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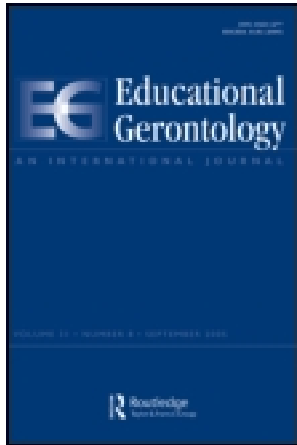

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Education and Older Adults at the University of the Third Age

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Education and Older Adults at the University of the Third Age

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This article reports a critical analysis of older adult education in Malta. In educational gerontology, a critical perspective demands the exposure of how relations of power and inequality, in their myriad forms, combinations, and complexities, are manifest in late-life learning initiatives. Fieldwork conducted at the University of the Third Age (UTA) in Malta uncovered the political nature of elder-learning, especially with respect to three intersecting lines of unequality—namely, positive aging, elitism, and gender. A cautionary note is, therefore, warranted at the dominant positive interpretations of UTAs since late-life learning, as any other education activity, is not politically neutral.

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Universities of the Third Age [UTAs] can be loosely defined as sociocultural centers where older persons acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with acceptable methods. Since its inception in 1972, the UTA movement has developed into a global success story, spreading to all continents and amounting to several thousand units with varying structures and programs. At the turn of the millennium, China alone contained some 19,300 centers with about 1.81 million members (Thompson, 2002). In 2009, Australia and New Zealand included 211 (64,535 members) and 60 (10,154 members) UTAs, respectively (U3A Online, 2009). The United Kingdom listed 731 centers with a total of 228,873 members in the same year (The Third Age Trust, 2009). UTAs are linked through the International Association of the Universities of the Third Age (AUITA), which has accreditation status to the United Nations.

Numerous studies have highlighted the social and psychological benefits that UTAs hold for third agers and society (Swindell, 1993; Lemieux, 1995; Yenerall, 2003; Huang, 2005). UTAs have been found to raise the social integration, personal fulfillment, and quality of life of older persons, thereby leading them to optimum levels of active and successful aging. Whilst acknowledging such positive functions, this article seeks to locate another side of the UTA movement by putting it under a critical lens. Applied to the study of late-life learning, a critical approach seeks to expose ''how relations of power and inequality . . . in their myriad forms combinations, and complexities, are manifest and challenged in the formal and informal education...of adults'' (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009, p. 3). Inspired by critical practice in educational gerontology (e.g., Glendenning & Battersby, 1990; Battersby & Glendenning, 1992; Findsen, 2005, 2006), this article reports on fieldwork conducted at the UTA in Malta. Its overriding goal

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was to shift away from the functionalist approach and embed the UTA movement in a sociopolitical framework that asks the following: Whose interests are really being served? And, who controls the learning process? This article, therefore, arises as a reaction to the fact that as most research is quick to laud and emphasize the role of older adult education in infusing participants with a lofty and progressive delight of life, there is a need to acknowledge the political nature of late-life learning. This task is presented in five sections. The first delineates the genesis and development of UTAs. The second overviews the methodology pursued in this study. The description of the Maltese UTA as an educational movement and developing institution, and its unique structure and educational processes, is the task of the third section. The remaining parts discuss the fieldwork data to uncover the possible political nature of UTAs. It is argued that a cautionary note must be warranted at the positive interpretations of UTAs since data point to their possible role in three intersecting lines of unequal relations—namely, positive aging, elitism, and gender biases.

UTAS : GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT

UTAs were born primarily from the ideas of Pierre Vellas who recognized the combined vitality and longevity of many older persons in France, and believed that universities should promote a combination of instruction for seniors and gerontological research that improves the life of older persons (Philibert, 1984; Radcliffe, 1984; Vellas, 1997). Vellas held that the goal of the UTA was to investigate, without any preconceived notions, how universities could improve the quality of life of older persons who, as demographic statistics at that time suggested, were becoming more numerous and whose socioeconomic conditions were often in a deplorable condition. Four major objectives were formulated for this new educational enterprise. These included raising the quality of life of older people, realizing a permanent educational program for older people in close relations with younger peers, coordinating gerontological research programs, and last, but not least, realizing initial and permanent education programs in gerontology. The first UTA was established in Toulouse, and it was opened to anyone over retirement age who was willing to fill in a simple enrolment form and pay a nominal fee. The learning activities were scheduled for daylight hours, five days a week, for eight or nine months of the year. The program proved to be so successful that other groups were created very quickly in other parts of France and continental European Francophone countries. Although there were some variations, all UTAs had university affiliations, relied on using university facilities, including the services of faculty members, and generally offered study programs tailored to older persons focusing on the medical and social problems of aging.

