

Tiina Tambaum, Felika Tuul, Reeli Sirotkina

WHAT IS MISSING – OLDER MALE LEARNERS OR A COMMUNITY STRATEGY?

ABSTRACT

Older men's participation in learning initiatives is low in Estonia (SHARE, 2015). The national plans for active ageing (Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023, 2016) indicate that activities related to inclusion and development are vital to improving older individuals' quality of life in the context of the 'longevity revolution'. There is little discussion about the ways in which older people themselves affect the success of these plans, and about the potential roles and opportunities for all members of the community to foster the inclusion of older people. Two qualitative studies conducted in Estonia in 2012 and 2017 expand upon the involvement of older men in different contexts. A content and thematic analysis revealed latent factors that may hinder older men's learning, such as loneliness, expectations about masculinity inherited from the cultural background, a restrictive domestic comfort zone, and a lack of demand for older men's experience. The main finding from the analysis is that older rural men in Estonia do not feel responsible for their own social health. As older men's personal initiative to create their own learning opportunities tends to be low, the community needs to provide more support for the reduction of men's indirect barriers.

Keywords: *older men's learning, barriers to learning, informal learning, rural area, Estonia*

KAJ MANJKA – STAREJŠI MOŠKI UDELEŽENCI ALI STRATEGIJA SKUPNOSTI? – POVZETEK

V Estoniji je udeležba starejših moških v učnih pobudah nizka (SHARE, 2015). Nacionalni načrti za aktivno staranje (Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023, 2016) kažejo, da so aktivnosti, povezane z vključevanjem in razvojem, ključnega pomena za izboljšanje kakovosti življenja starejših posameznikov v okviru tako imenovane revolucije dolgoživosti. Malo pa je govora o tem, kako starejši ljudje sami vplivajo na uspeh tovrstnih načrtov, ter o potencialnih vlogah in priložnostih vseh članov skupnosti pri spodbujanju vključevanja starejših ljudi. V Estoniji sta bili izvedeni dve kvalitativni raziskavi, prva leta 2012 in druga leta 2017, o vključevanju starejših moških v različnih okvirih. Vsebinska in tematska analiza je razkrila

Tiina Tambaum, MA, Estonian Institute for Population Studies at Tallinn University, tiina.tambaum@tlu.ee

Felika Tuul, MA, Centre for Applied Social Sciences at University of Tartu, felika.tuul@ut.ee

Reeli Sirotkina, MA, School of Governance, Law and Society at Tallinn University, reeli.sirotkina@ut.ee

prikrite dejavnike, ki lahko ovirajo učenje starejših moških, na primer osamljenost, ideje o moškosti, ki izhajajo iz kulturnega ozadja, omejevalno domače območje udobja in pomanjkanje povpraševanja po izkušnjah starejših moških. Glavne ugotovitve analize so pokazale, da se v Estoniji starejši moški s podežlja ne čutijo odgovorne za svoje družbeno zdravje. Samopobuda, da bi ustvarili svoje lastne priložnosti za učenje, je pri starejših moških običajno nizka, zato mora biti skupnost tista, ki zagotavlja več podpore za zmanjšanje posrednih ovir na poti do učenja.

Ključne besede: *učenje starejših moških, ovire pri učenju, priložnostno učenje, podeželsko območje, Estonija*

INTRODUCTION

For the first time in human history societies are facing the phenomenon of population ageing, and we need to be prepared for the 'longevity revolution' (ILC-Brazil, 2015). Over the past 50 years, life expectancy at birth has increased by about 10 years for both men and women in the EU28. In Estonia, life expectancy at the age of 65 is 18.7 years on average (20.8 for women, 15.6 for men) (Eurostat, 2017). Eighteen years is equal to the period in which a newborn grows up and becomes an adult. Do we expect a kind of growth among older adults in the same length of time?

According to a socio-cultural approach to learning, social relationships are important, and knowledge is generated between two or more persons (Schunk, 2012). Learning will always take place in a social context; knowledge is socially constructed and based on experience (Elkjær, 2009). Withnall (2010) asserts that adult education and community learning for men is always contextual, with bottom-up as well as top-down features, and that it is relationship-based and contextual rather than individual, cognitive and behavioural. Based on studies of older men's learning, Golding, Mark and Foley (2014) conclude that the most effective learning method for a large proportion of men who have little prior formal education is informal, local and community-based.

