Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots

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Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots

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Preface: Older Men Learning in the Community – European Snapshots

I am truly delighted to be asked to contribute this preface to what I regard as a very important and timely European contribution to the broad field of research on older men’s learning in community settings. As an oft-quoted source in the field, it has seriously concerned me that more colleagues were not working in the field internationally to provide the critically important refutation, qualification, or validation of what many older men were reporting, and that my research was turning up in Australia half a world away. As Australian community men’s sheds1 have taken root in culturally similar fertile ground in Ireland and the UK, I have wondered if things will turn out to be similar or different in the possible application of the same principles in more diverse and different cultural contexts in mainland Europe. This research provides some of the answers to this and many other important questions about men learning later in life.

This set of excellently edited and carefully researched case studies by highly regarded researchers from Estonia, Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia, which they have modestly called ‘snapshots,’ is in fact a very important advance. By absolute coincidence, in our ‘Discussion and Conclusion’ (Chapter 16) in Men Learning through Life (Golding, Mark, and Foley (2014, p. 252)2, we also remarked that our seven ‘national chapters are at best a partial snapshot and are far from representative of men’s learning worldwide’. This work significantly widens the lens, both culturally and theoretically.

The great value in this European book, excellently theorised and written in English, lies in part in the diverse backgrounds and theoretical depth of the 13 researchers who contribute chapters from countries whose national languages are not English. I first met and was enthused by the passion and expertise of Sabina Krašovec (from Slovenia) and António Fragoso (from Portugal) and other researchers from nations whose first language is not English at the 2009 ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults ‘Education and Learning of Older Adults’ (ELOA)) network meeting in Munich, Germany. I remain humbled by their linguistic dexterity, something most people like me, born in Australia (with the exception of Aboriginal Australians), do not share. Doing field research, writing, and assembling this painstakingly carefully researched book in English across four widely separated European nations, languages, and cultures is a notable achievement. Having access to literature and older men’s cultural insights in at least five

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1 Explored in Chapter 8 of Men Learning through Life (2014).
main languages (Slovenian, Portuguese, Estonian, and Maltese/English) expands
our collective, recent ‘snapshots’ of men’s learning to a very diverse and fascinating
three dimensional, coloured picture.

Veronica McGivney, a pioneer in the field on men’s learning in England from two
decades ago, remarked (in the preface of our Men Learning through Life) that this
relatively unexplored field of research was a theoretical minefield, mainly because it
raises questions about existing gender biases, not only in adult education practice,
but also in terms of what constitutes an acceptable set of theoretical perspectives to
bring to this much neglected field. It is gratifying, in a world increasingly plagued
by narrowing, increasingly instrumental, neoliberal views about the highly desir-
able, emancipatory ideal of lifelong and lifewide learning^3, to find researchers bold
enough to collectively declare at the outset that ‘the neglect of masculinities in
older adult learning can never be overstated.’4

ELOA ambitiously aims on its website ‘to bring together research activities in this
field [of older learning] on a European scale and to establish a regular interchange
of researchers who work on these topics. By continuous exchange via internet and
periodical network meetings the European collaboration in this field of education-
al research should be strengthened and common research projects and publications
should be initiated.’5 This research and book ably meet this laudable aim.

The range of European contexts in which learning is examined in this book’s na-
tional chapters and case studies further broaden the scope and cultural reach of
research in this relatively new, interdisciplinary field. The Estonian and Slovenian
examination of sharing knowledge, skills, and learning by older rural men has
important resonances with some of our Australian research. The examination of
politics and religion as vehicles for older men’s learning in Malta breaks new and
important ground, as does the nuanced examination of informal learning by older
men in informal spaces in southern Portugal. The strongly stated theoretical issues
and the carefully nuanced findings neatly bookend the volume that I highly recom-
mend to those researchers, policy makers, professional and practitioners worldwide
who interact with older men. I hope others take up the challenge of extending this
thinking, research, and action into Asia, Africa, and the Americas, as well as into
the diverse, other cultural ‘nooks and crannies’ across Europe.

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3 The Aim of Adult Learning Australia, of which I am President.
Community: European Snapshots.
5 Education and Learning of Older Adults from <http://www.esrea.org/older_learner_network?l=en>, Accessed
on 2 April 2014.
Finally, I am delighted, not because this gives recognition to the researchers, though this is warmly welcomed, but because excellent research like this can and does make a positive difference in the way we think about and treat older men. Research, in turn, can make huge differences in people’s lives, as demonstrated by the men’s sheds movement. There is a case for expanding this European snapshot of learning by older men in this volume to other groups similarly disadvantaged in accessing learning: by history, life circumstances, gender, income, language, culture, religion, or disability. It is a sobering reminder that we have to be very careful as academics, professionals, and practitioners not to get trapped into the dominant and potentially patronising discourse of clients, customers, patients, or students, particularly from ageist and deficit models of service provision which deny people agency. Older men are people with much knowledge and wisdom to share. Even from a narrow, economic-rationalist perspective, it makes sense to help all people to keep learning and looking after themselves, their families, children, and grandchildren for as long as they can.

Professor Barry Golding, 2 April 2014
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1 Introduction

Marvin Formosa, António Fragoso, Sabina Jelenc Krašovec, and Tiina Tambaum

Late-life learning has emerged as the most crucial challenge facing international trends in lifelong education. Indeed, older adult learning has become a catchphrase of our era, a slogan bandied about in conferences, symposia, and seminars by academics, policy-makers, trade unionists, and employers alike. This celebration of older adult learning is not a mere coincidence, but rather reflects two principal demographic trends, namely, that of low fertility and increasing life expectancy, which is reversing the age pyramid and leading to a shrinking number of younger people, as well as an increasing number and percentage of older people, and that of the permutation of a number of social factors that have opened up what could be loosely termed as a ‘third age’ in the course of life during which citizens spend a considerable number of relatively active years following retirement (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). These social factors range from improving and maintaining good health and the establishment of the welfare institutions of retirement and pensions to more positive values and beliefs towards later life. Such a state of affairs has not escaped the attention of academic bodies that traditionally restrict their attention to mainstream ‘adult education’ or ‘gerontology’ issues. While on the North American side of the Atlantic the Journal of Educational Gerontology has reached its 40th volume, with as many as 12 volumes and some 90 articles yearly, the British-based International Journal of Education and Ageing has recently published its fourth volume. One also cannot overlook various articles on older adult learning, traversing a range of journals dedicated to adult education, lifelong learning, or gerontology, as well as the increasing quantity of volumes specifically dealing with some aspect relating to older adult learning (e.g. Withnall, 2010; Boulton-Lewis and Tam, 2011). Moreover, the rising number of conferences wholly focused on late-life learning are noteworthy with, for example, the Network on the Learning and Education on Older Adults (ELOA) being successful in holding five consecutive annual conferences since 2010.

As one expects, gender issues represent one major theme in the academic analysis of older adult learning. Ever since the second feminist revolution in the late 1970s, gender studies gained a pivotal position in all domains of societal analysis. Late-life learning was surely no exception, spearheaded not only by the awareness that the female-to-male ratio increases dramatically in older people, but also due to
the fact that older women comprise more than three-quarters of older learning populations (Formosa, 2014). This is a worthy cause for celebration, considering that “research on men is as old as scholarship itself” (Coltrane, 1994, cited in Calasanti, 2003, p. 15). Nevertheless, it also promotes a dimension of inequity. Whilst one locates a consistent interest on that interface between learning in later life and women learners, the neglect of men and masculinities in older adult learning can never be overstated. In much the same way that Anglo-Saxon distinctiveness fell afoul of ‘reverse discrimination’ due to overriding interests in ethnic and minority identities, gender scholarship in older adult learning focuses too exclusively on women, hence failing to attend adequately to issues relating to men and masculinities. This lacuna is problematic, because despite the stereotypical view that men are privileged, the reality is that many older men “do not feel powerful, and may [even] be frustrated and angry by their lack of power” (Calasanti, 2003, p. 15). Similarly, it is far from clear that older male learners enjoy some kind of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ over female peers on the basis of physical strength, professional success, wealth, and self-control. Rather, if one follows Williamson’s (2000) and Formosa’s (2012, p. 123) research it arises that most learning avenues frequented by older adults in Europe are relatively ‘hijacked by women,’ where women’s interests generally override those held by male peers, and consequently these educational opportunities remain “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.” Of course, the ageing experience of older men is far from a homogenous experience. Rather, the ageing experience for older men is, rather, as the subsequent chapter demonstrates intrinsically contingent on one’s position in the structural relations of social class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as it is for all older persons who matter.

One key exception, one which has been a key influence in the constitution of this publication, consists of Barry Golding’s research on older men learning in the Australian context (2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b; Mark & Golding, 2012). Driven by a belief that the low participation and involvement of older men in lifelong learning is not based on personal choice, but actually stems from exclusionary forces on behalf of mainstream learning providers, Golding’s research “looked at men who were actively and voluntarily participating in community organisations” (2012a, p. 137). Findings demonstrated that older men are attracted to learning opportunities when the environment is sensitive to subjective and public perceptions of masculinity. For instance, community learning opportunities within fire/emergency service organisations, sporting organisations (particularly football and rugby clubs), and the so-called Men’s Sheds, are all very popular with older men.
(Golding, et al., 2007). This corroborates Williamson’s (2000) findings that older men are reluctant to join learning avenues where participants and members in management committees are mostly female, being reluctant to become involved with older people’s organisations they perceive to be dominated by women. Indeed, one key reason for the low attendance of older men in learning pursuits is that organisations continue to require men to relate to a culture that encourages them to cling to traditional roles and patterns of behaviour, which enforces the idea that engaging in learning is for women rather than men. To this effect, Golding recently concluded that

…the most effective learning from men in community settings occurs where learning intentions are not formalized or brought to the fore, where the pedagogies build on what men know, and where social relationships rather than courses or enrolments are emphasized. For men with the most negative attitudes towards learning, pedagogies based on communities of men’s informal practice have been found to be effective. (Golding, 2012a, p. 144)

Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots emerged from the concern that, excluding Golding’s research, older men have tended to be a forgotten minority in older adult learning, being accorded a second order of importance, and, as a consequence, being misunderstood and underserved. Without a doubt, the minimal and oftentimes biased portrayal of older men in literature on late-life learning, the lack of curricular offerings on older men’s lives in elder-learning programmes, the inadequacy of attention to older men’s concerns in organisational advocacy in lifelong learning, and the failure to launch recruitment efforts for older male learners has engendered a crucial lacuna that warrants urgent and serious attention. It is the purpose of Older Men Learning in the Community to elaborate on and discuss each of these concerns and issues to assist all who are involved in older adult learning in strengthening the participation of older men. Its objectives include coming to a better understanding of the interface between older men and lifelong learning, paying especially close attention to how many older men who experience a difficult transition from their paid working lives to retirement may or may not tap into the various spectra of late-life learning opportunities as a vehicle for optimising their physical, mental, and social well-being. This publication’s chapters seek to extend Golding’s research to better understand the extent to which older men are attracted to learning environments on the basis that it provides a welcome and positive circuit-breaker from the ‘underfoot syndrome’ in the family home when husbands interfere in their wives’ household routine.
Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots emerged as a by-product of the authors’ participation in a partnership programme funded by European Union’s Lifelong Learning Programme, Grundtvig, titled “Older Men as Active Learners.” The partnership included four members (University of Tallinn - Estonia, Had-Dingli Local Council - Malta, University of Algarve - Portugal, and the Slovenian Adult Education Association - Slovenia) and focused on the informal learning of older men - that is, men aged 60-plus - engaged in informal learning pursuits in their local communities. Its goal was to improve the state of knowledge about learning programmes at a community level that either targeted older men in an exclusive manner or which were popular with older men. The partnership included five meetings, namely, an exploratory/planning meeting in Ljubljana (September 2012) and four research visits in Malta (January 2013), Tallinn (May 2013), Faro (November 2013), and Ljubljana (May 2014). Such visits provided an opportunity to academics from partnership bodies, as well as students enrolled in diverse graduate programmes ranging from adult education to dementia studies, to conduct comparative research on older men’s learning, and also contributed a space to organise workshops structured according to the key foundations of this emergent field of study.

Older Men Learning in the Community consists of seven chapters. This introduction is followed by the second chapter entitled ‘Older Men Learning in the Community: Theoretical Issues.’ The subsequent four chapters present country-specific case-studies on older men learning. The third chapter is entitled “Passing on Skills and Knowledge as Part of Learning for Older Men: Readiness and Obstacles among Older Men in the Municipality of Tartu (Estonia),” while the fourth chapter presents the reader with “Older Men Learning Through Religious and Political Membership: Case Studies from Malta”. The fifth chapter, “Learning in Informal Spaces in the Community: A Case Study from Southern Portugal,” gives one a sense of further research abroad, and the sixth chapter provides information on “Older Men Learning in Urban and Rural Municipalities in Slovenia.” “Discussion and conclusion,” the book’s seventh chapter, traces the principle results derived from the four case studies on older men learning, and brings this publication to a close.

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2 Older Men as Learners in the Community: Theoretical Issues

Marvin Formosa, António Fragoso, and Sabina Jelenc Kršovec

2.1 Introduction

Literature on lifelong learning, including that which focuses on gender, men, and masculinities, has largely omitted older men from its scope, as it concentrated on younger men and the related issues of unemployment and vocational skills. Indeed, masculinity and the meanings attributed to older men’s experiences remain substantially unexpressed and concealed, with gender perspectives on lifelong and late-life learning continuing to be consumed by a predominant preoccupation with issues relating to older women learning. The need for lifelong learning studies to focus on older men is warranted for two key reasons. Firstly, there is an analytical interest in shedding more light on that interface between masculinity and elder-learning. Secondly, there exists a pragmatic interest in setting up gendered policies of lifelong learning sensitive to the social worlds of older men. Participation in lifelong learning doubtless possesses significant potential for improving older men’s overall well-being, and their role in civic and community participation. Community learning is also important for strengthening the ‘ageing in place’ of older men, since it encourages social and collaborative learning, empowerment, community renewal, solidarity, and social equity. This chapter offers a short review of the key theoretical concepts related to older men’s learning in rural and urban communities, providing a general framework for the research on older men learning in different countries presented in this publication. There is no question that informal learning in the community, which is of special consequence for older men, and which takes place in different municipal settings and forms, provides a common ground for contemporary and future research on late-life learning.

2.2 Masculinity and Later Life

Until recently, gerontologists’ inattention to older men, combined with a lack of concern with ageing studies on masculinity, rendered older men virtually invisible in research. However, it is positive to note that the last decade witnessed a renewed interest in the social worlds of older men and in how age-specific masculinities structure men’s experiences in later life (Calasanti and King, 2005). A critical focus on older men is, in many respects, a comparatively new field of study that emerged
in the 1990s in the Anglo-Saxon academic sphere, alongside a renewed interest in feminist gerontology and gender studies. Studies on masculinity are generally inspired by the work of Connell (2005), who put forward the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as a central notion for the analysis of the social and cultural construction of diverse masculinities and the role that power plays in shaping them. Inspired by the Gramscian notion of hegemony, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ refers to a pervasive cultural model dictating how men are supposed to act, feel, and express their emotions (Gramsci, 1971). Indeed, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ can be defined as the configuration of gender practices that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). This positioning presupposes men’s ‘activity’ in opposition to women’s ‘passivity’, and, consequently, implies a constant series of performances, discourses, gestures, and bodily postures by which men make explicit their position in the dominant model (ibid., 1987). It is true that the recent transition from a traditional model of ‘man as breadwinner’ and ‘woman as caretaker’ to a more egalitarian and symmetrical division of social roles in family dynamics has led to crucial changes in the understanding of masculinity. Yet, the processes whereby sexual differences are used to construct different gender identities depend on cultural contexts, and often stem from sets of stereotypes about the expected behaviour of men and women. Socialisation for male social roles plays an important role in shaping men’s attitudes (Jackson and Scott, 2002), as well as in forming participation trends in formal and non-formal learning (Golding, 2011).

Gerontological literature strongly documents how men continue to experience a privileged position due to the fact that ageism and sexism combine to the extent that the average older women experiences relatively lower levels of financial, cultural, and physical capital (the double jeopardy thesis) (Phillips et al., 2008). Older women are less likely to earn a full pension because of breaks in employment due to family care, and they tend to be covered by private pensions; studies indicate a higher incidence of poverty among this social group compared to older men (Cruikshank, 2009). Moreover, since most older women spend their final stage of life as widows, they find it very difficult to locate available care-givers, forcing many to become dependent and enter care homes (ibid.). Nevertheless, this dominant view of older men as a privileged gerontocracy fades when one looks beyond the confines of white, middle-class, suburban, heterosexual, and structured, nuclear families. Indeed, it is noteworthy that research has generated a number of insights into the extent of the difficulties experienced by older men in their attempts to retain their masculine identities. For instance, since men’s friendships
are principally forged and maintained within a workplace setting, it follows that on retirement they experience a reduction in their both their quality and quantity of social networking (Kosberg and Mangum, 2002). This occurs because many men's lifelong friends pass away close to the time of retirement and men maintain a common reluctance to frequent support facilities such as community centres and day centres (Davidson et al., 2003). The fact that older women tend to hold a dominant status in family dynamics, whereby family activities in late life are generally commanded by the interests of wives and female partners, continues to reinforce the social exclusionary status of older men (Kosberg and Kaye, 1994). Moreover, not only do a significant percentage of older men provide care to frailer partners and relatives, but these men are also capable of providing emotional and instrumental care of good quality (Davidson et al., 2000). This dismissal of the possibility of older male caretakers means that their experiences continue to be neglected and marginalised by policy makers and practitioners alike, so that older men experience less emphatic support and benefit from fewer services tailored to aid them in their daily regimen of social and medical care (Russell, 2007). Older men experience significant ageist discrimination in their occupational careers (de Jong Gierveld, 2003). Retirement policies push many older workers out of the workplace, while fuelling the myth that employees actually choose to leave paid work in order to pursue leisure activities. A high number of older men are ready and willing to take up part- or full-time employment, but limited training opportunities and negative attitudes towards old age means that this objective remains an elusive goal. Moreover, gay-specific services targeting older men are more the exception rather than the rule, only available in metropolitan cities with large gay populations and professing a limited client base, as many older gay men prefer to maintain the secrecy of their sexual orientation (Balsam and D’Augelli, 2013). Indeed, few gay older men venture out to approach or join community centres, which tend to be heterosexual-oriented and are places where these men may encounter homophobic reactions from other clients and even service providers.

