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Lifelong learning participation: an interdisciplinary theory

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Introduction

Lifelong learning participation is unequal, and especially in austere times, we run the risks that the gap between those who have and those who do not have, widen instead of narrow. Participation in adult lifelong learning activities is perceived important as it is believed to be related to a range of benefits, e.g. economic and social benefits, both at the level of the individual and the level of society (Field, 2012). However, knowledge on why certain people do and other people do not is available in a rather fragmented way. This paper aims to bring these separate puzzles together in a comprehensive model. This work therefore aims to move away from Courtney's 1992 monograph 'Why do adults learn' (Courtney, 1992) and introduce a new way of thinking about adult lifelong learning participation.

Lifelong learning: definitions and context

Lifelong learning has changed over the past few decades. While it used to start from a stronger humanistic approach, nowadays, lifelong learning policies are often criticised because they start from a rather economic perspective, focussing on the need for adults to function in the knowledge based economy (Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012). Key players like the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) all constructed their sets of benchmarks and indicators (Grek, 2009). Progress towards these benchmarks and indicators is carefully monitored and information is being made available on an annual basis, e.g. through publication of the Commission's monitoring reports and the OECD's Education at a Glance reports. These monitoring exercises include participation statistics referring to formal and non-formal participation, but exclude informal ways of learning. Overall, these statistics painfully demonstrate the wide variation not only between countries, but also between individuals from different socio-economic and socio-demographic backgrounds. Trends indicate that participation rates are highest in Nordic – Scandinavian countries, above average in liberal Anglo-Saxon countries and lower in other regions. At the individual level, those who are highly educated, have a job and those who are younger have more chances to participate. While these facts and figures are not new, it remains important to further understand what factors are actually contributing to these inequalities? In order to do so, this questions is first being answered drawing on insights from different angles. Later on, these insights will be integrated into an overarching model.

The contribution of disciplines to an interdisciplinary theory

The behavioural perspective

Psychologists tend to write about attitudes, motivation, confidence etcetera. One of the ways in which lifelong learning participation has been described, is drawing on the notion of the underlying decision-making process in which an intention to participate has to be formulated (see Baert et al., 2006). This work has been developed

after engagement with Fishbein and Ajzen's work on 'planned and intended behaviour', demonstrating that a positive attitude towards a specific behaviour is a precondition for developing an intention to undertake the specific behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980). Elements of this explanation also focus on the recognition of certain needs and more specifically an educational need. Drawing on work undertaken by Maslow (1943) one might assume that educational needs are higher up in the pyramid, and will not be formulated unless basic needs have been fulfilled. It is also worth considering whether intentions to participate will be formulated after an analysis of costs and benefits has been perceived as negative. Rational Choice Theory is arguing that decisions will not be taken if the benefits do not outnumber the costs (Allingham, 2002) and expectancy-value theory will argue that the relevance of the course needs to be clear, as well as the belief in one's own abilities to succeed (Vroom, 1964). The motivation to participate can thus be very instrumental and goal-oriented, although a specific interest in the course content or the desire to meet new people can also be recognised as important attributes of participation, already recognised by Houle (1961). Finally, the work by developmental psychologists can also help us in understanding why certain people do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities (Tennant, 1997). In growing older, people's interests change, as well as their bodies and brains. All these elements can have an impact in their decisions to participate in learning activities or not.

The micro sociological perspective

As stated above, participation in lifelong learning activities is unequal. There is a wide literature on social class that can be used in relation to understanding the social inequalities in lifelong learning participation (Nesbit, 2005). References are made to different forms of capital, such as social and human capital, as well as cultural capital, mostly drawing on references like Bourdieu (1986). Again, the idea of a cost-benefit analysis is at play here, mainly because the outcomes of this analysis is different for different people. Those with high levels of educational attainment have been successful in the past and thus feel more confident in attending extra learning activities as they know how to do it (Gorard, in Jarvis, 2009). Those who failed in the past might feel disgusted about learning in general and will often have to start their continuous education at lower levels in order to catch up with the highly educated. The costs for them are thus higher, while the benefits are likely not going to be higher compared to those who are already highly educated. The education gap is therefore more likely to widen. Women are known to participate as often as men, although they differ in relation to reaching higher positions in the workplace, positions that are often known to relate to being stronger in terms of receiving learning opportunities provided and paid for by the employer (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007). Workplaces are also less likely to invest in the skills and training of older employees as their time in the production process is shorter compared to that of younger employees (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). The costs do thus not weigh up in relation to the benefits. Another level of inequality appears at the type of job adults are undertaking. Those in elementary occupations apply a low range of skills and therefore do not receive training, making it difficult for them to climb the occupational ladder. But also people from different race and ethnicity are known to have to deal with more problems (see Sheared et al, 2010), e.g. clearly visible at the level of higher education in which certain institutes have a very low proportion of certain racial groups.