In 1979, adult educators from France and Britain issued an educational manifesto that was to be the heart of the British UTA movement. This explicitly stated that there is an urgent need to replace the image of elders as intrinsically wise or dependent with a concept of elderly as both teachers and learners (Midwinter, 2004). The first UTA in England was established in Cambridge in July 1981. Its objectives consisted in assailing the dogma of intellectual decline with age, providing retirees with resources for the development of their intellectual and cultural lives, developing an environment where intellectual interests arise as ends in themselves, and offering older persons opportunities for mental stimulation as widely as possible (Laslett, 1984). Contrary to the French experience, and akin to Illich's (1973) visions in *Deschooling society*, the

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Cambridge UTA rejected the idea of prepackaged courses for more or less passive digestion, and it demanded an intellectual democracy where there would be no distinction between the teachers and those taught. Its manifesto emphasized that all members would be expected to participate in teaching, and those who were reluctant to facilitate learning activities would contribute in some other way such as counseling or administration (Glendenning, 1985). British UTAs, thus, veered towards a self-help learning model in which people join small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of specific purposes. Self-help groups are usually formed by peers who come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change (Withnall, 1989).

Nowadays AUITA records five diverse models of UTAs depending on their form of linkage to a traditionally defined or host university, the curriculum offered, and kind of participation offered to members (Levesque, 2006). All five models are based on, and closely related to, the classic Francophone and British models. Although a significant number of members join UTAs in the pursuit of new knowledge and to discover things that they were not previously aware of, the UTA experience is more than an educational one (Swindell, 1993; Yenerall, 2003; Huang, 2005, 2006; Alfageme, 2007; Hori & Cusack, 2006). UTAs are typified by a sense of vitality and dynamism that go beyond what is usually the case in a normal adult education center. UTAs have also been found to address the developmental and spiritual needs of older persons. The nature and purpose of teaching and learning is coordinated in ways that complement the wish of older persons to interpret their lives in a meaningful manner. When members are asked what they gain from involvement in UTA activities, the first thing that comes to their minds are social outcomes, such as making new friends and finding a support group, which help them through difficult periods in their personal life. UTAs fulfill various positive social and personal functions, such as aiding lonely older persons to resocialize themselves by increasing their interests, as well as providing opportunities and stimulation for the use and structure of free-time that would otherwise be characterized by inactivity. UTAs also develop in its members a lofty and progressive delight of life, increase the social integration and harmony of older persons in society, inject a sense of creativity in older persons, and make them more visible in society. They improve members' abilities of understanding the objective world by aiding them to better grasp world development and social progress, whilst also helping them to ameliorate their abilities of self-health by enabling them to master medical care knowledge and prevention of disease. UTAs have also taken advantage of the cyberspace revolution, and they provide e-learning opportunities to meet the social and intellectual needs of isolated older adults devoid of social networking activity (Swindell, 2000, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

Data for this research publication emerged as a result of my involvement with the Maltese UTA as a faculty member of the European Centre of Gerontology (University of Malta) of which the Maltese University of the Third Age forms part. Data were collected through the techniques of *data combination* whose advantages include revealing a wider view of the complexity of human behavior, adding rigor and depth to the study, as well as compensating for the limitations in one method by the strengths of another (Neuman, 2002). Methods included nonparticipant observation and semistructured interviews. The observational method is the fundamental technique

in field research, and it was utilized to observe the interpersonal interactions taking place at the UTA as well as to empathize with the subjective perceptions of members. Semistructured interviews were conducted with both UTA coordinators and learners. In semistructured interviews, the interviewer asks specific open-ended questions but is also free to probe beyond them if necessary. Attention was also geared towards fieldwork's major ethical dilemmas, namely, consent and codes, deception, privacy, identification, confidentiality, and not spoiling the field. Research subjects were treated with dignity, making sure not to impose upon them any harm, and respecting their privacy by assuring strict confidentiality. During fieldwork, especially the final stages, effort was also made not to leave any unfinished business.

