

The mosaic of adults learning landscape

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INTRODUCTION

The Adult Learning Research group has a wide interest in adult learning, from younger to older adults, starting from the learner's perspective, focusing on adult learning institutions, national and international policy and having a specific interest in issues of equality in education, comprising participation, inclusion and society. There is also an interest in transition between different life periods: education, working life and leisure time. **Adult learning** is, as defined by the research group, a transformative process, being lifelong, life wide and life deep. In our view, adult learning is also interactive occurring in informal, non-formal and formal settings. We understand an adult who learns as a unique being, a social person, situated in a social milieu, constrained and shaped by it, but also as having agency, and influencing and shaping his/her own situation.

The research group was started in 1995 by Agnieszka Bron, at the Department of Education at Stockholm University. It was from the beginning an international environment, with a seminar run once a month in English, for both post-graduate stu-

dents and invited guests. From the beginning researchers were involved in research projects concerning non-traditional students' access to higher education, but the interest in the group over time became much broader and included: biographical learning of migrants, participants at folk high schools, adults' involvement in civil society and working life. The research concern was from the beginning broad, addressing the macro, meso and micro levels and the relations between them.

Since 2011 when the new Department of Education started, the adult learning research group has included new colleagues; today it consists of several senior and some junior researchers, involved in numerous research projects, often working together. The group regularly organises the monthly Adult Education Seminar, opened to Master's and PhD students as well as practitioners and foreign researchers. Moreover, the group meets for lunch once a month and once a year for longer research meetings. At one of such meetings, using brain storming, we described our interest in research through the cloud, with a core focus on adult learning, see below.

This cloud presents our research through various phenomena, characterised by the mosaic of interests and variations of approaches, methodologies and theories used, even though sociological perspectives on researching adults learning predominate. Taking such understanding, we are in good company with adult educationists internationally. Nonetheless, we also apply both educational theories and adult learning theories. These also include psychological theories as our discipline relies on them as well, together with gender theories that some of the colleagues apply. Thus, we use a variety of approaches, often working together and running dynamic and stimulating seminars, in

which both senior and young researchers participate, representing a diversity of cultures and countries. Saying this, presenting our groups richness or complexity by its variations and yet trying to be holistic is a challenge for all of us.



The research focus of the group is on structure and agency; consequently, we emphasise an intersubjectivity of adult learners. Giddens' structuration theory, Bourdieu's praxeological theory and Mead's theory of self are the theories which many of the members of the group work with. For Mead (1932) intersubjectivity means that what 'happens' between people, and as such precedes subjectivity, being indispensable to it. Consequently, we are first and foremost social and only thereafter individuals. Intersubjectivity connects to Mead's view on the generalised other and role-taking, as well as becoming the self.

Hence, our perspective is broad, embracing learning in a spectrum of time and space, including various aspects of life, in and outside institutions, in groups and individually, with family, friends, associations, in education and work, and civil society, to name just a few.

The research group's orientation is empirical in character, with interest in studying adults learning, its conditions, processes and outcomes. Moreover, we concentrate on macro, meso and micro levels studying institutions, policies, cultures as well as groups and individuals, trying to make sense of them. Through our research, we hope also to contribute to a better understanding of such phenomena as professionalization (Carlhed Ydhag, C. 2020; Osman. & Thunborg, 2019; Nilsson, 2017; Nørholm Lundin, 2020) and identity formation (Thunborg & Bron, 2019); concerning the first by looking at teachers (Giersch, Carlhed Ydhag & Korhonen, 2021), adult educators (e.g. Malec Rawiński & Bartosz, 2017), activists in civil society (Nørholm Lundin, 2021; Eslachi & Osman, 2021), or employees (Nilsson, 2017; Bron & Thunborg, 2020), and concerning the second, by becoming a successful learner, a student or non-traditional student (Osman, Carlhed Ydhag & Månsson, 2020; Thunborg & Bron, 2018), a family member or a parent (Pananaki, 2021), and when growing older or being stigmatised (Malec-Rawiński, 2017). Thus in researching adults' learning we use such categories as ethnicity, class, gender, ageing and socialisation of adults (by the whole group).

