Keeping the thread: older men’s social networks in Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Objective: to find out more about older men’s experience of social activities including their preferences for creating and maintaining satisfying social connections and to identify barriers and enablers to their participation in social activities.

Method: men aged 65 and older living in Central Sydney Area Health Service (CSAHS) were recruited for five focus groups (n=29). The men were asked about their experience of social interaction, with the transcripts of the groups analysed thematically.

Results: retirement, health changes, divorce, widowhood and changing personal relationships challenged social well-being. Strategies employed to combat these challenges included: a positive attitude, physical and mental activity and involvement in meaningful activities. Participants outlined their preferences for socialising within activities and suggested these differed from women’s.

Conclusion: activities that men saw as meaningful helped them cope with challenging events. Older men have preferred ways of maintaining social well-being and constructing social networks that may be influential in developing services.

Key words

older men friendship networks social isolation

social support

Despite recent increased attention to men’s health internationally, older men remain relatively ‘invisible’ in men’s health and ageing discourses (Fleming, 1996). This is reflected in the paucity of research reporting their views and experiences.
It is well recognised that good social relations are important for maintaining health and well-being, whatever a person’s age (Seeman et al, 1987; De Leo et al, 2001; Antonucci et al, 2002). Oxman and Berkman (1990) noted that older people experience challenges to their social well-being in the form of spousal death, retirement, increased levels of disability and decreased stamina. Davidson et al (2003) also drew attention to the impact of divorce on older men and proposed that masculine imperatives continued to influence coping with changes to marital status. These events affect older men’s opportunities to establish and maintain friendships. Lang and Baltes (1997) argued that older people may also reduce the size of their social networks in response to a desire for autonomy. Therefore, circumstance and preference may paradoxically dictate a reduction in networks, despite the propensity of events that will increase demands on these same social resources. Therefore, an understanding of older men’s creation and maintenance of social connections is essential.

Overall, women live longer than men and, as a consequence, older men are more likely to receive support from their wives or partners (Scott & Wenger, 1995). Alexander (2001) recognised how wives provide a buffer against difficult circumstances. Ahlund and Frodi (1996: 235) stated the ‘marital relationship is unique in providing closeness and support for men, whereas a number of relationships are equally significant for women’. This dependency may increase some older men’s vulnerability when divorce, separation or bereavement happen. Accordingly, widowhood and retirement have been shown to negatively affect older men’s health and well-being (Antonacci et al, 2002; Arber et al, 2003; Hanson et al, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1998; Neville, 2003; Van Grootheest et al, 1999).

Friendships are also important to older people, particularly the role that friends play in reconnecting them to the general community following loss and change (Crohan & Antonucci, 1989). There is a dearth of studies about older men’s friendships and those available have tended to consider them from a woman’s construct of friendship (Adams, 1994). The literature does note, however, that older men’s friendships tend to be established through their wives (Askham, 1995; Phillipson, 1997) and work and leisure activities (Scott & Wenger, 1995). Women play an important role in helping older men to establish and maintain friendships (Arber et al, 2003) but long-standing friendships with other men have been found to be equally important for men as same-sex friendships held by women (Scott & Wenger, 1995). Riggs (1997) drew attention to the capacity of men to develop emotionally supportive friendships post widowhood. Others responded to the challenge by seeking other social opportunities (Riggs, 1997) or volunteer work (Green & Blackett, 2004).

Recent research has suggested that older men may be misunderstood through policymakers viewing their social lives as no different from older women’s (Arber et al, 2003). Leading up to this study, the researchers encountered, among health services, the view that older men are ‘problematic’ because they attend services infrequently. This may indicate a lack of understanding of older men by service providers. Fleming (2001) confirmed that some older men do not attend planned activities for seniors because they were not of interest. Other reasons include an over-abundance of women at activities (Zinn, 2002) and a tendency to promote the passive receipt of a service (Arber et al, 2003).

**METHOD**

Men residing within the Central Sydney Area Health Service (CSAHS) and aged 65 and over were invited to participate in focus groups (Hawe et al, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Quine, 1998). Five focus groups were conducted at various community settings.

