
Lecture - Why gender-segregated learning groups for older men might be a good idea: A theory of conditional social equality

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Presentation by Helene Ahl

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Abstract

Men's Sheds are informal learning groups for older men, or men beyond the labor market. They offer men somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. Men's Sheds are usually equipped with a woodworking and metal shop, a kitchen, sometimes a garden, and the activities are decided by the members, so no Shed is exactly like another. Previous research has documented a host of beneficial effects from participating in a Men's Shed, such as improved health, improved wellbeing, social cohesion, and learning. Interestingly, men in Men's Sheds also collaborate across class divisions, and divisions of disability. This observation challenges the theory of cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD), which postulates that inequalities and social divisions will necessarily increase over time. Using evidence from studies of informal learning groups in Men's Sheds in three countries, we conclude that some social divisions among members in homosocial groups, in this case groups of older men, may actually decrease – but only under certain conditions. Male-gendered learning groups that were relatively homogeneous by age helped erase class divisions and softened gender stereotypes, while other divisions such as sexual orientation and ethnicity were kept intact. Our theory of conditional social equality (CSE) predicts that homogeneous learning groups may enable some aspects of heterogeneity, but other aspects of heterogeneity may not be tolerated, thus maintaining in-group cohesion. It also predicts that in-group homogeneity and boundary setting towards out-groups may be prerequisites for the acceptance of (some) aspects of in-group heterogeneity. All of this has important implications for adult learning in both heterogeneous and homogenous groups.

Biographical note

Helene Ahl is a professor and researcher at Encell, the National Centre for Lifelong Learning at the School of Education and Communication at Jönköping University, Sweden. She is a well-known feminist scholar and has published widely within feminist theory and entrepreneurship. Her research also includes work on motivation, adult learning, and workplace learning. At present, she leads a research project on women's entrepreneurship in rural areas, another one on mothers who start their own business, and a third on the role of civil society in the integration of recent immigrants, in co-operation with McMaster University in Canada. She is also a Visiting Scholar at Lancaster University. She teaches Gender and Organization at the Human Resource Management Program, and Feminist Theory for doctoral students. For a list of publications see <https://intranet.hj.se/en/personinfo?id=2327>