

**The theory of conditional social equality: Group homogeneity as a prerequisite for challenging (some) inequalities among older men.**

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**Abstract**

Based on observations that challenge the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD) which says that inequalities increase over time this paper formulates a new theory; the theory of conditional social equality (CSE). Based on observations, informal conversations and interviews at eighteen different Men's Sheds in Denmark, New Zealand and Australia, we argue that inequalities between older men may actually decrease – but only on certain conditions, and not any type of inequality. In the current study we use a narrative approach to show how learning groups that were homogeneous age and sex helped erase class divisions, while divisions of ethnicity and sexual orientation remained firm. Other configurations of divisions that are challenged or not challenged are evident from other studies. The theory of conditional social equality (CSE) predicts the following: i) in-group homogeneity enables the acceptance of some aspects of heterogeneity, ii) some other aspects of in-group heterogeneity will not be tolerated, thus maintaining in-group cohesion, and iii), in-group homogeneity and boundary setting towards out-groups are prerequisites for the acceptance of (some) aspects of in-group heterogeneity. We invite other researcher to test the theory in learning groups of different configurations.

Key words: Cumulative advantage/disadvantage, gender stereotypes, older men's learning, social inequality

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## Introduction

Inequalities between groups of people tend to increase over time – the older people get, the bigger the difference becomes between the haves and the have-nots in the same cohort. This was formulated in the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD) (Crystal & Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003). CAD says that not only are we born with unequal conditions, inequalities in any given characteristic, such as money, education, health, or status increase over time (Dannefer, 2003:327). People with educated parents tend to become well 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 so that people with a higher level of education often engage in adult learning throughout their lives, while those with only compulsory school do not. This in turn affects people's health, well-being, quality of life and even longevity (Burström, Burström, & Corman, 2014; Hudson, 2016, Marmot, 2000; Zhong, Schön, Burström & Burström, 2017).

This paper is inspired by an observation that challenges CAD. CAD is a somewhat deterministic theory, inviting ideas of what could be done to counteract such processes. Observations to this effect were made in 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 well researched from an education as well as a health perspective. Results show that the informal and participatory learning based on practical work that takes place in Sheds has positive effects on health and well-being for older men (Cavanagh, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2014; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007; Golding, 2015; Haesler, 2015; Morgan, Hayes, Williamson, & Ford, 2007). Participants come from all walks of life, thereby breaking social boundaries between, for example, social class. Women are, however, not welcome in most Sheds – the groups consist of men only. The absence of women has indeed been found to be one of the success factors (Ahl & Hedegaard, 2019; Golding, 2015). The research question is therefore: *can learning in gender homogeneous groups challenge patterns of inequality, and if so, what patterns and how?*

We start with a review of literature relevant for the study, including the theory of CAD, older men's learning trajectories, and previous research on Men's Sheds. After a section on method, we present the results in the form of a narrative case report. **In the discussion section we interpret our results and finish by formulating a theory of**

conditional social equality (CSE). In the final section we suggest ways in which future research can test the 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, or ultimately how inequalities develop over time (Crystal & Shea, 1990; Dannefer, 2003, Hudson, 2016). Primarily, the focus lies on the differential distribution of resources that affects health and well-being, and that these resources become more and 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 twenty-year difference in life expectancy between rich white people living in the outskirts of Washington compared to poor black people living in the city centre. Similar studies with similar results have been conducted in Sweden (Burström, Burström, & Corman, 2014) and China (Zhong, Schön, Burström & Burström. 2017).

Translating CAD to adult educational settings, this implies, for instance, that countries with a generally high level of education see a higher proportion of participants in adult education, especially in formal educational settings (Ingham, Ingham & Afonso, 2017). There are also differences within countries, where people in rural areas are less inclined to participate in adult education compared to people living in cities (Sherman & Sage, 2011; Ulrich, 2011). Focusing on specific groups of participants, previous research has shown that women are more likely to participate in adult education than men (Andersson, Bernerstedt, Forsmark, Rydenstam & Åberg, 2014; Folkbildningsrådet 2013; Folkbildningsrådet 2017; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Knipprath & De Rick, 2015) and in terms of socio-economical background, it is primarily the already highly-qualified adults who participate in adult education (Albert, García-Serrano, & Hernanz, 2010; Boeren, 2009; Bjursell et al., 2017; European Commission, 2010; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012). In terms of age, studies show that it is mainly the slightly younger elderly people who participate in adult education (Albert, García-Serrano, & Hernanz, 2010). When comparing different countries to each other, the participation rate among 55-74 year olds varies from approximately 20 percent in northern Europe to below 10 percent in the Mediterranean countries (European Commission, 2011).