Institutional barriers

While the literature strongly focusses on the individual variables of participants and non-participants, it is important to keep in mind that participation in adult lifelong

learning activities cannot exist if learning offers are not available. This does not only refer to availability per se, but also to the different modes of participation. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) explored this in relation to higher education and distinguished between the traditional mode and the lifelong learning mode. In a lifelong learning mode, both entrance conditions, didactical approaches and ways of delivering course content are much more flexible than in the traditional mode, which is rather seen as a barrier for the adult learner who has to combine his/her learning with other activities, including work and household duties. Institutions themselves therefore creating barriers was already introduced by Cross (1981). Not only educational institutions, but also workplaces can be described in terms of institutional barriers preventing certain groups from lifelong learning participation. Whether industries are more restrictive or expansive plays a determining role, as well as their training cultures, policies and know-how. One way of dealing with the level of institutional barriers, might be within the role of information, recognised by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) as an additional barrier. Adults might not be aware of educational offers available to them and also not about support mechanisms that can help them in overcoming certain barriers set up by the institutions, such as a reduction of registration fees for those on low incomes.

Country level determinants

Countries differ in relation to their participation rates in adult lifelong learning activities. Based on results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), conducted by the OECD, we can distinguish a number of groups (OECD, 2014). The first group with participation rates above 60 percent contains the four Scandinavian countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, but also The Netherlands. Participation rates are also high in Anglo-Celtic countries, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (above 55 percent but below 60 percent). A group of countries with participation rates around 50 percent includes Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Ireland and Korea. Japan and Spain are just under this group. France, Poland and the Slovak Republic are in a weaker group with participation rates between 33 and 36 percent, while participation in Italy and the Russian Federation is lowest and between 25 percent. All these participation rates are measured on the basis of a 12 months reference period.

At first sight, it seems that the grouping of these countries is not at random, but correlates the more or less with insights from previous research on welfare states (see Esping-Andersen, 1989; Fenger, 2007). An overview of macro level determinants has been summarised and discussed by Dammrich and colleagues and they point out to various factors, such as the characteristics of educational systems in countries, the flexibility on the labour market, the union density, countries' expenditure on research and development and more general measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Dammrich et al., in Blossfeld, 2014, p.37). It is e.g. clear that countries with strong levels of stratification and tracking in which young people are sorted at an earlier age, have lower participation rates than those in countries who have more comprehensive systems (Busemeyer, 2015). Countries with highest participation rates are also those countries in which the investment in education is highest, although in Anglo-Saxon countries, the investment is more dependent on private investment compared to the stronger focus of public investment in Nordic – Scandinavian countries. In general, a wide range of these social policy indicators correlate with each other and make it therefore easier to group countries into separate clusters or typologies.

The need for integration

The overview of theories above demonstrates that understanding participation in lifelong learning is not an unidimensional task, but requires the integration of a number of disciplines into an interdisciplinary theory. Both structure and individual agency are at play it is thus important to think further based on structure and agency approaches (e.g. Giddens, 1998). In the lifelong learning theory, Downes (2014) has worked with the ecological system developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), distinguishing between a micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-system. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) published a paper in *Adult Education Quarterly* in which they presented a Bounded Agency Model, demonstrating the cooperation between individuals and available structures in order to achieve lifelong learning participation. Feldman and Ng (2011) also worked on an integrated model in which they distinguished between individual differences, situational factors and access to learning opportunities.

While certain common features are thus present in these models, it is important to present a new model that tries to incorporate a review of the literature in the field. This model is represented in Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

The model starts from the three central players, the individual, the learning providers and the countries. At the level of the individual, a distinction has been made between social and behavioural characteristics. If we could go back to the notion of the decision-making process, we would say that those with different social characteristics, have different chances to go through this process in a positive way. All is shaped in interaction with the availability of learning providers. Both the typical educational institutions, but also the workplaces can act as generators or barriers to lifelong learning participations. The individual and the institution are also embedded within specific countries, who differ in the architecture of their education and labour market policies. In bringing these elements together, it is hoped that understanding the of participation issues in the field of lifelong learning has increased.

