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OLDER MEN LEARNING THROUGH RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS: CASE STUDIES FROM MALTA

ABSTRACT

This article examines two case studies from Malta that focus on older men learning through informal channels. The first case study 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 an avenue for informal learning activities for older men. The second case study investigated the connection between affiliation in the Labour Party Veterans' branch of the Labour Party (Malta) and informal learning. The case studies were carried out by employing a qualitative-methodological framework whereby data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The intent was to reveal the perceived interests and expectations regarding what would be considered a satisfying lifestyle in the context of membership of older men in both organisations. Findings reveal the benefits that older men enjoy through participation in such organisations, including increased levels of independence, improved social participation, and positive effects on participants' self-esteem and personal confidence. Informants report that membership also contributed to their mental and physical health and to increased activity. Many underlined how participation aided them in escaping boredom and keeping in touch with the outside world. Findings also reveal that only a few informants were simultaneously involved in organisations and activities not related to their religious and political affiliations, which highlights the importance of both informal learning channels in helping older men lead successful and active lives.

Keywords: *religious confraternity, political membership, older men, informal learning, social engagement, active ageing, self-esteem*

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STAREJŠI MOŠKI IN UČENJE SKOZI VERSKO IN POLITIČNO PRIPADNOST: ŠTUDIJI PRIMERA Z MALTE – POVZETEK

Članek temelji na dveh študijah primera z Malte, ki se osredotočata na starejše moške in njihovo učenje po neformalni poti. Prva je analizirala vlogo neprofitne lokalne organizacije – religiozne bratovščine, posvečene Naši Gospe Brezmadežnega spočetja, v vasi Mqabba kot okvira, v katerem poteka neformalno učenje za moške v zrelih letih. Druga je raziskala povezavo med članstvom v veteranski veji malteške delavske stranke in neformalnim učenjem. Študiji temeljita na kvalitativnem metodološkem pristopu, pri katerem so bili podatki pridobljeni na podlagi delno strukturiranih intervjujev. Namen je bil ugotoviti, kakšni so interesi in pričakovanja glede zadovoljivega življenjskega sloga, ki jih imajo starejši moških v okviru svojega članstva v obeh organizacijah. Ugotovitve razkrivajo, da so med koristmi, ki so jih ti moški deležni ob sodelovanju v takšnih organizacijah, med drugim zvišanje stopnje neodvisnosti, večje družbeno udejstvovanje, bolj pozitivna samopodoba in večja samozavest. Intervjuvanci poročajo tudi o tem, da je članstvo pripomoglo k izboljšanju njihovega psihičnega in fizičnega stanja ter povečani aktivnosti. Mnogi so poudarili, da so se po tej poti izognili dolgočasju in ohranili stik s svetom. Ugotovitve dodatno razkrivajo, da je bilo le nekaj intervjuvancev hkrati udeleženih v drugih organizacijah in dejavnostih, ki niso bile povezane z njihovo versko in politično pripadnostjo, kar nadalje osvetljuje pomen obeh neformalnih kanalov učenja pri prizadevanjih, da bi starejši moški živeli uspešno in aktivno življenje.

Ključne besede: *religiozna bratovščina, politična pripadnost, starejši moški, neformalno učenje, družbeno udejstvovanje, samopodoba*

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on those aspects of older men's educational pursuits that are neither formal nor non-formal. In the scenario of informal learning, the learner is usually a self-starter who may have assistance from a helper or a non-human resource. Langenbach (1988), for instance, refers to books, audio-tapes, television, radio, exhibitions, and computers. Tough's (1971) pioneering work on learning projects contrasts with many other programme development models, which have not placed the learner at the centre of the learning process. Indeed, Tough's projects represented a shift from more rigid formulations of curriculum development and promoted the significant potential of adults, including older citizens, in being responsible for their own continued education, especially when motivated by purposes that they themselves have identified rather than by goals selected for them by a professional or an organisation (ibid.). With regard to programme development, informal learning is generally 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 the dilemma of 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 of an individual being recognised as self-directed (akin to the traditional 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 in the context of advanced adulthood. Findsen and Formosa (2011, p. 148) also add the following query: "Is there a greater propensity for self-directedness in learning in later life?" In consideration of this last query, and, applying a notion of self-directed learning to later life, Laslett (1989) described the presumed greater autonomy and increased opportunity to locate one's "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 and their informal learning in two distinct and separate informal avenues. This strand of research is highly warranted considering that the learning needs of older men are far from being well served by contemporary adult education, and one finds little indication to suggest that governments and communities are contributing to this area. As Mark and Soulsby (2014, pp. 144-145) point out, "[t]here is little evidence of a sense of understanding, awareness, or recognition of the needs of disengaged older men and there would not seem to be any political will to take up the issue." Quite the contrary: the volatile employment situation in contemporary Europe is putting pressure on governments to enhance the employability of the older workforce. Consequently, there is no doubt that the need to develop policy and practice based on rigorously informed research on older men and learning constitutes an urgent and imminent challenge.