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THE UTA IN MALTA

Malta is a Member State of the European Union. It is located in the Mediterranean Sea with Sicily 93 km to the north, Africa 288 km to the south, Gibraltar 1,826 km to the west and Alexandria 1,510 km to the east. Malta has evolved out of a traditional pyramidal shape to an even-shaped block distribution of equal numbers at each age cohort except at the top (NSO, 2007, 2009). Whilst in 1985 the percentage of the 60+ and 75+ cohorts measured 14.3% and 3.8%, in 2008 these figures reached 21.4% and 6.1%, respectively. This occurred as the birth rate declined to 1.3 per family, whilst the expectation of life at birth for men/women increased from 70.8/76.0 years in 1985 to 77.7/81.4 years in 2005. Population projections estimate that in the year 2025 the percentage of persons aged 60+ will rise to 26.5%. Similar to international statistics, women are overrepresented in older cohorts, with the masculinity ratio for age cohorts in the 80–84, 85–89 and 90+ age brackets reaching 63, 57, and 48 respectively.

Malta is a relative latecomer in establishing its UTA. The UTA in Valletta, or as we call it in our native tongue, L'Universita Tat-Tielet Eta' (U3E), was launched in January 1993 and, thus, could draw on some 20 years of European experience. The U3E was founded as part of the then Institute of Gerontology (now European Centre of Gerontology) within the University of Malta and is, therefore, more in accordance with the French UTA model than the British. The first U3E program was not launched as a pilot project but as a full-scale activity, resulting from the aspirations of academics and government officials working in the field of aging. The U3E in Malta is governed by a mission statement written and developed by university academics:

> *. . . real life, free of constraints, of worries and of imposed responsibilities, starts with retirement. Yet, as long as one lives, one feels a natural yearning to know more, to explore and to understand. The University of the Third Age is making this possible for everyone. Thinking keeps us young...The U3E will encourage creativity and will propose several projects for this purpose . . . The U3E will also encourage special interest groups for pursuing hobbies or other interests.*
>
> U3E Prospectus (undated, circa 1992)

The U3E is governed by two main committees. Whilst academic matters are in the hands of a committee chosen by the University of Malta, its social undertakings are managed by a democratically elected association from U3E members. The U3E offers courses that are not intended to lead their participants to obtain any material or credential gains. It approaches education as consisting of the pursuit of nonutilitarian knowledge through which one's mind and personality can be enhanced. The U3E coordinates a wide variety of courses based on the assumed needs and

interests of older persons. These range from ''heavy'' courses on philosophical concerns to day-to-day courses focusing on gardening. Members have no direct control over the institution's program content. Although learners are free to suggest new courses, this decision rests solely in the hands of university academics. The U3E's prospectus states that the curricular program covers aspects of special interest related to the social rights and responsibilities of older persons that may range from financial matters, support social services, health care, physical exercise and dieting, to the prevention of illness and disability. Tutors are non-U3E members, either full-time or part-time university lecturers, and are paid according to university rates.

The coordination of the U3E is in the hands of the University of Malta which pays for the rent of the premises and lecturing/coordinating fees. Membership can be easily acquired by those who have passed their 60th birthday and pay a nominal fee of €12. In 2009, the U3E included 643 members, 198 men and 445 women. Members tend to be in the 60–74 age band (43%), with both membership and participation falling with increasing age. Female members outnumber males (3:1), with the ratio increasing further when one focuses solely on course attendance (5:1). Members also tend to live in the vicinity of the U3E center, which is situated in the highly urbanized Southern and Harbor Regions (64%), and which effectively function as Malta's socio-economic hub. The majority of members are married and still living with their spouses (82%), so that the U3E seems to be functioning more to combat the reduction of social roles resulting from retirement rather than to allay social solitude. Members also possess higher-than-average levels of educational attainment and qualifications. As much as 80% of persons in the Maltese 60+ cohort hold no educational qualifications compared to just 10% of U3E members. U3E members are 6 and 20 times more likely to be in possession of secondary school certificate/ordinary levels and tertiary credentials, respectively, than the average Maltese older person. The typical female member holds a history of working in ''female'' professions such as teaching and nursing (62%), whilst many male counterparts boast a managerial career within the civil service (66%). The majority joined the U3E to ''make up for lost opportunities'' (75%), views the learning environment as a place where ''one meets people of similar interests'' (55%), and lists Appreciation and History of Art as both the first attended and most preferred course (69%). Members hold strong appreciation for learning for its own sake, and they highlight with excitement the new directions it opens up, the feelings of self-fulfillment that result with satisfying their curiosity and creative potentials, and the sociable enjoyment from engaging in social and cultural activities:

