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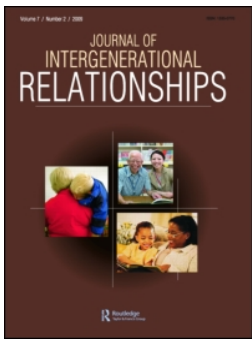
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## Men and Boys: Sharing the Skills Across Generations

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### ABSTRACT

Our paper focuses on intergenerational learning in informal community settings between older men and boys. It examines and challenges narrow definitions of the notion of what is meant by “older” and “intergenerational” learning. It stresses the importance of older men’s capacity to be contemporary in their worldview, while drawing from a deep knowledge and wisdom developed from their life experiences and also from their formative cultural, national, and Indigenous learning traditions. Our paper provides an account of intergenerational stories wherein men informally mentor, share skills, and develop meaningful relationships with disengaged and disconnected young people in the community Men’s Sheds.

### KEYWORDS

Intergenerational learning;  
Men’s Sheds

Our paper is framed by two challenges posed by Kirkwood, Bond, May, McKeith, and Teh (2010, p. 33) that have a focus on mental capital and well-being. The first challenge is

how to ensure that the greatest number of older people maintain the best possible mental capital, and so preserve their independence and wellbeing—both for their own benefit, and also to minimize their need for support as they age. (p. 33)

The second challenge is

how to ensure that the considerable resource which older people offer ... is recognised and valued by society, and that they have the opportunity to realise the maximum benefit for themselves ... and the wider society. (Kirkwood et al., p. 33)

Our paper draws on new, national, cross-cultural insights from several of the 42 national chapters in Findsen and Formosa’s (2016) book about older adult education internationally. Our narratives primarily derive from our empirical research in Australia, with men who have aged out of the workforce and young people who informally share their skills in community settings (Foley & Golding, 2014; Golding, 2012). Some of our insights are drawn from the remarkable and rapid spread beyond Australia of the Men’s Shed Movement (Golding, 2015), which arguably has some parallels with

traditional and Indigenous intergenerational ways of learning and knowing (Vaiolati, 2012).

Men's Sheds in community settings were invented in Australia around 20 years ago and have spread recently and rapidly across New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Ireland with Men's Shed-type organizations in 2016 also in Canada, the United States, and Denmark (Golding, 2015). They are a grassroots innovation,

typically located in a shed or workshop-type space in community settings that provide opportunities for regular, hands-on activity by groups deliberately and mainly comprising men. (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey, & Gleeson, 2007, p. 7)

Participants are mainly older men, but because there is a wide range of ages among participants, much of the learning is through informal mentoring and exchange of skills in communities of shared practice. Golding (2015, p. 13) notes:

Men's Sheds work precisely *because of* the informality and homeliness of the setting and the activity, not in spite of it, particularly because the informal aspect is not prescribed and named. The benefit to men occurs because of *and in spite of* there being very few professionals or programs.

Discussions about intergenerational learning have a tendency to assume it is about deliberately bringing older persons and younger persons together across different generations to formally share their skills and experiences. In many cultures "older persons," like adolescents and children, are relatively recently constructed social categories, "the result, as in other countries [besides Spain], of efforts to problematize and differentiate ageing in human beings." (Sanchez-Martinez & Saez, 2016, p. 411). Sanchez-Martinez and Saez identify some of the processes that have contributed to this recent construction of older persons in many developed nations including "the invention and expansion of retirement systems—and the non-productive activity associated with retired people [as well as] the growing creation and diversification of positive ageing models," leading to public policies that reinforce "the differentiation between *active* and *dependent* elders and differential distribution of power and privileges" (Sanchez-Martinez & Saez, 2016, p. 412).

Sanchez-Martinez and Saez (2016) argue that a specific "older adult education" based exclusively on age in a Spanish context is not possible. "If age is not adequately problematized, offering education specifically for older adults ... is like trying to build a house from the roof down" (p. 412). They argue that in this way, "Older persons are presented as individuals in a situation of risk, and education is presented as a key to improving their chances of social insertion ... to correct a deficit" (p. 413).

Even if we unquestionably accept the social construction of older adults this is only one part of intergenerational learning, which involves learning also from and about younger people by older people. The first author (Golding) experienced genuine two-way learning while researching in the small rural town of Ristijarvi, central Finland, in 2010. A comprehensive school and older learners complex in Ristijarvi were approximately co-located. On the same day, older local residents undertook a range of traditional Finnish craftwork programs with young people in school and later participated with the same young people in modified physical exercises and outdoor games in the school playground.