In an effort to contribute to such research and policy agenda, this article includes five sections, excluding the introductory and concluding segments. Following this overview, the second section provides a brief overview of the empirical universe and informal elder-learning in Malta. While the third section describes the key methods of inquiry involved in data collection and analysis in the case studies, the fourth section presents the findings and discussions emerging from the two case studies, focusing on older men's learning in a religious confraternity and through political party activism. The fifth section interprets the emergent data by highlighting both the benefits and constraints resulting from participation in informal avenues of older adult learning.

BACKGROUND

The Maltese archipelago is made up of three islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino. It is located in the Mediterranean Sea, with Sicily lying 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, that 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 km , 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 for at the top (Formosa, 2013a). While in 1985 the percentage of citizens

aged 60 or older measured 14.3%, in 2011 this figure reached 18.3%. This occurred as the birth rate declined to 1.3 per family, while life expectancy at birth for men/women increased from 70.8/76.0 years in 1985 to 79.2/83.6 years in 2011. Projections estimate that, in the year 2025, the percentage of older persons aged 60 and over will rise to 26.5%.

As in other international settings, informal learning in Malta 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 (2009) 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. 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 near future. Citing older persons themselves,

> 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, 2010, p. 74).

Volunteering is another important course of informal learning. The National Statistics Office (2013) reported that in 2013 the number of volunteers aged 12 and over and living in private households was 29,830. More than half of the total number of volunteers – 14,930 or 50.1% – were aged 50 years and over. Volunteers aged 65 or older amounted to 6,100 persons, or 20.5% of the total number of volunteers. In 2012, persons aged 65 or older performed an average of 22 hours of volunteer work in a typical month, which amounts to 28 hours for all retirees. The potential of hobbies as a source of informal learning is also not to be underestimated. Popular pastimes amongst older adults include reading, gardening, sewing/ knitting, travel, home decoration, crafts/collectibles, arts/crafts, singing/acting/dancing, spending time online, playing a musical instrument, model-building, and photography – in that respective order (The National Statistics Office, 2009). As far as book-reading is concerned, it is disappointing that the National Public Library holds no data on the ages of members and operates within an absence of official guidelines focusing on age-friendly strategies for increasing library use among older persons. Finally, although persons aged 55 or older use computers and internet technology the least, the rate at which they are achieving computer literacy and connecting to the internet surpasses that of their middle-aged cohorts (Formosa, 2013b). This is a strong indicator that higher percentages of older persons are engaging in learning through unstructured forays over the internet.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The implementation of case studies originated both from the author's awareness of the lack of research on informal avenues of older men learning, as well as from the author's participation in a four-nation (Estonia, Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia) EU-funded partnership titled "Older Men as Active Learners in the Community." The case studies adopted a qualitative research methodology in order to investigate older men's participation in informal learning avenues. Qualitative methodology "[...] is concerned with how ordinary people manage their practical affairs in everyday life, or how they get things done," constituting a "[...] systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds," (Neuman, 2002, p. 71).

The key rationale underlying the choice of a qualitative methodological standpoint was to give older men a voice in regards to their "social engagement" experience through their affiliation in religious and political organisations. To this effect, data collection was conducted by means of semi-structured interviews, and also via researcher observation of group activities and research notes, with the purpose of achieving triangulation. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is normally required to ask specific, open-ended questions, but is free to probe beyond them if necessary with the interview developing as a joint product of what the interviewees and interviewers talk about with each other. Therefore, semi-structured interviews have the advantages of both standardised and non-standardised interviews, such as flexibility, control over the interview situation, and collection of supplementary information (Neuman, 2002). Informants for the semi-structured interviews were selected through the process of non-probability sampling, which, although making no claim of being representative, is a common strategy in exploratory research. The case studies presented here opted for two types of non-probability sampling – namely, purposive sampling and snowball sampling:

> In [purposive sampling], the researchers purposively choose subjects who, in their opinion, are thought to be relevant to the research topic. In this case, the judgement of the investigator is more important than obtaining a probability sample....In [snowball sampling], researchers begin the research with the few respondents who are available to them. They subsequently ask these respondents to recommend any other persons who meet the criteria for research and who might be willing to participate in the project (Sarantakos, 1993, p. 138, 139).