As Thompson (2006) emphasizes, the conceptual footing of the study of masculinities in later life lies in the acceptance that there are different kinds of masculinities within society. For instance, researchers demonstrate that men with physical disabilities are viewed and treated from a different masculinity standard than the ones applicable to men without disabilities, and that masculinities cut across other subaltern locations - most notably, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. In later life, masculinities seem to be defined by norms of sociability, and reveal more vividly men's efforts to augment their social capital. With increasing age, men's experiences become more centred on the emotional work of relational concerns and reflection,
and less defined by the triumphs by which they used to shape their masculinities as younger men, which usually revolved around corporeal and sensual achievements. Moreover, a ‘busy ethic’ replaces the self-reliant ‘give ‘em hell’ values of earlier masculinities (ibid.). There is no doubt that in the absence of clear social guidelines and norms for men of what it actually means to be ‘retired,’ the way that men age constitutes a highly ambiguous issue in contemporary society. The research reported in these chapters contributes to and advances the field’s knowledge of men’s transition into later life.

2.3 Informal Learning of Older Men in the Community

Research in different countries has demonstrated that the share of older people who participate in formal education is limited. Comparative data on participation rates is sporadic, and the little information that exists tends to be ‘unreliable’ as it includes different definitions of ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ learning (Percy and Frank, 2011). Yet a literature review elicits two persistent findings. Firstly, there is a lower percentage of elder learners as compared to younger peers, with a sharp decline in participation as people reached their seventieth decade. In the United Kingdom, for instance, only one in five over 50s are ‘learners,’ compared to two in five of the adult population, with the proportion falling to only 7% for those aged 75 and over (McNair, 2012). Secondly, typical learners are middle-class women; the working classes, older men, ethnic minorities, and persons living rural spaces are highly underrepresented. Indeed, while most surveys on older adult learning reveal a positive women to men ratio - 3:1 in the United Kingdom and Malta (Midwinter, 1996; National Statistics Office, 2009), 4:1 percent in Australia (Hebestreit, 2006), and 2.5:1 percent in Spain (Alfageme, 2007) - the elitist character of some programmes (especially of the University of the Third Age) is now well-documented (Formosa, 2010, 2014).

As already highlighted, literature on older adult learning includes a limited focus on the role of men and masculinity, with research preferring to focus on why older women are highly motivated to enrol in learning opportunities. Reasons put forward include (i) women leave employment at an earlier age than men, and hence, have more accumulative time for leisure (Mahmood, 2008); (ii) when older women find themselves free from domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, it follows that many are highly motivated to make up for lost opportunities, with many perceiving older adult learning as a second and final chance for education (Wolf, 2009); (iii) the fact that women are in the majority in most educational programmes, and even occupy the leading positions in the organisational structure
means that they have an immense influence on the content and orientation of the activities to the extent that most learning initiatives reflect females interests and concerns (Williamson, 2000). Studies also clearly demonstrate that older women have a ‘learning edge’ over men in that they are generally highly aware of the positive value of learning, strongly attracted to various community roles which tend to involve learning activities, and perhaps most importantly, are particularly attracted to late-life learning due to positive recollections of compulsory education (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). At the same time, most lifelong learning programmes tend to operate along ‘schooling’ lines, embedded firmly in traditional pedagogies and confining classroom environments - that is, using styles that are extremely alien to older men, who prefer learning styles that promote a hands-on and practical approach, that take place in informal ‘men-only’ settings that involve peer mentoring, and that enable them to perform real tasks that result in tangible and transferable benefits (Golding et al., 2009). Older men prefer to be active in community associations in which informal learning takes precedence. To illustrate the meaning of informal learning, it is necessary to contrast this notion with formal and non-formal learning:

Formal learning refers to the ‘institutionalised, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured educational system’ spanning lower primary school, and the upper reaches of the university…Non-formal education is ‘any organised, systematic activity carried on outside the framework of the form to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children’….Informal education is ‘the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from early experiences and exposure to the environment’ (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974, cited in Maslowski et al., 2009, p. 8).

Consequently, informal learning is a direct contrast to formal education, and arises from a set of activities and interests that occur in people’s everyday lives and that cover a wide range of contexts and experiences (McGivney, 1999).

The limited body of research on older men learning distinctly documents how older men generally need and want different options for engaging in social and informal activities in their communities. Mark and his colleagues’ (2010) study on older men’s attitudes towards and experiences of learning in informal learning contexts in Northern Ireland was designed to find out which kind of provisions would encourage older men to further engage in learning through active community involvement. The authors concluded that
Community-based organisations provide unique and powerful contexts in which older men can express all aspects of communication not available elsewhere in their everyday lives to develop their masculine identity, improve skills, socialise, support, and mentor one another, interact in groups and seek further help when it is needed. Enjoyment, belonging, friendship and mental stimulation are highly valued aspects of informal learning for older men that came about while they were pursuing a hobby or interest rather than formal training. Within these organisations, the men have found a place where they can have an input into the design and content of learning, achieve a qualification, and can aspire to leadership amongst their peers, all of which provide a sense of empowerment and achievement. These men are taking pride in the valuable influence they can have on others in their community by assuming positions as peer tutors. (Mark et al., 2010, p. ii)

This study also found that older men are more likely to engage in a learning programme that results in confidence-building, enhances community skills, and that relates closely to their everyday lives (Mark et al., 2010). In other words, the benefit they mostly looked for consisted of experiencing a positive learning experience that contributes encouragingly to their personal and social identity, also bringing in higher levels of social capital - all of which function to bring together older people to become lifelong friends.

Turning our attention to the Australian context, one finds that community learning opportunities within fire/emergency service organisations, sport organisations (particularly football and rugby clubs), and the so-called Men’s Sheds, are all very popular with older men (Golding, et al., 2007a; Golding et al., 2007b). Such studies highlight how the low participation rate of older men in lifelong learning is intrinsically related to the fact that retirement creates a potential crisis for male adults. Disengaged from their respective worlds of occupational environments in which they have spent a substantial part of their adult lives, and lacking a role and affinity within the community social network, retired men tend to find it hard to come to grips with their newly found status. As their work-based source of positive identity suddenly becomes obsolete, and as men lack the community networking skills that their female peers hold in relative abundance, older men experience an elevated risk of social exclusion. Golding (2012) argues that older men thrive best when learning is ‘social,’ ‘local,’ and ‘situated’. While hands-on learning through practical and group activities has proven itself to be particularly attractive for older men, situated learning was shown to be particularly therapeutic for older men who have experienced a range
of setbacks in later life and who would not otherwise be involved in community activities. Indeed, older men are able, in non-threatening social and situated contexts within a wide range of community organizations, to informally and positively share skills from their work lives with other men of all ages, at the same time experiencing a range of important benefits for their own well-being, for the well-being of other men, and for the well-being of their communities (ibid.).

The limited available research incontestably represents an important base for further research on informal learning strategies of older men. Since community learning is often occasional, incidental, and informal, it could be defined by theories of situated everyday practice, whereby the learning process is conducted as everyday activity, reflection, communication, and negotiation among included members, while also demanding the full responsibility of the individual for gained knowledge and skills acquired (Lave, 2009). This type of learning happens when people confront issues on a day-to-day basis, motivated by the desire to understand the processes surrounding them. Learning is, after all, a highly personal accomplishment, conducted via observation and imitation, and resulting in tradition, perseverance, and continuity. As subsequent chapters undeniably demonstrate, learning in community organisations has multi-layered components and influences cognitive aspects (acquiring skills and knowledge), emotional issues (transmission of emotions and values between members), and social concerns (interactions between individuals and their environment), all of which are closely interconnected.

2.4 Urban and Rural Areas - Do Differences Matter?

The research report Older Men Learning in the Community: European Snapshots was conducted in different countries, and in divergent rural and urban communities. There is no common definition of rural and urban areas in Europe. Among the most frequently used definition of rural and urban areas is that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) classification, which uses a regional typology that divides regions as predominantly urban (PU), predominantly rural (PR), and intermediate (IR) (Eurostat, 2010). For this process, three criteria are used, namely, population density (the percentage of regional population living in rural or urban communities where ‘community’ corresponds to Local Administrative Units - the area is defined as rural if its population density is below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre), percentage of population living in rural communities (the region is predominantly rural if more than 50% of its population lives in rural communities, predominantly urban if less than 15% of the population lives in rural communities, and intermediate if the share of the
population living in rural communities is between 15% and 50%), and the size of the nearest urban centres (European Commission, 2008).

In applying the OECD (2006) definition, rural areas (both PR and IR) are prevalent in most parts of Europe, as they also account for about 75% of the land and almost a quarter of the population in OECD countries. It is noteworthy that the European Commission’s (2008) Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy has proposed a new classification, albeit still based on the OECD definition. In this classification, predominantly rural and intermediate regions are divided into two subcategories: regions close to a city (where at least 50% of the region’s population lives less than 45 minutes away by road to a city of at least 50,000 inhabitants) and remote regions. In academia, urban areas are generally described as areas that dominate the secondary and tertiary sectors in the economy, as those places with employment in administration and services, a higher than average educational level, high accessibility to services and information, but with low fertility and mortality rates, a low sense of community, and varied ethnicity (Scott et al., 2007). In contrast, rural areas tend to be defined as more dependent on the primary industry sector and on agriculture and forestry, and are known as areas with a lower than national average educational level, lower accessibility to services and information, but also as those with a higher sense of community, as well as higher fertility and mortality levels, higher emigration numbers, and more conservative political views (ibid.).

Understanding the differences between rural and urban areas is important because some research demonstrates that rural deprivation is more complex and present than urban deprivation (Giarchi, 2006). In rural areas, social exclusion and the risk of poverty is generally difficult to identify. Despite the fact that deprivation is found in both urban and rural areas (Scott et al. 2007), statistical data reveals that in Europe, older people who live in rural and remote regions face higher levels of social and economic challenges, a greater lack of social and health care services and infrastructure, and drastic population changes (Inder et al., 2012). Indeed, older people living in rural areas are considered to one of the most vulnerable groups on the basis that day-to-day life in remote areas has a definite connection to social isolation, loneliness, reduced mobility, and limited access to community services.

One’s residential location is also an important variable in late-life learning, since only a very limited number of learning programmes tend to be available in ‘rural’ areas, that is, farms, towns, and small cities located outside of urban or metropolitan areas. Research indicates that living in rural areas significantly hinders residents from participating in late-life learning, since residents find it difficult to travel to metropolitan areas (Mott, 2008). In Vallance and Golding’s words,
There is a limited range of formal learning venues and options available for rural men, compared with those of their city brothers. Even when formal venues are available, rural men tend not to gravitate towards them. The learning and training settings available in country towns other than neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Australia tend to be found in halls, workplaces, fire stations, football sheds, community men's sheds, and anywhere that does not resemble a school or classroom environment. Older rural men typically had quite negative experiences of formal education and left school relatively early, therefore, they tend to steer clear of more formal settings. (Vallance and Golding, 2008, p. 371)

Moreover, while many rural elders neither have a driving license nor own a car, public transport tends to be limited in rural areas. The absence of outreach work by formal and non-formal education providers means that rural elders are generally left out in the cold, with state subsidies and volunteering activities disproportionately biased in favour of those living in urban areas.

Of course, there have been a number of projects which successfully addressed the problems experienced by older learners in rural communities. For instance, the Department of Continuing Education at Lancaster University operated an innovative Learning from Home programme that enabled groups of adults, many of whom were older people living in rural areas, to engage in learning through telephone conferencing (Withnall, 2010). Another success story is Stories of Our Age – coordinated by the Workers Educational Association Northern Ireland (2011) and Age Northern Ireland – that targeted older people living rurally to give them the opportunity to have their voices heard, to speak out on issues affecting them as they grew older, and to offer them the chance to engage in e-learning. Research also highlights the importance of self-directed learning for older rural adults. Roberson’s (2004) research demonstrates how older rural adults were highly resourceful and creative in making use of self-directed learning. The latter can be described as intentional and self-planned learning, where the individual is responsible for and in control of the learning process, and can be evident by short-term projects lasting hours, as well as continuous and lifelong (ibid.). Older rural adults generally feel comfortable living in a rural environment, do not hesitate to contact friends and acquaintances for needed advice, and are quick to make use of friends and family, book clubs, religious institutions, libraries, local travel, and health clubs to expand this social dimension of learning. This is largely due to the fact the scarcity of experts in rural areas may motivate residents to become more imaginative in accessing knowledge. Moreover, the peace, quiet, and closeness to nature help to create a positive atmosphere for personal learning.
in rural areas - whilst the closeness that people feel toward one in rural neighbourhoods creates a community of trust, openness, and willingness to talk about activities of self-directed learning. As subsequent chapters show, self-directed learning was a major preferred form of scholarship for many older adults in more than one country.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter argues that older men engage in lifelong learning for social reasons, motivated especially by a need for friendship, as well as by the positive benefits such as higher levels of self-esteem and social belonging as a result of a feeling accepted by, and being able give back to, their community. In line with the course of their life experiences, older men's general preferences in learning lie in regular, active, social, hands-on, practical involvement, wherever possible ‘shoulder to shoulder’ and outside. Indeed, older men are much less likely to be involved in indoor, community settings where the emphasis or the activity is face-to-face, or where the emphasis is on welfare, learning, aged care, health, or community services. To summarise, informal learning offers great potential for the involvement of older men by offering opportunities for re-establishing personal ties, creating and maintaining social cohesion in the community, and influencing perceived well-being based on co-operation, collaboration, and trust. Research evidence demonstrates that older men “develop, express and share a range of positive identities through community organisations that are seldom regarded as ‘learning organisations’” where “the particular value of these organisations is that they provide men with opportunities for developing and enhancing positive identities without foregrounding the benefit” (Golding, 2012, p. 140). As subsequent chapters illustrate, the crucial means of developing older men's interest in informal learning is not learning per se, but the possibility of engaging in communicative cooperation. This issue seems to remain the key factor in paving the way for a higher participation of older men in lifelong learning.

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3 Passing on Skills and Knowledge as Part of Learning for Older Men: Readiness and Obstacles among Older Men in the Municipality of Tartu

Tiina Tambum and Helina Kuusk

Abstract

This qualitative study was carried out among older men in the rural municipality of Tartu, Estonia. The data was gathered to explore the wishes of men regarding readiness to share their skills and knowledge, their internal and external obstacles in regards to doing this, and motivational aspects. The study indicated the untapped potential of the involvement of older men sharing their skills and knowledge and the lack of men's initiative. Older men prefer practical content and specific tasks where the men can perform their professional skills rather than hobby-related knowledge. Older men in the municipality of Tartu expressed inflexible attitudes towards the correctness of their views, which may form an obstacle to informal education between generations. The study revealed the need for further investigation, asking to what extent the emergence of developing dialogue is affected by the significant age difference between the student and the mentor in the process of passing on skills and knowledge by non-professionals.

Key words: older men, passing on skills, informal learning, rural area, Estonia

3.1 Introduction – The Ageing Population in Estonia

Estonia has 1.3 million residents, 27% of whom are 25 years old or younger and 18% of whom are 65 or older. 68% of the population are Estonians. In 2012, life expectancy at birth was 77 for Estonians and 74 for non-Estonians. The life expectancy of men and women differs by 10 years (72 and 82, respectively). 32% of the Estonian population lives outside of cities. In the 60 plus age group, the city resident to country resident ratio among men is 66:33 and women 70:30, i.e. there are relatively more older men living in rural areas than women.

Older people in Estonia are characterised by quite poor health. In 2012, the average number of healthy years was just 55. In Estonia’s 65 plus age group, 57% have at least a secondary education; 70% is the respective overall percentage of citizens with a secondary education in Estonia. In the 65 plus age group, 26% have higher education. The age of retirement for men is 63, and, by 2016, women will also retire by 63. After that, the retirement age of both men and women will increase gradually by three months, reaching the age of 65 by 2026.
The cost of living in Estonia is comparable to that of western European countries. At the end of 2013, the average gross salary was 986 Euros and the average old-age pension consisted of 330 Euros. The number of people receiving the old-age pension was just over 300,000 (23% of the population).

At the end of 2013, 20% of 65–74 age group were working people. A pensioner cannot register with the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, which means that they cannot access state-funded re-training options.

A coping study among the 50–74 age group highlighted that, in the previous 12 months, every third respondent had completed a course or some other form of study for the purpose of individual development (Linno, 2010). However, only 16% of people of retirement age had participated in a course, workshop, or seminar, or had engaged in independent learning. Among those who had been actively studying, compared to men, women preferred training organised at their place of work (M 46%, W 57%) and formal education (M 1%, W 3%), while compared to women, men preferred independent learning and informal education (M 42%, W 30%). Among those who had not been actively studying (64% of respondents), slightly more than half have no wish to do so in the future.

In 2012, the study of employers and Estonian residents aged 50–74 (Espenberg et al., 2012) found that just 13% of the working people in this group (46% of respondents) believed that they would find another job suited to their professional skills if they lost their current job. The proportions of positive responses were 43% among those aged 50–59, 12% among those aged 60–64, and just 7% among those aged 65–74. Women are significantly more pessimistic than men. The same study showed that employers’ subjective opinions regarding the usefulness of training older employees is very high – 80%. However, only half of the employees involved in the study had participated in training funded by the employer.

The results regarding participation in training are indicative of the low level of initiative among older people. Also, it is clear that studying is directly and narrowly related to participating in the labour market.