We take as a starting presupposition that all older individuals are *already* intergenerational by virtue of having lived and identified at earlier times in their lives as children and adolescents, young men and women, workers and community members, and for many also as partners, parents, and grandparents. An older person therefore brings much more to any learning situation than their current age, formal learning, and identity. They will have been exposed to a much wider range of cultural and historical influences, experiences, and responsibilities at earlier ages and stages throughout life than young people, which remain part of who they are and what they are able to know and share with other generations at any age. As Sanchez-Martinez and Saez (2016, p. 418) neatly summarize, “Neither ageing consists solely in the accumulating of years, nor is chronological age the only characteristic to convey the temporal dimension of human life completely.”

Our argument is akin to the biological analogy of a tree. A mature tree has the most active growing layer (the *cambium*) close to the surface just under the bark. While the tree may be old in terms of the age since it was a seedling, it is supported and takes form, not only from its extensive network of water-gathering roots and solar-energy-collecting leaves conducted by and through the cambium, but by the wood within the trunk from every previous growing season. The tree’s identity is not based on its chronological age but by its species, its unique shape, its position in the landscape and its unique interaction with the soil, air, and biotic environment. As Sanchez-Martinez and Saez (2016, p. 418) put it in relation to humans, an older adult “is not monolithic, unchanging and identical to any prior category or label that announces how, where, why and when that person should learn.”

If we turn to the idea of *intergenerational learning*, there is a danger that we are embedding a presupposition that older and younger people necessarily have different voices, opinions, perceptions, and ways of seeing, knowing, and learning. Our argument is that what most differentiates older and younger people and enhances learning are intergenerational relationships. Being parents (fatherhood and motherhood) and being grandparents are both, by definition, intergenerational. The focus of

most intergenerational learning is through family and community contexts. Unsurprisingly, there is evidence that the nature and quality of the interactions between a child, a parent, and sometimes a grandparent in a family setting have more influence than any other single variable in relation to what a young person can achieve in life, at school, or at work.

Using this evidence and argument, Gorard (2010, p. 357) rejects the discourse of “barriers” to later life learning, noting,

Characteristics that are set very early in an individual’s life such as age, sex and family background, predict later learning trajectories with 75% accuracy. ... Once background and early schooling are taken into account there is just not enough variation left for barriers to make any difference to participation.

The single most important variable determining formal educational success of a child remains the highest education levels achieved by one of the parents. In this sense, even formal educational success is intergenerationally predetermined.

Western theories of intergenerational learning are relatively recent. Most formal Western learning has tended to devalue and discourage gendering of education. By contrast traditional intergenerational learning has tended to be inherently intergenerational but also highly gender segmented. The relatively recent imposition, with colonialism, of formal, Western educational systems to Indigenous peoples and nations in many different cultural contexts, such as across much of Asia, the Americas, and Africa—and in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific—has been far from benign. Vestiges of the colonial era of education, characterized by unequal, racially and ethnically based education focused mainly on the initial education and vocational preparation of young people remain in many nations. Australia and New Zealand both present superficially as modern democracies with concern for “a fair go,” but have a shocking record until very recently of systematically excluding Indigenous peoples from higher levels of education and ignoring or devaluing Indigenous languages, cultures, knowledge, and pedagogies. In the almost complete absence of education systems that are truly inclusive and intergenerational, schools in Australia find it impossible to “Close the Gap” in Indigenous disadvantage through formal education (COAG, 2016).

It is of some interest that in their most recent 20th century iterations, both Western colonialism and missionary zeal have made it less acceptable for many men and boys in traditional societies to be separated from girls and women (including in formal education settings) for sound reasons of gender equity and equal opportunity for women. While we are not arguing for a return to highly gendered and separate education systems in *all* nations or contexts, we are pointing out that *some* gendered

intergenerational learning traditions may be of value and worthy of more careful examination.