The links between learning and well-being constitute the basis of active ageing strategies. Despite the fact that the definition of active ageing includes continuing participation in economic as well as social, cultural, spiritual, and civic affairs (WHO, 2001, p. 12), the existing policies pertaining to active ageing still focus primarily on employment (Foster & Walker, 2013). Furthermore, educational policy-makers tend to view education, particularly for adults, primarily in terms of increasing vocational skills and knowledge (Field, 2009; McNair, 2015). In Estonia, The Estonian Active Ageing Development Plan 2013–2020 was adopted as a response to the theme of the Year 2012, but the document lacked a means of implementation. It was integrated into the Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023, and contained no element of learning for non-professional purposes. The focus on vocational skills and knowledge in adult education is also clearly identifiable in the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (HTM, 2014), which, while defining everyone as a learner, contains learning objectives only for adults up to the age of 64 (i.e.

around retirement age). A solitary measure for ITC skills is targeted to the population up to the age of 74.

Important considerations for educational and developmental activities for older people in Estonia can be found in the Social Welfare Act (2015), which defines the social services the state must provide based on need. The latter includes services to support independent coping and development strategies. Local governments are obliged to promote the creation, maintenance, and development of social relations, provide guidance on time management and the use of spare time, and develop general and personal skills by involvement in appropriate activities. However, these services are not extended to older people because of the requirement for a letter of referral. In the case of persons with disabilities, initiative or referral is presumed. However, if a retiree expresses interest in remedying deficiencies in knowledge, skills, or social relations, a lack of physical or mental diagnoses impedes an official response.

In addition to the narrow focus of existing policies on active ageing and the expectation of personal initiative, it is evident that EU Member States still lack a coherent and integrated approach, as well as a clear understanding of the gender implications of active ageing strategies (Foster & Walker, 2013). Retirement is experienced very differently by men and women: women tend to continue to live under their current conditions and to maintain their activities, but men more frequently exhibit a pattern of discontinuous retirement (Phillipson, 1998, cited in Findsen, 2006, p. 175; Arber & Ginn, 1995). Different tools and techniques are therefore required for promoting an active lifestyle in older age.

The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) of the European population aged 50 and older, in which Estonia has been included since 2011, provides an overview of engagement in non-formal and informal learning activities, such as attending educational or training courses and participating in clubs in the past 12 months. Taking courses is somewhat exceptional for older people. In Estonia 5% of men and 5% of women aged 65 and older took courses in 2015; 13% of men and 16% of women participated in clubs, which is a form of non-formal or informal learning (SHARE 2015, data base). The figures for Estonia are below the SHARE average. Older individuals who are not employed are less engaged in self-development than those who are employed, which contributes to the social exclusion of the population aged 65 and older (Myck, Najsztab, & Oczkowska, 2015). In Estonia the share of computer users is smaller among older men than among older women. In the 50–64 age group, the percentages of computer users were M 57.3% and W 70.9% (Statistics Estonia, 2016); in the 65–74 age group, they were M 32% and W 32%; and in the 75+ age group, they were M 13% and W 6% (SHARE 2013, data base).

THE PROBLEM

The reasons why someone does not participate in community-based learning endeavours are difficult to explore. Studies have shown that it is easier to reach people who are already

involved in similar activities (e.g. the study in Northern Ireland conducted by Mark, Montgomery and Graham 2010), and in Slovenia by Jelenc Krašovec and Kump (2014)).

One possible obstacle between older men and non-formal learning is the lack of previous (positive) learning experiences (Formosa, Frago, Jelenc Krašovec, & Tambaum, 2014; Golding, 2011), and in some cases, men appeared to define themselves as 'non-learners' as a way of expressing their independence and masculinity (Field, 2006, p. 136). At the same time better education is one of the factors associated with the probability of living longer (Jürges, 2009; Leopold & Engelhardt, 2013). For example, in Estonia there is little difference in the level of education between men and women aged 65 and older (Statistics Estonia, 2017): 60% of the men have at least an upper secondary education compared to 62% of the women, and 35% of the men have a higher level education compared to 34% of the women. Therefore, the common argument that men define themselves as 'non-learners' may not always be applicable when it comes to older people.

There is also no basis to the claim that men are generally less engaged in learning than women. The results of surveys conducted in Canada indicate an 'iceberg' effect on older men's learning – men are accustomed to being engaged in informal learning while working, and in retirement they continue to develop their skills and knowledge through housework (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006). The 1998 NALL (New Approaches to Lifelong Learning) and 2004 WALL surveys showed that the vast majority (80 per cent) of those who were engaged in housework, volunteer work and general interest activities were involved in some type of related informal learning. In 2004 the proportion of men involved in informal learning through housework, volunteer work or general interest activities was slightly higher than the respective proportion of women (ibid.). Studies in Australia and Ireland (in 2008 and 2009) also confirm that informal learning is particularly valuable for men who are no longer employed (Mark & Golding, 2012).