Advancing research and practice

Measuring adult lifelong learning participation

While an integrative lifelong learning participation model has been presented, it has to be acknowledged that certain limitations in our understanding of lifelong learning participation exist. Some of these limitations are the result of a lack of high quality data in the field (see Vignoles, 2007). Data on adult lifelong learning are collected by the European Commission's Eurostat, e.g. within their Labour Force Survey and the Adult Education Survey and the OECD, most recently within the PIAAC project (Desjardins, 2015). One of the difficulties is that lifelong learning participation within monitoring reports is mostly presented as one single indicator and any further distinctions do not tend to go further than comparing between formal and non-formal participation rates. In order to increase our understanding of the benefits of participation, it would be interesting for the European Commission and the OECD to develop a longitudinal survey in which adult learners can be followed up. While longitudinal surveys are available in certain countries, e.g. the British Household Panel Survey in Britain, comparative data are much harder to find. Also, too many data are available in a fragmented way and survey data do not tend to be linked to

administrative data, which could include more specific data on participants in educational institutions, workplaces and communities.

Implications for policy, practice and research

Improving adults' chances to participate in adult lifelong learning in a more equal way will ask for some different directions to follow in the future. As stated above, the investment in comparable longitudinal data will be important. At the same time, it is recommended that more detailed insights will become available on the institutional architecture of educational institutions, in order to better understand how to tackle institutional barriers. These institutions could then follow up on a range of actions such as offering courses in more flexible modes, develop new programmes in geographical areas where certain learning offers are not available, pay more attention to transparent information about their learning offers. Researchers could also further increase knowledge on this topic, e.g. through integrating the different levels of the puzzle in multilevel models and to provide more insight in whether there are significant differences in decisions to participate according to the chosen learning activity.

Conclusions

Lifelong learning participation is generally perceived as having a positive impact on both individuals and society, both in economic and non-economic terms. In austere times, support for the weakest groups in society tend to slow down. While the OECD focuses on 'better policies for better lives', my contribution aims to increase awareness on the complexity of lifelong learning participation in order to 'increase understanding for better policies'.

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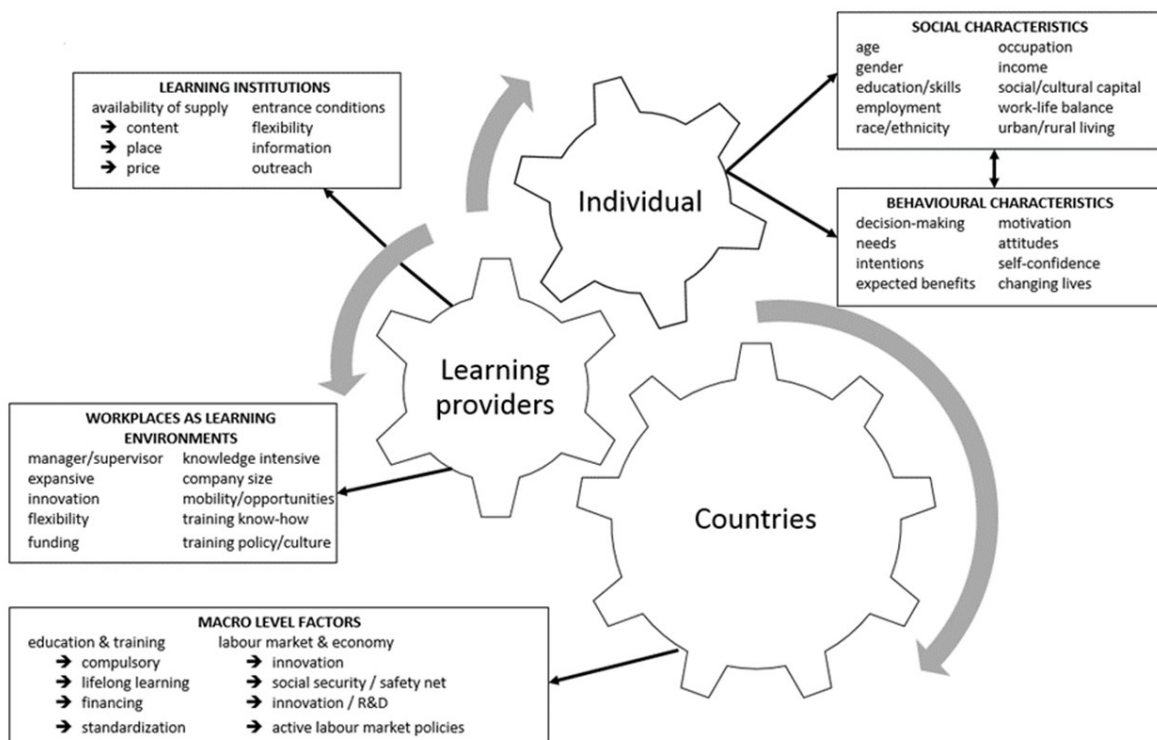
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FIGURE 1



SUMMARY

Drawing on the role of individuals, education and training providers and countries' social policy actions, and borrowing insights from psychology, sociology and economics, this paper works towards an interdisciplinary theory of adult lifelong learning participation. It explores the fragmented evidence of why adults do (not) participate in lifelong learning.