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Why some homogeneous adult learning groups may be nessesary for encouraging diversity: A theory of conditional social equality

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This paper proposes a new theory of Conditional Social Equality (CSE) which in some ways challenges the theory of cumulative advantage/ disadvantage (CAD), which postulates that inequalities and social divisions necessarily increase over time. Using evidence from informal learning groups in Men's Sheds in three countries, we conclude that some social divisions between homosocial groups, in this case groups of older men, may actually decrease – but only under certain conditions. Male-gendered learning groups that were relatively homogeneous by age helped erase class divisions and softened gender stereotypes. Our theory of conditional social equality (CSE) predicts the following: i) in-group homogeneity can enable the acceptance of some aspects

of heterogeneity, ii) some other aspects of in-group heterogeneity may not be tolerated, thus maintaining in-group cohesion, and iii), in-group homogeneity and boundary setting towards out-groups may be prerequisites for the acceptance of (some) aspects of in-group heterogeneity. All of this has important implications for adult learning in both heterogeneous and homogenous groups.

Keywords: *cumulative advantage/disadvantage, gender stereotypes, homosocial reproduction, older men's learning, adult community education (ACE)*

Introduction

Socio-economic inequalities between groups of people tend to increase with age. The older people get, the bigger the difference becomes between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in the same initial cohort. This was formulated in the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD) (Crystal & Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003). CAD suggests that not only are people born with unequal conditions, but that inequalities in any given characteristic, such as money, education, health, or status increase over time (Dannefer, 2003: 327). People with relatively well-educated parents tend to become better educated themselves, and vice versa. The difference is accentuated over time: a person's level of education tends to predict their engagement in adult learning.

Gorard (2010: 359) neatly summarises and questions the inequity of all of this when taking a life-course view, noting that:

> *'... qualifications are not seen as a causatory agent at all but as a substitute variable summing up the individual, social and economic determinants of 'success' at school and beyond. Educators do not select their potential students, nor employers their employees, on the basis of their economic status, ethnicity or age, as this is both unfair and illegal. However, they do select them on a substitute variable – prior education - that sums up, and is very heavily collected with, such background factors. What is the sense in that?'*

Thus, people with higher levels of formal education tend to engage more in formalised adult learning throughout their lives, while those with only compulsory school experience tend not to. This increasing inequity plays out across life in the workforce and in turn effects people's health, wellbeing, quality of later life and even longevity (Borrell et al., 2014; Hudson, 2016; Marmot, 2000; Zhong et al., 2017). Social divisions also tend to become accentuated due to homosocial reproduction, the human tendency to socialize and associate with people who are like us (Kanter, 1977; Moore, 1962; Rivera, 2013). Men tend to 'hang out' more with men, the better-educated with others who are better-educated, and so on. Groups thus tend to become increasingly homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. Without the opportunity to learn from people from other walks of life and break this vicious and inequitable cycle, it becomes more difficult across the life course to counteract social divisions and rising inequalities between groups.

This paper is inspired by observations in gendered, informal adult learning contexts, specifically in community Men's Sheds, that challenge the ubiquity of CAD. CAD is a somewhat deterministic theory, provoking ideas as to what might be done to counteract such processes. Observations to this effect were made in empirical studies of Men's Sheds. Men's Sheds are community-based workshops offering men beyond paid work "somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to" (Golding, 2015). Men's Sheds have been comprehensively researched from an adult education as well as a health perspective, with at least 70 peer-reviewed research articles published to date (Golding, 2021). Results show that the informal and participatory learning based on practical work that takes place 'shoulder to shoulder' with other men in Men's Sheds has positive effects on health and wellbeing of older men (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Golding, 2015; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007; Haesler, 2015; Morgan et al., 2007).

Most Men's Shed participants are older and beyond paid work. In Australia, the Shedder median age is approximately 70 years. Shedders are self-selecting and thus come from all walks of life, even if the majority has a working-class background and, as Foley (2014: 65) observes, often fall outside "... the privileged or dominant [masculinist] hegemonic frame [and] experience health and wellbeing disadvantages". And participants in Men's Sheds are predominantly men (but some do welcome women). Some critics hold that Men's Sheds are places for

uncritical reproduction of outdated ideas of masculinity (Boucher & Robinson, 2021), but the absence of women has indeed been found to be one of the success factors (Ahl, Hedegaard, & Golding, 2017; Golding, 2015). The research question is therefore: *Can learning in gender homogeneous groups challenge patterns of social division and equality, and if so, what patterns and how?*

The subsequent, recent development of the Women's Shed movement adds particular relevance to the current investigation – most of the Women's Sheds (124 open to 2021) are similarly homogeneous by sex and most operate exclusively for women. Though sometimes Women's Shed groups share a Men's Shed workshop space, in most cases it is usually with women on another day (Golding, Carragher, & Foley, 2021).