The **empirical setting of the research group** is broad and also varies, including higher education (mature and non-traditional students; policies; various institutions), adult education (including popular education, and adult educators), working life (such as transitions from education to work; professionalization; identity formation e.g. Nilsson, S. & Nyström, S. (2013) civil society and family, as well as rural and urban places and biographical learning spaces of young adults e.g. Thunborg, Osman & Bron (2021).

By using various theoretical perspectives and mostly qualitative methodologies, the research group's objective is to collect and

analyse data, but also to theorise the results. **Our methodological approaches** include both quantitative and qualitative strategies. Varying approaches include the use of ethnographic, biographical and longitudinal methods, while others use netnography, and still others use surveys to collect data; while when analyzing data, we use qualitative biographical/narrative analysis, and/or comparative analysis, and others of us content analysis and statistics. Thus we apply a variety of research and analysis methods.

Even by applying/exercising specific theories, we both differ and complement each other by using symbolic interactionism, including Mead (1932) and Goffman (1963); Bourdieu's (1990) habitus and field theory, situated learning perspective of Wenger (1998) and Lave & Wenger (1991); biographical learning (Alheit, 1995; Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Bron & Thunborg, 2017); governmentality from Foucault (1991), just to name a few. However, we are not dedicated to just one theory; we also combine various sociological theories, and are even interdisciplinary by including anthropological, cultural geographical and psychological approaches. We try in our research not only to be driven theoretically, but also to be focused on empirical and theoretical discovery by generating theories. Some examples of theorising are the concept of Floating (Bron, 2000); theory of Biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017); and Identity formation (Thunborg, 2016; Thunborg & Bron, 2019). Another example is an attempt to develop an analytical model of Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* (Carlhed et al, 2021).

To get some flavour of our way of doing research, we present three examples of on-going research projects in the group that focus on adults in their various life phases from young adults to those who are getting older. To select these examples, we invited all researchers in the group to contribute, and these were the

examples we received. The first contribution is about learning while ageing of Polish immigrants to Sweden. Małgorzata Malec Rawiński has followed several elderly adults, both female and male, for almost ten years by collecting their narratives. As the author has her theoretical background in symbolic interactionism, she connects to Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and to biographical learning theories (Alheit, 1995). The first can be helpful when characterising the process of ageing; and the second in understanding ageing Polish immigrants' ways of belonging and identity's feeling as in between; by finding out how they cope and learn by ageing biographically as immigrants.

The second example, presented here by Carina Carlhed Ydhag and Ali Osman, is about the academic success of upper secondary students seen by looking at what social support they encounter and what social investment they make. These students come from both disadvantaged and advantaged social situations. The researchers focus on the meaning-making processes at the individual level of these students, based on the students' own stories. Theoretically, they lean towards a social capital concept and habitus developed by Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986). What is more, they developed a tentative analytical model based on Bourdieu's concept of *illusio*, helping them to extend their analysis of interview data. By finding a strong belief in the necessity of a social investment among the interviewees, they could uncover the core of this concept in the data by finding three aspects of *illusio*. They concentrated on the support students get, depending on any inherited educational capital they could mobilise.

The final example by Camilla Thunborg draws on the project: *Spatial pockets of (in-)equalities ...* presenting young adults' every-

day life-learning and how they navigate in suburban territory. Two theories of learning are used to understand these processes: construction and re-construction of biographical life (Alheit, 1995; Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Bron & Thunborg, 2017); and participation in various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Lave; 2019). The suburb in which the young adults navigate is seen as a learning space.

Here we present the three examples, starting with Małgorzata Malec Rawiński contribution.