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> *Attending the U3E gave me real confidence. I had three children in succession so participation in educational courses was always out of the question. I always saw myself as incomplete, curious about life, but never able to satisfy this desire.*
>
> female U3E member, age 62

> *One day I was checking some of my bills and found myself unable to concentrate. I realized that my mental skills were in hibernation* [laughing]. *The U3E provides me with the mental gymnastics to help me remainmentally alert.*
>
> male, U3E member, age 76

> *The U3E helped me regain my self-esteem and independence. Retirement was a big blow. Now I have something to look forward to. I help in the coordination of social events which gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction*
>
> male, U3E member, age 66

> *Discovering the U3E was a real life-saving experience. My husband died on the first week of his retirement so you can imagine how I felt. The U3E provides me with an opportunity to participate in interesting activities and make new friends everyday.*
>
> female, U3E member, age 63

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The above testimonies are all strong demonstrations of the ways in which UTAs aid older persons to cope with adverse circumstances whether social, economic, or health-related. However, this does not preclude the possibility that UTAs may incorporate a janus-faced character by also functioning as yet another example of glorified occupational therapy that is both conservative and oppressive. The critical debate in educational gerontology was advanced by Glendenning and Battersby (1990) who contested the legitimacy of learning institutions that attract older adults who had already benefited substantially from the formal educational system. Challenging the conventional wisdom on which elder-learning provision tends to be based upon—especially the belief that education, in whatever mode, is a neutral enterprise and is inherently good for older people—Battersby & Glendenning (1992) drew attention to the socially constructed nature of learning that may work in favor and against the interests of the status quo and vulnerable elders, respectively. In fact, early studies criticized the UTA movement for pandering to the cultural pretensions of an aged bourgeoisie who had already learned to play the system (Morris, 1984; Okely, 1990). More recently, Formosa (2007) found UTAs to harbor class distinctions and associated such a movement as part of a large macrocosm of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relations in a subtle but efficient manner. Findsen (2005), writing from a New Zealander perspective, demonstrated how New Zealander UTAs work to marginalize older Maori and Pacific people. Alfageme (2007) noted how Spanish UTA members hold higher levels of education and monthly income compared to their same-aged peers. Participation rates also featured an exceptionally high percentage of retired pensioners and early-retired persons and a relatively low percentage of pensioners who had not worked previously or been unpaid domestic workers.

Researchers have also commented how despite older women are more numerous in UTAs, they tend to be less visible within a mixed classroom where male peers tend to dominate any arising discussion (Formosa, 2005). Jackson (2006, p. 88), in her study of older women learners in a residential college belonging to the National Federation of Women's Institutes in the UK, notes how the courses on offer at this college served to anchor students in choices that were located in both social class and gender expectations about women's traditional roles: ''although there is evidence that there are social benefits to lifelong learning, including more engagement with active citizenship and the development of social capital, learning can also be a mechanism for exclusion.'' At the same time, other research highlighted the failure of UTAs and other elder-learning centers to cater for hard-to-reach and isolated men and how little is done to attract older men to learning bodies that they perceive to be dominated by women (Williamson, 2000).

In the light of such practices, educators have increasingly rebuked the tacit assumption that UTAs automatically empower and emancipate older adults by reducing their perceived social exclusion and improving their quality of life (Kump & Krašovec, 2007). Inspired by the analytical and empirical travails of critical educational gerontology, fieldwork was geared to uncover the role of the U3E in contributing towards any intersecting and interlocking lines of inequality in later life. Three avenues of hegemony were located—namely, positive ageism, elitism, and gender biases.

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Positive Ageism

The present vision guiding the U3E is modeled upon assumptions premised on the notion of *positive aging*. Positive aging refers to a new vision of aging that accepts the realities of a fundamental genetically driven biomolecular process leading to death, but with the prospect of achieving healthy, active, productive, and successful aging to the very end through lifestyle modification and interventions (Andrews, 2002). Learning is geared as a means of remaining active and contributing to society, as a means of accumulating the needed life-skills in later life, and delaying the clinical symptoms associated with dementia and other diseases. Positive aging is fêted within older adult learning circles because whilst it promises that many decrements associated with later life are actually modifiable and reversible, it also provides a means of countering the negative stereotyping of older people. Such a rationale presents various valid arguments since, as already highlighted, many U3E members claimed to find late-life education as an indispensable activity to overcome the various challenges brought on by later life.