**Sample and composition of groups**

The focus groups ranged in size from four to 14 participants, and each group ran for one to 1.5 hours. Participants were recruited via advertising flyers at local shopping centres, local newspaper advertisements and through existing networks and groups.

Purposive sampling was used to create focus groups composed of men with differing levels of superficial social contact. Group A participants were recruited from existing groups including Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) – a local discussion group, and Men’s
Sheds – a charity group that uses trade-based skills; Group B were from local licensed residential centres. These boarding houses are licensed hostels that provide board and lodging. They tend to cater for people with mental health problems and offer less than ideal conditions (Sherry, 2001). Groups C and D were selected on age: Group C aged 65–74 and Group D for men 75 and over. Group D had a large attendance, thereby reducing the time available to pursue topics in depth. Therefore, a sub-set of participants (Group E) was invited back to expand on these issues. The men of Group E were counted as participants once. Another focus group was planned with older gay men but, due to a lack of response from existing networks, this was cancelled.

**Participants**
A total of 29 men participated in the focus groups. The criterion was for participants to be 65 years or more. Despite this being communicated to participants beforehand, it was realised after one focus group that a participant was only 58 years old. Therefore the age range was 58 to 88 years, with an average age of 73.6.

None of the men in any of the focus groups identified as gay or bisexual, and in the groups they referred to their partners as ‘wives’ or ‘spouses’. We also asked if they lived with their ‘wife’ not ‘partner’ on the questionnaire, which may have excluded identification of same-sex relationships. Only approximately a third of participants stated they were in relationships, with all others divorced, widowed or single.

**Participants’ educational status**
The boarding house participants (Group B) were less likely to have attained apprenticeships or completed high school than other groups. Conversely, the men recruited from clubs and existing groups (Group A) had higher formal education.

The use of focus groups with men from boarding houses turned out not to be an effective way to explore their experiences. A group setting was not conducive for discussion with these men, and they spoke in less detail on all thematic areas than other groups. While education factors may have been relevant, other cognitive or communication deficits may have been present. One-to-one interviews may have been a more fruitful way to engage these men.

**Focus group protocol**
The study was conducted between April and July 2003. Ethics approval was received from the local ethics committee and the study conformed to the Declaration of Helsinki. All 29 participants provided written informed consent for their participation and audio recording of their group. The planning and conduct of the groups, including the development of the interview questions and the demographic questionnaire, were guided by established protocol and strategies (Hawe *et al.*, 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2000). The fourth author of this paper was the moderator, with the first author acting as assistant moderator. The other authors took turns in the role of scribe – responsible for writing a contemporaneous version of events while also noting non-verbal aspects of communication (Quine, 1998).

All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Immediately following each group, the moderator, assistant moderator and scribe discussed their observations and views of the session and noted behaviour, verbal and non-verbal, relevant to the interpretation of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>All participants</th>
<th>Boarding house residents* Group B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>9 (31%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De facto</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5 (17%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>8 (28%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29 (100%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All participants from the boarding houses were single, widowed or divorced.
recorded information. Transcriptions were distributed to the research team for individual and then group thematic analysis. The research team discussed the data, developed themes and resolved any differences in perspective or interpretation through discussion.

**RESULTS (THEMES)**

**Events that affect social lives**
Participants named retirement, health problems, bereavement, divorce and other changes to personal relationships as being the primary challenges to their social well-being.

**Retirement**
For several of the men the transition from paid work to retirement was difficult:

‘I wasn’t prepared for it and I think lots of us aren’t. We’re not really prepared for retirement period. When retirement comes, that’s the first big blow to you. What do I do with my day?’

**Health**
Mobility and sensory loss were seen as barriers to social opportunities:

‘I find that hearing is a problem even with hearing aids, and you start a conversation and [have to ask] “what did you say?”... it gets a bit embarrassing.’