BEING 'IN BETWEEN' – ELDERLY POLISH ADULTS IN SWEDEN: UNDERSTANDING THEIR IDENTITIES WHILE AGEING

This research tries to understand the life and learning experiences of various groups of stigmatized/excluded adults by applying biographical perspectives. The research agenda concerns learning opportunities and a process of being excluded and/or stigmatized as adults, framed through theories of stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963) and biographical learning. The main ongoing project, entitled: *Learn to age*, started in 2010 and focused on ageing and learning in the context of migration and concentrated on the group of elderly Polish immigrants in Sweden. Ageing is defined here as a process of managing and negotiating different events in life, by using different resources and strategies. The process of ageing is dynamic, interactive, subject to the twists and turns of life, with changes, transitions, and transformations and sometimes migration (place and time) that cause complications. What is more, biographical ageing (Malec-Rawiński, 2021) means a complex process consisting of interweaving

biological, social and cultural factors. Such a learning process of becoming older is not a straightforward path, but includes detours, interruptions, stops, disappointments, repetitions, and uncertainties in life. Consequently, one does not age according to biological time but according to experienced time through life events. The set of life experiences refracts, being influenced by culture, society and external historical events (e.g. wars, cataclysms, pandemics). Thus biographical ageing deals with various life experiences throughout one's entire life. As migration is one of the important factors of biographical ageing, it is characterised by experiencing the constant practice of negotiating a place of belonging, in this case a negotiation between two countries. Since migration becomes a background for recognising life experiences, the research questions were: What kind of difficulties do the immigrants face? What do they struggle with? What does one's place of living vs. place of belonging mean for elderly immigrants? To find answers to these questions, the study was conducted among elderly Polish immigrants in Sweden.

By taking the immigrants' position, a new perspective might be opened by reflecting on who they are as migrants; and where they belong. Perhaps it is the place where they presently live, or maybe the place where they grew up? Which culture dominates, a Polish or a Swedish one? While ageing, life experiences intertwine with each other, including work experiences, and dealing with health and social problems, with family problems, with personal needs, but also with language problems, and finally by facing stigmatisation. Often these disappointments based on migration led through learning to coping with them by transformation. However, while reflecting upon an entire life, elderly immigrants see their life experiences intertwined in a kind of mosaic.

Thus the place of migration itself can open the door to new perspectives while ageing that might be seen as a challenge and an opportunity to develop, or as struggle and resistance to the surrounding culture and language. The migrants learn to navigate by being in between, as one of them said:

When I travel from Sweden to Poland, I know that I will make myself very tired, because I have a lot of work always in Poland. When I return to Sweden I do not have the feeling that I am coming back, as someone might say, to the second homeland, I am coming back to my studio. And now, the question is whether I have any country at all, I do not know? Most likely it is Poland, subconsciously yes, but not Poland as Poland, but the people there (Robert).

Sweden for the ageing migrants, however is a place of learning and becoming, being neither Polish nor Swedish but rather living and being 'in between' the Polish migrants negotiated who they are; they are anchored in Sweden on the one hand, but linked culturally to Polish culture, on the other, as Jadwiga said:

I was not and will not be Swedish. It is primarily related to culture and language. I am culturally linked without comparison, more to Poland than to Sweden. This ... cannot be changed.

Still, these migrants are no longer Polish and yet 'not enough' Swedish; they have some doubts about who they are. Even though in some way they might feel more Swedish than Polish, as Jan said:

I became too Swedish, for sure, because I do not know if I would have managed to come back to Poland, find myself there ... maybe, maybe? But I'm not sure. Well, a man is a bit weird, you know, a little bit, you know, maybe a little strange. I do not know how to explain it, well... you get another perspective ...

Being a migrant means constant negotiation of 'Who am I'? However, the reason for migration can be seen as meaningful when understood through the perspective of biographical ageing. Why did the person migrate? What preferences does she/he have concerning the place/country/culture she/he migrated to? What changes has she/he experienced during the time/life course?

Nevertheless, and most importantly, this study of elderly Polish migrants in Sweden illustrates that they cannot simply be reduced to their migration experience, but that they also carry with them a myriad of relevant life experiences to the new host country, which enriched their opportunities for learning (Małgorzata Malec Rawiński, 2021).

