

# Older Men's Perceptions on Nonformal and Formal Activities in the Community

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## Abstract

The demographic landscape of Europe is undergoing a profound transformation, with a growing proportion of older adults. In response, European Commission has adopted the Active Ageing policy, aligning with the World Health Organization's framework, to promote participation among older adults. However, participation in learning activities remains unevenly distributed, often favouring those with higher educational attainment and women. Drawing on Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage theory, the main aim of this study is to understand if differences and similarities in older men's perceptions of non-formal and informal activities are shaped by their educational attainment. Using a biographical research approach, we analysed narrative interviews with 54 older men from southern Portugal, alongside with three focus groups with educators and non-formal education providers. Our findings revealed that social class and gender are key factors in influencing older adults' participation in learning and community activities. Older men with lower educational attainment faced precarious work conditions, financial instability, and limited engagement in learning activities. In contrast, those with higher educational attainment benefited from cultural engagement and social capital, being more involved in learning activities. Gender also influenced community participation, with older women favouring structured learning and older men favouring informal, community-based activities. Community activities seem to be a way for women to leave traditional domestic spaces and to express changes in their daily lives. The lower participation of men in such activities can be explained by social class, but also by the gendered nature of different spaces. Men tend to seek out safe, predominantly male spaces and avoid mixed education and learning spaces. Both situations stem from patriarchal dominance in private relations and a more nuanced relative dominance in community/societal relations.

## Keywords

older men – social class – gender inequalities – community learning – community gendered spaces

## 1 Introduction

In 2019, approximately one fifth (20.3%) of the EU 27 population was aged 65 or older. Projections suggest that this demographic will grow significantly, reaching 29.4% by 2050. Europeans are also living longer, with the number of individuals aged 85 or older expected to more than double, from 12.5 million in 2019 to 26.8 million by 2050 (European Commission [EU], 2020). This demographic shift presents both societal and individual challenges. Societal challenges include increased pressure in health care systems, social services, pension schemes and labour markets, while individual challenges may involve health issues, economic insecurity, and social isolation (EU, 2020).

In response to these challenges, the European Commission launched the Active Aging policy, aiming to “help people stay in charge of their own lives for as long as possible as they age and, where possible, to contribute to the economy and society” (EU, 2020, p. 9). This policy aligns with the Active Aging framework proposed in 2002 by the World Health Organization [WHO] (Narushima et al., 2018). According to the WHO (2002), active aging is “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (p. 12). Active aging is influenced by various factors, including economic, social, behavioural, and personal circumstances, with culture and gender being cross-cutting determinants. This approach emphasizes older individuals as active participants and contributors, which necessitates “programs that support learning at all ages” (WHO, 2002, p. 44).

However, participation in education during later life is unevenly distributed. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in both formal (Alves Martins et al., 2022; Lido et al., 2016; Villar & Celdrám, 2013) and informal learning activities (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018), and women tend to participate more than men (Villar & Celdrám, 2013; Villar et al., 2016). As Villar and Celdrám (2013) observed, active aging initiatives often favour a well-educated, culturally and socially engaged elite, thus reinforcing existing inequalities.

## 2 Inequality among Older Adults

Global income inequality has been steadily rising (Piketty, 2014), and this trend is particularly evident among older adults aged 65 or above (Crystal et al., 2017; Heap & Fors, 2015). Crystal et al. (2017) highlight that the “two worlds of aging” (p. 915) phenomenon persists, with disparities between

affluent and impoverished individuals becoming more pronounced. These growing inequalities underscore the cumulative impact of life course experiences.

The Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage (CAD) theory has been widely applied to explain inequalities across the life course and heterogeneity in old age (e.g., Brown, 2018; Crystal et al., 2017; Dannefer, 2003; Shuey & Willson, 2008; Szabó et al., 2024). Resonating with social reproduction theories “CAD theory offers a systematic life-course component to the general understanding of education and work as comprising institutionalized systems through which class and gender inequalities are systematically and relentlessly reproduced, and through which success and failure are created” (Dannefer, 2003, p. 331).

Research grounded in this theory demonstrates that early-life advantages and disadvantages not only persist but tend to intensify over time (Heap & Fors, 2015; Veenstra & Aartsen, 2022; Wildman, 2020). Outcomes such as well-being (Pratschke et al., 2017), perceived life satisfaction (Cheung & Chou, 2019), physical and mental health (Levinsky & Schiff, 2021; Sieber et al., 2020), income in old age (Hungerford, 2022), and quality of life (Vilhena et al., 2019) are largely determined by these cumulative experiences. Older adults are particularly vulnerable to disadvantages in multiple life domains, especially when dealing with psychological challenges (Heap & Fors, 2015).