Yet, one cannot neglect the dark side of the positive aging rationale. Positive aging is at fault for advocating a type of social engagement that is insignificant to some sectors of older persons, promoting cultural-specific traditional roles for older persons, and being excessively tuned to the needs of consumer capitalism (Phillipson, 1998). Ideologies underlying positive aging are inherently ageist since the main implication is to remain indistinguishable from middle-aged peers (Katz & Marshall, 2003). In an educational setting, positive aging is inadequate because it operates within an *individual pathology* model that perceives older persons as deficient following their loss of familial and work responsibilities. On its own, the individual pathology model is too limited to capture the complexity of older people's engagement in pastimes and their participation in education. It overlooks how unique backgrounds and circumstances to later life—such as social class, gender and age-related discriminatory factors—have an immense impact on motivation and aptitude to participate in educational activities. Positive aging is discriminatory and influenced by a middle-class hegemony; not all activities are warranted equal status. Whilst it implicitly castigates older people who do not wish to, or cannot embrace, the ''busy'' ethic as in some way withdrawn or deviant, it is ''intellectual'' and ''high-brow'' learning initiatives that derive encouragement and approval. The U3E, thus, remains unable to consider a diversity based on social and cultural preferences. Rather, it supports an environment where the most powerful perspective acquires a moral dimension to the detriment of those who end on the wrong side of the equation:

> *We keep very high standards. We are proud to have here a school [sic] of excellence. All our courses are taught by university academics . . . I admit that you need a certain, I mean a good, level of education to be able to follow the courses we provide at the U3E. I do not feel bad about this as there are other community centers that older persons with lower levels of education can turn to.*
>
> female, U3E coordinator, age 64

At the same time, positive aging focuses on learning as an end-in-itself that loses sight of the bigger picture. Older persons are not simply empty vessels for the deposition of liberal-arts knowledge but operate within a humanistic dimension that seeks to provide ''meanings'' to their respective social and personal environment. Following Manheimer (2009, p. 286), meaning

implies norms and values, which, in turn, ''makes people's experiences in life courses rather than simple concatenations of events.'' As the following learner asserted, the frenzy to pursue learning activities can transform the U3E from a supposedly worthwhile and constructive experience to an emptiness of meaning:

> *Do not get me wrong. The U3E is a marvelous experience. But I feel that the U3E's activities do not gel together. Some members attend daily, others come as they please. What is mean is that we participate as individuals here, and there is no guide from coordinators as what is the ultimate reason underlying our participation. I feel that we should join forces and transform mere attendance into something more worthwhile. I do not know what this is, something related to charity work perhaps? Or perhaps giving older persons in Malta a voice that influences policy makers?*
>
> male, U3E member, age 66

By embracing a positive aging framework the U3E also overlooks the social-psychological nature of adult aging where the negotiation between internal and external worlds becomes of paramount importance. Unfortunately, a defining feature of positive aging is to make older persons similar to middle-aged peers when the ''psycho-social processes of identity in later life involves an amalgam of social ageism, personal integration, and bodily changes'' (Biggs 2004, p. 98).

Elitism

The correlation of class and participation in compulsory and continuing education is one of the strongest, as well as most enduring, scientific axioms of contemporary societies (Ball, 2005). Reflecting other international research on UTAs (e.g., Okely, 1990; Alfageme, 2007), the U3E is not an exception. Although it was open to everybody and offered no hindrances or obstacles to older persons wanting to join—in that the only requirements were being over 60 years old and a willingness to pay a nominal fee—the membership body was exceedingly middle-class in character. Members displayed strong forms of middle-class dress codes, linguistic variations, etiquette and gestures. The elitist character of the U3E was evident by members' pursuit of expressive lifestyles, eagerness to instruct themselves in the bourgeois ethos of freedom, close affinity with traditional intellectuals, and preference for expressive over instructional education. Most female members had retired from rewarding careers in the nursing and teaching professions, and made their utmost to display a *professional femininity*. Rather than propelling an interest to buy the latest juice-blender, which, as a local advertisement promises, performs ''a million-and-one functions at even a cheaper price,'' female members were focused on postmaterialist issues such as, for example, how they can have more sunlight in their living-room and whether the latest diet fad made sense.