Homogeneity may of course be conceptualized in many different ways. In this paper, we use some of the classifications typically present in anti-discrimination laws: gender, ethnicity/race, disability, sexual orientation, and age. We start with a review of literature relevant to the study, including the theory of CAD, older men's learning trajectories, and previous research on Men's Sheds. After a section on the methodology, we present the results in the form of a narrative, collective, autoethnographic field report. In the discussion section, we interpret our results and conclude by formulating a theory of conditional social equality (CSE). In the final section, we suggest ways in which future research might test our theory.

Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and its manifestations

CAD pays attention to the increasing gap between people in favourable positions versus people in less favourable positions. It ultimately draws attention to the way inequalities develop over the life course (Crystal & Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003; Hudson, 2016). Primarily, the focus lies on the differential distribution of resources that affect health and wellbeing, and the tendency for these resources to become more unevenly distributed with age (Crystal & Shea, 1990). Common measures of the expression of CAD are longevity and life expectancy among different cohorts. In the U.S., Marmot (2000) demonstrates this emphatically by the 20 year difference in life expectancy between socio-economically advantaged White people living in the outskirts of Washington compared to relatively disadvantaged Black people living in the city

centre. Similar studies with similar results have been conducted in 16 European cities (Borrell et al., 2014) and China (Zhong et al., 2017).

Translating CAD to adult educational settings implies, for instance, that countries with generally elevated levels of formal education might see a higher proportion of participants in adult education, especially in formal educational settings (Ingham et al., 2017). There are also observed differences within many countries, where people in rural areas are less inclined to participate in adult education compared to people living in urban areas (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Ulrich, 2011). Focusing on specific groups of participants, research has shown that women are much more likely to participate in adult education than men (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Knipprath & De Rick, 2015; McGivney, 1999). Further, in terms of socio-economic background, it is primarily the already relatively highly-qualified adults who participate in adult education (Albert et al., 2010; Boeren, 2009; Bjursell et al., 2017; European Commission, 2010; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017). In terms of age, studies show that it is mainly middle-aged (45 to 65 years old) people who participate in adult education, often after child rearing and before retirement from paid work, and typically with some vocational intent or benefit (Albert et al., 2010). When comparing different countries to each other, the participation rate among 55-74 years olds varies from approximately 20 per cent in northern Europe to below 10 per cent in the Mediterranean countries (European Commission, 2011).

Thus, the resource that adult education constitutes is unevenly distributed and homosocial reproduction is clearly present. Participation in adult education has proved to be a way for older people to maintain social and community connections beyond paid work and continue to be included in society. However, the benefits of learning are again greatest for the least educated (Myers & Myles, 2005), including promoting their health and wellbeing (Field, 2011; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020; Hughes & Adriaanse, 2017; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Waller et al., 2018). This benefit, in turn, contributes to predict health outcomes (Borrell et al., 2014; OECD, 2012; Zhong et al., 2017). Adult education in general, and formal adult education in particular, thus seems to again reinforce rather than challenge cumulative advantage/disadvantage.

The underrepresentation of men in formal adult education

Being important for health and wellbeing, participation in adult education becomes a concern not only from a learning and development perspective, but also from a quality-of-life perspective (Lohr, 1989) as well as for the wellbeing of the community (Merriam & Kee, 2014). But as previously mentioned, it is primarily more formally educated women who participate in formal adult education, whereas men, particularly the relatively less formally educated ones, are largely missing and sometimes arguably excluded (McGivney, 1999; Albert, García-Serrano, & Hernanz, 2010; Boeren, 2009; European Commission, 2010; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012). Women are over-represented in formal adult education in all European countries, as well as in Australia and New Zealand (Desjardins, 2020 p. 152). So are senior women (Andersson et al., 2014; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Knipprath & De Rick, 2015) and urban residents (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Ulrich, 2011). Denmark, one of our case countries, is no exception. Danish men, not least seniors, are likely to favour informal activities, particularly fishing and hunting in their leisure time, whereas women participate in creative and cultural activities organized in the form of adult community education (Eske, Rask, & Thøgersen, 2022, pp. 45-47,63) – women comprised 73 per cent of learners in evening classes in a large Danish municipality (Bjerrum & Thøgersen, 2016, p. 43).