Thus, the resource that adult education constitutes is unevenly distributed. Since participation in adult education has proved to be a way for older people to continue to be

included in society and to promote their health and well-being (Field, 2011; Hughes & Adriaanse, 2017; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Waller, Hodge, Holford, Milana & Webb, 2018) this, in turn, contributes to predict health outcomes (Burström, Burström, & Corman, 2014; OECD, 2012; Zhong, Schön, Burström & Burström, 2017). Adult education in general, and formal adult education in particular, thus seems to reinforce rather than challenge cumulative advantage/disadvantage.

### **Men as odd birds in formal adult education**

Being important for health and well-being, 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). However, as previously mentioned, it is primarily well-educated women who participate in adult education, especially in formal settings (Andersson, Bernerstedt, Forsmark, Rydenstam & Åberg, 2014; Folkbildningsrådet 2013; Folkbildningsrådet 2017; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Knipprath & De Rick, 2015), whereas men, particularly the low-educated ones, are largely absent (Folkbildningsrådet 2013; 2017). The formal adult education arrangement itself may be an obstacle for men. Studies show that men, particularly men with low formal education may have negative experiences from school and resist forms of education that are in any way reminiscent of schooling (Paldanius, 2002). Such negative experiences, or memories, may also have a gender dimension. Girls consistently outperform boys in school (Houtte, 2004; Öhrn & Holm, 2014) and teachers are more likely to be women than men, particularly in the lower grades (Burusic, Babarovic, & Seric, 2012). Negative memories from school may thus be associated with negative judgements from female teachers and from girls that outcompete boys. So, even if adult education has many beneficial effects, ordinary forms of adult education is unlikely to attract men, particularly those men who tend to make up the majority of the participants in Shed, namely older men, primarily from a working class, and often rural background. Indeed, research on Sheds has shown that many participants in Shed prefer self-directed, flexible and informal activities, without the presence of women, and without formal teachers and teaching, where the focus is on what they know rather than on what they do not know, and where they share this knowledge with other men in social communities (Golding, 2015, Ahl & Hedegaard, 2019).

## **Men's informal learning at Men's Shed**

Starting in Australia in the 1990s, Men's Shed is a growing social movement with over 2000 Sheds worldwide (<http://mensshed.org>). The target group is largely retired working-class men; a group disadvantaged in terms of education, health, income and social status. However, Sheds attract men from all walks of life; even well-educated and professional men. A shed is a self-organized collective workshop, often equipped with woodworking tools, but may also have a kitchen, a computer room or a garden – every shed is different.

The Sheds have been found to benefit older men's learning, health, well-being, and social integration. Traditional class divisions were erased, and participants were able to relinquish stereotypical “macho” male identities in favour of softer, caring male identities – indeed a positive male role with emphasis on care and social responsibility has emerged (Cavanagh, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2014; Golding, Foley, & Brown, 2007; Golding, 2011; Golding, 2015; Morgan, Hayes, Williamson, & Ford, 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 to care about one's health.

Research has found three primary keys to the success of Sheds: (i) Sheds offer men practical, gender-stereotypical activities such as wood- or metal working, (ii) they are self-organized, so service providers are kept at arm's length, and (iii) women are not present (Golding 2015; Ahl, Hedegaard, & Golding, 2017). Golding (2015) found that typically, some resourceful and energetic men would assume the role of project leaders or chairperson and help organize the Shed as well as engage in fundraising activities for the Shed. Other men of great practical knowledge and skill would take charge of building or reconstructing an old facility to make it fit for the purposes at hand. They would also become appreciated informal teachers in the workshops. Yet other men belonged to the category that would “be dead without the Shed”; often older, or physically impaired men for whom going to the Shed and meeting new friends gave their life new meaning (Golding, 2015). Some Sheds have also served as mentors for young boys at risk, who 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 issue of social equality, an issue to which we turn in the current paper.

## **Material and method**

The data used in the present study was collected in New Zealand and Australia in 2017, and in Denmark in 2016 and in 2018. We have notes from participant observations and conversations with participants and organizers at five Sheds in Denmark, as well as data from five focus-group interviews and eight individual interviews with partners of the participating men. From New Zealand and Australia, we have data from observations and informal conversations with participants at thirteen different Sheds, and from one focus-group interview with partners of Sheddors. Visits at Sheds typically lasted about half a day. The focus groups lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and the individual interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes. The interviews totalled 26 participants. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for qualitative, thematic analysis.