Careful and critical examination of older learning in many very diverse national contexts beyond Australia (including Botswana, China, Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, New Zealand, Spain, and Uganda: see Findsen & Formosa, 2016) confirm how unhelpful the imposition (and ignorance) of Western learning specifically for “older learners” in deliberately segmented and societies has been. In many neocolonial national contexts, there has been an unquestioning removal of gendered services and programs, sometimes accompanied by equal-opportunity programs for women and girls. Again, we are not arguing that women should not be empowered. What we *are* suggesting is that in the process of change, the welfare and well-being (including diverse masculinities) of *some* men and boys in postcolonial, postconflict and recent refugee and resettlement contexts need to be seriously considered and addressed. As an example, in Namibia (Africa), Hamunyela and Nekongo-Nielsen (2016) consider that before independence from apartheid in 1990, the Namibian education system was domesticating, dehumanizing, and oppressive. Even today, they note that older adult education in Namibia is non-existent.

In Botswana (also in Africa) in 2016, learning cannot be separated from the rest of life’s activities and is inherently gendered and intergenerational (Lekoko, 2016). Older adults in Botswana “are treated as active agents of their learning. The very status of being old affords them respect.” It is unsurprising that in many traditional and Indigenous cultures, older people are described and treated with considerable community respect as male or female *elders*, not by virtue of their chronological age but by virtue of their accumulated knowledge, experience, and wisdom. It is on these theoretical perspectives that our paper seeks to challenge narrow definitions of the notion of what is meant by “intergenerational,” and also asks questions about the value of *some* gendered intergenerational learning.

Given that the main focus in the balance of our paper is on men and boys, and consistent with the evidence and arguments above, we place a particular importance and emphasis on older men’s capacity, in a wide range of learning contexts, to be contemporary in their worldviews, drawing from a deep knowledge and wisdom developed informally over their life experiences from their own often very diverse, typically gendered work and life roles and experiences and, in many nations, also from highly gendered traditional or Indigenous knowledge and traditions.

## Intergenerational challenges

Kirkwood et al. (2010, p. 34) note:

The adverse effects of intrinsic ageing on memory and capacity for intellectual work have been greatly exaggerated. ... The persistent negative stereotyping of older people ... is responsible for a massive waste of mental capital in the later decades of life.

Our specific argument for *some* gendered intergenerational learning is informed by and framed by two intergenerational challenges posed by Kirkwood et al. (2010, p. 33) that have a focus on mental capital and well-being. The first challenge is

how to ensure that the greatest number of older people maintain the best possible mental capital, and so preserve their independence and wellbeing—both for their own benefit, and also to minimise their need for support as they age. The second challenge is how to ensure that the considerable resource which older people offer ... is recognised and valued by society, and that they have the opportunity to realise the maximum benefit for themselves ... and the wider society.

On the basis of these two challenges and the widespread tendency, argued in our introduction, for modern Western societies to seriously undervalue the mental capital of older people, Kirkwood et al. (p. 36) note:

It is unsurprising that there has been so little investment to date in providing other than recreational classes for older students and very little research on its utility with regard to mental capital trajectories. ... In the current educational model, in spite of increasing attention to the principle of lifelong learning, the great majority of those entering older age will have had little education since attending school many decades earlier.

One of very few Western exceptions to the above “bad news” from most postcolonial nations comes the Nordic countries. The Nordic model of lifelong learning, articulated by Tikkanen (2016), is

built on shared values, traditions and culture, as well as history, language and socio-political structure. The core values are equal opportunity, social solidarity and security ... for everyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, conviction, functional capacity, age and sexual orientation.

While the political commitment to this utopian model of free and universal lifelong and lifewide learning has been frayed recently in some Nordic nations by the rapid influx from 2015 of young, mainly male, Moslem refugees, for most people in most Nordic nations the opportunities for learning at any age are truly intergenerational.



## Why the focus on men and boys?

The balance of our paper puts male gender into the intergenerational learning lens and looks specifically at intergenerational learning by older men and boys. Our rationale to work and theorize in this lacunae-type space internationally has been covered in Golding, Mark, and Foley (2014). In essence this lacuna is because the intervention of equal gender opportunity for young people in most contemporary, national neoliberal education primary school systems has led to girls and women out-participating and out-achieving boys and men later in life in later life education systems (Jha & Kelleher, 2006). This is desirable and positive for girls and women but raises important questions about equitable opportunities for *some* men and *some* boys. In later life, where formal adult and community education provision is available, women are the main participants in many developed and postcolonial nations including in the Pacific and the Caribbean.