### 2.1 *Inequalities in Learning and Community Participation*

Participation in non-formal and formal activities in community presents significant opportunities for older adults to feel included in society, to experience meaningful engagement (Alves Martins et al., 2022; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020), mitigate ageism and can constitute a source of social capital (Formosa, 2021). This type of involvement has been shown to improve older adult's well-being (Aberg, 2016; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020; Jenkins & Mosfata, 2015), physical and mental health (Hardy et al., 2018; Schoultz et al., 2020; Takács & Nyakas, 2021), reduce the feeling of loneliness (Smale et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018) and even foster social inclusion (Smith & Victor, 2019). Attending education, arts or music classes (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018), participation in community art groups, like choirs, dance, theatre or music groups (Bone et al., 2023) allows the pursuing of an activity of their choice, enjoy the company of others, and to feel satisfaction and self-fulfilment, contributing, as MacKean and Abbott-Chapman (2011) have found, to the maintaining and improvement of quality of life in old age, and more particularly in times of loss and transition.

We should also note that participation in learning activities serves as driver for a broader social engagement. Lido et al. (2016) found that individuals

involved in various types of learning activities were more likely to engage in political, social, and cultural activities, highlighting the role of education in fostering lifelong participation and social integration (Harvey et al., 2014). Thus, addressing barriers to learning and community participation in later life becomes crucial to reducing inequalities and promoting democratic participation (Hachem, 2020), not only in learning, but also in community.

Socioeconomic status (SES), particularly income and educational attainment, is directly linked to older adults' participation in various community activities. Individuals with higher income and education levels are more likely to engage in leisure, cultural, political, and civic activities (Jivraj et al., 2012; Milbourne & Doheny, 2012; Scherger et al., 2011). Moreover, these individuals are more inclined to participate in both formal and informal learning activities (Alves Martins et al., 2022; Kalenda & Kocvarová, 2022; Lido et al., 2016; Villar & Celdrán, 2013; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018). As Villar and Celdrán (2013) state this is a clear example of "the Mathew effect ('the rich get richer and poor get poorer')" (p. 142), or, in other words, of a process of cumulative advantage.

Gender is another key factor in shaping participation in lifelong learning and community activities. Studies show that women tend to participate more in lifelong learning activities compared to men (Fragoso & Formosa, 2014; Villar et al., 2016), although they report having less leisure time, due to time spent in domestic work (Khan et al., 2021). This does not mean that older men are not interested in learning activities. As Nurmi et al. (2018) have found older men felt the need not only to learn, but also to share with others the knowledge and the skills that they had acquired during their lives.

Informal learning in community settings appears to be particularly appealing to men who are more isolated or have faced greater adversity later in life (Golding, 2011). The exchange of skills acquired during their working years not only enhances their own well-being but also contributes to the well-being of other men, like, for instance, younger boys (Golding & Foley, 2017) and the broader community.

Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of participation in non-formal and informal activities in later life, and the well-established influence of socioeconomic status and gender on learning in older adults, there is limited understanding of how educational background shapes older men's perceptions of these activities in community settings. To address this gap, this study investigates whether differences and similarities in older men's perceptions of non-formal and informal activities are shaped by their educational attainment. The aim is to better understand how older men view and engage with these learning opportunities within their communities.

### 3 Methods

This research was integrated into the activities of the European project Old Guys, which aimed to analyse the informal learning of older men in the community. As cumulative advantages and disadvantages can only be understood from a life course perspective, we used biographical research (Roberts, 2002) to understand the interplay between individuals and history, self and other (Merrill & West, 2009). For this chapter, we analysed face-to-face narrative interviews of a group of 30 older men with low educational attainment and 24 older men with higher educational attainment living in southern Portugal. We also collected data from educators and non-formal education providers working in different institutions in the region. For this purpose, we organised three unstructured focus group debates (Morgan, 1998; Krueger, 1998). To interpret the results, in both cases we used qualitative content analysis (Schreir, 2012) to understand emergent patterns of meaning (Kondracki et al., 2002) that could guide us in building categories.