As pointed out above, social relationships are important for learning (Schunk, 2012). Loneliness as the lack of meaningful social contacts is perceived as subjective feeling (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) and may occur after retirement. Coping with loneliness is connected on the one hand with social stereotypes and on the other with the possibility to participate in the community. As a loner you are stigmatised, and masculinity can be a barrier to overcoming loneliness:

According to definitions of hegemonic masculinity, not only should men display the aforementioned traits (independence, competitiveness, assertiveness, emotional detachment and physical competence), they should also reject social closeness, outward display of emotion and vulnerability – traits associated with femininity. Among older men, there are several factors that can threaten the maintenance of a masculine identity, including poor health, decreased mobility, increased reliance on others, and seeking traditional health-care services and community-based services for help with loneliness and social isolation. (Reynolds, Mackenzie, Medved, & Roger, 2015, p. 533)

Formosa (2014) states that the reasons underlying men's less frequent participation in non-formal learning activities is their content and the manner in which they are advertised. Studies conducted at Australian Universities of the Third Age reveal that older men's and women's interests are different, i.e., they like to do different things (Williamson, 2000 in Russell, 2007; Hooyman & Kiyak, 2002 in Mehrotra, Wagner, & Fried, 2009). At the same time the empirical and theoretical works on reducing the obstacles to older people's learning and development are often based on the assumption that such individuals are generally open to suitable learning opportunities. The assumption of immanent motivation on the part of older men – that they are waiting for proper offerings and suitable types of learning opportunities – could be faulty (Tambaum & Kuusk, 2014; Canning, 2011).

The research question is how to support the social relationships of older men and what kind of possibilities there are to empower older men to participate in community-based learning.

METHOD

The first qualitative study was carried out among older men in the rural municipality of Tartu, Estonia in 2013. The initial information on male pensioners was provided by the municipal government, after which the interviewer contacted the men by telephone. During the interviews the men recommended other interviewees, the circle of which also expanded thanks to the municipality's residents, including recommendations from the leaders of local activities.

The data were gathered via semi-structured interviews to determine the indicators of the men's desire, motivation and organisational expectations regarding their readiness to be involved in social interaction and community undertakings, including learning activities and knowledge sharing. A total of 31 men were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews lasted 1–1.5 hours. The inductive content analysis method (Franzosi, 2008) was used to analyse the interviews. The men were not explicitly asked about the obstacles to their active involvement in the community. Nevertheless, they felt it necessary to talk about the barriers. Categories emerged from the data and were included in the content analysis scheme until most of the text could be classified. The content analysis revealed the men's experiences to be loneliness, expectations about masculinity inherited from their cultural background, expectations about individualism inherited from long life, and the lack of demand for older people's knowledge and experience.

A similar qualitative study was conducted among rural and urban, active and inactive men aged 60 and older in eastern and southern Estonia in 2017. The analysis presented in this paper is based on interviews with rural men, and 59 out of 94 interviews constitute the data set for the second study. The sample was selected according to the same principles that guided the first study five years earlier. In this study, respondents were explicitly asked about their obstacles to being active in the community, e.g., 'If you feel excluded

from your community, please give an example'; 'How do you deal with this feeling of exclusion?'; 'What can be done to avoid it?'; 'What other problems do you face in your community as a member of the older generation?'; and 'Are there many older men in your community who are not participating in community life?' The thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was based on the whole interview in order to identify phrases about the five types of obstacles listed above. All of the barriers and obstacles revealed in the first survey were represented in the 36 interviews of the second.

RESULTS

The experiences of older men in the first survey, which were confirmed in the second, revealed four major groups of reasons that contribute to the learning process in the community.

Unsolved loneliness

As people age, they find themselves increasingly lonely. Many friends who they enjoyed spending time with have passed away; relationships between friends have changed; there are new and unfamiliar people in the village; they only have contact with acquaintances with whom they do not have meaningful relationships; and friends and acquaintances are reluctant to join them in activities. The following sentiments by an interviewee indicate that an older man is often left alone among unfamiliar people:

When we discuss sports, this K. gets angry. This K. always presses me. Then you give up. With my old friend, we understood each other but he is no longer with us.

