

Volume 28 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rcééa

CJSAE Book Review

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editor-in-Chief: *Donovan Plumb*
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

28,1 February/février 2016
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

PRIVATE WORLD(S): GENDER AND INFORMAL LEARNING OF ADULTS

Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska and Cristina Vieira (Eds.). The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Collaboration with Sense Publishing, Rotterdam, 2015, 194 pages.

Private World(s): Gender and Informal Learning of Adults is an important and timely publication. We are in a very complex, gendered world today. Issues of gender are highly visible, manifest in instances of sexual and gender harassment on university campuses, in social media, and in military ranks, coupled with the reinforcement of stereotypes—femininities and masculinities—through war propaganda, advertising, and film and television programming, to name but a few. Yet as the editors of this volume argue, there is insufficient gender questioning and reflection in society in general and in adult education in particular. The latter is especially worrisome given that the primary principles of adult education are to raise awareness, foster critical forms of thinking, combat discrimination, and encourage pedagogical action for justice and change. This book provides food for thought in the diverse and provocative connections it makes between contemporary issues of gender, informal learning and lifelong learning, non-formal and formal education and within and through daily life, and social interactions.

The introduction of this widely available online text sets the stage by defining the concepts used throughout, particularly the concepts of gender and socialization, illustrating how they are reinforced through cultural symbols such as language and art, religion, politics, and other types of institutions such as family and the military. Both tacitly and overtly, these sites help to characterize, and one could even argue stabilize, normative masculine and feminine identities and behaviour.

This edited volume is divided into three sections that include chapters by 22 authors who employ a range of theoretical perspectives in diverse contexts to explore processes of informal learning in relation to gender—again, both male and female. The authors come only from Europe and Australia but are affiliated through the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults' Network on Gender and Adult Learning.

In the first section, entitled *Private Worlds*, the focus is the intimate spheres of life, with four chapters that deal with interpersonal relations. Katarina Popović, Maja Maksimović, and Aleksandar Bulajić's chapter explores through discourse analysis and interviews the problematic of masculine gender identity-shaping during the Serbian war. They illuminate how "regressive" forms of transformative learning can reinforce and strengthen notions of heteronormativity in the form of masculine, physical, and political power, arguing that adult educators need to pay attention to these types of situations and their power to

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
28,1 February/février 2016
ISSN1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

“transform” in negative ways. In Chapter 2, Ostrouch-Kamińska presents biographical research on dual-career couples. Her findings show how power in “equal” relationships is connected with value systems, self-esteem, and respect for a spouse and based on principles of equality, justice, and freedom. Astrid Seltrecht’s chapter looks at the informal learning that happens around breast cancer, for both men and women. In the final chapter in this section, Joana Pisco Véstia da Silva and Cristina Vieira explore the learning strategies of non-literate women over the age of 65 in a small municipality in Portugal. Their findings show that even though these women have suffered over their lifetimes the prejudice of sexism, illiteracy, and later ageism, they have learned to become agents of social change.

The second section of the book, *Minorities and Activism*, focuses on gender issues and activist initiatives that seek to give voice to people who are suffering or who have experienced several types of gender-based discrimination. Catherine André and Elisabeth Hofmann describe a French network of women—“La Barbe”—and how they actively work to denounce male domination in official institutions, particularly in political and financial spheres. Letitia Trifanescu looks at migration as a source of empowerment for women to challenge pre-established, historically embedded gender domination patterns and learn very different relations for their new lives. Barry Golding and Lucia Carragher explore the importance of “men’s sheds” in Australia and Ireland, spaces where all men—heterosexual, gay, or bi—can come together and talk as men. Their research also shows that although some have been ambivalent, women have in fact played very important supportive and facilitative roles in the success of men’s sheds.

The four chapters in Part 3 focus on non-formal contexts of informal learning, exploring gendered knowledge and experience. Susana Villas-Boas, Albertina L. Oliveira, and Nátalia Ramos present findings of a needs assessment of residents in a parish within the city of Porto in Portugal, outlining how gender inequalities have resulted from the different roles played by each person throughout his or her lifetime. Gender must therefore be considered in the planning and implementation of all educational programs if gender equality is to be reached. Małgorzata Ciczowska-Giedziun explores the meaning of informal education in constructing gender assumptions for students preparing to be social workers, illustrating how their awareness has an impact on perception, attitude, and behaviour toward clients. Martina Endepohls-Ulpe, Elisabeth Sander, Georg Geber, and Claudia Quaiser-Pohl analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 female Austrian scientists and six German scientists working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. Results suggest the importance of informal learning through parents, siblings, and peers in enabling them to enter these professions. In the final chapter, Elmira Bancheva and Maria Ivanova present their research on the School of Management, New Bulgarian University. The research examined the learning methods employed by both female and male managers and executives and the effect of gender and organizational culture on their participation in the workplace. The final chapter of the book brings many of the threads from the chapters together and identifies the new perspectives they bring to the field of adult education and their implications.

The main strength of this book is how it looks at gender from both masculine and feminine angles. Yes, men do have a gender here, and it is taken up in many creative ways. This volume constantly reminds us that “each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns that she is worth less” (p. 9). We therefore need to continue to use our pedagogical practices—and understand the power of informal learning—to

empower women and to challenge problematic social conditioning. However, it also argues that the same situation exists for boys. Boys and men are constantly bombarded with images of male heroes who are powerful individuals who single-handedly save the world (and the weak females who have tripped and fallen). These male models do not show feelings of fear or sadness, but rather exhibit stalwart, aggressive, and all-powerful behaviours. Another strength is the introduction, as it provides one of the clearest descriptions of the complex world of the different types of education and learning that exist in adult education. A weakness is probably more my own shortcoming. I am in no way a fan of PDFs. I find them impossible to negotiate. Just as you are reaching the final paragraphs of a page, the view jumps to the next page—deeply frustrating. I am a fan of accessibility online, but there needs to be something more user-friendly than the trickster PDF.

This aside, this edited volume is a very different and very enlightening gendered text that is essential reading for anyone wishing to improve their ability to expand and explore today's complex gender issues in their classrooms, seminars, or workshops.

Darlene E. Clover,
University of Victoria