
Figure 2. Photos of the Shed’s workshop space, and organisation of practical and symbolic objects such as tools.....	44
Figure 3. Floor plan diagram of the Shed.....	46
Figure 4. Thank you letters from local kindergarten for the Shed’s contribution to learning materials	49
Figure 5. Photographs that depict the restoration of a damaged bandsaw.....	51
Figure 6. Various forms of scaffolding used to construct the internal Shed	57
Figure 7. Photograph of Deasy’s boat during its construction, and the plans used to construct it	60
Figure 8. Photograph of Tuatara’s diagram of Joseph Campbell’s Monomyth.	67
Figure 9. Photographs showing the open plan of the lunchroom, and the small ‘pockets’ of men that form around construction projects.....	99
Figure 10. Photographs of co-created and meaningful objects.....	101

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant information (at time of stage two of the research).....	36
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