The second contribution is an example from the project on *Following footprints of resilient young people: successful educational trajectories and transition into higher education* presented by Carina Carlhed Ydhag and Ali Osman: Researching social support and social investments for academic success among upper secondary students

INTRODUCTION

Why choose a research topic like academic success? We are constantly aware of the current political and public discourses of educational achievements and employability supporting the national and international ambitions to fulfil goals. Rather than follow the policy ideas of what student success is and thus track numbers of student completions or successful transitions from education to labour market, we have been eager to find ways of researching these phenomena, ways in which the meaning-making processes are focused and analysed. Lately, we have been engaged in examining how young adults give meaning to performing well in school and how their social and cultural backgrounds play a role. One special interest has been to study how students from both disadvantaged and privileged social situations, and how they motivate themselves and manage to mobilise support from their social networks to maintain high achievements in school and eventually achieve transition to higher education. In our analysis we adopted an analytical framework and concepts derived from cumulative empirical studies (Osman, et al. 2020; Carlhed, et al. 2021; Månsson, et al. 2021) inspired by Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu's (1990, 2010) conceptualisations of social capital and habitus.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPPORT AND SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

In the analysis, the interview data (n=23) was sorted thematically, focusing on which support students with low levels of inherited educational capital mobilised. We focused on the sup-

port that transcended, socio-economic background, ethnicity/race or gender. We identified three types of themes regarding support that the students singled out as significant in their school performance, irrespective of their background: 1. *Unconditional emotional support*. As one student pointed out. “She [mother] helps me to prepare for my tests. She asks me questions and I answer them.... She is my moral support. My mother knows when I am stressed. 2. *Peer support* as described by a student: “L is my best friend. He tells me the truth and stops me from doing stupid things”. Another student pointed out: “I usually work with those that are on my level and they are the most fun to work with. Yes, I hang out with classmates that I know are on the same level or slightly better” and 3. *Teacher’s support*: I have a teacher. She is very good and encourages me if I doubt about getting a certain grade. She always tells me I can get it and when I get the grade she says, ‘What did I tell you?’

The results show that there is a combination of three factors that spur these students to excel academically. The quality of the student–teacher relationship, i.e. the engaged teacher. Unconditional supportive family, i.e., parents who push these students to do their best, but at the same time minimise everyday school anxiety. Finally, socialisation with like-minded peers who provide them with academic and non-academic support and motivation. (see Osman et al, 2020; Månsson, et al, 2021)

MECHANISMS AND MEANING IN THE SOCIAL INVESTMENT IN ITSELF

From the students’ own stories of what drives them to perform well in school, we aimed to discover the mechanisms and meaning in the actual social investment (to become aca-

demically high-achievers). For this analysis we used interview data (n=52) from different gender, socio-economic, educational and migrant/native backgrounds. In our latest article (Carlhed et al, 2021) we developed a tentative analytical model of Bourdieu's (2010) concept of *illusio*, which we use as a dimension of habitus, like a magnifying glass.

The core meaning in *illusio* is the strong *belief* in the necessity of an actual social investment, but we also focused on three aspects 1) its specific *catalysing origins* in relation to specific life circumstances and habituses, 2) the *social targets* e.g. people the social energy involves and 3) the *gains* – that is what makes them believe the game is worthwhile. From the students' narratives we reconstructed a main theme: 'Reasons for seeking success' and four sub-themes which reflected the variation of reasons and were called different kinds of *illusio*: *Revanche*, *Proficiency*, *Fear of failing* and *Expectations*, and in each sub-theme we explored how the specific *illusio* came into play with the habitus.

Differences were apparent between students with a migrant background and native Swedes when it comes to experiencing racism or low expectations from previous teachers and classmates. For example, the *Revanche* *illusio* was activated or catalysed by habitus clashes from these former experiences and was driven by an urge to restore their human dignity. Another example is when children of immigrants uniquely talked about restoring the parents' and family's social position (which was lowered during the migration process) by the student's high academic achievement. Thus, the gain is about a higher social position in social space. At the same time this *illusio* involved a larger range of social targets compared with the other *illusions*. There are very strong emotions connected to all *illusions*; anger, fear, joy, love, pride, shame and of course hope – for a lucky future.

CONCLUSION

During our ongoing work we are slowly reaching in-depth knowledge about the logic of practice behind a particular social investment in itself – to perform well in upper secondary school and the type of support that is necessary and significant to reach momentum and persistence in the processes. We hope that our model can assist researchers in empirical studies to further develop knowledge about the social aspects of academic success and we hope to continue by analysing our longitudinal data, in progress. The present study contributes to a small but emerging body of literature, which focuses on contextual factors that can add to the educational resilience, and educational success of students.