Throughout the data collection process, concerted efforts were made to elicit information about older men's views and perceptions of their participation in both organisations. This strategy was followed in order to situate their personal perspectives in a biographical narrative. Moreover, to strengthen the study's levels of validity, the authors attended events organised by both the religious and political organisations that ranged from social activities to committee meetings. All interviews were held in the meeting place of the group

and lasted at least an hour, with informants welcoming the opportunity to share their experience about their membership within the confraternity and political organisations. The interviews sought to investigate the members' age, status, educational background, reasons for joining the confraternity, length of membership, and expectations. Dialogues were digitally recorded and consequently transcribed. The privacy and confidentiality of respondents was respected at all times, so that informants remain anonymous and unidentifiable throughout this article. Data was analysed following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded-theory approach, which advises assigning codes, annotations, and memos to data arising from observations, conversations, and interviews.

CASE STUDIES

Religious Affiliations

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. In Malta, there are various confraternities in every village. Though both women and men can join, most members are male, and notably, only men are allowed to take part in the processions. The confraternity chosen as a case study is the one dedicated to "Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception" of the village of Mqabba, led by the rector, who is responsible for all administration and activities. The confraternity's most important events include the annual organisation of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on the eighth of December and the feast in honour of "Our Lady of Lilies" held on the 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 the titular feast of the "Assumption" in August. 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 confraternity includes 60 members, all men, 75% of which are 55 or older. Members usually joined the confraternity in their youth, once they had turned 18. Informants agreed that the reason they had joined the confraternity was because of a tradition in their families that stated that men usually joined a confraternity and because of the devotion towards "Our Lady of Immaculate Conception." Along the same lines, most informants also stated that "all [of] my friends joined, so I did too…to be with them." Although "learning" was an evident goal of the confraternity, spontaneous comments about learning novel knowledge and skills emerged in a consistent manner throughout the interviews. Findings demonstrated that many respondents perceived "learning new things" as one of the satisfactions they gained from their involvement in the confraternity. Most particularly mentioned 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, members of the confraternity knew the timing of when 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 performed, from spiritual gatherings to social functions, 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. In the words of one informant:

> 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 organise 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 a doubt, this is in line with literature review findings that describe the benefits of belonging to a group in the community, which results in the enjoyment of being with like-minded people (Wenger, McDermott, and Synder, 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 although 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 clearly present themselves. There are a multitude of social benefits derived from belonging to a community-based organisation and through the participation in leisure activities. In this case study, learning was found to be an important component. Livingstone (2000) had described "informal learning" as an iceberg, mostly invisible at the surface and immense in its mostly submerged informal aspects. Informal learning may not even be recognised by the individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills (Longworth, 2003). This study gives a transparent example of these definitions. Other benefits demonstrated were those of positive effects on one's well-being, as well as an ability to maintain self-esteem, independence, and social engagement. This is in line with the literature review (MacKean, and Abbot-Chapman, 2011). Moreover, the findings from the confraternity also resulted 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.

Political Affiliations

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 running the party at one level or another. One of the most active branches of the party is the *G aqda 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 of the activities organised by the branch.

The LPV was founded in 1988, following an electoral defeat of the LP. Active older members of the party felt that they had to contribute to the party to bring about change within it. The current LPV committee includes 22 members – 20 of whom are older men – who hail from different educational backgrounds. All of the members are assigned different roles that 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 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 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, social and cultural outings are included, as well as seminars held both at a party level and on a national level. The LVP also provides training to its members for 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, most notably, general 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, regardless 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.

The information obtained from the case study was consistent with the question of why older men would be willing to participate in activities at the community level organised

by the political party with which they are affiliated. 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 help them escape boredom and also to keep in touch with the outside world. One inform-ant explained that since he is the main caretaker for his less active and less healthy wife, the activity serves as a respite for him from his caring role. A 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 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, few stated that they at-tended any other activities or were involved in any other organisations that were not relat-ed 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, most participants stated that they would attend any activity organised by the LPV, while few stated that they only enjoyed attend-ing the dancing and social gatherings such as the one they were attending that day.

There is no doubt that older adult males' participation in the community is closely related to the mental, physical, and social well-being of the individual. Indeed, membership in this political affiliation was perceived as functioning to improve the quality of life in old age:

> Getting here and helping out, or even simply attending committee sessions, gives you a boost in that you are active, you move your body, and you use your mental faculties. Very few are here because they are political animals. The ma-jority join and attend functions because they know it's beneficial to them. Re-tirement can be a big blow to you, even resulting in experiencing mood swings and depression. Joining clubs is a good remedy to all this.

