

7 Discussion and Conclusion

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In order to frame our interpretation of the OMAL project findings, the first step warrants a reflection of the diversity of contexts, approaches, and methodological designs that emerged in the preceding chapters. OMAL's learning partnership was primarily an opportunity for researchers from different countries to establish a path for a future common understanding of the interface between masculinities and older adult learning, taking as our point of departure our determination to focus on the role of community and informal learning settings in the lives of older men. Project leaders decided not to take a rigid approach to or engage in a unified coordination of the cases being studied. Basically, each partner decided freely which approaches were best suited to each context. Sometimes driven by curiosity and sometimes by our desire to learn more about the relatively unknown locations of leaning for older men learning in our own countries, we considered diversity to be of utmost importance in our exploratory attitude towards a field of inquiry as of yet almost completely unexplored. Consequently, different approaches to our research consisted of the following: while Maltese researchers studied a religious confraternity and the Labour Party Veterans' branch of the Labour Party, the Slovenian group conducted a qualitative and quantitative study of voluntary associations, comparing rural and urban municipalities. At the same time, the Portuguese researchers chose to focus their studies on an amateur fishing club and a group of retired fisherman still working ashore, and Estonian scholars researched a sample of older men in a rural municipality. Of course, these diverse cases entailed varying methodological approaches that ranged from questionnaires to observations, interviews with different degrees of structure, focus groups, and informal conversations. By the same token, it is noteworthy that the forms our international partners chose to describe their investigations were different in nature and even highlighted different issues.

It is, therefore, not a surprise that the richness and diversity presented in the preceding chapters make it challenging to produce a unified body of inferential analysis, summaries, and conclusions. Difficulties aside, this variation comprises the first key finding of our project, namely, that when looking beyond the more structured spaces of the workplace and typical formal or non-formal learning spaces, one recognizes an astonishing diversity of informal, non-structured spaces where older men feel secure and where various activities happen that have a direct and indirect

influence on their well-being. This obscure world has been mistreated and judged as unimportant both by research and policy, largely because its unstructured character makes it harder to typify emergent analytic categories, and consequently, to identify learning locations as *predictable objects* - as is so often the case, for example, in formal education. Indeed, “while the male sex may have in the past dominated the field of education, older men in particular (and increasingly men of all ages) remain excluded from education and learning” (Golding et al., 2014a, p. xvii). We have only begun to scratch the surface of the immense diversity of informal learning spaces where older men spend an important portion of their time. This discovery, simple as might seem, foregrounds the situated nature of learning taking place that in certain cases might constitute a powerful narrative of practices. At the same time, it bluntly reminds us that community is mostly characterised by this unstructured character and by diversity, forcing the concept of community away from naive and narrow definitions that have dominated academic literature on the subject for so long. This goal of developing a new definition of community is increasingly timely considering that “recently, things have begun to change and the pendulum is swinging against men’s involvement...men are now often minority participants in education across different sectors and areas of provision in many countries” (ibid.).

Far too often, the community has been depicted as a simple homogeneous grouping of people that benefit from common identities, interests, and objectives, cooperating apolitically within a certain, well-defined territory. The community spaces that we inferred from the chapters included herein demonstrate differently, however. Accepting the diverse, heterogeneous, informal spaces around us functions as a means of opening the doors to an educational vision of community, implementing Freire’s (1985, 1990) dialogue and dialogical relations. Dialogue, in this context, entails a recognition of the other, something only possible in communities characterised by heterogeneity and cultural diversity. The learning spaces presented here also constitute *symbolic spaces* that frame people’s sense of belonging, one built from symbols that have powerful meanings in the community (Kurantowicz, 2008). Here are some demonstrative examples of the same from previous chapters: in the Portuguese fishing club, it was the sea, the lagoon, and the surroundings that formed a symbolic space that gives older men a sense of belonging, at the same time allowing them to build fruitful ties with the larger community. In Malta, veterans gather around the symbolic spaces of political action and the labour party; it is from these symbolic spaces of their learning activities that the older men aim to bring a renewed dynamism to the party and to the younger generations, and from which they seek to influence the broader political scene. Fire brigades and sporting clubs in Slovenia also form symbolic spaces that both build a diverse community

and allow older men to strengthen their ties to the community. Finally, in Estonia, it became evident that men prefer to adopt a learning attitude regarding the other in the sphere of their professional skills, therefore acquired through work, which was built around specific and diverse symbols (meaning either bicycles or electric equipment). It thus becomes clear, in our international chapters, that the informal spaces where men interact have the simultaneous ability of building a sense of belonging that ties them with community and of allowing older men to contribute positively, in some way, to their communities. This can be recognized in the Estonian attempts to passing on knowledge or skills, or, in Portugal, in the fishermen's donations of fish caught during social events to social work institutions. Whichever examples we choose, these situations contradict the pessimistic categorization of older people that reifies older citizens as dispensable, non-economic items.