The final example of research is presented here by Camilla Thunborg.

LEARNING TO NAVIGATE THE SUBURBAN TERRITORY

What is it like to grow up in a disadvantaged suburb and how do young people learn to navigate the suburban territory? In the project: *Spatial pockets of (in-)equalities*: we explore the life careers of young adults, 18-25 years, in disadvantaged areas in Sweden. In this example we analyse biographical interviews with Bahar, Claudio, Fahtma and Filip. We define learning here as both a construction and a re-construction of lived and unlived lives (Alheit, 1995; Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Bron & Thunborg, 2017), through storytelling and participation in different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Lave; 2019).

The suburb studied has about 400 young adults (between 18 and 25) and in total 4,600 inhabitants. It is situated a short distance from an upper-class residential area, diversified when it comes to ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and balancing between becoming gentrified or even more disadvantaged. At the time of the interviews a young man was recently murdered, by his best friend, outside his own apartment. His destiny became part of the young adults' re-construction of their lived and unlived lives. What made them stay on the right side? From their stories, I found that learning from family and significant others, participation in school and navigating suburban norms were the most important factors in ending up on the 'right side' and in this example I have narrated their stories and used their own words to come as close to their own account of their lives as possible.

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Significant others were important for staying on the 'right side'. The guy that was murdered lacked support. Claudio and Filip's mothers supported them from the beginning and Claudio also met a girl who taught him about 'goodness'. But what is supportive? Fathma thought of her mother as too protective, and started to lie in order to be able to live her own life. Bahar had serious conflicts with her father, was notified to the social service and was placed in emergency homes. After troublesome years with drugs, anorexia and serious illness, she considered herself 'lucky to be on the right side'.

PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL

A good school was seen as an important factor as they spent a lot of time there and the guy that was murdered went to the nearest school in the suburb, as Claudio and Fathma also did. In school Claudio discovered differences between ‘Swedes’ and ‘Blackheads’ and learnt to fight. Fathma was harassed daily by different guys. Bahar went to another school, where she learnt to drink and take drugs. Only Filip went to the school in the snobbish area and had good school experiences. In a retrospective perspective, school contributed to different paths.

LEARNING SUBURBAN NORMS

Learning to navigate the norms of the suburb was important and at the age of ten, the risk of becoming a criminal started. The norms were rough and aggressive: ‘loyalty was everything’. The guy that was murdered was a nice guy, bullied at times, and thus became an easy target for criminal gangs. Filip begun to play handball and became an elite player, and navigated between that world and the suburb by being diplomatic. He even talked himself out of being robbed three times. After falling in love, at 15, Claudio quit fighting and stayed at home, ‘out of trouble’. He started to study and did well, but dropped out and nearly became addicted to TV games. Fahtma started upper secondary school in the city, pretending to come from an area with a better reputation. Despite wishing to escape from the suburb, she was recently forced to sign a cell phone contract for criminals by one of her former class mates. Bahar moved back to the suburb and got a job. She dreamt of becoming a social worker to be able to make a difference for others.

DISCUSSION

In the public debate about disadvantaged suburbs much attention is paid to young men at risk. The results of this study focus on the importance of significant others, school and activities that break with the suburban norms to stay on the 'right side'.

The four young adults could identify themselves with the murder victim as it could have easily been one of them. To become part of the suburb, Claudio learnt to fight; falling in love became a turning point, and studying and escaping into the world of TV games his way out. Filip, with one foot in the suburb and one elsewhere, learnt diplomacy. Having supportive mothers and significant others was crucial for staying on the right side for both of them.

The two women struggled between the norms of their families and the suburb and became victims of both. They had no support from their families, or in school, but survived. Fathma learnt to lie and pretend to be someone else. Bahar got help from society and returned, wanting to make a difference for others.

One conclusion is that being double victims as women in disadvantaged areas needs more attention in disadvantaged suburbs in both public debate and research.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

These were just three examples of understanding adults learning: adulthood, non-traditional students, and disadvantaged adults but also young adults from the perspective of the Adult Learning Research Group. They provide useful illustrations of the various methodological and theoretical approaches used

within the group and the interesting results which can emerge through such research.