Jha and Kelleher (2006) looked carefully at a range of former British Commonwealth countries to try to determine the most important and common reasons to explain underperformance of boys in schools. They concluded, after dismissing “social, economic and occupational practices” and “paucity of school places and facilities” as reasons in Australia, Jamaica, Lesotho and Samoa, that the most likely reason was what they called ‘Conformity to ‘masculine’ gender identity that clashes with the demands of so-called ‘feminised education’” (p. 43). Later they elaborate:

On one hand, inter-gender divides play a role where girls come to school with a different kind of socialisation, making them more amenable to schooling processes and demands; on the other, inter-gender pressures further push boys away. (p. 45)

Golding et al. (2014) provide a comprehensive case about being concerned about *men learning through life* including about enhancing intergenerational relationships and the associated learning between men and boys (Foley & Golding, 2014; Golding, 2010). The situation for men and boys can be neatly summarized, as below, in part from Jha and Kelleher’s (2006, p. 8) argument, acknowledging that girls and women continue to be more disadvantaged globally and face many inequalities. The emerging trend of boys and men’s underachievement “also needs attention, especially in terms of underperformance and in some cases even of under-participation. It is important to understand the nature and causes of the problem and look at the possible ways in which it can be addressed.”

As Veronica McGivney puts it in the foreword of *Men Learning Through Life* (Golding et al., 2014, p. vii), “Lack of qualification, literacy and work poses significant risks not only to men’s individual health and wellbeing, but also to those closest to them, and by extension to wider society.”

These risks are easily identified but have proved to be very difficult to address. Support and encouragement of fathers for their children, when they are involved in formal education and training, is important for children's educational success. So too is the role modeling of fathers who are often less than responsible about their own, ongoing learning. Men locked into a narrow breadwinning role arguably tend to work harder rather than more strategically or smarter. Data from most developed nations confirms that for a range of reasons women and girls are significantly out-participating and out-performing men and boys in almost all areas of formal education and training. Women typically take on the role of family educational facilitator and mentor.

It is overly simplistic to argue that these obvious gender imbalances might be resolved for men and their boys by more male teachers and/or male-only schools or classes. Indeed the available research evidence suggests that many boys do less well in masculine or hypermasculine educational environments. Men from less-educated backgrounds tend to blame the school and teachers rather than reflecting on their own negative attitudes and stereotypes of schooling based on their own outdated and sometimes negative experiences of formal schooling and assessment (Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2008).

### **Discussion: There are other ways ...**

The insights for much of the rest of our paper primarily derive from our empirical research in Australia with men who have aged out of the labor force and young people (Foley & Golding, 2014; Golding & Carragher, 2015) informally sharing skills in community settings, bought about through partnership arrangements with community organizations including Men's Sheds in community settings and local schools, sometimes making use of a vocational curriculum in community model. These programs are popping up across the country in out-of-school settings and are being seen as a way to reconnect boys (and girls) to learning. For the purposes of our paper the data and insights discussed are taken from the responses of boys and men from two Australian research projects. In both studies, a series of questions were asked related to perceptions of learning enjoyment and perceptions of formal learning and schooling. In both studies that involved Men's Sheds, the men working alongside the boys were interviewed. Both studies used the participant's narrative responses to identify themes in the data. Narrative research relates to interpretative qualitative studies, in which stories are used to describe human actions. According to Chase (2005, p. 658), the narrative approach highlights narrators' "identity work," "as they construct selves within specific institutional, organisational, discursive and local cultural contexts."

The first project involved data from 24 community-based Men's Sheds and local schools. The second project involved alternative school programs

including some Men's Sheds where boys were identified as at risk or as school resisters or displaying behavioral issues. The boys interviewed in this study were ages 14 to 17 years. Our insights are also taken from the remarkable and rapid spread beyond Australia of the Men's Shed Movement (Golding, 2015).

### *The boys ...*

Respect and trust were common themes in the data taken from the boy's narratives across both Australian studies. Themes around "feeling at home" and feelings of respect were evident across all of the data through comments such as, "I'm treated like an adult" and "The teachers respect us here." Some of the boys interviewed in the projects were identified as having been bullied at school or had felt isolated at school, which made them feel uncomfortable or angry with the school itself, their peers and their teachers. "I used to throw tables and chairs at the teacher ... and went a bit too far sometimes." For others, concentration was a problem: "Well I was never really good at school, can't really concentrate for long."