The formality of the adult education arrangement itself may be an obstacle for men. Studies show that men, particularly men with lower levels of completed formal education may have had negative experiences as boys from school and resist forms of education that patronise them as 'students' which is reminiscent of their failures with early schooling (Foley & Golding, 2014; Paldanius, 2007). Such negative experiences, or memories, may also have a gender dimension. Girls consistently out-participate and outperform boys in school (Schuller, 2018), and most forms of post-school education, including university, in most relatively developed nations (Houtte, 2004; Öhrn et al., 2017). School teachers are also more likely to be women than men, particularly in the lower grades (Burusic et al., 2012). Negative memories from school may thus be associated with negative judgements from female teachers and from girls that typically outcompete boys.

So, even if adult education has many beneficial effects, many formal forms of adult education may not attract men, particularly those men who tend to make up the majority of the participants in a Men's Shed, namely older men, primarily from hands-on or rural work backgrounds. Indeed, research on Men's Sheds has shown that many participants prefer self-directed, flexible, and informal activities, without the presence of women, and without curriculum, courses, formal teachers and teaching, or assessment, where the focus is on sharing what they know and can do rather than being confronted with what they do not know, and where they are able to positively share this knowledge informally with other men in local and social communities of hands-on practice (Golding, 2015; Hedegaard & Ahl, 2019).

Men's informal learning at Men's Shed

Starting in Australia in the 1990s, the Men's Shed is a growing social movement with approximately 2,800 Men's Sheds open worldwide pre-COVID (Golding, 2021). The participant group is largely older, retired, working-class men; a group relatively disadvantaged in terms of education, health, income, and social status. However, Men's Sheds attract men from all walks of life, also well-educated and professional men. A Shed is a self-organized collective workshop, often equipped with woodworking or other tools, but may also have a kitchen, a computer room, or a garden – every shed is different.

Men's Sheds have been found to benefit older men's learning, health, wellbeing, and social integration. They provide an environment that typically allows men to feel 'at home' and comfortable, thus improving their social connections and overall wellbeing (Foley, 2014). Traditional class divisions tend to be erased, and participants are able to relinquish stereotypical "macho" male identities in favour of prosocial, softer, caring male identities – indeed a positive male role with an emphasis on care as well as social and community responsibility has emerged (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Golding, 2015; Golding et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2007). Haesler (2015) found that Sheds assisted older men in relinquishing the idea that masculinity equals strength and invulnerability. Instead, it was constructed as masculine in Australian Sheds to care about one's health as well as the health of one´s fellow Shed participants.

Research has identified four primary keys to the success of Sheds:

1. Sheds offer men practical, gender-stereotypical, hands-on activities such as wood- or metal-working
2. they are self-organized, so service providers are kept at arm's length
3. men are not patronised as customers, patients, students, or clients from deficit models of provision, and
4. women are typically not present in the Shed (Golding, 2015; Ahl et al., 2017).

Golding (2015) found that typically, some resourceful and energetic men would assume the role of project leader or chairperson and help organize the Shed as well as engage in fundraising activities for the Shed. Other men with more practical knowledge and skill would take charge of building, reconstructing or repurposing an old facility to make it safe and fit for the purposes at hand. They would also become appreciated informal mentors and teachers in the workshops. Yet other men belonged to the category that would "be dead without the Shed"; often older, less skilled, or physically impaired men for whom going to the Shed and meeting new friends gave their life new meaning, even if it was just to share 'a chat and a cuppa' in the company of men (Golding, 2015). Some Sheds have also served as mentors for young boys at risk, who have found a place of refuge among the older men in the Shed (Cordier & Wilson, 2014). While much has been written about the beneficial effects of Sheds for the participants, and the reasons for such positive effects, less attention has been given to the issues of inclusion and social equality.

In summary, we have observed that Men's Shed can act as a refuge for men and a homely 'third place', aside from work and home, where men from different social classes and diverse work backgrounds meet. We have also seen examples of intergenerational learning between men and boys. Unlike much of formal adult education, Men's Sheds have thus been able to break patterns of homosocial reproduction regarding social class, and in the cases of mentorship, also regarding age. But at the same time, homosocial reproduction linked to gender prevails. How can this be understood? This is an issue to which we turn in the current paper.

