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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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David Anstiss
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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-emplacing 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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