**Bereavement and divorce**
Several of the men spoke about losing their partners through death or divorce. The consequent danger of isolation was described:

‘It strikes me that women handle that [widowhood] better than men do for some reason, god knows why... I think men will withdraw. They’re not so likely to go out and find themselves a group.’

‘You are lonely, I mean you divorce, you live on your own, you are lonely.’

**Changes to personal relationships**
Personal relationships with family and friends were sometimes disrupted because of geographical distance. One man said his friends were:

‘Scattered to the four winds... I look and I see that all of my friends have disappeared and I am... really fearful of becoming lonely.’

For others, contact with adult children was important but difficult due to their differing values and lifestyles.

**Responses to socially challenging events**
The response of participants to challenging life events included descriptions of the actions they took and the underlying values and beliefs that informed these choices.

**Underlying beliefs and values**
*The importance of physical and mental activity*
For many, an important defence against loneliness was being active. They found physical and mental activity was stimulating and brought contact with others. Purpose was found in organised activities and in the smaller, day-to-day tasks. One participant stated:

‘I think that little necessity to struggle to survive somehow gives you that discipline or whatever that keeps... the little threads of your life together somehow much better. If that incentive is not there the need for survival, somehow all the threads seem to start falling apart.’

Becoming involved in activity drew in a diverse array of organisations and people providing information and assistance. Not knowing about interesting activities was identified as a barrier to participation, and word-of-mouth the preferred way to receive information. Another barrier to attendance was the impact of physical health problems. However, several men described strategies they use to remain active:

‘Well, you gotta make adjustments... you gotta slow down because if you walk slowly, you can walk all day.’

**Comparison with women**
Many men noted that their wives and other female friends were the organisers and initiators of social activities. They considered
women to be good communicators who made new friends easily. Some saw women as skilled at initiating conversation. There was a tendency to compare themselves to older women. In the words of one man:

‘Women [have] the quick ability... to talk to each other and so forth. I mean if you could get men to do that you can make men more like women (laughter).’

Some suggested that older women had more in common with each other, than older men have with each other, and so make connections more easily. Several men noted that while they are impressed by women’s social skills, they were not interested in the, to them, unstimulating content (‘chatter’) of older women’s conversations.

The importance of a positive and interested attitude

Some men emphasised that an attitude of interest and curiosity about life helped to maintain a sense of social well-being. For example, in relation to involvement in the focus groups one participant stated:

‘There’d be people who read your bit of paper (the letter of invitation) [and say] “I don’t want to do that, I wanna be lonely”.’

The willingness and capacity of older men to socialise

Many participants described a feeling of alienation from their male peers. Some considered connecting with like-minded men to be a high priority yet found it difficult. Poor socialisation skills among men was suggested as a reason why this is so:

‘Men won’t go out of their way to talk to men.’

‘Men are reluctant to do something that’s out of the ordinary, that’s not part of their normal behaviour.’

Others commented that older men don’t make friends easily as they were passive, shy, suspicious of new activities and protective of their privacy. For others they did not initiate contact due to a fear others would misperceive their friendly approach as a homosexual advance.

Ironically, participants’ behaviour during focus groups appeared to contradict these perceptions of men’s abilities, with most sharing their stories and views in an enthusiastic and open manner.

Meaningful activity

Participants emphasised the importance of the activity on offer. For some men this was more important than the people attending. One stated that activities needed to be ‘something interesting, rather than just time consuming’.

Participants engaged in a diverse range of activities from traditional volunteer roles in organisations such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, to interest groups like the Bromeliaed Society, and newly emerging men’s activities such as Older Men; New Ideas (OM:N), and Men’s Sheds.

Some men found typical seniors’ activities, such as bus tours and bingo, inadequate. One participant described these activities as the ‘blue rinse factory’ as they mostly attract older women and did not cater to men’s interests.

Participants highlighted certain characteristics within activities that made them more attractive.