Material and method

The data used in the present study were collected by Helene Ahl and Joel Hedegaard from Men's Sheds in Denmark in 2016 and in 2018 and in New Zealand and Australia in 2017, as well as by Barry Golding from Australian Sheds in 2019/20. In total, we have notes from participant observations and conversations from a total of 22 Men's Sheds. Our data also includes focus-group interviews with 24 male shedders, focus-group interviews with 36 female partners of participating men, and individual interviews with 17 female partners. Visits to Men's Sheds typically lasted from several hours to half a day. The focus group interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, and the individual interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and the interview data were analysed for recurrent themes.

Although the Sheds in the three countries in which the data collection took place differ in terms of how they were initially organized and financed (top-down in Denmark through the Ministry of Health, versus bottom-up in Australia and New Zealand through grassroots or community initiatives) the outcome and how the Sheds work are similar (Ahl et al., 2017; Golding, 2015). In Denmark, the participants took over the management and organization of the Sheds once started, so the four success factors referred to above were present in all three contexts. Regardless of the country, the Sheds are participant-driven and based on what the older men are interested in and find meaning in doing.

While we have a very rich international data set, it should be noted that the data were originally collected for two different research projects with different research questions, namely i) organizing principles for Men's Sheds, and ii) gender identities and involvement patterns among Sheds participants and their partners. Both studies were reported elsewhere (Ahl et al., 2017; Foley, Golding, & Weadon, 2023; Hedegaard & Ahl, 2019). The current research question was triggered by the stories we heard and by our observations of some consistent patterns and themes in the narrative data emerging from our visits to many different Men's Sheds in the three countries. In the current paper, we therefore rely primarily on observational data and our joint reflections from the analysis of the conversations and interviews. In our rereading of the

narratives in the transcript material, we identified themes concerning age, gender, segregated groups, social class, masculinity, disability, sexual orientation, and ethnicity/race. We employ narrative research, or storytelling as a method of inquiry (Linghede et al., 2016). The data from Men's Sheds which supports our theory is presented in the form of a reconstructed, collaborative autoethnographic account (Chang et al., 2016). Muncey (2010: 148) describes autoethnography as 'an engagement in an iterative relationship between [our] research and [our] personal experiences'.

We understand and present the autoethnography that follows in terms identified by Mykhalovskiy (1996), neatly summarised by Muncey (2010: 93). Our account is a social, collaborative and dialogic process engaging with a journal readership. As authors, we are not being self-indulgent or seeking truth in this account or in our theory. We are engaging with the critical reviewer and the reader and seeking to contribute to sociological understanding by encouraging debate and discussion. As Muncey (2010: 93) put it, 'Do you, the reader, find any value in what has been written?

Our experiences presented as an autoethnography revolve around a visit to a composite Shed, the content of which is selectively drawn from the entirety of the collected material. The narrative construction of our story is based on theory, on the research question at hand, on the results of the analysis and interpretation of the collected data material and our reflections on our understandings of what this might signify. In practical terms, a plot was constructed that could hold the identified themes and display a contextual meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988). Having built a plot, we went back to our material to identify observations or instances that could be used as building blocks in our story. The narrative serves the purpose of synthesizing, illustrating, and communicating our findings in a manner that saves time and space, but also holds the promise of evoking a response in the reader that the ordinary logico-scientific way of representing data cannot (Linghede et al., 2016). The following story is thus constructed but based on solid data. It is a story of a visit to a typical Men's Shed, with characters taken from actual Sheds. Similarly, the quotes below are not verbatim. What one person says below is a conglomeration of many utterances, but the content is representative and a reconstruction of actual quotes.

A field report from a Shed

We arrived at the Shed around nine o'clock in the morning, and were greeted by the chairperson, a former project leader who had retired from a large manufacturing company. He showed us the facility – a formerly deserted, now repurposed elementary school that the community had given to the men and that they had lovingly and skillfully restored. Several men were busy in the workshop, making outdoor furniture for preschools. Other men sat at the computers, some others worked in the adjacent garden while still another group played cards in the coffee room. All of them were grey-haired, wearing unobtrusive clothes – work pants, t-shirts, knitted sweaters or plaid flannel shirts. And all were white. They didn't take much notice of us, but merrily engaged in conversation when approached. A group of men was busy in the kitchen preparing today's lunch for the whole group, some of which was gathered from the garden. They had integrated cooking with a cooking class, on a rotating schedule, so that all participants could learn how to cook. We asked them what the point was with a Shed only for men. "Well, if the wives were here, they would just take command of the whole place and rearrange the pots and pans so we could never find them again – we wouldn't get a chance to learn how to cook".