National adult education statistics from 2011 (for those aged 20–64, with a number of respondents of 3324) revealed that computer users comprised only 50% of the 50–64 age group and that over four years (from 2007–2011) the number of users in this age group had increased by just seven percentage points (from 43% to 50%). In the older age group, the share of computer users is lower among men than among women (M 48%, W 53%); at the same time, the share of users with an expert level is larger among men (M 13%, W 9%).
Of general education, it is known that 1% of all university students are people aged 51 or older. The oldest student in this study was 67 years old (Roosalu et al., 2013). Although there are no systematic obstacles to older people participating in formal and non-formal education, the number of older learners is small, and this fact was also stressed in the Development Plan for Active Aging 2013–2020. The document, drawn up by the Ministry of Social Affairs (2013), sets a goal of creating equal life-long learning (LLL) opportunities for older people and outlines activities designed to achieve this goal, including the following: a) the connection of the LLL idea and goals with social coping and wider collective activity, b) the development of innovative solutions to support the LLL of older people, and c) raising awareness and competence of educational workers and trainers regarding the learning specificities of older people. Unfortunately, for now, no state resources have been geared towards achieving these aims, which means that the state has still not taken responsibility for the systematic development of education for older people.

Important points on educational and developmental activities for older people can be found in the Social Welfare Act, which defines the social services the state must provide based on need. The latter includes a service to support the independent coping and development strategies. Local governments are obliged to guide people in creating, maintaining, and developing social relations, in guiding them in time management and the use of spare time, and moulding their personal and everyday skills by involving them in activities that develop the same. The reason why the services stated in law often do not reach older people is the point of origin, namely, a letter of referral or the need the person has expressed. In the case of disabilities, we presuppose the person’s initiative or referral. If a retired person complains about deficiencies in knowledge, skills, or social relations without any physical symptoms, the complaint may not even take an official turn.

Larger or more active local governments have established centres that offer these legally required services; these are called day centres or social centres. The City of Tallinn requires day centres that have more than a hundred visitors a day to employ a social activity manager. The number of establishments offering day centre services in 2012 was 107, of which 60 were located in cities, including 17 in different districts of Tallinn. The number of day centres has risen by 45 since 2000 (Mäe, & Linno, 2010).

The function of the centres is divided into three categories – services (e.g. hairdressing), hobby groups, and events. In 2012, approximately 40,000 older people participated in the services, groups, and events offered by the centres. The majority of the centres’ older clients were event participants (29,500 people). More systematically,
older people were involved in learning through hobby groups (10,350 people, i.e. 2.6% of all old-age pensioners in Estonia), training courses (3270, i.e. 0.8%), and self-help groups (1850, i.e. 0.5%). Personal contributions among service users in day centres amounted to 9.6% in 2012.

In the field of education for older people, the Universities of the Third Age have garnered a lot of attention in Estonia. The University of the Dignified of the University of Tartu has been in operation since 2010 and offers lectures in six cities. The Health and Movement University of Tallinn University was established in 2011. The Third Youth Folk High School of Tallinn has been operating on the premises of Tallinn University of Technology since 1993 and is led by the Estonian Association of Pensioners’ Societies. In 2013, the Tallinn City Government also established the Downtown Elderly University. All of these organisations primarily implement the French principles by offering lecturers and inviting experts and public figures (e.g. ministers and professors) to give talks (Formosa, 2014). There is always a great deal of interest in the lectures. During the 2011-2012 academic year, 1500 older people participated in studies at the University of Tartu. At Tallinn University, the number of participants has increased from 430 to 1070 in three years. The participants often have a higher education and are mostly women. Of the four Universities of the Third Age, three are active in Tallinn alone.

The network of public libraries also offers older people a significant impetus for personal development. In 2013, there were 557 public libraries in the country, around a hundred of them found in cities, the remainder being in rural areas. Three-quarters of readers are adults; there are no separate statistics on older people, but we can assume a large ratio. Libraries offer the option of using computers and a data network, individual training on how to use e-databases and how to develop e-skills (12,400 training events in 2013), and group training (2430 events with 35,300 participants). Librarians organised 9360 events – film nights, music evenings, travel stories, poetry nights, meetings with well-known people, presentations, and readings – involving 197,400 participants.

### 3.2 The Municipality of Tartu

The population of the municipality of Tartu is 6990. The share of people above the age of 60 is 19%; men aged 60 or older make up 8% of the population. It is a municipality located next to the City of Tartu, the second largest city centre in Estonia. The municipality’s area is 300 km², and its territory is divided into nine districts according to functions, with five towns and 38 villages.
94% of the people in the municipality are Estonians. Of the men aged 65 or older in the municipality, 58% have a basic education, 24% have a secondary education and 18% have a higher education.

Two small towns host regular meetings of the Country Women’s Association. One town has a women’s folk dancing group, women’s choir, and mixed choir, while the other town has a brass band and a village choir. The municipality has six libraries, which are the only educational venues for older men. There aren’t any more non-formal or informal community activities for middle-aged and older citizens provided by the municipality or by NGOs.

One mayor has been in charge of the municipality for 20 years now. Until 1991, the municipality had a collective farm and state farm within its territory, on which most of today’s retirement-aged people worked. When Estonia regained its independence, the assets of the holdings were privatised and people had to quickly adapt to the principles of an open market economy.

3.3 Research Methodology

Since the readiness and practices for learning and self-realisation of older men have not been studied before in Estonia, a study with qualitative methods was conducted. The municipality of Tartu does not have a service offering coordinated activities for older men. The municipal government does not deny the theoretical problem, but has not thought of a solution, either. This study was not commissioned by the municipality.

The data was gathered via semi-structured interviews. The aim was to use content analysis to determine indicators of current activities and the future wishes of men regarding existing skills and knowledge, readiness to share the same, external obstacles, and impetuses. The inductive content analysis method was used to analyse the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in summer 2013. The length of each interview was 60–90 minutes.

The initial information on retirement-aged men was received from the municipal government, after which the interviewer contacted the men by phone. During the interviews, the men recommended other interviewees, the circle of which also expanded thanks to the municipality’s residents, including recommendations from local activity leaders. The final selection was based on the age-specific proportion of the respondents; geographic location was also considered, as was the aim of
involving men with different levels of education (seven with higher education, four with vocational education, and the remainder with secondary or basic education).

The interviews were conducted with 31 men from four towns and nine villages. The interviewees were two disability pensioners in their 50s, 15 men in their 60s, 11 men in their 70s, and three in their 80s. Six of the men had full-time jobs. One used to be a teacher, one still worked as a teacher, two had worked as coaches, and one had experience holding training events. Among the men who participated, seven used or had used a computer, four were principally against using computers, and the others were non-committal.

The interview texts were typed on a computer during the interviews.

The results of initial content analysis revealed the following indicators and values of direct purposeful teaching and sharing one's skills and knowledge:

1. Basic readiness to share one's skills and knowledge: active readiness and passive agreement.
3. Ways to pass on one's skills: practical individual instruction, theoretical discussions, and non-formal teaching.
4. Target group of skills and knowledge: family members, young people, and adults.
5. Skills and knowledge passed on: professional and hobby-related.
6. Possible physical obstacles: health, equipment and transportation.
7. Psychological obstacles: doubting one's skills and knowledge and whether they are up to date and doubting one's suitability.
8. Organisational solutions and proposals.

3.4 Findings

3.4.1 Readiness to Share One's Skills and Knowledge Purposefully

29 of the 31 men expressed their readiness to pass on their skills and knowledge. One refused, and one interview did not reveal if there was any basic agreement.

Basic agreement is divided into two categories. The first group of respondents (12 men - from here on the number of relevant men is given in brackets) had already considered it, had previous teaching experience, or, during the interview, could see themselves passing on their skills and knowledge and immediately started talking about the details of the situation.
- (dance lessons) I could give dancing lessons. I'd need a partner though. /.../
If you go to a party in the local area it’s good to have a partner [who can dance well enough]. There's a lady in Kõrveküla village, a bit older than me. When we dance, others always look at us. There's a lot to teach. They say that when you dance you have to relax your body, but some people are very stiff.

- Yes, I agree. I could teach youngsters how to maintain and care for their technical equipment, their bicycles and scooters. I could tell them and teach them that you have to also take of your equipment, not just step on it! I could teach them how to look after and fix simple agricultural equipment, too. I'd agree to that – if my help and advice is needed, then let's do it!

All four men with previous teaching experience expressed their active readiness. From the age perspective, men in their 60s expressed a more active approach (10).

The second group of respondents (18) did not say no, but their expressions regarding the teaching situation were passive and lacked confidence.

- If I could give advice or teach people, then why not, but it should probably be in the field of agriculture or animal husbandry. Horse husbandry and related fields.

3.4.2 Motivating Factors for Passing on Skills

Three distinct groups of reasons, not mutually exclusive, emerged in the interviews regarding motivating factors for passing on skills. The reason most often mentioned was the positive emotion one gains from sharing one's experience (6). This emotional experience is valued by both former workers and managing workers and it is not related to education levels.

- (power stations) I'd be happy for the old guy [i.e. the interviewee himself].
(former specialist)

- (ikebana) It would be nice. (former executive)

Among other things, an interest was expressed in personal development that would accompany teaching – teaching would bring about changes (1), teaching would enable one to keep oneself familiar with the topic (1), and the experience of teaching is interesting (2). The educational backgrounds of these men were different.

- (turning) I could take on an apprentice. /.../ They'd bring something new into my life.

- (bicycle repairs) I like it when they come in. I'm happy to help. You can keep informed on developments. The basics are the same, so if you're interested, you can follow them.
- (fishing) Well, if I could, I'd take someone with me. It would be interesting. I always teach the little guy [the interviewee's grandson] – he's a tough little kid. It [fishing] is different to what you see in the movies.

Men are also ready to share their skills with others for external reasons (6).

- I could teach children to appreciate nature. Whenever the municipality plants a tree – I don't know if there are any left! It should be arranged so that every child has their own tree. Then the kids would protect them and not damage them.

### 3.4.3 Ways of Passing on One's Skills

When describing what they imagine to be purposeful teaching, half of the interviewees tended to favour a practical, individual process involving demonstrations and a hands-on principle (16). All of these men had learned their professional skills fully or at least in part through independent learning; at the same time, all levels of general education were represented among them.

- (bicycle repairs) I'd teach. /.../ they come to my garage and we take the wheel off. I let them do it.

- (optimising driving) I could give advice. Even strangers are welcome. /.../ If someone were here I'd show them the tricks of the trade.

If someone pictured themselves passing on more theoretical information (5), this was preferred in a small group in a more private way.

- (village history lectures) They've been sweet-talking me for a while now. I only offer readings... It could be done privately.

- (war time) I don't like to speak at all. I'd never do that. If there were someone [interested] with whom I could discuss it, then yes.

The last example presents a viewpoint many interviewees (5) expressed clearly – men do not like the lecture format or theoretical teaching. Discussions in small groups and with people they know are more acceptable.

- (electrical equipment) I'm not the lecturer type. I like talking and discussing things. Let's open a nice bottle of wine and chat.

Men with teaching experience (two teachers and two coaches) and one man with no experience in teaching were prepared to conduct non-formal group lessons. However, four of the five men added important conditions to their general readiness, e.g. schedule flexibility and the need to have a co-teacher. The man who currently works as a teacher sought payment for adult courses; the others either refused payment or their attitude towards it did not come up during the conversation.
– (self-defence) I definitely agree. But not very often. Once a week, I suppose, would be OK. I’ve been out of that kind of thing for a while now. Not everything can be planned ahead – if my grandkids need me, I go to them. (the interviewee had passed his coaching work on to a colleague after retiring.)

– (chess) But I couldn’t do it alone – my health isn’t at all good some days. If I had a partner, then I could teach people. Every day, if necessary.

3.4.4 To whom the Men are Ready to Pass on Their Skills and Knowledge

As expected, family members – primarily children and grandchildren – were named as the target group for knowledge-sharing.

– 30 years ago I didn’t think about the kind of legacy I’d leave for my children and grandchildren. But now I want that legacy to be sorted out. That means passing on my skills and knowledge.

– (agriculture) My children and other relatives ask me about it because I’m older, I’ve held senior positions, and I’ve got a lot of connections. Their questions tend to be related to agriculture. Sometimes my opinion’s the only one they seek.

The majority of the interviewees (20) saw adults in general as their target group, including peers. For three-quarters of the group (15), sharing their skills and knowledge with adults did not mean teaching, but exchanging experiences individually or in small groups.

More than a third of the interviewees expressed their readiness or at least were not opposed to the idea of educating young people (12).

– (wrestling) I’d have nothing against it. /.../ To make them interested, and make the boys braver.

At the same time, many did not believe that the young (or people younger than them) were interested in learning practical skills or knowledge from older people. Thus, older men are essentially prepared to pass these on, but are pessimistic about such willingness being realised.

– (farm work) I’ve even got the damn tools. Of course I’d help. I like it when people ask me stuff. They’re not people my age – they have their own way of doing things. But they really don’t want to work either. I have no hope for them. I don’t think there’s anyone who’d come and ask. The young are lazy – they have no enthusiasm for anything. Make them work, I say. They’ve never done a day’s work in their lives.
Men see younger generations as being alienated from practical skills, with the reasons given being general changes in society.

- That's how our country's structured. Do you hear anyone talking about state plumbers or state sewer workers? No, they talk about artists. You can live without art, but what will you do when your toilet gets backed up? We've not noticed anyone interested in things like that here.

The difference between the men's own generation and the youth, as well as the men's attitude towards the younger generation and the men's positions regarding young people are characterised by the following quote:

- Young people are taught to think differently. They have more democracy. They're used to it. /.../ They speak and think like they're taught at school. Their beliefs are what society has fed them. They're nudged in a certain direction. Why would I bother making a stand against the entire educational system? They learn about computers and do less physical work. They're smart and pretty. I once listened to a girl speaking – so diplomatic, using such grand words. All this nice talk can be taught.

### 3.4.5 Skills and Knowledge to Be Passed On

It is mostly professional skills that older men feel confident enough to pass on to others (27). During the interviews, the men revealed the trade or practical skill they had learned, worked with, or applied at home (with many men of this generation being e.g. amateur builders who built their own homes).

- I can give advice on equipment. On building. On gardening, too.

- I learned plumbing from my workers. The PRIA project was here: they came and asked for my advice.

A smaller proportion of men proffered a hobby or topic they had studied in depth in their spare time and which did not relate to paid work or work around the house (7).

- I could talk about UFOs. I'd prepare properly for that. Get some stuff off the computer. Just talking would be boring.

### 3.4.6 Physical Obstacles to Passing on One's Skills and Knowledge

The majority of the interviewees did not express any obstacles to sharing their skills and knowledge in one form or another (25). Poor or unstable health was mentioned by three of the men. Important here is that the influence of health
on the readiness of teaching and its influence on actual teaching are two different things. Health does not affect readiness to teach, but it does affect the actual teaching process.

- (accordion) People have wanted to come for lessons from as far afield as Tallinn, but I haven’t had the time – I’ve been sick.

Another obstacle was the issue of not having the necessary (or modern) tools to pass on skills (2). The latter was a significant obstacle when talking about the young.

- (ploughing) I’m not against the idea, but I just can’t do it technically. My equipment’s old. I could discuss it with some old specialist. But for the young you need modern equipment – and that I don’t have.

If there were physical obstacles, usually only one was mentioned, not several at the same time.

3.4.7 Psychological Obstacles in Passing on One’s Skills and Knowledge

Internal arguments were mentioned as obstacles in passing on one’s skills and knowledge. Most often this manifested itself as uncertainty as to whether one’s skills and knowledge were sufficient (6).

- (ikebana) I read how, in Japan, they put different flowers in every room. I don’t think my skills are good enough to pass them on to others. I’m not sure.

- (electricity) When I studied it, things were different – the competency thing has changed. Work techniques and safety requirements… it’s all entirely different.

At the same time, some admitted that when the young person in question is a complete amateur, the basics of the area have not changed, so somewhat outdated tools and knowledge of trends are not obstacles to passing on knowledge.

Two men were certain that the skills they could teach were no longer relevant (2).

- (turning) I could take on an apprentice. But nobody needs turners anymore – now you have bench operators, catalogues and orders....

A third group of psychological obstacles consisted of doubts regarding one’s suitability to pass on skills and knowledge, but such opinions were openly expressed by only three men.

- I gave a lecture on the intarsia technique at Vocational School no. 16. Times are such now though that in order to teach somebody you have to create a system, and modern teaching methods are different. (not a qualified teacher)
As with attitudes towards the young, psychological obstacles in the exchange of information between adults were sensed not so much in regard to oneself but to others. Life experience in everyday teaching and learning situations has taught the men that it is better to keep their wisdom to themselves than share it. It is sensed that the fixed opinions and attitudes of others are too difficult to change.

- /Disappointedly/ Everyone’s smart these days.
- We discuss politics, but that’s not much use. And nobody listens. Everyone does what they think is right. You get angry when you talk about things.
- I can see them planting their hedges on the other side of their lot. According to the Law of Property Act, it could be taken down. I’ve told them this, but they don’t listen. You keep telling them, but they stick to their own silly idea.

The men clearly saw other adults as learners and themselves as the party aware of the absolute truth. In other words, the men described the learning process in an informal form, but did not see themselves equally as givers and receivers but only as providers of information.

- There’s a big difference with 40-year-olds. I’m right, but they talk and think they’re right.
- History is really one-sided [as written]. If you read a newspaper article that’s based on history, there are lots of factual errors. It’s the kind of thing I don’t bother pointing out. If luck’s with you, live your life; if you’re healthy, work.

3.4.8 Organisational Solutions and Proposals

The study shows that although the men express readiness to share their skills and knowledge, they generally lack the initiative to do so. They presume that someone else will make the first move, approaching them or gathering together everyone involved.

- (dance lessons) First we’d have to see whether anyone was interested. There’d be no point if there were less than ten pairs. I don’t know if the local government is even interested in it.

Moreover, the men prefer it when people know what to ask and have very specific tasks.

- (wood and metal work) I like people who know what they want.