The chapters in this edited manuscript helped us draw the conclusion that, within community organisations, older men can frequently have an influential community role, as argued in the theoretical approach presented by Mark and colleagues (2010) – even if this is sometimes not obvious to the general public. It is within these symbolic, informal spaces in the community that, in all of our cases, the importance of socialising appears to be crucial for older men. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions about later life, men are not always the victims of social exclusion, lying in the shadows of their female peers who are thought to monopolise the community sphere. Socialising simultaneously appears as one of the main motivations for these men to join together in their own contexts to perform a wide range of activities, and demonstrates a fundamental, relational result in more than one sense. Firstly, those spaces appear as spaces of human relations of informal gatherings, sometimes through travelling or via relationships with a culturally different acquaintances; these get together allow men to talk, have fun, share opinions and their particular views of their world, or perform activities that in some cases have an intrinsic value, *per se*, in *the* case of sports, simple games, or fishing, for instance. This aligns with McGivney's (1999) claim that education was especially successful when taking place in informal community spaces. The central importance of socialising at an older age must also be studied from other perspectives as well, however. Interacting socially is a way to fight back the natural, progressive deterioration of social networks generally associated with aging. In other words, socialising is an important factor in preventing isolation and loneliness that, associated with other factors, can dramatically reduce the quality of life and the health of the elderly. The cases we researched provide many examples that prove socialising to be fundamental, whether in regards to men in voluntary associations in Slovenia or those in Malta who are members of religious fraternities.

The importance of the various forms of socialising summarized in our research gain additional meaning when the emphasis is placed on older citizens. Quite often, in the context of aging population research, we find ourselves researching or describing daycentres, retirement homes, or similar institutions. While there is no doubt regarding the necessity of these institutions (or even of the positive services provided to citizens and residents), researchers do often state, as did São José (2012), that institutionalisation should only be considered as a last resort, the last solution along the natural processes of decline as part of aging. Moreover, it is disquieting that both researchers and politicians tend to fail to point out means of avoiding this 'last resort'. In this sense, our project findings highlight that community is the intrinsic and natural solution to this issue. Community organisations – such as the ones we focus on in this book, and especially those that are informal and less structured – keep older citizens integrated in their everyday activities and enable them to socialise with people from different generations. Voluntary associations and clubs of diverse natures, regardless from which country, represent this hope that older citizens (both men and women) may postpone institutionalisation. In this respect, questions must be asked as to which activities can be included in the definition of active ageing: “If paid work and volunteering are included...what about house cleaning? What about listening to music? What about taking a lifelong learning course?” (Bass, 2011, p. 179). Indeed, there is no question that a productive ageing society reflects

...the values of a community that seeks policies that enable all of its citizens to continue to live productive and rewarding lives as they choose. By engaging older people and expanding the availability and opportunities to participate in significant societal roles, their [older people's] talent, experience, and insights would be retained or even maximized; the overall society would benefit from their participation and generations would appreciate the value of each other across age lines (Bass, 2011, p. 181).

The findings in the various case studies presented in this edited manuscript provide evidence of the need for social and educational policies to further take into account the role of community organisations in improving the opportunities for older men's learning.

The fact that these informal spaces are fundamental, relational spaces does bring forth the issue of intergenerational learning, which is a fashionable issue in the context of current day European policy and is also, therefore, constantly referenced in official discourses (Hatton-Yeo and Sánchez, 2012). While its importance and its advantages are not contested, intergenerational learning is fundamentally *assumed* to be an intrinsic outcome of intergenerational relationships:

Intergenerational learning arises from activities which purposely involve two or more generations with the aim of generating additional or different benefits to those arising from single generation activities. It generates learning outcomes, but these may or may not be the primary focus of the activity. It involves different generations learning from each other and/or learning together with a tutor or facilitator. (Thomas, 2009, p. 5)

As data from all of the chapters indicate, older men's contact with people of all ages is at the centre of social experience. For instance, in the Portuguese fishing club, there are explicit results that point to intergenerational learning of the fishing techniques, but, even in this case, this learning seems to be a kind of extension of the family unit to the club spaces and places. This provides a clue to pursuing additional, related research, namely, that informal spaces can potentially serve as links between family and community and can have a role in this type of learning. The Estonian case, on the other hand, reveals the tensions among generations. Despite the men's willingness to share their skills, there seems to be an attitude problem mixed with a general disbelief in the youngsters – that is, an intergenerational divide that by definition resists the very notion of socially built learning, or learning as a social construction.