The chairperson explained to us that it is important for many of the men that any significant women in their lives are not there. It gives them a homely space away from home which helps them open up to each other 'shoulder to shoulder'. He says that women have eye-to-eye conversations and get straight to the point, but most men tend to go about it differently: "They start working together on some project, quietly, shoulder to shoulder. The next day they start talking, and the following day they may forget about their work and just talk to each other, even eye-to-eye as trust grows and the nature of the conversation deepens".

Another participant tells us how he has started to care for his health. "The wife has nagged me about taking my blood pressure for years – but here I see other men lining up for it, so I just do it myself, too". Outside there is some construction work going on. "We take long walks together to get some exercise, but many men have bad knees and cannot participate, so we are building a petanque court so everyone can get outside and move about a little". The members have also constructed a

ramp for men with limited mobility so they can have easy access to the facilities. We see more signs of men caring for each other – people tell us that if someone has not shown up for some time, they will call them up or drop in to see that everything is all right.

We walk over to an old vintage car in a corner of the workshop that is being restored by some men. We talk to one of them, a retired banker, who proudly demonstrates an iron wheel rim he has built in cooperation with a former goldsmith and a retired farmer. "We needed a missing rim and didn't know how to make one, but the goldsmith said that it shouldn't be any more difficult than making a ring, just bigger. So, we made one!" Another group of men – formerly a CEO, a business consultant, a builder, and a car mechanic – demonstrate an ongoing boat building project. The builder and the car mechanic become the teachers whereas the others happily participate and learn in good camaraderie.

We ask many of the men what their partners say about them being away at the Shed the whole day, and they all answer that their wives are quite happy to their own time and do their own thing during the day, and that they will then both have something independent to do and interesting to talk about at night. Noting that all of them refer to their wives, we ask the chairperson if none of them has a male partner. He flinches, as such a thing would be unthinkable. "No", he said, "Everyone is, or was, married to a woman. We do not have any homosexuals here. And if we did, they likely wouldn't let it be known – that would probably jeopardize their acceptance among the other men."

Noting the lack of cultural diversity in the group, in spite of the area having a considerably large immigrant population from diverse ethnic origins in the neighbourhood, we asked why this might be so. The answers indicated a very clear demarcation between them and us. "We don't think they'd fit in here", said one of the men. "And we don't think they would be interested in coming either". The answers were delivered in a tone that did not invite further questioning. When we left the premises, the chairperson gave the female researcher a bouquet of flowers while the male researcher was greeted with a firm handshake.

Discussion

Having read about, and experienced, primarily positive, and inclusive effects at Men's Sheds, we observed that some mechanisms of exclusion including by racial or ethnic background and sexual orientation were present. Perhaps this is unsurprising as racism and homophobia are still present amongst citizens in all of the countries in which we collected data, despite being discriminatory and illegal. We noted that while some Men's Sheds were able to overcome some inequalities, other social divisions remained firmly in place. With some exceptions, Men's Shed groups we studied were homogeneous in respect of gender, sexual orientation, age, and ethnicity/race. They were able to overcome heterogeneity in terms of disability, education, and social class – the well-educated and well-to-do men cooperated on an equal basis with men from working-class backgrounds. It appears that when older men get to do gender stereotypical activities in sex segregated groups, they are able to relinquish class divisions. We also observed that masculinity was renegotiated – the strongman at the helm was relinquished in favour of a flatter and more inclusive Men's Shed organisation, and a caring masculinity, in which members with diverse abilities including disabilities were well taken care of. The men were thus able to overcome (some) gender stereotypes – provided that no women were present.

But we also noted that differences in terms of gender, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation were not universally tolerated. Whilst homogeneity in terms of sex, age, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation seemed a prerequisite for erasing class divisions and for relinquishing some stereotypical aspects of masculinity, other divisions and boundaries remained firmly in place. In terms of the theory of cumulative advantaged/disadvantaged (CAD), we conclude that CAD is not deterministic. To answer our research question of whether learning in gender homogeneous groups can challenge patterns of social division and equality, and if so, what patterns and how, we found that in informal learning groups that were homogenous by sex, it was possible to break some patterns of social divisions and inequality, but conditionally so. Learning informally in homogeneous groups appears to encourage the erasure of some inequalities, but can reproduce others, and the former appears conditional on the latter. We use these observations to formulate a theory of conditional social equality (CSE) which may provide a partial antidote to CAD.