Use and develop skills and knowledge

Activities that combined skill utilisation and social activities were highly valued, as this comment from a member of Men’s Sheds showed:

‘We’re learning new skills as a group. We’ve got professionals there who advise us. For someone like me, who doesn’t even know what half this equipment is then at the end of the day, you’ve made something... and you meet a group. So you have a lunch. You sit down there and chat. There’s a bit of comradeship about it and you’re working together as a team.’

Activities that are physical

Activities that had a physical activity component were exemplified by the following comments:

‘[For me it’s] not so much the socialising there although that’s quite reasonable, but it’s more... it does me some good I...’
feel it's physical which I've never done, really haven't done since I was a schoolboy... and this helps a lot.'

**Activities that benefit others**

Several participants found fulfilment through contributing to the lives of others:

‘You need a challenge in life, you can't wake up in the morning and go back to sleep again all day, you need to be able to challenge to find yourself even at 70 that you are a good for society, you're still useful.’

Caring and providing assistance to spouses, neighbours, friends, pets and the community in general was considered important.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Participants' descriptions of events, such as bereavement, divorce and retirement, impacting on their social lives corresponded with current research (Antonacci et al, 2002; Oxman & Berkman, 1990; Arber et al, 2003; Hanson et al, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1998; Neville, 2003; Van Grootheest et al, 1999).

Descriptions of existing relationships, and those ended, confirmed the importance of spouses. The importance of women and adult children, also noted in the literature (Arber et al, 2003; Askham, 1995; Pearlín et al, 2001) was often mentioned.

Participants confirmed the importance of friendships with other men but described difficulties establishing and sustaining these. Some felt this related to older men lacking social skills. Hogg and Heller (1990) suggested that women have superior social skills to men and the men of this study tended to subscribe to this view, however, they demonstrated a capacity to communicate openly and frankly during focus groups. Focus groups may have promoted a different quality of exchange because they included several of the characteristics that participants preferred, namely the opportunity to utilise their expertise about older men and to contribute to the lives of others.

Davidson et al (2003) concluded that older men may have different needs and wishes in relation to intimacy and friendship, and that measurements of their social ‘success’ derived from the female experience may be inadequate. It may be that the men of this study have internalised negative stereotypes around men’s supposed inability to communicate. Further investigation of what facilitates older men’s communication may increase the capacity of services to promote their connection with others.

It is clear that within this group of men, remaining active, interested and positive is a precursor to finding social connections. They fostered this interest via meaningful activities which they described as those that provided them with opportunities for utilising or learning skills and knowledge, being physically active and contributing to the lives of others. Increased social interaction was seen as a positive and sought after by-product of meaningful activity.

The identified preferences may be borne from how comfortable men are with socialising in a work-like context, one of the places where older men have tended to establish friendships (Scott & Wenger, 1995). Davidson and Arber (2003) proposed that, among older men, masculine drives to express self-sufficiency and competence remained influential in relation to choice of social activities. Particularly salient for older men who have often spent a lifetime in paid employment is Herzog and Markus’ (1999) proposal that older people engage in activities that produce a social or economic benefit as a means to compensate for the loss of demonstratably useful roles. Having been socialised to meet expectations of success and competency in the workplace (Solomon & Swabo, 1994), they may be rejecting ‘passive’ activities because such activities do not meet that aspiration. Activities that recognised the preferences outlined above not only meet those expectations but also enhance opportunities for older men to apply their coping strategies. For example, attending a woodwork group offers opportunities to be physically and mentally active and to produce an item for the benefit of others.

Considering that older men tend to be viewed as analogous with older women in terms of their social needs (Arber et al, 2003; Fleming, 1996), it is noteworthy that in this research they clearly defined the different way
they approach socialising. They recognised the importance of developing and maintaining social connections and sought to do so on their own terms. These findings support the need to directly tap into the expertise of older men in order to inform the creation of relevant health and community interventions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

For many of the men in this study, older people's activities lack consideration of their needs. Older men's preferences are likely to vary considerably from older women's and, as such, activities seeking to recruit older men should reflect these differences. The potential of activities to provide older men with social connection may be reliant on tapping their experience about what is meaningful and purposeful.

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**References**