A similar phenomenon emerged during the interviews when the men were asked if they could manually make someone a gift. Six thought they could not, but that if someone asked for help in making something, they would be happy to assist
them. Three thought that they would only try if they were given a specific idea about what to make. Two thought that their skills would not ensure the quality of the gift. Although the context of the question was different, the results show that the men are more willing to take responsibility for performing the task than for offering.

When speaking of specific readiness to share one's skills and knowledge, money was not mentioned in 25 of the interviews, despite the fact that generally the men described themselves as members of a social group with an income too low for active life (16). Two were certain that they would not want any payment for their teaching. Three thought that they would teach if paid. One man, however, was afraid that he would be the one who would have to pay because his apprentice would do all the work and might ask for money. The last instances show that the obstacle is not a lack of payment but the complex structure of asking for payment.

- (additional driving lessons) How would they pay? Who would pay? It's very complicated. The local authorities would have to be involved. It'd all get so big. That's why I've done it a couple of times without being paid for it.

The other common argument – a lack of time – did not come up in the interviews. However, the need for a flexible schedule was mentioned (2) because of changes in health or a need to be available to children and grandchildren.

3.4.9 Personal Learning Experience and the Use of Terms when Talking about Teaching and Learning

In order to create a context for the preparedness of older men to share their skills and knowledge, information on how they themselves gained the skills and knowledge, i.e., their own learning experience, was analysed. Although there was no specific question about this in the interview (at the beginning of which a question was merely asked about their level of education), 23 of the interviewees revealed that they had gained some or all of the skills needed in life (e.g. building) at work without specialist training.

- When I was young, I developed an interest in machinery. When I was 10, I rode on the tractor with my father. And then, one time, my father jumped off a moving tractor. It was really dusty. It was like learning to swim. I'm sure he knew that his boy [the interviewee] had some knowledge. After that, my father rarely got behind the wheel.

Of these men, six described independent studying as observation, i.e. independently studying how others work so as to later attempt it themselves.
- (lifelong accordion player) That's how I learned. I watched how they played; some played zithers with plectrums. I watched how everyone played. I remembered some of the tunes.

- The grill’s made from a pig’s trough. I went to a birthday party and saw that someone had made one like that.

The analysis revealed that the men rarely used the word ‘teach’ in the interviews. Often the word was present in the context of theoretical teaching (i.e. that they would not teach theoretically). Three men used the word ‘teach’ regarding children or grandchildren (teaching them to play checkers and chess and teaching them to appreciate nature). One interviewee claimed that he would teach the entire scale on a trumpet and one man described generally that “there’s a lot to teach,” referring to a lack of dancing skills among adults.

When describing their skills and how people have approached them, the men used words and expressions like ‘help,’ ‘give advice,’ ‘show the tricks of the trade,’ ‘pass on skills,’ and ‘guide.’ With peers they would rather discuss things and share experiences.

3.5 Discussion

Life experience gives older people the chance to take on the role of conveying skills and knowledge without pedagogical training. This qualitative study revealed that older men in the municipality of Tartu are essentially ready to assume the role of passing on skills and knowledge. Of all the interviewees, it could be said that only one did not express such readiness. More than a third of the men participating in the study (12) were instantly able to describe the details of an imagined teaching situation. This result is highlighted by the fact that only a few direct obstacles were named as standing in the way of sharing skills and knowledge and that these obstacles did not emerge immediately. The detail that geographic inaccessibility was not mentioned as a barrier does not conform with the results of Jelenc Krašovec and Kump (2013). The reason could be due to the fact that older men in particular, that is, those who aren’t too fragile to share their knowledge, tend to have their own transportation, or they engage in activities close to their homes, which reproduces the microscopic view described by Dye et al. (2011) about people from rural areas having an ‘attachment to place.’

Consequently, with the exception of health issues, the obstacles (transport and tools) can be overcome by using a systematic approach. Considering this, the fact that only five of the men had actual teaching experience in the general education
system, and that men with different educational backgrounds expressed their readiness, the results represent vast untapped potential.

The men with pedagogical training were all ready to take on non-formal teaching work in groups (sports training, chess, and traffic rules re-training) on the condition that the organisation and workload differed from the work they used to do professionally. The results show that retired teachers and coaches are ready to work in non-formal adult education if the study processes are planned as moderately intensive and flexible and where, if necessary, the workload can be divided between two people.

The main motivators were emotional factors. According to Kasepalu et al. (2013), 25% of older people in Estonia feel unneeded, which in turn affects their health and quality of life. The chance to share skills and knowledge could be one activity that makes older men feel needed.

Some men saw the opportunity for self-development as valuable in sharing skills, and these were not only men with higher education. A person passing on his knowledge feels that he can keep his skills sharp, refresh half-forgotten knowledge, and stay up to date on innovations. This result corresponds directly with the viewpoint that every act of teaching is at the same time learning (Jarvis, 2006). Considering the limited participation of retired people in formal and non-formal education, sharing skills has the potential to be a satisfactory form of development for retired men (Linno, 2010).

Considering the learning experience of the men themselves – two thirds of whom learned their professional skills by trying, failing, and trying again –, it is no wonder that as a method of teaching they also preferred hands-on demonstration. Golding (2011) stresses that men prefer to learn through something, not about something, by applying the same principles they have used for years at work. This study confirms the same about passing on skills. The processes of passing on and acquiring skills and knowledge seem to be similar processes for older men.

Hands-on methods require tools and materials. A lack of these was rarely mentioned as an obstacle, which could mean that it is not seen as a problem and that the older men rely on the student or coordinator to deal with this.

The clearly preferred practical format in passing on knowledge agrees with the results, according to which most of the interviewees were ready to share skills connected with work done professionally or during their lives. Only seven ideas were related to hobbies. This can be interpreted as follows: the hobbies and work of men
living in rural areas have no distinct boundaries, which means that socially developing activities should be pursued in a work context. Tambaum (2010) reached a similar conclusion when studying the content preferences of older internet users.

One-third of the men did not oppose the idea of the target group of teaching being youth. At the same time, they did not believe the young would be interested in learning from them.

When children and young people were seen as the target group, the word ‘teach’ was used: the vocabulary connected with adults included verbs and expressions like ‘give advice’ and ‘help.’ Whereas the process of teaching between adults was imagined as an informal process, the role of children and the young was seen to be empty vessels eager to be filled with knowledge. Furthermore, even regarding middle-aged people, older, more experienced men tended to take an inflexible position, bothered at the idea of the other person not accepting their word unconditionally. General disbelief and a sense of hopelessness regarding trends in society also emerged.

If the other participant is not seen as a source of skills and knowledge and there is no dialogue, nothing will come of the mutual learning. In a post-modern society, older people’s uncompromising attitudes in terms of their own standpoints and their role in society can become obstacles to the integration of different generations. For instance, of all of the men who participated in the study, only seven were computer users, four expressed a clear opposition to using computers, and the viewpoints of the others remained ambiguous. National statistics indicate low levels of computer use, particularly among older men. The complex reason here could be caused by older men seeing themselves primarily as bearers of skills and knowledge and stubborn autodidacts, and not as receivers of skills and knowledge from younger people.

The study shows that although men express a readiness to share their skills and knowledge, they themselves generally lack the initiative to do so. They presume that someone else will make the first move, approaching them or gathering together everyone involved. Aside from general passivity, it can be seen that the men present certain social concerns that could be resolved through a study project with their own participation. Here, too, however, external organisational initiative was expected. There is next to no civic initiative among older men.

The reason for this may lie in this case in the historic background of this social group or in the life experience of older people. The interviewees’ youth years and for older also middle age years were lived in a socialist society where initiative was
part of the system. The community in question (the municipality of Tartu) has had a mayor marked by an autocratic style for 20 years. On the other hand, during the interviews, the men talked of failed attempts to teach those who were not willing to take advice. These are experienced men who know how to assess the probability of failure in every action. The former indicates the need for empowerment of older citizens (Cusack, 2000), while the latter seems to conform to the Walker et al. (2013) thesis that “[a]s they age, most participants simply found that they have less capacity and energy to expend on social activities. They become more discerning about how they expend energy, particularly in terms of the emotional, social, and support returns they secure from interactions.” Anyway, initiative means responsibility, and the results of the study suggest that older men avoid taking risks but comfortably await offers.

Lack of initiative, passive readiness and the so-called need for an agent form a clear contradiction to the current structure of the logic of self-development activities for older people in Estonia. In order to launch work at day centres or add topics of interest to men to the current programmes, the system requires initiative from the older people themselves. Also, it is presumed that teachers, organisers, and guides will step up from the target group as volunteers. Only Tallinn has enforced an administrative social activity manager position at day centres; it is unlikely that such a regulation will be enforced in rural areas.

Using a metaphor, it can be said that in the process of sharing knowledge, older men see themselves as trees of wisdom with strong roots, who know the absolute truth and to whom reasonable young(er) people could come for advice. This tree of wisdom needs outside help, however, to integrate itself and its wisdom in and with the development of the community and society.

3.6 Conclusions

Based on the qualitative study carried out among older men in the municipality of Tartu, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The involvement of older men sharing their skills and knowledge is an untapped source in society. The target group for older men could be youth to whom practical, basic skills could be taught, as well as middle-aged people and peers with whom experiences can be shared.

2. The role of sharing skills and knowledge is a suitable way for older men to develop themselves.
3. Men with a pedagogical background are more likely to be ready to lead a non-formal education process. Men without such a background prefer practical individual instructions or informal experience-sharing in small groups in which the students create tasks and ask questions.

4. Older men in the municipality of Tartu are not prepared to take the risk of initiative, despite being ready within themselves to share their skills and knowledge and not seeing obstacles to doing so; instead they wait to be asked to do so.

5. Older men in the municipality of Tartu expressed inflexible attitudes towards the correctness of their views, and disbelief in trends in the development of youth. This phenomenon may form an obstacle to informal education between generations and for general activities related to integration. This is why integration processes should be launched with activities in which both parties have something equally valuable to offer each other.

6. The guidance provided by older men is more likely to succeed if it has practical content and a specific task where the men can perform professional skills in which they are proficient. The process should be called not ‘teaching’ but ‘helping,’ ‘showing,’ or ‘advising.’

7. The process of passing on skills and knowledge by non-professionals should be studied in depth, as should the degree to which the emergence of developing dialogue is affected by the significant age difference between the student and mentor.

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References


4 Older Men Learning Through Religious and Political Membership: Case Studies from Malta

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Abstract

This chapter reports on two case studies in Malta on older men learning in informal avenues. The case study on religious confraternities investigated the role of a community-based organisation, namely, a religious confraternity dedicated to ‘Our Lady of Immaculate Conception’ of the village of Mqabba, as a source of informal learning for older men. The study was carried out via semi-structured interviews, revealing the perceived needs and expectations for a satisfying lifestyle in the context of older men’s membership in the confraternity. Findings also revealed the benefits that older men derive from participating in the activities organized by the confraternity: their independence, social engagements, and self-esteem all profited. The second case study investigated that interface between members in the Labour Party Veterans branch of the Labour Party in Malta and informal learning. It reports how older male members stated how membership kept them both mentally and physically healthy and active. Many went on to explain that such activities served to escape boredom and also to keep in touch with the outside world. It was noted that out of most participants interviewed, very few stated that they attended any other activities or were involved in any other organisations which were not related to their political party. These activities/organisations included local band clubs, pigeon clubs, art classes, and parish organisations. The members seemed to be pleased about the activities organised by the Labour Party Veterans in Malta.

Key words: religious confraternity, political membership, older men, informal learning, social engagement, active aging, self-esteem,

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on those aspects of older men’s education which are not formal. In the scenario of informal learning, the learner who is usually a self-starter may have assistance from a helper or a non-human resource. Langenbach (1988), for instance, refers to books, audio-tapes, television, radio, exhibits, and computers. Tough’s (1971) pioneer work on learning projects contrasts with many other programme development models that have not placed the learner at the centre of the learning process. Instead, Tough’s projects lifted the lid from more rigid formulations of curriculum development and promoted the enormous potentiality of adults, including older citizens, to be responsible for their own continued
education for purposes that they themselves have identified rather than for goals selected by some professional or organisation. With regard to programme development, informal learning was described as “a process in which individuals take the initiative in designing learning experiences, diagnosing needs, locating resources and evaluating learning” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 40). Of course, the sub-field of informal learning is fraught with conceptual ambiguity and what it means to be self-directed. Is self-directedness a state of mind? Is it a characteristic of being an adult? Is it a process through which individuals pass to become more fully human? Is it a product in the sense that an individual can be recognised as being self-directed (akin to Maslow’s notion of self-actualisation)? Is it a prescription for living and/or is it emancipatory? These complex questions continue in the debate over informal learning whilst in the context of older adulthood, Findsen and Formosa also add the following query: “is there a greater propensity for self-directedness in learning in later life?” (Findsen, & Formosa, 2011, p. 148). In consideration of this last question, and applying a notion of self-directed learning to older adulthood, Laslett (1989) has described the presumed greater autonomy and increased opportunity to find the ‘self’ in the third age away from the demands and responsibilities of the second age. This is because the resources available to different groups of older people will vary considerably and the extent of social networks may also play a major role in one’s ability to marshal resources for learning. The goal of this article is to take stock of older men’s informal learning in two distinct and separate informal avenues, the whole of which is broken down into four sections. Following this brief introduction, the second section provides a brief overview of the empirical universe and informal elder-learning in Malta. The third and fourth sections present the findings and discussions emerging from the two case studies, focusing on older men’s learning in a religious confraternity and political party activism, respectively.

4.2 Older Adult Learning in Malta

The Maltese archipelago is made up of three islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino. 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. Comino is uninhabited, and with Gozo having a population of about 31,375 persons, leaves Malta as the major island of this archipelago state (National Statistics Office, 2014). The total population of Malta is 386,057 on a total land area of 315 km², which makes it the most densely populated European Union Member State. Malta’s population has evolved out of a traditional pyramidal shape to an even-shaped block distribution of equal numbers at each age except at the top (Formosa, forthcoming). Whilst in 1985, the percentage of citizens aged 60-plus
measured 14.3%, in 2011 this figure reached 18.3%. This occurred as the birth rate declined to 1.3 per family, whilst life expectancy at birth for men/women increased from 70.8/76.0 years in 1985 to 79.2/83.6 years in 2011 (ibid.). Projections estimate that in the year 2025 the percentage of older persons aged 60 and over will rise to 26.5% (ibid.).

Informal learning refers to day-to-day incidental learning during which people are not necessarily aware of the on-going learning processes. Informal learning occurs in a wide range of locations, ranging from libraries to dance clubs, and generally takes place through self-directed strategies in which learning typically begins with a question, a problem, a need to know, or a curiosity. The National Statistics Office reported that in 2007, 36% and 15% of persons aged in the 55-64 and 65-plus age brackets respectively spent at least one night on a holiday abroad (2009). The average number of nights spent holidaying abroad by these age groups were eight and nine and a half nights respectively (ibid.). The connections between travel and learning are widely recognised by older adults, and study/travel trips will surely become a lucrative business in the nearby future:

Our hobby is travelling. But ‘hobby’ is not the best word to describe it because we do not travel for sun and sea escapes. We indulge in ‘travel’ because it opens one’s mind; you learn so many things. Last summer we went to Italy. It was my third trip to Florence but you always discover something new in museums. The same can be said of the Louvre. I visited it two times and wish to visit again... Every country can stimulate your mental faculties, not just Italy and England, but even countries such as Slovakia, Tunisia, and Cyprus. (older adult, 80 years old, cited in Formosa 2011, p. 74)

Volunteering is another important course of informal learning. The National Statistics Office reported that in 2013 the number of volunteers aged 12 and over living in private households was 29,830 (2013). More than half of the total number of volunteers - 14,930 or 50.1%- were aged 50 years and over. Volunteers aged 65 years and over amounted to 6,100 or 20.5% of the total number of volunteers. Moreover, in 2012, persons aged 65 years and over performed an average of 22 hours of volunteer work in a typical month, which amounts to 28 hours for all retirees.

4.3 Religious Confraternities and Older Men’s Learning

During the Middle Ages, a time during which many lay people wished to participate in some way in the spiritual life of religious orders, confraternities were
established with the purpose of promoting special works of Christian charity. Every confraternity has a set of rules which are set up in order to govern the confraternal organization. Through the years, confraternities shaped the civic religious culture through various activities such as charitable work, public shrines, and processions. In Malta, there are a number of confraternities in every village. Though both women and men can join, most members are male and also, only men are allowed to take part in the processions. The confraternity chosen for this study is the one dedicated to ‘Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception’ of the village of Mqabba.

The devotion towards ‘Our Lady of Immaculate Conception’ in Mqabba dates back to 1615, when it is documented that there was an altar dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. In 1772, a confraternity under the ‘Holy Patronage of Our Lady conceived without sin’ was erected and, three years later, in 1775, the aggregate confraternity of the ‘Immaculate Conception’ of San Lorenzo in Damaso in Rome united the two. For the occasion, a statue and a stone cross were commissioned and placed in a very prominent place at the end of the village of Mqabba. The confraternity is led by the Rector who is responsible for all administration and activities. The members and the confraternity as an organisation perform quite a few obligations and activities. First and foremost, every member must own a white pleated cassock paired with a blue shoulder piece; rosary recitation must be spoken daily and, moreover, in case of a member’s demise, fellow members must attend and participate in the funeral.

The confraternity’s most important tasks, however, are the organisation of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception held on the eighth of December and the feast in honour of ‘Our Lady of Lilies’ held every second week of June. The confraternity also participates during the feast of ‘Our Lady of the Holy Rosary’ in October, Corpus Christi in June, the Easter procession, and during the titular feast of the ‘Assumption’ in August. The members of the confraternity take part in the processions by walking in front of the statue in twos, holding a candle while wearing the white cassock and the blue shoulder piece. The Rector carries the cross and wears the confraternity’s medallion. Apart from taking part in processions, members are also responsible for valuable items that the confraternity owns inside the church. Such items are, for example, the gold gilded front of the altar, embroidered altar cloths, silver lanterns, crosses, gilded candlesticks, lace under cloths, silver items such as chalices and plates, numerous paintings, and last but not least the statue of ‘Our Lady of Lilies’ and the gold and diamond diadem and sandals for the same. Members are responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of these items and for decorating the church during feasts.
The confraternity of Mqabba never ceases to modernize itself and consequently, apart from intra-community activities, the confraternity is involved in quite a number of outside community activities as well. The confraternity is regularly invited to participate in events held by other communities, both in Malta and abroad, and especially in Sicily. The confraternity also met with the late Pope John II in 2000 at Vatican City in order to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the statue of ‘Our Lady of Lilies.’ Members also met with His Holiness Pope Francis in 2013 during the ‘Year of Faith,’ during which some 50,000 members of traditional confraternities from various European countries gathered in St. Peter’s Square in Rome.