We thus have very rich data, but it should be noted that the data was originally collected for two different research projects, with different research questions, namely i) organizing principles for Sheds, and ii) gender identities among participants and their partners. Both studies were reported elsewhere. We did not ask any specific questions around the issues discussed in this paper. The current research question was rather triggered by the stories we heard and by our observations of some consistent patterns and themes during our visits to many different Sheds in three countries. In the current paper we therefore rely primarily on observational data and on our joint reflections from the analysis of the conversations and interviews. We employ narrative research, or storytelling as a method of inquiry (Linghede, Larsson, & Redelius, 2016). The data is presented in the form of a story of a visit to a Shed, or a retrospective field report as it were, the content of which is drawn from the entirety of the collected material. The construction of the story is based on theory, on the research question at hand and on the results of the analysis and interpretation of the collected data material. Once these steps were ready, 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 the story. The story 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 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 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 – an old deserted 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 while still another group played cards in the coffee room. All of them were grey-haired, wearing unobtrusive clothes – work pants, t-shirts, knotted 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 were busy in the kitchen preparing today's lunch for the whole group. They had integrated cooking with a cooking class, in 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 the men that women are not there. It helps them open up to each other. He says that women have eye to eye conversations and get straight to the point, but men go about it differently: "They start working together on some project, quiet, shoulder to shoulder. The next day they start talking, and the following they may forget about their work and just talk to each other, even eye to eye".

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". We see more signs of men caring for each other – people tell us that if someone has not shown up for some time, they call them to see that everything is all right. The Shed also has a ramp for easy access for the disabled.

We walk over to an old vintage car in a corner in the workshop that is being restored by some men. We talk to one of them, a retired banker, who proudly demonstrates an iron 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 own their own time during the day, and that they will have something 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 wouldn’t let it be known – that would probably jeopardize their acceptance among the other men.”

Noting that all men were white, in spite of the area having a considerably large immigrant population from diverse ethnic origins, we asked why this was so. The answers indicated a very clear demarcation between them and us. “We don’t want them here”, said 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 by a firm handshake.

## **Discussion**

Having read about, and experienced, primarily positive and inclusive effects at the Sheds, we were surprised to find that also mechanisms of exclusion were present. We noted that the Sheds were able to overcome some inequalities, but other social divisions remained firmly in place. The groups were homogeneous in respect of sex, age and ethnicity. They were able to overcome heterogeneity in terms of education and class – the well-educated and well-to-do men cooperated on an equal basis with men from a working-class background. It appears that when older men get to do gender stereotypical activities in



gender segregated groups, they are able to relinquish class divisions. We also observed that masculinity was renegotiated – the strongman was relinquished in favour of a caring masculinity. 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 ethnicity and sexual orientation were not tolerated. Whilst homogeneity in terms of sex, age and ethnicity 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/disadvantage (CAD) we conclude that CAD is not deterministic. It is possible to reverse inequalities, but conditionally so. Learning in homogeneous groups allows the erasure of some inequalities, but reproduces 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 education:

- i) In-group homogeneity enables the acceptance of *some* aspects of heterogeneity
- ii) some other aspects of in-group heterogeneity will not be tolerated, thus maintaining in-group cohesion
- iii) in-group homogeneity and boundary setting towards out-groups are prerequisites for the acceptance of (some) aspects of in-group heterogeneity.

In our case, homogeneity in terms of sex, age and gender erased class divisions, but reinforced divisions of ethnicity and sexual orientation. One might find other configurations such as in a study by Carroll, Kirwan and Lambe (2014) where homogeneity in terms of class and gender enabled the acceptance of diversity in terms of ethnicity, but not in terms of class – low income men from a poor background were very uncomfortable with those better off.

Group homogeneity is often seen as a problem in adult education. One of the goals for adult education in Sweden is to increase democracy and participation in society, but

typically, classes tend to attract like-minded people of similar backgrounds. In Sweden, young boys learn rock music, young women take dance classes, adult women take humanities or art classes, and older men, if at all present, learn something practical and manly. There are folk high schools that cater to certain age, political, religious or ethnic groups. Our study shows that this may not be a problem at all – a safe, homogeneous group may in fact be a prerequisite for opening one’s mind to people of different backgrounds and interests, or to question received ideas of, for example, gender. Homogeneity may create a spirit of acceptance and security, and be a condition for wanting to participate in the first place (Bjursell, 2019a; b). A completely heterogeneous group may not have been able to offer the safe space necessary for such reconsideration. The fact that not all facets of diversity will be accepted may be the price one has to pay. Varying the aspect that is homogeneous for groups of learners (sometimes sex, at other times ethnicity, and so on) may be a way out of this conundrum.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The conclusions drawn in this study are theoretical. While based on a rich material, the study was not designed to test the theory, the theory of CSE rather emerged from the data. We therefore invite research to set up studies that explicitly test our theory. Such studies would need to select a number of social characteristics – we have suggested age, gender, class, sexual orientation, education and ethnicity – but other characteristics could also be considered, such as ableness or religion. 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 and activity through an ethnographic approach or devise a suitable interview schedule and do pre- and post-interviews with the participants. One might, for example, study mixed gender groups – some Sheds do actually admit women as well, more so in Europe than in Australian and New Zealand where the Shed movement started. If doing a quantitative study, other factors such as personality or attitudinal factors could be controlled for. While results would invariably be context dependent, it would be very interesting 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 learning environment is to be

maintained. It would be equally interesting to map findings about social characteristics to characteristics of the learning environment.

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