### 4 Results

#### 4.1 *Results 1: Inequalities among Older Adults*

The life course of the group of older working-class men was primarily shaped by their educational background, via its regulatory effects on occupation and income (and very low financial capital has consequences on secondary factors, such as the ability to face health problems). Less than four years of schooling meant that they could only access non-skilled manual jobs with limited stability and low salaries. Moreover, a low level of education also influenced the way they viewed their labour rights and made them vulnerable to manipulation, which can be seen, for example, in the fact that many of them turned to the informal economy: illegal work, working without social security or paying taxes, often meant the inability to save over the years and a very low pension at retirement. Manual work and poor working conditions have long-term consequences.

I had no idea that this was happening in my hometown. I've had the opportunity to speak to dozens of people who worked in the canning industry, the people who worked in the salt pans, the fishermen, those who worked in the carob and cork factories (...). They did all their lives, they didn't even pay social security, they didn't even know what tax

obligations were. And these people have arthritis, many have respiratory problems because of the dust, they're all ruined physically. (FG 1)

In cases where there have been no changes in educational qualifications, secondary or tertiary disadvantages accumulate over the years. A serious health problem, an accident at work or a disability cannot be resolved without additional losses. For example, a further reduction in the family income or mobility problems that complicate the men's lives in every respect and reduce their ability to socialise. These men tend to become increasingly isolated, which also reduces their ability to receive social support of any kind (even from their own family). It is not surprising that many of our interviewees today, in old age, live in various precarious situations or even in a state of declared poverty. Some say they will work until they can, because their pensions are not enough. Some are dependent on civil society organisations to eat regularly. A significant number of them live alone and report feeling often lonely.

What do these men say about learning and learning opportunities? Most of the time our questions do not even mean anything to them. It is not learning they feel they need, but a more dignified life. It is a fact that some of them, despite their difficulties, have been able to make a successful transition to retirement in their own terms (different from those of the research team). Their main activities (some of which are said to be leaning) are informal: watching television and socialising in the public spaces of the city/small cafes, etc. In a minority of cases within this group, this type of informal activity seems to be sufficient, at least to some extent, to combat loneliness or to maintain existing relationships (a way of providing some social support). In most cases, however, their relationships with their neighbours are superficial, and this can be linked to the pace of urban change in recent decades. Gradually, the spaces that were familiar to them are changing – small shops, cafes, specific spaces in the streets – and these changes are felt as losses: 'These people stay in a place that is the place they recognise, but the life they had in that space is no longer the life they used to have. And so, I think, they become more and more isolated' (FG 2).

The educators and providers who discussed the more or less limited learning opportunities of this group of older adults clearly identified the barriers they face: most of them stem from their very low financial capacity (even small local fees are impossible for them), lack of good public transport and reduced mobility, and inappropriate social public spaces in their communities (which could potentially be an important resource). In the words of an educator: "People with a certain level of education can go to the *Farensé*, go to the theatre, go to the cinema. But then there are the others who stay at home and those who just sit on park benches" (FG 2).

The men in our second group (middle class, higher literacy) found in their educational background the opportunities to find jobs that generally allowed them to have a higher financial capacity, the ability to save and build a meaningful and enjoyable cultural life, and the opportunities to build social networks that provide resources to support the other dimensions of life. They are examples of how advantages can be cumulative over the life course. The main factor that made this trajectory possible was education, which enabled better financial, social and cultural capital to be built up through professional activity. As a result, these men are better equipped to face the natural challenges of old age: they are better able to deal with serious health problems if they arise, they are able to build up social capital and to focus on family and friends after retirement. It is therefore not surprising that they maintain an intense learning and cultural life after retirement.

At a non-formal level, we find that these older men continue to learn (some through senior universities, for example) and are active in sport. They are not only consumers of local culture (active in civic associations, theatre groups, etc.). There are also some minority cases in which they maintain a local political activity. But within this group we also find most older men who are active in informal learning: reading books and newspapers, using social networks, going to the theatre and cinema, travelling, etc. They report that they are able to make new friends or reconnect with older friends, thus strengthening relationships and maintaining activity in different dimensions of life.

Our two groups of men are therefore examples of how cumulative advantages and disadvantages can operate over the life course. They are examples of how social class can influence the trajectories of one group towards poverty and the other away from poverty. These types of trajectories are typical, as our results show, but we are by no means suggesting that the Mathews effect is some kind of deterministic or rigid sociological effect – this would be to deny the agentic capacity of individuals to overcome structural factors such as social class. Although a minority, exceptional cases from both groups might eventually illustrate this point. However, the focus groups we conducted also gave us results on an important aspect: the gender aspects of older adults' learning.