It is often the case that particular anniversaries provide an excellent platform to take initiatives and build commemorative programmes. This was the case when in 1997, when the confraternity commemorated the 225th anniversary of its establishment. For that occasion, a concert was held in the local parish church. During this programme, a new musical composition was introduced. Another commemorative event took place in 2007, when the confraternity recognised the 235th anniversary of its canonical founding (1772 - 2007). A year later, it marked the 50th anniversary of the confirmation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in Lourdes (1858 - 2008). Another centennial celebration of the foundation of the club which collaborates with the mentioned confraternity was celebrated through the publication of the book *Sicut Lilium: Devozzjoni u Ritwal Tul is-Sekli*. This 600-page book, edited by Charles Farrugia, brought together historical documents about the entire culture related to the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of the Lilies as celebrated in Mqabba. Furthermore, it also documented hundreds of photos and oral history from older persons who participated in this lay religious culture during the last 100 years. Through such initiatives, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of Mqabba weaves together the historical narrative of older persons and shares it with the younger generation.

As a congregation aiming to foster the Marian culture among the inhabitants of Mqabba, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception is attempting to make the best use it can of outreach in order to build bridges with communities of a similar type abroad. Contacts have already been established with other confraternities in Italy. In particular, there is work in progress with the community of Giglio di Veroli, Frosinone Italy, and the community of Anticoli Corrado, Lazio, Italy. Both of these communities have confraternities, bands, and feasts with connections to the culture surrounding the Immaculate Conception or the Our Lady of the Lilies. Members have already engaged in exchanges among different communities. There are plans in
place so that in the future groups of different citizens (including older persons) will be able to visit each other within a structured programme of mobility.

### 4.4 Methods of Inquiry

Qualitative research methodology was implemented in order to investigate older men’s participation in a religious confraternity, a community-based organisation of which they are members. One of the main aims was to give older men a voice in regards to their ‘social engagement’ experience through their membership in the confraternity and the benefits derived from the activities carried out by the confraternity. In order to explore the participants’ own reflections, interpretive inquiry was adopted. Concerted efforts were made in order to learn about their views and actions. This was done in order to understand their lives from their perspective (Charmaz, 2006). The research was conducted by means of in-depth, semi-structured interviews on a sample of community group members, and also via researcher observation of group activities and research notes, with the purpose of achieving triangulation (Cresswell, 2008). A semi-structured interview with the rector of the confraternity was carried out as well. All interviews were held in the meeting place of the group and lasted at least an hour. All participants welcomed the opportunity to share their experience about their membership within the confraternity. The interview sought to investigate the members’ age, status, educational background, reasons for joining the confraternity, length of membership, and expectations. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The privacy and confidentiality of the respondents was respected at all times. Respondents are anonymous and are not identifiable in the study.

### 4.5 Findings and Discussion

The rector was asked about the demographic data of the confraternity, and about its history, role, and activities. The answers demonstrated that all members are male and that the confraternity consists of 60 men, 75% of which are 55 years or older. Findings also revealed that men usually joined the confraternity in their youth, once they have turned 18, and not once they retire. The 25 interviewees were asked about their status, age, previous employment, reasons for joining the confraternity, and their expectations. The age of the participants ranged from 61 years to 74 years. At the time of the interview, ten were married, eight were bachelors, and seven were widows. All participants were pensioners, though prior to retirement, nine held an office job, thirteen were skilled workers, and three were unskilled workers. The majority agreed that the reason they
had joined the confraternity was because of a tradition in their families which dictated that all of the men usually joined a confraternity and because of the devotion towards 'Our Lady of Immaculate Conception'. Along the same lines, some also said “all my friends joined, so I did too…to be with them”. The word 'learning' was not specified in the interview questions. Questions were directed to the satisfaction in feeling a sense of belonging and to the confraternity as part of leisure time. Spontaneous comments about learning new things did, however, emerge throughout.

Findings demonstrated that many respondents perceived 'learning new things' as one of the satisfactions they gained from their involvement in the confraternity. Mentioned most particularly were spiritual meetings, the history of the organisation through the celebration of events, and also the experience of visiting new countries and participating in processions. Some were proud to share that, as a confraternity, they have the privilege to carry the statue and are also allowed to decorate their altar. To the people not directly involved with feasts and rituals, these things are taken for granted, however, the members of the confraternity knew the timing of when to and how to decorate the altar, the different colours of the different confraternities, and even what the different ways of ringing the bell meant. This is 'learning by participation,’ whereby new knowledge is acquired through a process of becoming a member, so that learning is viewed as a process of becoming part of a greater whole (Sfard, 2008). The confraternity provided an opportunity to some to go abroad for the very first time. The visit to the Vatican during ‘Year of Faith’ in 2013 was referred to especially often: “I am 70 years now, but I still love challenges and went to the Vatican for the first time”. Members also spoke with pride about all the activities that are carried out, from spiritual gatherings to social functions and from formal anniversary celebrations to maintenance work on the confraternity’s statue and other works in the church. Membership in the confraternity is a platform whereby empowerment is still a possibility, even in old age:

I have joined (the confraternity) as part of the family tradition, and devotion towards Our Immaculate Conception, however, being a member is also lots of fun. We organize a lot of activities, meet friends and make new ones and have somewhere to go to in the evening – it’s like being at home away from home.

Others felt that by belonging to the confraternity, they still have the chance to go on being useful and hence this contributed greatly to the participants’ feeling of self-worth:
I have to go to church during the time of decorations to teach the young ones what to do and where certain things should be laid – there is so much to do.

Without doubt, this is in line with literature review findings that describe the benefits of belonging to a group in the community, which provides the enjoyment of being with like-minded people (Wenger et al. 2002). Moreover, it has also been revealed that community activities and events are sources of informal learning for actively participating adult learners (De Carteret, 2008).

Findings from this research clearly indicate that though the original aim of becoming a member of a confraternity is that of attaining spiritual benefits and demonstrating a devotion to ‘Our Lady’, other benefits are very clearly revealed. There are a multitude of social benefits derived from belonging to a community-based organisation, through the participating in leisure activities. In this case study, learning was found to be an important component. Livingstone had described ‘informal learning’ as an iceberg: “mostly invisible at the surface and immense in its mostly submerged informal aspects” (2000). The informal learning may not even be recognized by the individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills (Longworth, 2003). This study gives a very clear example of these definitions.

Other benefits demonstrated were positive effects on one’s well-being, an ability to maintain self-esteem, independence, and social engagement. This is in line with the literature review (MacKean, 2011). Moreover, the findings from the confraternity resulted also in “a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” (Wenger et al., 2002). Older people require constant stimulation, motivation, and opportunities to learn if they are to maintain and develop their cognitive capacity. Confraternities are community-based organisations that have the capacity to provide these crucial factors.

4.6 Political Membership as a Vehicle for Older Men Learning

The Labour Party in Malta (LP) is one of the three main political parties of the Maltese Islands. The party includes different branches, which seek to meet the needs, ideas, and engagement of different individuals who wish to be involved in the running of the party at one level or another. One of the most active branches of the party is the Ghaqda Veterani Laburisti (Labour Party Veterans – LPV), which is the branch made up of older adult members of the same party. The LPV maintains an important role in all levels of the LP and it is also represented within the National Executive of the Party; delegates of the LPV also attend the General
Conference of the same party. All members of the LP who are 60 or older are automatically enrolled in the LPV, and thus they are encouraged to attend and participate in all the activities organised by the branch.

The LPV was founded in 1988, following an electoral defeat of the LP. Older active members of the party felt that they had to contribute towards the party to bring about new change within the party. The current LPV committee includes 22 members - 20 of which are men - who hail from different educational backgrounds. All of the members are assigned different roles, which all require a level of commitment. The committee meets on a regular basis to organise and implement the different activities throughout each calendar year. Their current aim is also to discuss the way forward (renewal/soul searching) of the same branch, plan policies, and attend meetings both at a party level and national level with regards to matters and issues related to older adults. Apart from the national executive at the party level, the LVP also consists of 10 sub-sections spread across the island. The aim of these sub-branches is to be closer locally to the members of the LVP, who in total roughly add up to 30,000 members. This does not imply that all of these members are in fact active within the LVP, but rather that such high membership is the result of the automatic enrolment in the LVP once members reach the age of 60. Among the activities organised by the LVP are included social and cultural outings, seminars that are held both within a party level and on a national level, The LVP also provides training to its members on specific skills, e.g. how to use Facebook to keep in touch with peers of the same age and also with younger generations and customer care skills for specific tasks or events during the year, for example, elections. The organisation encourages participation in political activities to expand the presence and target the needs of older adults. Such activities are always open to all LPV members, irrespective of gender and background. This means that during such activities, one is able to meet different people hailing from different walks of life, thus making the activities more interesting for those who attend, as there is space for sharing ideas and experiences among members.

4.7 Methods of Data Collection

The data for this case study was collected through interviews with members of the executive committee of the LPV and additional interviews with 25 male members of the branch who were attending one of the social activities organised by the branch. The committee members that were interviewed included Mr. Anthony Degiovanni, the President of the LPV, and Mr. Arthur Vassallo, the Information and Coordination Secretary of the LPV. Some information was also gathered from
Ms. Veroinca Cuschiери and Ms. Connie Green, both of whom are members of the executive committee, and actually the only two elected women on the committee.

Mr. Degiovanni explained the history of the LPV, its aims, its different structures, the work being carried out, and also future plans for the LPV. After completing a tertiary-level education, Mr. Degiovanni held a number of important roles within the public sector throughout his career. He thus came into the position of president of the LPV with a lot of experience in different areas related to management and planning. Mr. Degiovanni is still in public employment and, as such, is still very much involved in different roles related to his pre-retirement career. He is also in the process of undertaking a degree in law, a dream which he has wanted to realize since he was young. As noted beforehand, the LPV is a very active branch within the Labour Party, meaning that to keep things alive and on-going, the branch must organise several events per year. These events are not always only limited to political activities related to the party, but are also organised on a national level. This means that such events would require more commitment from those involved in the actualisation of the events and would also demand more responsibility to ensure follow-up on any potential outcomes of such events.

Mr. Vassallo has retired from paid employment, but still dedicates most of his time to helping in and organising the activities for the LPV. He has a secondary level education and afterwards obtained more on the job training, during which he used to work with the British Services. Mr. Vassallo explained that he enjoys becoming involved in different activities and to date still enjoys learning new skills and tasks that help him get his jobs done. One of these skills is improving his computer skills and learning how to create and edit the LPV’s webpage with minimal guidance from the domain host. Mr. Vassallo explained that he dedicated a lot of time to learning new things about managing a website and also enjoyed finding help and guidance from individuals from the younger generations. During the interview with Mr. Vassallo, it was noted that he takes a great passion in organising and coordinating the number of tasks involved in organising one activity for the LPV. Two female committee members were assisting him on the day of the interview. Apart from organising and coordinating the events, Mr. Vassallo is also the person responsible for promoting the activities organised by the LPV with the media, including printed press, radio, TV, and the web. He feels that, throughout the years, he has gained more and more experience in different areas that require specific skills.

Following the interviews with members of the LPV’s executive committee, the researcher attended one of the social activities organised by the LPV. This activity included a morning gathering to which the members of the LPV and their friends
were invited for some light snacks and dancing. The organisers of the event state that the members look forward to these events and the researcher was surprised by the high turnout to the event. It was well attended by members who are 60 or older, but also by individuals from younger groups. Although the majority of the attendees were women, there was also a considerable amount of men who were present at the event and who were not necessarily there to accompany their spouse or partner.

The researcher identified 25 members who could be included in the study. After explaining the scope of the study and obtaining their consent to conduct interviews regarding the study, the researcher asked questions in relation to age, educational background, roles within the LPV, length of membership, motivation for membership, the preferred kind of activities attended, member’s expectations of the LPV, and whether or not members attended any other organisations and/or activities within their communities. All data was recorded at the time of the interviews to ensure that no information was lost throughout the process of completing the study. It was noted that all individuals who were approached agreed to participate in the study without any hesitation.

4.8 Findings and Discussion

The information obtained from the study was consistent with the question of why elderly men would be willing to participate in activities at the community level organised by the political party with which they are affiliated. The age of the 25 participants in the study ranged from 63 years old to 84 years old. Nineteen of the participants still lived with their spouses or partners while six of the participants were either single or widowed. On the day of the activity, 15 of the interviewees were accompanied by their spouse or partner. All but only two of the participants did not complete a standard level of education, while six of the participants had either a tertiary education or completed the same during job training while they were still employed. Only two participants said that they attended the University of Third Age at some point during their retirement years.

When the participants were asked why they are members of the LPV and why they attend the activities, it was noted that all of the participants stated that by doing so they felt that they kept themselves both mentally and physically healthy and active. Some went on to explain that such activities served to escape boredom and also to keep in touch with the outside world. One of the elderly men explained that since he is the main caretaker for his less active and less healthy wife, the activity served as a respite for him from his caring role. The second most common response was that they feel the need to attend the activities and be members of
LPV to show their support to the party. Despite their loyalty and support, very few (five members only) stated that they would attend and participate actively in political discussions or that they were members of their own local committees. It was noted that of all the participants interviewed, only five of the interviewees stated that they attended any other activities or were involved in any other organisations which were not related to the their political party. These activities and organisations included local band clubs, pigeon clubs, art classes, and parish organisations. The members seemed to be pleased about the activities organised by the LPV. In fact, 20 of the participants stated that they would attend any activity organised by the LPV, while five of them stated that they only enjoyed attending the dancing and social gatherings such as the one they were attending that day.

Older adult males’ participation in the community is closely related to the mental and physical well-being of the individual. From this case study, data provided sufficient evidence that older men attend different activities that they enjoy, mainly for social interaction needs, but also to keep themselves involved in the communities in which they are living. Post-retirement, most men do not seek to attend structured activities, but rather enjoy being free to participate in activities they select themselves. Being members of the political party they support also gives them a sense of pride that they can somewhat influence decisions by making their voices heard, and gives them a sense that they might be heard at a governmental level, especially now that their party is in power. Still, they also feel that for all the support they provide, they should also be on the receiving end of support from their party, and while they accept that this cannot always be on an individual level, the support they receive should be reflected in decisions made that will affect their affiliated group. The more the activities and opportunities for learning within such activities appeal to their social needs, the more older adult males are interested in attending and participating actively. Even though some of the activities might require them to update some skills or experiment in new areas to which maybe they were not exposed before, as long as they have guidance and friends on whom to rely for support, they do not fear or shy away from new experiences, but tend to become very engaged in such activities and willing to become involved in related tasks.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the diversity of informal learning by, for, and with older men beyond formal education provisions. In informal learning conditions, older adults tend to move away from the mechanisms of expert-devised curricula, overt professionalism, credentialism, and imposed assessment to freer expression,
sometimes in self-directed activities (learning projects), at other times as part of social institutions of which older adults are members or in learning connected to social movements. This chapter demonstrated that the tradition of self-directed learning is strong in some communities in ways which many community educators would applaud; older people identify their learning goals, seek the resources required, find appropriate learning modes, and make judgment on efficacy (self-evaluation). While self-directedness in learning is to be admired, the type and value of learning to individuals and societies is, however, unevenly distributed, usually in accord with personal interests and needs. The work of Morrow-Howell points to much that still remains unknown about the interface between informal learning and older volunteerism in later life, but one can conclude that there is a win-win relationship between organisation and individual learners, where the benefits to both parties are considerable (2010). This chapter has also shown that another important sphere of informal learning is that of engagement in active citizenry based on varying domains of citizenship (civil, political, and social). As the majority of social movements are organically-driven (inductive and grassroots based), older people can join at multiple levels to help effect significant social change in a variety of roles. These social movement sites, whether of the ‘old’ or ‘new’ modality, provide scope for leadership, especially as collective life experiences can provide a strong platform for political activism, as demonstrated by pensioner action groups. In conclusion, the third age is not necessarily one of great inactivity - on the contrary, for many older people it is a time for new directions and of passionate voluntary commitment to democratic values and to social activism free of external expectations.

References


5 Learning in Informal Spaces in the Community: A Case Study from Southern Portugal

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Abstract
Portuguese researchers are increasingly interested in studying aging and in learning about its various dimensions and disciplinary approaches to the same. Nevertheless, there is not yet enough research, adult education aside, that focuses on older citizens’ learning. Also, the focus on older men is not very frequent in Portugal. In this chapter, we present the results of two case studies related to fishing. The first case concerns an amateur fishing club in the city of Faro. It reveals an informal learning space in which older men can engage in informal, intergenerational learning that stems from practice and socialising. This non-structured community environment seems to maintain elderly social networks and fight isolation and loneliness. The club members demonstrate a significant sense of belonging and of feeling essential to the community. The second case concerns a group of retired fishermen who still work at the docks for several reasons, namely, to complement their income and be able to help their families, to feel socially useful, and to maintain a connection to the environment where they worked all their lives. Their patterns of social- bility and the way they relate to each other not only reflects an identity built around the values and meanings of work, but also points to building specific forms of masculinities. Shoulder to shoulder, they share symbols and meanings characteristic of the fishermen’s lives, which do not include typical female relationships. Altogether, these cases provide us important clues as to how masculinities are built, as well as on the importance of informal learning to men’s well-being.