The theory of CSE predicts that in adult and community education (ACE):

1. in-group homogeneity can enable the acceptance of some aspects of heterogeneity
2. some other aspects of in-group heterogeneity may not be tolerated, thus maintaining in-group cohesion
3. in-group homogeneity and boundary setting towards out-groups can be prerequisites for the acceptance of (some) aspects of in-group heterogeneity.

In our case, homogeneity in terms of gender and age tended to erase class divisions, but tended to reinforce gender segregation and divisions of ethnicity/race and sexual orientation. One might find other configurations, such as in a study by Carroll et al. (2014), where homogeneity in terms of class and gender enabled the acceptance of diversity in terms of ethnicity/race, but not in terms of class. Low-income men from a poor background in that study were very uncomfortable with those better off.

Group homogeneity or homosocial reproduction can be seen as a barrier to access and equity in adult community education. A common goal for adult community education is to increase democracy, diversity, and participation in society, but in many cases, adult community education classes tend to be promoted to and attract like-minded people of similar backgrounds and with similar interests. In Denmark and Sweden, for example, there are Folk High Schools that deliberately cater to certain age, religious, or ethnic groups as well as those with particular disabilities (Borsch, Skovdal & Smith Jervelund, 2019; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020; Hedegaard, Hugo, & Bjursell, 2021). The safety of a homely, homogeneous group may be more likely to be comfortable for someone otherwise alone and socially isolated. Such a group may be a prerequisite for opening one's mind to people of different backgrounds, abilities, and interests, or to question received ideas of, for example, gender. As McGivney (2006: 94) put it, writing in a UK context, there is a need and argument for adult education to engage '... with people in the community, winning their trust, listening to them in order to increase the quality of their engagement'. Creating homogeneity in adult learning groups may create a spirit of acceptance and security and be a

condition for wanting to participate in the first place (Bjursell, 2019). A heterogeneous group with both men and women present may not be able to offer the necessary safe space for some men or women. That not all facets of diversity will be welcomed or accepted in a particular group may be the compromise necessary for promoting other forms of social inclusion. Varying the aspect that is homogeneous for some groups of learners (sometimes making them gendered as in Men's or Women's Shed, at other times making the group homosocial by ethnicity/race, and so on) may at times be welcome, positive, and accepting. Ironically, providing and encouraging learning through relatively homosocial groups may be one way out of the conundrum of reducing social isolation and broadening participation in and through adult community education and thereby constitute an antidote to CAD.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our theory of conditional social equality (CSE) is based on conclusions drawn from a limited sample of Men's Sheds. As with all theories, it is a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained. While based on a rich body of field data, the studies which have led to our theory were not designed to test the theory. Rather, the theory of conditional social equality emerged from the data, mainly in Men's Sheds contexts. We anticipate future research to set up studies that explicitly test our theory. Such studies would need to select a number of social characteristics subject to research ethics guidelines– we have suggested age, gender, social class, sexual orientation, disability, and ethnicity/race – but other characteristics could also be considered, such as educational attainment or religion. If a study was conducted inclusive of Shed-based organisations it might include Sheds specifically for First Nations men, for migrant or refugee groups, for War Veterans, or with dementia. Each characteristic would need to be operationalized, and groups of learners be selected and categorized according to the chosen characteristics. The next step would be to either follow a group of learners as they engage in a course, program, or activity through an ethnographic approach, or alternatively devise a suitable interview schedule and do pre- and post-interviews with the participants. One might, for example, study mixed gender groups across the Men's Shed / Women's Shed continuum, particularly in the UK or Australia where

mixed gender Sheds are becoming more common. If doing a quantitative study, other factors such as personality or attitudinal factors need to be controlled for. While results would invariably be context dependent, it would be very interesting and useful if such studies could result in a mapping of what social characteristics are best combined to facilitate the reconsideration of other social characteristics – and vice versa, which characteristic(s), for which given group of learners, cannot be challenged if group cohesion and a safe and homely informal learning environment is to be maintained. It would be equally interesting and useful to map findings about social characteristics to characteristics of the learning environment. Other configurations of divisions that might be challenged or not challenged might be obtained from other or future studies.

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