#### **4.2 *Results 11: Gender Inequalities in Community Learning***

If we analyse our interviews and the results of the focus group research globally, some patterns emerge with regard to gender and non-formal and informal adult learning in the community: women are more attracted to structured learning (similar to formal education models), which they usually find in third age/senior universities; men are a minority in these settings; men are

the majority in activities involving games or competition, and also in informal learning in community clubs, such as fishing and hunting clubs, pétanque, etc.

However, these general statements hide more complex social mechanisms. In senior universities in Portugal, it is common to find a curriculum that includes lectures or disciplinary courses of some kind, but also non-formal and informal activities, such as walks, visits, excursions, etc. Women are majority of participants and their enthusiasm for learning seems to contrast with the tendency of men to be more passive (an exception to this rule seems to be the very popular courses on information and communication technologies, which attract both men and women in large numbers). An interesting issue that was widely discussed in order to explain these gender differences in learning participation was the link between two contexts: family or household life and the learning spaces of senior academies. For some educators, women are used to being responsible for shopping, cooking, cleaning, caring for husbands and the household, and this forms a pattern of activity that tends to spill over into other areas of non-formal and informal learning and socialisation. In many households, long-standing inequalities in gender roles severely disadvantage women:

The husband is a hindrance. The husband, the person who retires and stays at home, is a hindrance for the woman. It disturbs them because they don't really do anything, it disturbs the more dynamic, more active women. For those women who have always done domestic work, even if they retire and aren't in many associations, they always find something to do. And the man is a hindrance. (FG 2)

Women, yes, women are more likely to take part in these non-formal education activities than men, in fact. And then there are men. Men who throughout their lives have had routine activities and who isolate themselves and almost entrust themselves to a social death and spend a lot of time at home watching television. They don't take part in cultural activities. But there are also men with lower levels of education who have always been active in organisations. They get together a lot in fishing clubs, pétanque clubs. They have the need to meet up at the associations, have a few beers, chat and play games. You can see that kind of segmentation a lot. (FG 2)

But the fact that women now spend a significant part of their time in learning or socialising activities has forced them to get out of the house, which in turn means that their husbands are forced to do some of the tasks that were

traditionally done by women. And gradually this has made a difference, as both women and the teachers at the senior academies have recognised:

And the funny thing is, there were ladies who came up to me and said: "Look, you know what? My husband doesn't mind me going out, he stays at home, he cooks dinner and everything, and I don't have to do anything, I don't have to leave anything done, he does it now". These are small achievements. And this was a crescendo of emancipation, because more and more women's groups went out and took part in more activities, more activities, more things, and they left home. (FG 3)

Within the focus group this gender issue was widely discussed and it was recognised that the practices and discourses of the educators, as well as the nature of the activities offered by senior academies, were indeed geared towards women (which seems natural to us as researchers, given the strong gender inequalities in these communities):

Perhaps the problem lies in what you've just said. Our discourse is always directed towards women. And perhaps, in the case of gender, it's also a reflection of this. Maybe when we plan our educational interventions we should actually start thinking, start questioning, but why aren't men taking part? What can I do to reach men? Maybe we don't do that. Maybe, if they were women, we would do it and would be concerned. But maybe we're not worried about men and their participation. (FG 3)

Could it that we are witnessing a shift in the power of intimate relationships that has a reflexive effect on wider social behaviour?

I think the men are oppressed [the whole group laughs]. Listening to our conversation, you get the feeling that women have suddenly emancipated themselves. And men have become oppressed. The men who used to have a place to be, had a leading role, and now, all of a sudden, in these kinds of activities that we do, they no longer feel comfortable when women are there, and are no longer comfortable in the spaces shared with women, or in the spaces where there are more women. And they've become comfortable in spaces where it's just them. For example, I see my father, he belongs to a hunting association in the Alentejo, and they go there all happy, and spend the day there, and cooks, and do this, and do that. And my mum sometimes says to my dad, but you don't cook at home! And I've already told her, he doesn't cook at home, because if he

does anything wrong at home, you'll point it out to him. Of course. And when he is with other men, he does as he pleases. So maybe they're a bit oppressed by us too, by the whole situation. (FG 3)

But for the vast majority of focus group participants, this seems to be a generational situation. That is, a situation specific to generations of older adults who have been socialised to assume and legitimise very unequal gender roles. Several examples were given of educational activities with younger generations where mixed activities are not an issue; and many activities where is the fathers who bring and participate in such activities with their sons and daughters – not the mothers.