Keywords: adult education, informal learning, community, men’s learning, older adults

5.1 A Glimpse into Portuguese Research on Aging and Learning

Portugal is one of the ‘oldest countries’ of the world, where structural aging is seen through a range of different indicators. In a population of about 10 million inhabitants, the population aged 65 or older is 2,023 million, representing 19% of total population. In the last decade, the number of older citizens has increased by about 19%. Among the elderly, the age group that has witnessed a drastic increase is comprised of those who are 80 or older. The aging index has, in 2010, reached its highest maximum value (INE, 2011): in 1990, the aging index was 68,1%, in 2000,
It was 102.2%, and in 2010, 120.1%. As Gonçalves and Carrilho point out, in 2050, the total resident population and the children under the age of 14 will decrease, while the active population (15-64 years old) will maintain a negative variation in this period, representing a loss of about 2 million people in 40 years (2006). The number of persons aged 65 or older will grow to 1.1 million, reaching 31.8% of the population by 2050, and the aging index will reach a national average of 243%.

Over the last decades, Portuguese researchers have demonstrated a growing interest in aging. Starting from an ecological perspective within psycho-gerontology, the works of Constança Paúl and his collaborators are central. They have approached aging in Portugal by looking at the biological, psychological, and social dimensions in order to explain the global changes in behaviour through the processes of aging (Fonseca and Paúl, 2006; Ribeiro and Paúl, 2012). They have also published an impressive number of articles on various dimensions on the fields of psychology, gerontology, and clinical gerontology, investigating the crucial importance of social networks on the process of aging, loneliness (Paúl and Ribeiro, 2009), loneliness and disability at an old age (Paúl, Ayes, and Ebrahim, 2006), disability and psychosocial outcomes (Paúl, Ayes, and Ebrahim, 2007), geriatric care, and older men's carers and masculinities (Ribeiro, Paúl and Nogueira, 2007; Ribeiro and Paúl, 2008), among other issues related to aging.

There is a growing interest in researching care, not only from the psychological perspective, but also from a sociological perspective. São José, for example, has been studying the subject for some years now, looking for the divisions and inequalities within care and caretakers (2012). He demonstrates, for example, that care in Portugal is still based on poorly qualified women earning low wages.

There is a strong area of Portuguese research that focuses on universities of third age or similar. In these investigations, there is a visible concern with learning and its influence on the several dimensions of older citizens’ lives. Within this issue, the work of Veloso, is central, not only because she studies policies of the third age and their evolution over time, but also because of the conclusions concerning the role of these institutions regarding the elderly’s lives (2011a, 2011b). To sum up the crucial points, learning and socialisation in universities of the third age give the elderly the possibility to strengthen social networks and reinforce their social capital; it also has a crucial role in helping them with the difficult transitions from paid work to retirement. Other Portuguese researchers have been studying learning in third age universities as well. Machado and Medina, for example, have studied the elderly’s learning trajectories, arguing for a positive influence of learning on their well-being (physical, psychological, social,
emotional, and mental), self-esteem, and self-confidence (2011). Despite the number and variety of perspectives one can find in investigations in third age institutions, however, Veloso acknowledges that a classical model of school was only partially rejected and that one cannot say that a liberating education (in a Freirian sense) is being followed (2011a). Finally, the predominance of middle-class participants in this learning space was also clear – a pattern already noted in other European countries.

Only recently have higher education institutions in Portugal started to facilitate access to non-traditional students. Learning later in life in higher education is not, therefore, a strong area of research in Portugal. Even so, we can highlight some interesting points on older students in higher education. In a study on two universities in Portugal, there seems to be no doubts that mature students recently entering higher education come from the working class, breaking the usual self-reproducing pattern of advantage from middle-class participants in academia (see for example Gonçalves et al, 2011). Secondly, although drop-out rates seem high, the academic success of mature students was proven to be better when compared to traditional students. Average grades for the age groups of 30 to 39, 40 to 49, or above 50, were all higher than average grades of the students with less than 30 years old (Santos, Bago and Fonseca, 2013). Finally, in Fragoso et al (2013) it becomes clear that mature students prefer and make use of deeper approaches to learning (cf. Richardson, 1994) and, as a consequence, are more capable of assuming a critical position towards the world and a more reflective attitude, among other factors. Altogether, these data show that mature, older students in higher education can do well and expose the myth that age is a severe limitation in this context.

To summarise, learning among the elderly has been studied in various perspectives in Portugal. However, it is important to stress that the adult education sector has not paid enough attention to the issue. Veloso (2011a), who analysed the Portuguese social context between 1985 and 2008, states there is an absence of a global, coherent policy of adult education, a lack in particular in regard to older adult learning that in turn leads to the marginalisation of the same group. In Portuguese research on adult education, however, there is a subfield that transversely comes into contact with the cases we will present: community development and education, commonly called local development in Portugal. Local development emerged as an important field of practices in the middle of the 1980s and experienced a golden period roughly until the end of the century. In Portugal, community development was particularly inspiring for popular education (Fragoso, 2011): aside from local needs or community problems, there was a goal of organisation
and education with the population in order to enable and facilitate change. A great part of the work done in Portugal did not focus specifically on the older citizens; instead, territory or communities were to be the centre of the action. In any case, the results regarding informal learning were significant. As we have demonstrated with Fragoso (2009), most of the learning that occurred in community settings was not formal, but rather non-formal and informal. The important results that we have obtained over more than two decades of community development in Portugal lead us to look carefully for the importance of informal learning – and to the importance of informal spaces of learning.

The OMAL project gave us the opportunity to conduct some exploratory research work focusing on older men in the community. In Portugal, we are interested in knowing more about the importance of informal learning in community, non-structured learning spaces and in understanding to which extent we can make connections to masculinities.

5.2 Methodology

In this chapter, we present two case studies conducted in the region of Algarve (in southern Portugal). In both studies, we tried to understand the case in its natural context (Stake, 1994). We had little time and insufficient research resources to conduct an in-depth case study, as we would have liked. Instead, we adopted an exploratory position (Yin, 1993) in both cases that allowed us initial contact with our cases and a better formulation of guidelines and questions for future investigations.

The first case concerns an amateur fishing club located in the city of Faro. Our approach included, in a first phase, document analysis (members files, minutes of the meetings, etc.) and informal conversations (Bogdan and Biklen, 1994) with key-informants to naturally understand the origins and evolution of this group mainly comprised of men. These factors were fundamental in establishing an informal relationship and in being able to observe natural situations that are part of the everyday life of the club. Naturalist observation followed at different times of day; this included an observation of a fishing event (a social one) that took place at Faro beach on 25 April 2013. Finally, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994) with different club members: with those who have been directing the club or have an historical memory of its evolution, with those who take part in the official fishing competitions, with the woman who manages the bar, with those who, although not participating in fishing, still use the club spaces for socialising and doing other types of daily activities.
In the second case, we still looked at fishing, but in a different context; we found retired fishermen who were still working on shore six days a week, repairing nets, or doing maintenance jobs in the boats. This approach was, of course, harder; in this context, every interview would seem ridiculous. We had to use, besides observation, long periods of informal conversations. In the first phase, these conversations – in contrast to the interviews – did not have a precise objective of collecting information. In the second phase, we decided to try to guide the conversations towards the understanding of the men’s past as fishermen, in a way trying to do a superficial biographical approach. We had to understand if the patterns of learning through the men’s work as fishermen had something to do with these men’s lives today.

5.3 The Case of the Faro Amateur Fishing Club

The amateur fishing club in the city of Faro (in southern Portugal) was founded in 1956 by a group of eleven friends. Initially, they organised their own unofficial competitions, but soon they assembled teams and started to compete officially. In a few years, they became regional, national, and international champions. Because of the need to guarantee the continuity of their successful performance in competitions, some members of the club decided to dedicate some time to teaching a group of young people the fishing techniques – and thus a new generation of champions was born. Today the amateur fishing club is one of the best clubs in the country (top three); they have won many individual and team trophies at all levels. The club has the status of an institution of public utility and has received the city medal for sport merit.

Today there are approximately 280 members in the club, most of whom (85%) are men. The ages of the members range from less than 25 to 82 years old; only 7% of the members are less than 25, 12% are between 26 and 39, 51% are between 40 and 64, and 29% are between 65 and 82 years old. The professions and social status of members also greatly differentiate from each other. Based on the data we have been given, around two thirds are blue collar workers (37%) or white collar workers (34%).

This club offers some activities like fishing competitions at various levels, social fishing, and indoor activities. The club’s teams that perform well at regional competitions are allowed to compete in national competitions; if the teams rank in the first group at the national level, they have access to worldwide competitions. Social fishing on the weekends or during holidays with their families or friends is a central activity during which fishing appears to be a pretext for socialising. These
activities usually end with a common lunch at the club's bar. Some indoor activities like snooker, cards, domino, darts, and 'drinking and talking', also take place in the club's bar. All of these activities seem essential for members' social life.

Elderly participation in official competitions is not possible because of physical limitations. These members participate in local or social fishing events and primarily use the club spaces for socialising, gatherings, and participating in social games like cards, snooker, and dominoes. These men see the club as their own space, a place where they feel good and with which they identify. They said that this club is different from the others because they know each other and feel that it is a safe space:

The important thing is that they [older men] come to pass the day. Practically, this is where they pass most of their time, isn't it? When it opens, they come, mostly after lunch. In the morning it is very quiet, but then they pass the rest of the day here. This is opened every day; we used to close on Mondays, but not anymore, so they are here the whole week. They play cards, talk, and spend time with other persons, and this is practically their second home. (E5, Female, 25)

Contrarily to other similar spaces, socialisation does not occur only among members of these men's age group. The games or simple conversations happen among people of very different ages:

People here are very friendly and always willing to help… we have very strong ties. It's curious that these bonds do not have a definite age. It's funny how people can meet and have a good relationship, even at completely different ages. Here I see kids who are ten or eleven years old. I see people who are 70 and I find that very interesting. (E4, Male, 42)

Apart from the group of older men, it is possible to identify additional groups of adults or young adults in the club. There are the ones who have their jobs and participate in fishing competition or social events. There is a group of young adults who are unemployed and hang around during the day, socialising with all the rest and playing games in the club. This club seems to represent an important resource to their mental health and an anchor to feelings of community belonging. There are also some groups that have been built through professional relationships and, after retirement, the club space represents their meeting point. For example, there is a group of men who have retired from the National Guard and still meet as a group in the club. To summarise, the club spaces and activities are fundamental to the continued socialising of the elderly and to fighting isolation. More than that, it seems to contribute to intergenerational socialisation and learning.
Family structure seems to be deeply embedded in the club and its socialisation patterns. It was surprising to see how men take their children with them to the club space or to the social fishing events. This seems to contribute to a strong tie between family and the club. It is possible to find three generations fishing at the same time. Nowadays members teach fishing techniques to others, and learn from each other and collectively in the most informal way possible. There are neither appointed or hired coaches, nor scheduled, formal training sessions – strangely enough, if we think in the context of the significant sports accomplishments of the club. This means, on the one hand, that complex fishing techniques are learnt through informal dynamics, similar to the everyday learning occurring while socialising or other sorts of informal relations. It also demonstrates, on the other hand, the potentialities of hands-on learning. These men are able to build a common narrative from practice which, of course, also has the consequence of depicting a strong sense of belonging. The sense of belonging, although in some cases departing from family, extends beyond family ties. As a 63-year-old man said, “Let me put it this way: there are men who don’t have a family and this is a family…”

We also obtained some interesting results on gender relationships within the club. The women in the club seem to reproduce the traditional gender roles: women cook in the lunches or sell raffles to raise some funds for competitions. This club has a young woman in the bar; she manages and maintains the order there. This girl is respected by the men and she can function as a way to bring more women to the club. In here it is not as in other clubs where they are all men and when a woman enters everybody stares… No, not in here! Only the fact of having a woman in the bar says everything. Women feel at ease to come here and to hang around. (E4, male, 42)

There are groups of women who are not members but still come to the bar, mainly to drink coffee during their break, as they work nearby. Women who are members – despite being a minority – use the club spaces for socialising purposes and also for social and official competitions at all levels. Men stress that women are as good as men at fishing and respect them for that; this fact seems to be the key for their ‘acceptance’ in a mainly masculine environment.

The last point of our interpretation is the relationship between the club and the community. The club members are capable of establishing important ties with the larger community. We see a significant number of ‘non-official’ members using the club spaces and the bar mainly for socialising. The club members often volunteer for community actions related to the environment, the sea, or the lagoon. They participate in cleaning initiatives of green spaces or the islands
surrounding Faro: “Last year the City Hall invited us to grab garbage in the islands and we also helped.” When they organise fishing events, the fish they catch is given to institutions:

And we give help, we help. When we do a fishing competition, the fish we catch goes to CASA [a NGO that works with homeless or older adults impoverished]. In the last one we gave them 118 kilos of fish, so we help the community. (E2, male, 81)

We think that the quality of life of these men consists of subjective and symbolic meanings. The simple fact that such places and spaces exist seems to provide a non-structured, free environment where men can be far away from daily pressures. Places and face-to-face socialising are still important. The club has a strong socialising dimension that, although it is waning, still exists. We also understand that this informal learning space can help to fight isolation and loneliness and to maintain social networks of older men; at the same time, it promotes intergenerational relationships.

There are some strong symbols that hold people together and keep them going, which in this case have to do with fishing: prizes, trophies, and the lagoon. All of these things possess powerful images and objects associated with them and make it easier for people to identify with the underlying norms and values. Although the club has no financial support, no appointed or hired coaches, no organised training sessions, and no type of planned training structure, it is recognised as one of the best clubs in the country. In fact, informality, friendship, and family relationships seem to be the base of this success, and reflect the concepts of identity and a sense of belonging central to any community.

5.3.1 “Shoulder to Shoulder”: Working (Together?) By Ourselves

This case study has been developed in a fishermen community in Olhão. The participants of our research are a group of retired fishermen, who nowadays dedicate their time to repairing the fishing nets (and similar materials) and doing maintenance on the boats. They are between 64 and 72 years old, all married and with children and grandchildren. These men’s working place is near the docks, from where vessels sail to the sea. It is also the place where the fish is discharged to be sold and resold.

They work in short and narrow places similar to sheds, filled with all sorts of fishing material. There they perform their daily tasks, usually two men in the same space, each one doing his job. It is a typical male environment; there are always men arriving, others leaving to the sea, and still others who just want to talk to each other.
At first approach, these men are not very open to conversation. Although they do not refuse to talk, they do it shortly and superficially, while they keep on doing their tasks. Their days are mostly spent working ashore. Their work week runs from Monday to Saturday, with a varied timetable, depending on the amount of work they have to do. They can start before 7 a.m. and work until 4 p.m./5:30 p.m. They have a break for lunch, most of the times at their own homes, as they all live in Olhão. At the end of the day, depending on the season, they can remain talking to friends in the avenue or near the market, or they go home because of the bad weather. On Saturdays, if the weather is bad and the sea is rough, they do not need to spend so much time repairing the nets, but if the weather is fine they can work entire days as the amount of work increases. This is why their weekend is only Sunday. On this day they are free; they can rest, be with their families, and go for small walks or drives.

These men began this activity when they were small children, still attending primary school. Some of them succeeded in finishing primary school, and that made it possible for them to obtain a working permit, to attend the Fishing School in Pedrouços, or to go into the navy. These qualifications allowed some of them to sail abroad for long periods of time and to earn better wages. Others did not have the opportunity to study, because they had to begin working earlier to help their families.

Most of these men spent long periods of time in fishing ships, very far away from their families, but with the company of their mates (masters, foremen masters, drivers, fishers, etc.). Some friendships have lasted until today. Despite it being difficult to notice their real affective bonds, it has been possible to observe that their facial expressions changed when they remember those days and people. Maybe because it was the only life they knew, liking or disliking it; regardless of how hard their profession was, the memories of those times bring them comfort.

The routine on a fishing boat leads to repetitive procedures: casting the nets, mending others, collect the nets with fish, depositing the fish in containers, casting the nets again and again... The communication established among these fishermen was mainly related to the tasks they had to do and little else. The few breaks they had were used to make meals together - in groups, because the job could not stop - to play dominoes or cards, to talk a little, and essentially to rest. Some told us that the conversation was short because the men were of few words and they were there to work.

Life at sea was very hard; these men were subjected to precarious and dangerous conditions. They had to face storms in the high seas in small boats. The conditions
of hygiene and nutrition were also much worse than what they had on shore. We think that the profession and way of life of these men directly affects the way they learn. For them, working in a group does not mean that there is collective learning. Although some of them have taken courses, they stated that what they have learned in formal terms was not enough to be fishermen. It was the everyday struggle at sea that has taught them. In a boat, one learns primarily through practice and by observing the older or more experienced comrades. However, each man learns primarily by himself. It seems to be a form of relationship in which affection and sociability have very particular contours. What unites them is the work. It seems, though, that there are no ties of affection among them, despite them spending so much time together, confined to the boat in which they live and work for 15 or 20 days or even months at a time, with only with a few stops along the route. It is possible that these relationships, resulting from their biography and typically male, have been built through these labour relations, clearly leaving a mark on the men of our case study, even today.

The work done ashore is different from what many of them were used to doing at sea, but the way of learning is the same: through practice and with each other: “I had a cousin who was a land master and sometimes I used to be next to him, watched him, and he taught me, so I was learning to fix the nets”.

In their private lives, there is a point in common: all of the men all have children and none of them passed on the art of fishing – none wanted their children to follow a profession connected to the sea. Some have a great fondness for teaching the younger generation and have always done so throughout life, even continuing to do it while retired…but their children represent a significant exception.

Having made professional trips (along the Portuguese coast, Mauritania, Senegal, South Africa, Angola, USA, Morocco), enabled them to come into contact with other cultures, customs, and languages, as well as to acquire knowledge of geography, management, and economics. The facility with which the two fishermen who worked abroad the longest talk about various subjects from politics to the environment and social issues, etc. is obvious. We believe it would be interesting to pursue this matter further and to see if in fact there is a direct relationship between their cultural experiences outside the country and the range of their backgrounds and interests.