The Adult Learning Research group has its own dynamics by depending on the composition of various members with their own research prospects, ideas and careers, and obviously each member has his/her own topic of interest. Thus there is a variety of projects and concepts. Nevertheless, already now, as we understand and support each other theoretically and methodologically through stimulating criticism and discussions, we are still looking for tasks which could bring us together along and across our themes. One opportunity might be a common book, an anthology, in which we could find the core and peripheries of our rich landscape of adult learning and links between them. The other is a project that a whole group could be involved in: the process of writing a proposal. Such an initiative has already been initiated. We have just applied for such a project and hope to be funded.

To engage in a common project could be a way to consolidate the group even more, even if only those members who have permanent positions stay, while others finish their projects and move on. We see that we already have a high level of collaboration and teamwork within the group, as we have been fortunate enough to see some researchers come back to the Department and continue their collaboration with us. As a group we are not involved in any specific teaching program yet, but we are engaged in several programs and courses which we can link to important aspects of our research. Obviously there is a potential in our group to develop programs directly connected to our research.

To conclude, we hope that from a mosaic and variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, we will be able to achieve a holistic understanding of adult learning.

The Adult Learning Research group is coordinated currently by two colleagues: Camilla Thunborg and Małgorzata Malec Rawiński, while responsibility for moderating the seminars shifts among senior researchers, which contributes even more to the mosaic of the adult learning landscape.

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SAMMANFATTNING

EN MOSAIK AV FORSKNING OM VUXNAS LÄRANDE

Forskning om vuxnas lärande utgår ifrån att lärande är en livslång, livsvid och livsdjup process som sker i formella och institutionella samt i vardagliga informella sammanhang. Ett grundantagande är att människor formas av olika livsvillkor utifrån deras sociala och etniska bakgrund och tidigare livserfarenheter, de platser där de bor och de sociala sammanhang de deltar i. Samtidigt formar människor också sina egna livsvillkor genom de beslut de fattar och de unika erfarenheter de har. För att utveckla kunskapen om vuxnas lärande används en mångfald av forskningsansatser, metoder och teorier för att empiriskt utforska såväl vad som lärs och hur lärande sker som under vilka villkor det görs, utifrån ett mikro-, meso- och makroperspektiv. Forskargruppens arbete kan liknas vid en mosaik av ansatser, perspektiv, metoder och fokus. I det här kapitlet beskrivs denna

mosaik i såväl ett historiskt som ett nutida perspektiv. För att ge ytterligare fördjupning ges tre exempel på aktuell forskning. Det första exemplet baseras på polska invandrades berättelser och behandlar vad det innebär att lära som äldre. Studien visar att polska äldre migranternas berättelser inte kan reduceras till migrationserfarenheten, utan att de också bär med sig en myriad av relevanta livserfarenheter till det nya värdlandet. Livserfarenheterna berikar sedan deras möjligheter till lärande. Det andra exemplet handlar om vilka villkor som krävs för att lyckas i skolan och fokuserar på gymnasieelever med olika bakgrund samt identifierar ett antal sociala villkor som har betydelse för deras studieframgång. Forskarna identifierade tre typer av stöd som eleverna oavsett bakgrund såg som betydelsefulla för skolprestationen: känslomässigt stöd från betydelsefulla personer, stöd från kamrater och stöd från lärare. Det tredje exemplet handlar om unga vuxna i en utsatt förort och hur de lär sig att navigera mellan olika miljöer och undgår risken att hamna på fel sida. Resultatet visar på vikten av betydelsefulla personer, en bra skola och deltagande i aktiviteter som bryter mot förortsnormerna. En slutsats är också att kvinnor som vill bryta mot traditionella familjenormer och/eller har svagt stöd hemma lätt blir offer för kriminella grupperingar i förorten och riskerar att bli dubbelt utsatta. Dessa kvinnors situation behöver större uppmärksamhet i både samhällsdebatt och forskning. Kapitlet avslutas med visioner och mål för fortsatt forskning.