Our interpretation as researchers are the following: older generations have lived for decades in a situation of patriarchal dominance both in private relationships and in community/societal relationships. The learning opportunities provided by non-formal providers created a new environment characterised by more balanced power relations. This situation seems to have broadened and influenced the balance of power between women and men in the household and provided new opportunities for women. This in turn may mean that men have lost power in both settings and, as a result, avoid mixed education and learning spaces. Instead, they look for “safe spaces”, which they find in informal/community settings where men are in the majority (hunting and fishing clubs, bowls clubs, some sport clubs, etc.). Whether or not this is a temporary situation, until men are able to adapt to new contextual conditions (or even new masculinities in the making) or more balanced power relations, remains to be shown by future research.

Finally, it is very important to discuss what we as adult educators should do when planning non-formal learning activities. That is, if we recognise that today's learning activities might be more tailored to women and not men, should we change the educational offer and provide more opportunities for men? This was discussed in depth in focus group 1. And although there was no consensus, at least the majority agreed that this gender difference in learning stems from a traditional division of gender roles that needs to be addressed. As such, educators should not reinforce unfair gender inequalities.

## 5 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter is to address the existing gap in knowledge regarding the influence of an individual's educational background on their perceptions of non-formal and informal activities in later life. The existent literature

indicates that participation in education in later life is distributed in a manner that is markedly unequal (Alves Martins et al., 2022; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018; Lido et al., 2016; Villar & Celdrám, 2013; Villar et al., 2016), as we have seen in the results. Moreover, the observed increased in these inequalities serves to underscore the cumulative impact of life course experiences.

The Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage theory was used to elucidate the observed inequalities across the life course, with a particular focus on learning and community participation. Some participants were found to be particularly susceptible to disadvantage in a number of life domains, particularly in response to specific changes. Additionally, as others researchers have demonstrated (e.g., Veenstra & Aartsen, 2022; Wildman, 2020), early-life advantages and disadvantages not only persist but also tend to intensify over time.

The analysis revealed that socioeconomic status and gender are key factors in influencing older adults' participation in learning and community activities. The participants in the study were all male and exhibited a range of educational attainment levels. In some cases, the issue at hand is one of dignity in life, and the questions posed may even be meaningless to the subjects in question. Those who are living in precarious conditions for the entirety of their lives, or even in poverty, isolation and loneliness, are experiencing a particularly challenging aspect of their lives. In other instances, we identified instances of how advantages can be cumulative over the life course, with education representing the primary factor. Indeed, social class appears to exert and influence on the trajectories of both groups under study, with one group tending towards poverty and the other way from it.

Additionally, patterns emerged with regard to gender and non-formal and informal adult learning in the community. However, the results may conceal more intricate social dynamics pertaining to gender roles in Portuguese society. Historically entrenched inequalities in gender roles have profoundly disadvantaged women.

As adult educators, we are aware of the role of non-formal and informal activities as significant opportunities for older adults to feel included in society and to experience meaningful engagement (Alves Martins et al., 2022; Hedegaard & Hugo, 2020). Furthermore, these activities have the potential to contribute to the softening of ageism. Formosa (2021) posits that such activities contribute to the formation of social capital. However, in a society that is still characterized by patriarchal norms, particularly in some regions, this is a challenging endeavour. It is imperative that initiatives be implemented to challenge the prevailing gender and social inequalities. Nevertheless, this necessitates intervention in multiple dimensions of the adult's life, as it is not

possible to participate in active ageing if one's life circumstances do not permit it. It is not our intention to suggest that Matthew's effect (Villar & Celdrán, 2013) is the sole determinant of these adults' lives. However, our findings do indicate that some individuals do exhibit this sociological effect.

This research has enabled us to respond to our research questions in this context and to emphasise the pivotal role of education (e.g. Rogers et al., 2013; Tamborini & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, we have gained a deeper insight into the life trajectories of older adults, enabling us to plan interventions and collaborations with the community. Despite the ongoing difficulties and constraints, we have also been able to identify the complex dynamics between structural factors and agency.

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