It is very important, for these men, to keep on working after their retirement, not only because they can feel socially useful and occupied, but also because they can be paid for work they are still able to do. Although sometimes they refer to how hard the life of a fisherman was, their connection to the sea is deep. For almost all of them, this was the only life they knew and to keep working (although away from
the sea) allows them to continue to live with people who use the same language and share meanings and symbols.

To maintain activity on land also allows them to keep on busy in their daily routine, aside from being a way to earn some extra money. All of the men in our case study admit that the fact that they can earn some more money is a key factor. It allows them to help their families financially. Some have unemployed children living with them.

In two cases, the fact that they are active and develop some kind of activity helps them to escape addictions (mainly alcohol). It is also a matter of being able to maintain a certain balance in their mental health. Some men, even on Sundays, go to fix the nets, or spend this day in the garden with fishermen or former fishermen, talking about football, women, and the sea.

The pattern of activity described here demonstrates significant ambiguities. On the one hand, men feel good about no longer having to be away for long periods of time, being away from the family, "(...) while there were fish, and whether it was day or night, raining or sun shining, they had to be working (...). They wish to rest more at this stage of their lives. There are men who reported wanting more time for themselves, to rest, to pursue leisure activities, and to give more attention to their families. On the other hand, however, the fact that they continue to have an activity after retirement, six days a week, also means that the time spent with their families is not experienced as it is in other cases of typical pensioners. As money does not explain it all, there is an ambiguity about this type of life: they seem to want to stay apart from the fishing life, but at the same time they seem not to be able to live without it. Finally, there are those who say explicitly that they are working just to escape family life – to escape an experience of everyday family company which only now, after retirement, is possible.

Some typical features of masculinity in these men are evident. In the time we spent with them (even when we were silent), we observed that they kept distance among them. Those men spend their days together, but separated in relational or affective terms – or in the terms women usually experience relationships, namely, through affection and sharing feelings. Each of the men works individually and speaks little, even knowing exactly what the other one is doing. Even when they were closer in personal terms, at work everyone did their job and spoke little. We noticed, however, that in this kind of relationship there is a certain comfort. They are alone together and have company while at the same time they are alone. They do not have to communicate verbally with the mate next to them, and yet, it seems
important that the guy is next door, daily. In short, there is more than one way to be together or not to be alone, or apart.

5.4 Conclusion

These findings give us room to stress the issue of masculinities. In the case of the amateur fishing club, we find there is an ambiguity among gender relationships. For example, some women at the club still assume traditional gender roles, some women are also fishing champions, making them an appreciated presence at the club, and some expressed the view that the club should have more female members. It is important to note that a substantial part of life at the club revolves around competition, but also around games of various types, daily activities that could easily be understood to be a form of hanging out or doing nothing. In this club, there is a mixture of traditional characteristics attributed to men that would partially comprise the so-called ‘old masculinities,’ and there also exists the potential for different and possibly new masculinities. Research on masculinities done in Portugal can be applied parallel to our findings, namely, the notion that old masculinities and new masculinities refer to transitional gender relations and male roles (Wall, Aboim, and Cunha, 2010). It is also crucial to stress that masculinities exist in a fragile condition, requiring constant vigilance and affirmation through discourse and performance (Almeida, 1995). Vigilance, in this sense, surrounds us in multiple contexts of our life, but it is a fact that modern life forces us to spend a large portion of our time within working environments and with family, while time devoted to friends or to leisure seems to be, at least in some cases, decreasing. At the fishing club, however, we find a high percentage of older men who are retired and younger unemployed males in the minority. The informal character of the learning spaces found in the club may function as a new kind of space in which men are freer to build their masculinities in a different way. On the one hand, these men have more confidence to spend their free time on hands-on activities or on informal kinds of male relationships that mostly consist of hanging around and playing cards or other types of games. However, it is possible that these informal spaces also function as an opportunity for some transitions in gender relations and for building new gender roles. The case of the retired fishermen working ashore also provides an impetus for masculinity research and food for thought about masculinities, but in a different direction. While formally working, these men built things side by side with other men in a very particular environment (the totalitarian milieu of the fishing boats where they spent significant amounts of time), while influenced by traditional gender roles regarding central values and work norms. The hard working life of a fisherman included the following: learning from practice and taking advantage of other experiences, enduring harsh conditions on a daily basis,
prioritising the job over family, and limiting friendly relationships among men to the few opportunities they had to rest between tasks. In this way, the men established solidarity among mates, cemented by common experience, and ‘sharing’ in their case did not include a necessary verbalisation or oral expression of feelings. After retirement, therefore, it is only natural that these men maintain all the behavioural patterns of ‘old masculinities’ performed during the long phase of their formal employment. Money alone does not fully explain why they continue working. It seems natural that these men want to keep feeling useful and occupied, and it is further understandable that they need to maintain a social connection with their mates. The additional role of family, however, should not be forgotten in regards to this issue. These men, while formally working, spent limited periods of time with their families. (It would be of outmost interest to know more about their family life from the perspective of women, but we did not have the opportunity to speak with female family members.)

When these men retire, they are faced with having to forge a very new and daily kind of relationship with their families: this process potentially produces some clashes of gender roles and expectations, or a re-negotiation of the division of the family tasks, among other shifting factors. In our exploratory conclusion, these retired fishermen also continue working in order to escape this new familial situation and to be able to maintain the usual pattern of relationships they used to have while formally working.

The case of the fishing club also allows us to put forward some important conclusions regarding learning. Firstly, it is important to stress that everyday life in the club’s spaces demonstrate interesting signs of intergenerational learning. Learning to fish is a very technical issue involving significant detail, as well as a good knowledge of the sea, the tides, the weather, etc. Although during a certain phase of the club’s history members organised some training sessions, today the club supports hands-on learning. This learning is built on practice, grows from the experience of others, functions as an extension of the family unit, and includes persons of every age. This constitutes an important collective narrative of practices. Mainly, however, it reveals how men demonstrate a preference towards community-based, hands-on learning – provided they control the rhythms of learning: the opposite of the processes of formal learning and training. This conclusion has also been reported in other research, as was mentioned in a recent publication on older men’s learning across a variety of different settings: “…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” (Golding, Mark, and Foley, 2014, p. 256). Our findings also demonstrate the central importance of socialising and the effects it can have on maintaining the men’s ties to community, combating loneliness, and preventing the natural deterioration of the social networks with age. At the same time, the fishing
club members show a considerable sense of belonging that seems to makes them more capable of contributing to the larger community in a positive way; they seem to build a valuable symbolic space around the specific symbols related to fishing and the fishing competitions (the sea, the lagoon, the numerous trophies, etc.) (Kurantowicz, 2008). Finally, it is important to understand our cases as exploratory and our conclusions as provisional. Mainly, however, we have only begun to explore a novel research area – the world of informal spaces of learning in community, characterized by great diversity and difficult to comprehend within a short period of time. Now is the time to pursue a joint effort to reflect on the results of the research; this will render us more prepared to plan the next steps of our research.

Acknowledgments

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Older Men Learning in Urban and Rural Municipalities in Slovenia

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Abstract

In this paper, the results of a quantitative and qualitative study on informal learning of older men in voluntary associations (VAs) are presented. The study was carried out in Ljubljana, Gorišnica, and Vitomarci. Main research questions of the research aimed to examine the activities available in VAs and the share of older men among members; semi-structured interviews and a focus group were used in selected case studies of VAs in which the majority of members are older men. Main results show that there are only a selected number of VAs with older men representing the majority of the membership. Educational activities are only organised in some VAs, but informal and incidental learning occurred in all of these associations. Our study has demonstrated that the number of VAs in a community correlates with the degree of urbanity (the result of many different factors), but, more importantly, the number of learning activities varies according to the degree of urbanity. Our research also stresses the positive influence of membership and informal learning in VAs, which result in better quality of life and an improved well-being of members and the local community as a whole. For older men, this is an opportunity to stay connected with their peers, to meet other generations, and to come into contact with other members of the local community, but also to have the chance to stay active, to enjoy and feel satisfaction, and to feel useful and respected. We confirmed that membership and informal learning in VAs has an important role in strengthening the social networks of older people by offering different kinds of social support and by diminishing the exclusion of older people, as well as by strengthening the community and influencing its well-being.

Keywords: Urban and rural municipalities, informal learning, well-being, older men

6.1 Introductory Thoughts on Aging and Older Adult Learning in Slovenia

Slovenia is situated in Central Europe and borders on Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. It has been a member state of the European Union since 2004, and, in 2010, it joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). With its population of 2.05 million, Slovenia has one of the most pronounced aging population rates in Europe due to low birth rates and increasing life expectancy. According to Eurostat’s EUROPOP 2010 population projections,
the next 50 years, the age structure of the population in Slovenia will change significantly. In 2010, older adults (that is, those aged 65 or older) represented 16.5% of the population; by 2060, almost every third person in Slovenia will belong to this age group (Eurostat, 2011). The aging population brings up many questions regarding the availability and accessibility of social care and medical treatment for older people, but, at the same time, also presents questions regarding the possibilities of keeping older people involved as members of society. The data shows that older people are extremely vulnerable to a disadvantaged lifestyle, being at a much higher risk of poverty - one twice as high as that of the general population in Slovenia (Hlebec et al., 2010); in 2011, among all persons classified to be within the at-risk group for poverty in the country, retired persons comprise the largest group, amounting to 32% of those considered (SURS, 2012).

The data on older adult participation in organised education in Slovenia shows that a very small share of older people is involved in organised education. Though offers of education for older adults have improved in the last few decades, participation has not increased and remains at approximately 10% (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec, 2007). The new educational possibilities were predominantly offered by the expanding programs at the University of the Third Age (UTA), the diversified network of study circles, and by inter-generational programs. In our previous research (Jelenc Krašovec and Kump, 2009), we’ve observed that an extremely non-stimulative environment reduces the inclination of adults to learn, but on the other hand, data also show that factors that ensure a more diverse learning environment do not always offer enough incentive for all groups of older adults to learn. Results from our study demonstrate that the more organised and long-term forms of education are primarily attended by women and by older people aged 50 to 65 with higher degrees of education (at least a secondary school and more) (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). The feminisation of education of older adults, as noted in other countries (Findsen, 2005; Formosa, 2012; etc.), is, therefore, also present in Slovenia. Aside from gender and the level of education, the Slovenian older adults’ previous occupations also had an important influence on their willingness to participate in education (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). This is congruent with findings from other research (McGivney, 2001; Sargant, 2000; Withnall, 2006; etc.). We can assume that some groups of older adults, among them men, are marginalised in Slovenia. It is also necessary to develop other educational opportunities for older adults that have root in an experiential basis, problem sets, and practical and informal learning in the community.

Our research shows that, especially in rural areas, there is a lack of providers for the education of older adults, but there are also a considerable number
of interest-oriented voluntary associations, many of which are intergenerational (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). They often attract more men than women, but they are also interesting for the less educated older people who were not active learners in the past. Learning in these community organisations is more action and problem-oriented, being situated and informal, and simultaneously takes place in conjunction with socialising and conversation.

6.2 Rural-Urban Differences in Slovenia

Although much attention has been devoted to the urban-rural relations, some problems in defining the differences between these termini still exists (Wokoun et al., 2010, p. 1883). According to the OECD definition, rural areas (PR, predominantly rural, and IR, intermediately rural) are predominant in most parts of Europe, but they also account for about 75% of the land and almost a quarter of the population in OECD countries (OECD 2006, p. 12).

Among all 12 Slovenian regions, eight can be defined as predominantly rural (PR) and the other four regions are considered intermediately rural (IR). Regarding this definition, Slovenia does not have predominantly urban regions (SURS 2013). The differences of definitions become obvious as we compare the classifications; regarding the classification of Slovenia and data from the last census (2002), the urbanization rate in Slovenia was 50.8% (Pavlin et al. 2004:45). Eurostat’s definition declared only the municipalities of Ljubljana and Maribor to be densely populated areas (or urban); 54 municipalities fall under the category of intermediate rural areas and the remaining 137 municipalities belong to the category of a thinly populated (or rural) area (SURS, 2005). Wokoun et al. note that rural areas can range from prosperous areas near large cities or near major transportation routes to rural areas in inner and outer peripheries with the lowest potential for development (2010, p. 1883).

The main thesis in our research was that voluntary associations (VAs) in the community play an important role in the social gathering and learning of older men. We supposed that older men value learning highly, but that they have different learning needs than women and more often exercise learning activities in less formalized and structured settings (like in VAs). We also presumed that there are some differences between rural and urban communities in Slovenia regarding the availability of learning and socialising possibilities for older men. The purpose of our study was to examine the activities offered by VAs in two selected town quarters (Polje and Bežigrad) in the urban community of Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia, and in two selected rural municipalities (Gorišnica and Vitomarci) in
the northeast of Slovenia. We mapped the possibilities for learning in VAs and performed an in-depth analysis of the opinions of older men about learning and socialising in voluntary associations.

6.3 Methodology

The methodology of our research was based on a successive use of quantitative and qualitative methods (Holland and Campbell, 2005; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). First, we executed a state-of-the-art quantitative survey of VAs in selected quarters in Ljubljana by using an online questionnaire designed to assess the activities available in VAs and the percentage of older men among VA members. In the two rural municipalities we selected, we sent questionnaires to VA headquarters. To provide a more complete description of the observed phenomena, semi-structured interviews and a focus group were used in each of the selected town quarter and rural municipality VAs in which the majority of members were older men. The case studies were ethnographical in character, since they provided a written description of a particular culture based on information collected through fieldwork (Genzuk, 2003, p.1), in our case, namely producing a description of a culture of older men participating and learning in VAs in their local communities.

6.4 Sample

For the purpose of this study, we have chosen four different communities – two urban and two rural. Urban communities Bežigrad and Polje are two different town quarters of the municipality of Ljubljana. Ljubljana is, according to Eurostat’s definition, a densely populated urban area. Bežigrad is located very near the city centre, and can be described as densely populated or as a typically urban community. Polje is located on the outskirts of the city of Ljubljana, and can be described as an intermediate rural region, with the majority of people living in densely populated areas and others living in houses in sparsely populated rural areas with lots of green space. The municipalities of Gorišnica and Vitomarci are located in the northeastern part of Slovenia, which is, according to OECD’s definition, a predominantly rural region and, according to Eurostat’s definition, a thinly populated area. The municipality of Gorišnica can be described as a rural area near a large major transportation route, and the Vitomarci municipality can be classified as a rural area in the inner periphery with the lowest potential for development.

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the town quarters Bežigrad and Polje and of the rural municipalities of Gorišnica and Vitomarci where our research was
conducted. For comparison, the demographic data of Slovenia and the town municipality of Ljubljana are also included.

Table 1: Demographic Data for Slovenia, Ljubljana, and Selected Town Quarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (N)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>65+ (%)</th>
<th>Density (/km²)</th>
<th>Surface (km²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>1,996,433</td>
<td>48,9</td>
<td>51,1</td>
<td>15,0</td>
<td>98,5</td>
<td>20,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
<td>267,563</td>
<td>47,7</td>
<td>52,3</td>
<td>16,3</td>
<td>1,633.5</td>
<td>163,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bežigrad</td>
<td>31,632</td>
<td>45,7</td>
<td>54,3</td>
<td>19,0</td>
<td>4,370.5</td>
<td>7,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polje</td>
<td>17,078</td>
<td>48,4</td>
<td>51,6</td>
<td>14,0</td>
<td>772.6</td>
<td>22,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorišnica</td>
<td>4,032</td>
<td>49,6</td>
<td>51,4</td>
<td>16,5</td>
<td>139,0</td>
<td>29,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitomarci</td>
<td>1,195</td>
<td>50,5</td>
<td>49,5</td>
<td>12,6</td>
<td>66,0</td>
<td>18,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: The Urban Audit Project (2004); SURS (2011).

6.5 Data Collection

The survey was conducted from December 2012 to March 2013. The questionnaire (17 survey questions) was sent to all active VAs in selected communities that had their addresses published in a business directory. The invitations to participate in our survey were sent to a total of 567 VAs (e-mail invitations to 143 VAs and ‘ordinary’ mail invitations to 424 VAs). Two reminders were sent to all VAs who did not respond. All incomplete questionnaires were discarded from the analysis.

Table 2: Survey Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sent</th>
<th>Answered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ljubljana – Bežigrad</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ljubljana – Polje</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorišnica</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitomarci</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaires were sent to 400 VAs with headquarters in the urban quarter of Bežigrad and to 117 VAs in the urban/rural quarter of Polje. We received 58 responses from VAs in Bežigrad and 56 responses from Polje VAs. In rural municipalities, we sent the questionnaires to 37 VAs in Gorišnica and to 13 VAs in Vitomarci, and received 25 responses from VAs in Gorišnica and nine responses from VAs in Vitomarci.
The qualitative research was conducted in five VAs (two in Polje, one in Bežigrad, one in Gorišnica, and one in Vitomarci) which were selected due to the fact that older men comprised the majority of the membership. In Bežigrad, we selected the “Veterans,” a group of men mostly older than 60 (nine men aged 47-72) who practised gymnastics in the Sport Association Sokol Bežigrad, while in Polje we chose the Bowling Club and the Firefighting Brigade. In Gorišnica, we chose the Chess Club and in Vitomarci, the Vine and Fruit Growers’ Association. An interview (with the president) and a focus group with members were carried out in Bežigrad, five interviews (with two presidents and three members of two selected VAs) were conducted in Polje, and two interviews (with the president and one member of the selected VA) were conducted in Gorišnica and in Vitomarci.

We conducted semi-structured interviews and led a focus group that took place in June 2013 in urban communities and in October-November 2013 in rural municipalities. Interviews were conducted individually, and each lasted 30 to 100 minutes; the focus group required 90 minutes. Before starting the interview or focus group, we shared the purpose of the survey with our participants and briefly described the research process. We ensured the participants’ anonymity in order to obtain a certain trust, which was essential to ensuring the quality and veracity of the data. With the participants’ permission, we used a sound-recording device to record our interviews and the content of our focus groups.