These responses from the boys are indicative of ongoing commentary associated with a growing proportion of young people in Australia and indeed across many OECD nations where boys in particular are at odds with the school system, which positions them for significant challenges associated with academic success, reconnecting with education, or finding suitable training or employment (Anlezark, 2009; Foley & Golding, 2014; Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001).

When asked questions about why they were not at school and how they felt about the community program, they commonly expressed dislike for the formal structure of school; for example, one boy said, "In High School I never really did get along with any of the teachers." Other boys felt that the classroom restricted them, causing considerable frustration. As one boy said, "Well sitting in the Maths classroom, I am not one who can normally sit in a room whereas here we have some freedom and can walk around."

A significant theme in the responses, when asked about their feelings toward the community education programs, boys were positive for the most part about the programs and about their futures. When asked what encouraged them to come back to the program, a majority of boys identified the flexibility they experienced, the respect they felt they received from the mentors, and the relevance they saw in the program, in particular its relevance to "real life" or authentic work experiences.

Another key theme involved the respect and trust they felt for their teacher/mentors. Indeed in both studies the key themes coming from the data involved the programs assisting boys to build confidence in themselves through the trust and relationships they developed with mentors in the programs.

### ***And the men ...***

For both the boys and the men, respect was identified as having developed through the establishment of relationships in an environment that for the boys felt more authentic. Common responses involved comments such as, “It’s more like work” and “It’s not like school.” Many of the respondents saw that the work-like environment teamed with the mentor relationships the men provided for the boys facilitated a space where they could learn skills from the men in a work-like environment that held the boys attention.

Learning and sharing knowledge was not the only benefit identified in the data. Strong themes associated with “caring,” affection, and friendships were clearly evident in the data. Comments such as, “I like it here ... I can relax and have a laugh with Bob without getting into trouble.” There were feelings of affection toward the men, such as demonstrated in this comment where a boy relates to one of the men as a grandfather-like figure: “He’s like having a pop ... we have a laugh. It’s fun with him”; and according to the older man, “I reckon they like it here ... [I] love them being here .... it’s not hard working with the boys. In fact I love it when they come.”

The benefits for the boys and men in the two Australian studies were clear. The data showed evidence of boys connecting with community education opportunities mixed with intergenerational relationships with the men, involving feelings of respect and friendship that provided for both a sense of connection.

### **Conclusion**

The data in the two Australian studies goes some way to highlight the benefits of intergenerational learning in light of Kirkwood et al.’s challenges. Indeed the older men in the study were identified as sharing their knowledge and skills with the boys in contemporary spaces where friendships, respect, and indeed affection for each other was seen to develop.

Health and well-being comes from feeling valued and being able to contribute and share knowledge. The data strongly indicates that the older men in the study felt valued for their knowledge sharing, their mentoring, their wisdom, and indeed their humanity as friends to the boys, which contributed to the older men’s positive sense of self-worth.

Positive relationships with adults are important for the healthy psychological development of young people (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Spencer, 2007). The data from our studies indicate that meaningful mentor relationships between boys and men have positive influences that can engage boys with learning in meaningful and authentic ways that are promoted and encouraged by older men. The data from the studies

points to an intergenerational relationship that involves close emotional and social bonds that provides significant benefits across generations.

In the introduction to our paper, we turned to the idea of *intergenerational learning* and a danger that there is an embedding presupposition that older and younger people necessarily have different voices, opinions, perceptions, and ways of seeing, knowing and learning. We challenged this idea, arguing that older individuals are *already* intergenerational, bringing forward the argument that older people have already lived through their lives as children and adolescents, young men and women, workers and community members and, for many, also as parents and grandparents. Older people carry forward life experiences from all ages and stages, seeing their knowledge as developmental building from one generation to another and situating their knowledge *as* contemporary.

The data used in our two Australian studies goes some way to challenge a presupposition of difference and to show that some of the very reasons behind the boy's connection to the men and the learning taking place involved the boys connecting with the contemporary skills and knowledge being shared. The argument being made here is that the boys related to the contemporary voices, opinions, and perceptions from the men, dispelling the notion that intergenerational learning involves different or noncontemporary knowledge sharing.

Indeed the findings from the two Australian studies had broader implications that expand our argument to include people of any age and gender. We concur with Vaiolenti (2012) in his study of learning by Pacific peoples that learning is (and should be acknowledged as) “a social activity that provides opportunity for learners to learn and to teach each other” (p. 44).

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