An important finding of the OMAL project results was that of which activities and types of informal learning are preferred by older men. There is no doubt that older men tend to choose hands-on activities, problem-oriented activities in some cases, and those characterised by competition in other cases (either in sports or in simple games like dominoes or cards). However, in many instances, what the case studies unearthed was an informal, situated, community-based and non-structured form of learning, millions of miles away from the rigid structures involving formal learning and vocational training that increasingly crowd in and create extra pressure on professional life. The informal learning style preferred by men is also deeply embedded in their own past and present experience, independent of the source of such experiential knowledge (stemming from work and working life, or roughly coming from leisure). This is of key significance for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is important because it shows that the little attention being paid to men's learning encourages men – in contrast to women – to avoid the mainstream, market-based learning opportunities that can have a positive impact in men's lives. This leads us to think that apart from all the rhetoric, there is – for men – a *different way of learning* which, in the historical moment in which we are living, is being relegated to an invisible limbo. This statement, based on our findings, is sustained by other bodies

of research and, in this issue, the similarities are indeed surprising. In a recent book on men's learning that brings together exploratory research work from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, Greece, China, Australia, and New Zealand, the editors conclude the following:

The research we have analysed shows that, almost counter-intuitively, the most effective learning for most men with limited prior experiences of learning is informal, local, and community-based, which builds on what men know, can do, and are interested in. Learning for such men is less effective if it assumes that all men have a problem, that particular masculinities *are* the problem, or if it requires them to be served up curricula and assessments for qualifications, vocational training or literacy, as students, customers, clients, or patients, which presupposes a deficit. These approaches are totally inappropriate and patronising for most men and boys of any age, and most patronising for men already turned off to learning by negative prior learning experiences (Golding et al., 2014b, p. 256-257 - italics in original).

Taking into account the diversity of all of the informal spaces involved, these consistencies are simultaneously surprising and meaningful. They also bring to the discussion a central issue that reappears throughout our findings, namely, the building of masculinities and its influence on men's perspectives, attitudes towards learning, and well-being. As we have formerly pointed out in our theoretical chapter, social norms and principles exert pressure on men regarding what their masculine roles are supposed to be and how these roles are supposed to look. Connell's (1987) hegemonic masculinities were defined as the configuration of gender practice that embodies the accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy and guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Deeply anchored in power relations, hegemonic masculinity is supposed to subordinate all other alternative masculinities, including complicit and subordinated masculinities (ibid., 2005). More than contesting a concept that forms a basis for analysis, we still have to point out that its foundations are rooted in Gramscian notions of power, while in our cases it may be useful to look further into post-structuralist notions of power, such as those put forward by Michel Foucault. To return to our research, both of the religious fraternities (in which only men are allowed to participate in processions) and the veterans' branch of the Labour party (highly dominated by men, as frequently occurs in a significant number of political parties across Europe) show signs of having the construction of hegemonic masculinities as a common ground and a base. Additionally, the case of the retired fisherman still working ashore is meaningful, particularly because they have been involved, in

their past profession, in totalitarian environments (the fishing boats). These fishermen appear to have built their gender roles in men-only, harsh working milieus, which have determined their present forms of shoulder-to-shoulder relationships and learning. It is a hands-on, practical learning that nevertheless does not include the typified forms of female relations - most of the times it does not even include talking. After retirement, thus, older men seem to need to take a refuge in the same terms that have conditioned the past construction of their masculinities. This is only a superficial and partial analysis, however, as gender roles are socially constructed and situated, and frequently seem more complex than we can grasp only from our exploratory cases which, mostly, have not been methodologically designed towards this aim.

There are two additional comments concerning masculinities that seem useful to bring up at this point. First, the notion of old masculinities and new masculinities refers to transitional gender relations and male roles that allow us to distance ourselves somewhat from both oppressive notions of power and masculinities (Wall et al, 2010). Second, masculinities are a fragile condition requiring constant vigilance and affirmation through discourse and performance (Almeida, 1995). In other words, while women better able to solve the problem of femininity through marriage or pregnancy, men tend to interpret social pressure around them as having to behave in a constant affirmation of their masculinity. In the case of the fishing club, we ventured the interpretation that the club learning spaces were free, secure spaces where men *did not have to* constantly affirm their masculinity; these contradictions could simply mean that the way these men construct their gender roles in changing, or that they are starting to mix old and new masculinities. Synthesizing informal learning spaces in the community can potentially provide non-structured spaces free of pressure, those beyond the more constraining milieus of family and work; this may open up more possibilities for retired men to build *different* masculinities. This is something that, in our opinion, makes sense to retain as a potential hypothesis further research.

A final finding central to our cases is that of the relationship between men's learning and their health and well-being. In almost every case, there were signs that participation in informal learning activities gave older men an increased feeling of self-esteem and self-confidence. Also, it was very clear that, in the countries researched, men felt that these activities were central to keeping busy, staying involved, being a part of the community, and, especially, having the feeling of being socially useful to the community. Acting together, these factors give men new perspectives for their life. Quoting from the Slovenian case, "in their opinion [men's

opinion], all of these factors contributed to their quality of life, well-being, and longevity” (p. 94). There are also results demonstrating the influence of activities on physical health and lifestyles. Sports activities naturally carry these advantages; there are also reports from men who mentioned being active as a way of escaping alcoholism. Nevertheless, more research data on this issue are needed to strengthen such statements.

At this point, we might return to our point of origin - that is, although the learning partnership gave us the opportunity to have scratched the surface of a very complex and rich field of research, we still have a long road ahead of us. Clearly, this book represents our departure point from which to reflect on the primary research areas we must now explore. Hopefully, some years from now, we will be able to more fully understand the political implication of this research, and, consequently, to be able to suggest more robust changes that target enduring social change for improved provisions of older men learning.

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