6.6 Method of Analysis: Data Processing and Analysis of Material

On the basis of the quantitative data analysis, we constructed frequency tables and cross tables to display results with respect to our research questions, calculating the absolute and relative frequency distributions. The field data obtained and the records of the interviews and the focus group have been transcribed and edited for further processing. The analysis of the content was inductive; it included open coding and creating categories and abstraction. Using the generated categories, we formulated a general description of older men learning in VAs.

6.7 Results

6.7.1 Characteristics of Voluntary Associations in Selected Local Communities

Approximately one fifth of the VAs that answered the questionnaire had a majority (more than 50%) of older adults among their members. In all VAs (regardless of the
share of older adults among members), recreational and sports activities prevail. The dominant interests of VAs were followed in decreasing order by educational activities, environmental protection and animal care, and cultural and artistic activities. Out of the 53 VAs in which the members were mostly older adults, nine responded that their main activity was the development of local communities and housing, nine indicated their emphasis on educational and research activities, eight responded that their main activity was the organisation of recreational and sporting events, seven mentioned environmental protection or animal care, and six brought up cultural or artistic activities.

Approximately one quarter of VAs reported that the amount of men in their association is higher than 50%; among those with a male majority were sports clubs (30), but other concentrations were education (9), health (5), culture (4), social care (4), environmental protection, animal care (4), and other.

Finally, we analysed spheres of content in VAs dominated by older men. Older men were predominant members in 20 VAs (15 VAs in Bežigrad, four VAs in Polje, and one VA in Gorišnica). There is no VA in the rural municipality of Vitomarci, where older men would be the predominant members. For example, in Polje, the bowling club, the cycling club, the association for seniors, and one cultural association consisted of a majority of male members. In Gorišnica, older men comprised the majority of the National Liberation Struggle Association.

Again, most VAs with membership dominated by a majority of older men were associated with sporting or leisure activities (12) and educational activities (9), while a smaller proportion of VAs were involved with intercultural activities (4), environmental protection or animal care (4), and the development of local communities and housing (3).

Most VAs organised activities only for their own members, such as leisure time activities, competitions, field trips, and meetings. A significant proportion of VAs organised non-formal education and learning activities for their members and offered a place for informal socialising and a means of meeting other members. All VAs in the selected communities gave a total of 543 responses about activities their VAs activities for their members.

In all selected communities, there were only a few activities that were intended predominantly for older men (seven in Bežigrad, 11 in Polje, eight in Gorišnica and zero in Vitomarci), including sports and/or recreational activities (competitions, exercises, bowling, cycling, shooting, and marches). In addition, some VAs organised discussion evenings, round tables, computer courses, excursions, outings, meetings, fundraisers, parties, chess, cards, and board games mainly for older men.
6.7.2 Learning Activities in Voluntary Associations

From the data on learning activities organised by VAs in all selected communities (Table 3), we can conclude that only a few VAs did not organise any learning activities (four VAs in Bežigrad, 13 in Polje, four in Gorišnica and only one in Vitomarci). The data in the table are difficult to compare, since this was a multiple response question and VAs from different quarters and municipalities gave a different number of responses. However, in the Bežigrad quarter (an urban community), there were more VAs that organised different learning activities than in the Polje quarter (a mixed urban/rural community). In the rural municipality of Gorišnica (close to the city and transport route), there were more VAs that organised different learning activities than in Vitomarci (at the periphery, with less potential for development). More VAs in Bežigrad than in Polje organised lectures, conversations, discussions, study meetings, and research activities, but there were no differences in both selected urban communities regarding the organisation of workshops, courses, tutorials, and training, the attendance of performances, exhibitions or museums, and also educational trips, excursions, and cooperation with locals. Among both rural municipalities, there were no important differences regarding the learning activities.

Table 3: Learning Activities in VAs by Town Quarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Bežigrad</th>
<th>Polje</th>
<th>Gorišnica</th>
<th>Vitomarci</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures, conversations, and discussions</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings and discussions with experts</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting organisations, associations, firms</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending performances, exhibitions, museum outings, etc.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops, courses, clubs, tutorials, training</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of educational trips, excursions</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study meetings</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research activity</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning activities offered by VAs with a majority of older men among their members are presented in Table 4. According to the data, there was roughly the same number of VAs in both selected quarters that coordinated the following activities: visits to different organisations, workshops, courses, and training, educational trips or excursions, and learning with computers. In rural municipalities, there were not important differences in the offer of learning activities. Only three VAs in urban communities with overwhelmingly male membership (as compared to five VAs in both rural communities) did not organise any learning activities. The data in Table 4 show that the offer of learning activities declines with the degree of urbanity.

Table 4: Learning Activities in Selected Communities (VAs with >50% of Older Men)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Bežigrad</th>
<th>Polje</th>
<th>Gorišnica</th>
<th>Vitomarci</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with printed materials, learning with computers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We do not organise any educational activities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Bežigrad</th>
<th>Polje</th>
<th>Gorišnica and Vitomarci</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lectures, conversations, and discussions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings and discussions with experts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting organisations, associations, firms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending performances, exhibitions, museums, etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops, courses, clubs, tutorials, training</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of educational trips, excursions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation with the local community</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research activity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with printed materials, learning with computers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We do not organise any educational activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.7.3 Opinions of Members of Selected VAs in Urban and Rural Municipalities

Learning and Education

We used the interviews with members of selected VAs to research the opinions of members and presidents about learning and education in their VA. According to the interviewees, the Fire Brigade Association (urban quarter Polje) had a lot of organised education and intentional learning on the subject of firefighting and first aid; they had lectures, courses, practical exercises, and a mentoring program, while the Bowling Club (urban quarter Polje) had no organised educational activities. When the question was posed differently, and we asked if they learned anything while participating in the VAs’ activities and while socialising with other members, the interviewees answered positively. Older members of the Fire Brigade Association learned by talking with each other about the use of the equipment. They also preserved their knowledge and learned through mistakes when they exercised for the competition:

“Yes, you learn a lot of useful things, the majority of things through conversation, reasoning and afterwards practically. Some things come occasionally, we help each other, one shows the other…”

(5th interviewee, 74 years)

...when they exchange their opinions they learn a lot. They talk, half about the fire service and half about different life situations. That’s why this informal gathering is so important….

(2nd interviewee, 31 years – president)

Older men in the Bowling Club learned through competition and by talking about bowling. They did not think of this as learning; however, they talked a lot about the game and kept their brains busy:

“Mostly they learn through sports, share their experiences…”

(4th interviewee, 47 years – president)

While talking with members of the “Veterans” VA (of the urban quarter Bežigrad), one of the members in the focus group said:

“…of course, I personally progress. We learn from each other…”

(member of the focus group, “Veterans”)

Older members in the Gorišnica Chess Club learned through playing chess with each other, trying out computer chess, and even by playing chess on the internet. They also learned through analysing games of chess. Their president’s quote reads as follows:
“So they learn through the computer, or even through the internet... mostly, they learn individually, sometimes in pairs.”

(8th interviewee, 56 years - president)

“We teach the young and we also learn from each other.”

(10th interviewee, 71 years)

In the vine and Fruit Growers’ Association in Vitomarci, older members learn through talking with each other about work in the vineyard and orchard, and they exchange information with each other for example about aerial spraying, cutting vines, and fruit trees. They have also organised different workshops, lectures and meeting with experts every year. Their president states:

“We have at least six educational programmes... I think, they do learn: through exchange of information, experience...”

(7th interviewee, 41 years - president)

**Older Men’s Motives for Enrolment in a Voluntary Association**

When asked about their motives for enrolment, the male members of Vas interviewed in Polje mostly quoted their own interest in the VAs’ activities and also the opportunity to socialise, have fun, develop a sense of belonging, to follow tradition, and to spend their time actively. The proximity of the VA was also stressed as important.

“...because of the fun and interest...”

(1st interviewee, 83 years)

“That’s been handed down from generation to generation ... already because of the joy, so that the man is not rejected. You’re in a club where something is happening...”

(5th interviewee, 74 years)

The interviewed presidents of both selected VAs in Polje stated that people enrol in their VAs for the socialising, because of their own interests, and for the VAs’ activities, the good climate, and to have a sense of usefulness.

“The main reason is definitely socialising. They have their colleagues with whom they spend their time... and helping people: to do something useful with their work.”

(2nd interviewee, 31 years – president)

“...when people talk amongst themselves and see that here is a healthy middle ground, and they like to come... because of good company. Those who like bowling love coming here.”

(4th interviewee, 47 years – president)
The members of “Veterans” and the president of the SA Sokol Bežigrad asserted that the reasons older men participated in the group were very diverse; each member had his own viewpoint. They said:

“…we certainly feel better. It’s a more healthy way of life ... [...] also socialising ... but what some do, to go after every session in the buffet, we don’t do this often...”

(member of the focus group, “Veterans”)

“...how would I say, it gives them satisfaction...they wanted a better figure, but also the company...and it is certainly stimulating that here and there we have a gymnastic show ...”

(6th interviewee, 65 years – president)

Older members in the Gorišnica Chess Club (rural municipality) stressed their own interest as the main reason for participation, but also the opportunity to socialise, have fun, and test their own knowledge or follow tradition.

“…most important is socializing, socialising with chess friends. A secondary factor is that of satisfying their own needs, the needs for improvement in chess...”

(8th interviewee, 54 years – president)

“Playing chess and socialising with friends.”

(10th interviewee, 71 years)

As for the main reasons for being members of the Vine and Fruit Growers’ Association in Vitomarci, their president states:

“I think the most important thing is socializing. Then maybe exchanging information... And also following tradition.”

(7th interviewee, 41 years – president)

Members in VAs in both rural municipalities are also founders of a VA.

Gendered Activities in the VAs

The older men we interviewed from the VAs in Polje thought it was important for men to have segregated activities and to have their own place to gather and learn. This separation provides them with the possibility to socialise and to be active, to discuss and share their opinions and experiences, and to experience better connections and to better their chances of success.

“Yes, so we are able to discuss all things that have to be done in the local community...so that the connectedness is better, so they can socialise and gain better knowledge, and so they can work out...”

“They [men] deal with the arduous work ... so they are able to speak with those people who understand them...”

(1st interviewee, 83 years)
Members of “Veterans” engaged in separate activities, because women practiced at a different kind of gym. Otherwise, they were not very sure that separation was necessary; they often prepared different activities together. They said the following:

“…we (men) do a performance on Women’s Day for our women, and then we chat a bit, depending on an individual’s preferences…”

(member of the focus group “Veterans”)

The presidents of the selected VAs in urban communities had a similar opinion about the importance of segregated activities for older men. They stressed the possibility of sharing their opinions, of leaving the house, of relaxing and being at ease, and of having have some ‘male’ privacy.

“…that is important. So they have some kind of joy, to have the possibility to share their opinions, to talk to each other, to teach something to the youth. I think it is very important to have a space to socialise…In fact, they come to breathe in another environment…”

(2nd interviewee, 31 years – president)

Members of VAs in both rural municipalities have similar opinion about the traditional roles of men and women. They think that VAs are intended for men, but that women are interested in different things.

“Vine is more the domain of men.”

(9th interviewee, 76 years)

“Women, women, have family stuff.”

(10th interviewee, 71 years)

Quality of Life and Well-Being of Members and the Local Community as a Whole

All interviewees experienced a positive sense of inclusion in VAs; they can stay connected with the VA’s activities and with the people from their local community and neighbouring communities. Membership gives them the opportunity to stay active, to socialise, to make plans, and to influence the local community as a whole. They say that they take better care of their health, because membership in a VA not only give them joy and the possibility to experience success, but also allows them to pass on their knowledge and build connections with other generations. In their opinion, VAs organise events in the local community and give the people of the community the opportunity to meet and stay connected through social events, which VAs organise on annually.

When asked how they felt about their inclusion in the VAs and the VAs’ contribution to the local community, they responded as follows:
“I am very happy. They take me into account, and I am very popular when I come to the fire brigade among members of all generations. They visit me; we have field trips and social events where a lot of people come together. The locals are very connected… it [the VA] cooperates with the neighbouring association as well….”

(1st interviewee, 83 years)

“…at this age I am still active, bound to my profession and that is what helps me to train my brain… though it is sometimes unpleasant or I am lazy […] it is necessary to look after your health. Also in such a healthy, sociable way.”

(9th interviewee, 76 years)

The interviewed presidents of the selected VAs all saw the positive psychosocial effects of membership for older adults and their quality of life:

“I think a sort of confidence that they help the local community… In fact a memory of their youth, and so they can feel useful, so they can come and talk, and that we listen to their opinion and we thank them so they know they are still useful and that we respect their work. Again, this is this informal gathering where they find out what is going on in the local community…”

(2nd interviewee, 31 years – president)

“Our performances are of great value for our VAs, because they are a good way of promoting ourselves. Our local community finally noticed us. We had performances and caught their attention…”

(6th interviewee, 65 years – president)

“…tradition. This has important meaning… We keep our heritage. That means a lot to them.”

(7th interviewee, 41 – president)

One of the presidents was still concerned about cooperation with the local community:

“…the real question is how to unite all these people? Urban communities are too big … how to connect neighbours, how to help each other?”

(6th interviewee, 65 years – president)

When asked what kind of social and learning activities VAs provided for older men, members quoted different activities that also had an educational character:

“On Fridays, for example, we have cultural-social evenings here in the club. Once a year, we have a very good training program for our guides, for several hours, various lectures. Such a thing is valuable…”

(Focus group, “Veterans”)
“For older men ... the competitions, there is a discipline for senior firefighters... on Thursdays, we carry out various activities and exercises, we wash cars and take care of the equipment... One thing that especially the senior members are working on is also the old-timer vehicle and the elderly take care of it”

(2nd interviewee, 31 years – president)

The president of Sokol Bežigrad still believes that they should do more in the area of learning, culture and education, despite the fact that they are a sports club.

“We have a variety of picnics and excursions, in addition to regular exercises, and we are trying to introduce culture. It seems to be missing. In the past, in the old Yugoslavia, an educational worker was employed in the club. I miss that, because if one is leading everything from behind, then the sports guides also feel different; they know that there is a certain wisdom guiding everything, more or less correctly…”

(6th interviewee, 65 years – president)

6.8 Conclusions

Voluntary associations (VAs) are important anchors in the community and in the neighbourhood, since they provide mechanisms for self-help and for a better quality of living of their members; they connect people with similar interests and often provide possibilities for collective action (MacKean and Abbott-Chapman, 2012). Our research findings show that there are only a few VAs in selected communities with a dominant share of older adults, and among these, even fewer VAs can claim older men as representing the majority of their membership. Most of the VAs organise activities only for their own members, so being a member of an association in a community might be an important factor for being active, socialising, and learning. Although some VAs organise educational or learning activities and others do not, informal and unintentional learning occurred in all VAs through activities, gatherings, socialising, and conversations among their members. Older men in selected VAs more often had social than cognitive motives; they appreciate being a part of the community, which is an important mission of most VAs. Older men appreciated activities with an emphasis on sports and free time. There were also some differences in motives of older men for participation in VAs. While men in rural communities – apart from their own interests – highlighted tradition as one of the important motives for participating in VAs, men in urban communities stressed the importance of having the opportunity to perform. Tradition is obviously more valued in rural areas.
Our findings demonstrate some differences in the provision of learning activities in different communities, as did previous research in different neighbourhoods in Slovenia (Jelenc Krašovec and Kump 2009). Our study has shown that the number of VAs in a community correlates with the degree of urbanity, the result of many different factors, but, more importantly, the number of learning activities varies according to the degree of urbanity, i.e., there are fewer learning activities available in rural areas. Previous studies in Slovenia have shown that older people enrol in educational organisations and in numerous VAs, but those who would like to participate can be excluded from social activities both in rural and urban environments if services and activities are not close enough to and do not respond to the needs of learners (Kump and Jelenc Krašovec, 2014).

Interviewees from VAs all emphasized the importance of socialising among members, which is easier if members have a space for informal gatherings where they can socialise, talk, exchange opinions, and engage in other leisure time activities. Veronica McGivney drew attention to the impact of learning locations (1999). Her research (1999, p. 25) showed that community education was especially successful in the following situations: when the education is performed in informal spaces of the community, if it is free of charge or very inexpensive, when it is a response to the needs of learners (especially socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged older adults), and when it is accompanied by a number of supporting activities (information sessions and counselling, financial aid, transportation provision, etc.) to diminish as many obstacles for learners as possible.

Our research also stressed the positive influence of membership and informal learning in VAs, which resulted in a better quality of life and improved well-being of members and the local community as a whole. Membership in a VA not only provided the older men interviewed the opportunity to stay connected with their peers, to meet with people of other generations, and to come into contact with other members of the local community, but also the chance to stay active, to enjoy life and feel satisfaction, and to feel useful and respected. In the men’s opinion, all of these factors contributed to their quality of life, well-being, and longevity. We confirmed that membership and informal learning in VAs plays an important role in strengthening the social networks of older people by offering different kinds of social support and by diminishing the exclusion of older people (see also Jelenc Krašovec and Kump, 2009; Uhlenberg and de Jong Gierveld, 2004), as well as by strengthening the community and influencing its well-being (Field, 2009; Golding, 2011). Other research has demonstrated that the neighbourhood has several functions, particularly that of “relaxation and re-creation of the self, making
connections with others, fostering attachment and belonging and demonstrating or reflecting one’s own values” (Kerns and Parkinson, 2001, p. 2105). According to Kilgore, the individualistic components (identity, the feeling of being a part of something, consciousness) and the collective development components (collective identity, collective consciousness, solidarity, and organisation) have to be seen as a dialectic entity (1999, p. 192).

Finally, some limitations of our study should be addressed. Quantitative and especially qualitative data presented in this article were very limited, so generalizations about other VAs were not possible. In addition, this research provided only a general insight into the main problems; further in-depth research focused on the needs and possibilities of older men’s learning in VAs and other community organisations in different municipalities is still needed.

References


7 Discussion and Conclusion

António Fragoso and Marvin Formosa

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 learning 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 qualitative 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 it 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. Whenever 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 dominos 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.

References


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