From this case study, the data provided sufficient evidence that older men attend dif-ferent activities that they enjoy mainly for social interaction and to keep themselves in-volved in their communities. 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. Moreover, 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 the group with which they are affiliated. The more the activities and opportunities for learning within such activities appeal to their social needs, the more older adult men become interested in attending and participating ac-tively. 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, informants did not fear or shy away from new experiences, but tended to become very engaged in such activities and were willing to be involved.

DISCUSSION

The case studies confirm Golding and colleagues' (Golding, Mark, and Foley, 2014a, 2014b) argument that empowering men with a desire and opportunities to learn and contribute to the community during the course of life, especially beyond paid work, is clearly beneficial to their quality of life, with direct benefits to the wider social fabric. In parallel to a recent study on older men learning in Ireland (Carragher, Evoy, and Mark, 2014), the findings reveal that many of the older men were experiencing an awakening to the benefits of learning, especially in regards to history and heritage. During field research, it was evident that both religious and political affiliations provide ideal contexts that have the capacity to address disadvantages, especially agism and exclusion, stress, and lack of self-esteem and -confidence. This became evident because it was established that informants enrolled in religious and political affiliations for a host of social reasons, such as having something to do in their spare time, asserting their masculinity in the facing of growing older and mandatory retirement, having a social outlet, developing a sense of belonging and for comradeship. Through participating actively in the confraternity and political party, older men developed a firmer sense of control, personal discipline, and most principally, purpose, hope, and achievement. Both case studies also demonstrate clearly that enjoyment, belonging, friendship, and mental stimulation are highly valued aspects of informal learning for older me. Indeed, through such informal learning environments, older men were practicing varied aspects of lifelong and lifewide learning, which were certainly having a positive impact on their health and well-being. As Carragher and colleagues highlight:

> 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 practice and develop their masculine identities, improve skills, socialise, support and mentor one another, interact in groups, and seek further help when needed. (Carragher et al., 2014, p. 159).

It is especially notable that both case studies run counter to customary accounts in the sociology of older adult learning, which highlight how such learning is usually the prerogative of the bourgeoisie. Rather, the case studies confirm Golding and colleagues' (Golding et al., 2014) conclusion that men of all ages who stand to benefit most from lifelong and lifewide learning are those least likely to access it, particularly if it is presented and packaged in a way that is different from deficit models of learning. Indeed,

> …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… to be served up [as] curriculum and assessment for qualifications, vocational training or literacy… (Golding et al., 2014b, p. 256).

In short, as Mark and colleagues (Mark, Montgomery, and Graham, 2010) found in their study on older men's learning and well-being in Northern Ireland, both case studies highlight how community-based organisations provide unique and powerful contexts in which older men can express themselves in ways that are not available to them elsewhere in their everyday lives. Through their religious and political affiliations, older men were successful in developing their masculine identities, improving skills, socialising, supporting and mentoring one another, and interacting in groups. Indeed, within these organisations, older men have found a place where they can aspire to leadership among their peers, which provided a strong sense of empowerment and achievement, taking pride in the valuable influence they can have on others in their community by assuming a role of significance.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated the diversity of informal learning by, for, and with older men beyond the customary and formal educational provisions. In informal learning conditions, older men tend to move away from the mechanisms of expert-devised curricula, overt professionalism, credentialism, and imposed assessment to freer expression, sometimes pursuing learning 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. Drawing on the two case studies reviewed herein, this article has demonstrated how older men learning occurs in avenues that are not customarily thought to be educational contexts, resulting in clear benefits for older men themselves and the wider society. Principally, as Marks (2000) underlines, informal avenues for older men learning can address the World Health Organisation's "social determinants of health" (Wilkinson and Marmott, 2003), while also serving to save men's lives, regardless of their position in the course of life:

> This is not wild hyperbole: if these men can find something that expands their intellectual horizons, draws them out of the narrow confines of their own lives, and shows them that there is more to life, they will have gained a reason to live … If health practitioners are similarly committed and can offer support to the lifelong learning community, then we may be able to stop the rot of misplaced masculinity and save at least one generation of men from themselves (Marks, 2000, p. 13).

While both case studies have advanced the knowledge available on older men learning in community contexts, there is no doubt that much more research is still needed in order to identify the relations between informal leaning and men's subjective well-being. We are sure that this special issue augurs a positive step in the right direction.

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