The predominance of middle-class adults at the U3E was not a coincidence but followed a number of social closure tactics which made the learning experience unappealing to older persons with low levels of income and education. The choice of subjects—such as History and Appreciation of Art and The Many Faces of Pirandello—provided an alien environment to older persons from working-class milieus. Indeed, the U3E has not escaped the *pervasiveness of schooling* as its organization operated through a top-down model of instruction that cultivates respect for authority, experts, and universal knowledge. Moreover, the term university in its title

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means that working-class persons are apprehensive to join an organization with such a heavy class baggage:

> *You must be joking in suggesting that I should join the university for older people. I have no schooling experience*. [MF: The U3E is open to everybody and there are no exams. It simply consists in a number of courses for older adults]. *Whatever! I will not join university. The people there will probably be very stuck-up. It is no place for me. It will be simply a waste of time.*
>
> ex-dockyard worker, non-U3E member, age 63

On the other hand, the U3E holds a useful function for middle-class retirees in their effort to maintain and improve their position in the class structure. As previous identities and statuses associated with one's occupational position are erased and become meaningless, retirement acts as a *status leveler* by putting persons from different class backgrounds closer together in the hierarchical social space. Retirement forces middle-class persons to an arena of role ambiguity, enforcing a dependence on the state welfare system, and declining their social worth to the extent that their position in the *social space* changes from that of achievement to one of ascription. In their attempt to offset such a leveling experience, middle-class older persons attempt to enroll in new arenas for moral and practical support, as well as to reassert their previous and intended position in the social space. Membership in the U3E provides them with the possibility of acquiring the label of cultured or cultivated with respect to the rest of the older population. In the way that books and paintings are used to impress neighbors, friends, and other social viewers, U3E membership becomes employed as a strategy of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) to obtain and compete for social honor:

> *[At the U3E] one finds same-minded people. I cannot stand retirees who spend their entire day staring at TV soap operas. The U3E gives you back the identity you enjoyed when previously working, and the opportunity to make use of your educational and professional experiences. As a past headmistress, I always excelled in coordinated events. The U3E provides people with the opportunity to work their talents.*
>
> female, U3E member, age 65

In sum, as far as class politics are concerned, the U3E serves as a reproductive and domesticating educational agent. It does not elaborate on all the various forms of learning but only those that reflect middle-class values. In doing so, it functions as a perpetuator of *symbolic violence* by imposing middle-class meanings as legitimate.

Gender Biases

The application of a gender lens to the U3E finds that its program discriminates against both women and men. Coordinators perceive older learners as a homogenous population, a stand that is fundamentally *malestream* considering the great divide in the type and volume of capital held by older men and women. Older women in Malta are less likely to have received workplace learning, received an apprenticeship, hold educational qualifications, and be in receipt of an occupational pension (Troisi & Formosa, 2006). Cultural constructs put a large proportion of older women in the army of informal carers. These people either support sick and disabled relatives, especially husbands and aunts, or—as it is becoming increasingly frequent—as carers of

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their grandchildren whilst their children and sons/daughters-in-law work full time. At the same time, one can never overemphasize the double standard of aging—that is, the severe difficulties that older women face as the result of the combination of ageist and sexist prejudices. However, the U3E overlooks the unique barriers faced by older women such as their low expectations that they can participate successfully in educational pursuits, difficulties reaching learning centers due to inadequate transport amenities (the large majority of older women in Malta do not own a driving license), and problems in finding time for educational pursuits when caring is so time-consuming. Fieldwork located a masculinist discourse within the U3E where women are generally silenced and made passive through their invisibility. The learning experience provides a too firm stand on providing learning to women instead for women:

> *I am lucky. I am one of the few who can live her retirement like a man* [laughter]. *Coordinators here have no idea of what it means to be an older women. Sessions take place in the morning but many have to prepare lunch for their husbands, go on errands for their frail parents, or care for their grandchildren. Sessions always start at nine which is way too early when you consider that many use public transport.*
>
> female, U3E member, age 66

> *Most lecturers are patronizing towards us. They are nice but patronizing. They assume that our knowledge is constrained to domestic chores such as cooking and childrearing. When discussion turns to the financial aspects or inheritance, we get little opportunity to air our views. When subjects related to care, volunteering, and grandparenthood come to the fore, they expect us to lead the discussion!*
>
> female, U3E member, age 63

This demonstrates the need for an inclusive approach towards older women, with alternative timings during the day that give them with the opportunity to plan the lectures. Looking at ways of facilitating learning for older women necessities a reformation of the conventional ways in which older adult education is currently employed. For the U3E to be of significance to older women's lives, it must be sensitive to the specific learning needs of older women, ranging from financial literacy to informal care. U3E must also be knowledgeable of the unique and specific barriers woman experience.