Our analysis revealed that although older men are clearly aware of the need to compensate for their physical disadvantages, social disadvantages are not perceived to be an object of personal concern. They describe their problems of physical health together with the solutions they have found for them; at the same time, social disadvantages ("a friend passed away"; "I feel bored at home") are recognised with no personal initiative to do something about the situation.

Expectations about masculinity inherited from the cultural background

The sense of awareness of how things should be in cultural settings is very evident in reading the experiences of these men:

These are not people of my era; they do things their own way.

And similarly:

Our country is built like this. Have you ever heard someone talking about the republic's best plumber or best toilet unclogger? They talk about artists! You can live without art but what will you do if your toilet is clogged?

The status of a pensioner is perceived in a stereotypical way; in the words of one of the men:

Going to the city is good for a change. But then you go to a store and do not buy anything, and you feel embarrassed.

Furthermore, the stereotypes about learning affect the way in which the older generation thinks about themselves as learners:

I often feel that I have run out of time to start something big, to waste capital.

If their masculinity is threatened by stereotypical expectations, men tend to withdraw from the community. On the one hand, older men think there is no justification for their study but on the other, they think they have the skills they need for daily life:

I am not so stupid that I need to start learning something now. I have intermediate skills. There are enough activities to fill my time.

Although these men are aware of their lack of basic contemporary skills, they feel that they can manage with their existing skill-set or that the effort would be justified if personalised learning is offered:

I cannot use a computer; I get a headache. I do not want to learn. [Pause.] Actually, it would be good to learn to use a computer. Payments and things. But where would you go? I guess I'm not finished with learning. My brother knows how. A good teacher would be needed; one who would not get upset with a dullard.

Lack of demand for older people's knowledge and experience

The two studies in Estonia pointed to the untapped potential of older men sharing their skills and knowledge, and this topic has been explored by Tambaum and Kuusk (2014).

Expectations about individualism inherited from long life

The psychological limits to older men's learning can arise from having lived a long life. This creates a domestic comfort zone that promotes disengagement. The more older people have seen and experienced, the better they can predict the outcome. Consequently, it is difficult to find new ways to arouse their interest.

As people age, they are surrounded by an increasing number of belongings. For example, many men in rural areas have their own workshops with tools and workbenches. They always prefer to go to their own sauna instead of the village or the neighbour's sauna. The objects in one's own familiar environment are more convenient to use than those offered elsewhere. Consequently, their activities inevitably become more circumscribed with age. The saturation of life places higher demands on the community:

Recently the municipality organised a tour of Piusa for pensioners. I have seen these sand pillars. They have remained similar, not interested.

The feeling that they have already seen, heard and learned everything tends to create a sense of superiority that acts as a barrier between the individual and a changing society. This was particularly evident in the men's opinions about using or learning to use a computer. Only seven of the 31 rural men interviewed in the first survey (2013) were using or had used a computer, and 28 out of 59 rural men from the second survey were using a computer. In the first survey, the remaining men were vague and uncertain about their opinions, believing, on the one hand, that they did not need a computer, while musing, on the other, that they should probably learn to use one.

Older men construct psychological limits related to ageing by comparing their current condition with their previous selves, and themselves with younger people. One of the men commented on participating in the Defence League:

I don't want to run in the forest with people who are younger and stronger.

Such mental constructions prevent them from feeling comfortable in normal community interactions, and lead to a sense of personal disappointment and demotivation for learning. In addition to comparing their current with their past abilities, the respondents also compare themselves with younger people, and believe that they are a hindrance to the young.

DISCUSSION

Articles on reducing external obstacles are often based on the assumption that older people are internally motivated, that they are open to suitable opportunities if offered and adequately informed. This study has found that the assumption of internal motivation is arbitrary.

Most of the subjective obstacles identified in these studies – the unsolved loneliness, the perceived differences inherited from the cultural background, as well as the mental image of one's own limited abilities and opportunities – are descriptors of a restrictive sense of security or, in other words, of the ways in which older men confine themselves to a prison of their own making. The solution to surmounting these perceived restrictions must come from outside. A sense of security is a mental construct, which is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the actual level of risk or security (De Donder et al., 2013). For example, a survey by Belgian Ageing Studies (*ibid.*) indicated that the reduced availability of public services in their neighbourhood affects older people's personal sense of security. Several obstacles to participation in community learning are caused by unfamiliarity with other people in the neighbourhood, both in their own and in younger age groups. Our studies have found that a lack of friends and acquaintances does not increase older men's readiness to seek new comrades. Older rural men in Estonia do not take personal

responsibility for their own social health. Their passivity reduces the probability of their participating in community activities and learning.

Zarifis (2014) has noted that while much of the literature on successful and productive ageing focuses on the personal characteristics of individuals as determinants of the types and amounts of learning activities in which they engage, there is no formula for empowering men (younger or older) to take responsibility for their own learning. The World Bank (2002) has defined empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. In the case of Estonia, older men need to be introduced not only to how to make or evaluate choices but also to *the need* to make choices. Older men must be made aware that one's social health is as important as one's physical health.

One difficulty with regard to older men is that they may no longer have any close or reliable friends because of the gap of life expectancy between men and women. As we saw from our survey, it is very difficult for men to make new friends or even meet people. Therefore, more responsibility should fall on the municipality. Communities should organise events with the deliberate aim of introducing people to each other, and where contacts are intentionally created. This step would create an opportunity for the development of further interaction and communication. Establishing new contacts would make it possible to implement a buddy system to attract older people to community activities. Studies have indicated that older people are more concerned about the care of others than they are about themselves (Canning, 2011); Withnall, McGivney and Soulsby write that “[c]ollective rather than individual approaches often work best” (2004, p. 11). Empowerment strategies initiated by community facilitators should provide the means for the older target group to involve others. Cascading empowerment could solve the problem of feeling lonely among strangers and increase the number of participants.

Our studies show that disappointment in their own decreased abilities promotes isolation among older men. A range of data on education, training, health and well-being confirm that men encounter various dilemmas as they age, particularly after retirement (McGivney, 2004; Schuller & Watson, 2009). Our qualitative data indicate that older men tend to compare their reduced abilities with their past abilities relative to younger people. This means that older men are concerned with age comparison which is compatible with the outcome of a study conducted in Ireland where men in a literacy course “felt that younger learners [...] have different attitudes to older men, which has a negative effect on the group dynamic” (Mark, Montgomery, & Graham, 2010).

External support is needed to help men become aware of self-defeating thought patterns, raise self-esteem, and promote living in the present and in the future instead of in the past. Empowerment (Cusack, 2000) will probably not solve all the problems of ageing men. Researchers have found that the absence of clear social guidelines and norms about what it means for men to be ‘retired’ constitutes a highly ambiguous issue in contemporary society (Formosa, Fragoso, Jelenc Krašovec, & Tambaum, 2014).

As it is recognised that learning begins with a question (Jarvis, 2006), knowledge sharing could provide a path to learning and, according to our results, would probably be one of the preferable options for older men. Making use of men's existing skills and knowledge as an important component of their learning is mentioned with regard to men's shed-building projects in Australia and the UK (Mark & Golding, 2012). It is important to develop and share "what they know rather than emphasizing what men cannot do or do not know" (Golding, 2014). The literature has emphasised the importance of recognising the skills and knowledge that older adults have in abundance (e.g., Field, 2009) but, as emerged from the current study, community learning opportunities have to contend with the infrastructure that older rural men have erected in their homes as well.

Raising participation levels among males could be in the interests of the wider community and society (Mark et al., 2010). Social and educational policies need to give further consideration to the role of community organisations in making a long-term commitment to improving opportunities for older men's learning (Formosa & Fragoso, 2014). Attracting and keeping older men in community-based learning is a long-term (Askam, 2002) community responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This study on the subject of older men's learning indicates a continuing need to explore the reasons for men's lack of participation by focusing on older men who are not involved in community-based learning, rather than on exploring good practices and motives for participation among those who have taken advantage of such opportunities.

Although gender issues constitute a major theme in the academic analysis of older adult learning (Formosa, Fragoso, Jelenc Krašovec, & Tambaum, 2014), our study shows that older men may be equally concerned with age and aspects inherited from their long life may have implications on their readiness for community learning. It also highlights a need for social guidelines and norms regarding what it means for men to be 'retired', as this represents a highly ambiguous issue in contemporary society.

An important and unique role for communities emerged in connection with solving the problem of older men's social passivity. Older men encounter several challenges that prevent them from taking part in community activities. These barriers include expectations about masculinity inherited from the cultural background, low personal responsibility for their own social health, a lack of consciousness of the need for or importance of social engagement, disappointment in their own reduced abilities, and a 'defensive' domestic comfort zone. The solution to removing these, often unconscious, restrictions should come from outside.

The results of this study highlight the unique role of community members and facilitators, and identify a need for a long-term community learning strategy.

Acknowledgements

The study was supported by the Erasmus+ project *Old Guys Say Yes to Community* and the composition of the paper was partly supported by the European Social Fund.

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