This is not, however, the same as saying that the U3E is a man's world. Despite the masculinist agenda, its membership body is characterized by a high proportion of women learners. The low percentage of older men signals strongly that for some reason the U3E is not attractive to them. The U3E is promoted through avenues – such as during health-related programs on the broadcasting media or through leaflets at health-care centers where most of the clients are women. Health promotion courses at the U3E, despite being open to all, are delivered by women with a bias towards women-related health issues such as weight-loss and osteoporosis. The U3E is, thus, miles away from incorporating courses that are interesting to male lifestyles such as health and cooking programs called Pit Stops and Cooking for Men as is the case in Australia (Golding, 2011). A member expressed his disappointment at feeling left out as follows:

> *The U3E is hijacked by women. For the past five years I have been trying to organize a social event where we go and watch a football match. Not a chance! Men's health, or even sexuality in later life, are out of bounds here. And then we wonder why men do not become members. I think that most women here have a chip on their shoulder, and now want to turn the U3E into a ladies' circle organization.*
>
> male, U3E member, age 67

Undoubtedly, the U3E will continue to be seen as a women's place unless it is promoted with male images, voices, and concerns. An inclusion of male-oriented subjects such as astronomy, botanical, and zoological studies—together with some focus on learner-friendly sessions on mathematics and physics—is another step in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights that despite its positive functions towards its members and society in general, the UTA in Malta is not immune to promoting the marginalization of vulnerable older adults. The empirical data presented herein derived from a particular institution from a single country. Nevertheless, the fact that international research (e.g., Okely, 1990; Findsen, 2005; Jackson, 2006) has also expressed similar preoccupations towards the political nature of late-life learning implies that its findings are also—to an extent—valid to other geographical and national regions. Another limitation of this study relates, of course, to the fact that the U3E subscribes to the French rather than the British UTA model. Admittedly, research hints that UTAs premised upon the self-help model are relatively egalitarian (Karola Hebestreit, 2006). However, one should not be carried away on this point. Studies on British models still locate a membership body that is exceedingly well-educated and financially secure. Moreover, one still awaits evidence highlighting the work of British-style UTAs in empowering older men and subaltern elders from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds. The evidence is to the contrary, even though not as strong as the data presented herein.

In sum, there is an urgent need for UTAs to break free of positive aging and embrace a rationale that is sensitive to the complex issues surrounding later life. A possible way forward is found in Moody's (1990) call to implement elder-learning programs that adopt a developmental perspective that emphasizes gains as well as losses with the process of aging. A *life-review* educational process does not let the learners forget they are old; it ties their rich life experience into the classroom and facilitates the conversion of life experience from an obstacle into a source of strength. Such guiding principles have great potential to aid all learners rediscover their identity as cultural bearers and creators. Moreover, UTAs must respond to the fact that many older adults remain educationally and socially disadvantaged by implementing a *widening participation* agenda. Coordinators must think out of the box so that late-life learning initiatives attract adults that are not necessarily White, female, and middle class. There must be serious attempts in outreach work to facilitate learning opportunities outside formal settings with older adults who could not or would not usually participate in traditional formally organized provision. Without doubt, the teaching of information and communication technology (ICT) and e-learning strategies comprise a central priority on a widening participation agenda.

The road towards good practice in third-age learning is, of course, not without obstacles. The pervasiveness of ageism means that courses of action are likely to attract less political attention in the short and medium term. The label old is not positive, and older persons may prefer to copy successful models targeting younger peers rather than identifying themselves through gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 2005) and the mature imagination (Biggs, 1999). At the same time, human and public resources—such as access to buildings, workshops and equipment—that could be used for learning may exist but be unavailable due to conflicting priorities, unhelpful regulations, or a lack of awareness of inherent possibilities (McNair, 2009). Such issues are

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surely not easily resolved but, in the spirit of the critical paradigm, there is real hope if local and global movements collaborate together for social transformation.

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