

Gender and Polish family discourse in adult education: Towards family informal learning of adults

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Abstract

The main aim of the paper is to reconstruct the family discourse in adult education in Poland in the context of gender research perspective. In reference to the latest literature, both international and Polish, the author analyzes a family as a place of adult learning and family learning/informal learning of adults as a process; reconstructs the examples of family research in adult education, as well as gender approach in adult education, gendered learning of adults, and examples of gender sensitive research in Polish family discourse in adult education. At the end the author presents a case of own biographical research on partnership in marital relations in dual-career families as an example of using gender filter in researching family life of adults. Concluding, the author underlines the role of gender sensitive approach in researching tacit knowledge of informal learning of adults. .

Keywords: Adult education, dual-career family, gender, gender equality, informal learning in a family

Introduction

Learning is integrally linked to the common life activities taking place in the professional, personal and social spheres. Adults learn not only to deepen or update their knowledge but also to redefine their roles and re-create their identity. Today, changes in the socio-cultural context of adult learning can be seen, as well as the expansion of the fields and areas in which they operate and in which they develop their daily experiences (Bron, Kurantowicz, Olesen & West, 2005). The andragogic discourse emphasises the shift in exploring the areas of adult education from the classroom dimension, contact with the book or the teacher to the ‘person-world’ system (Malewski, 1998, p. 113) and from teaching processes to learning processes, which Malewski (2010) describes as ‘a



paradigmatic change in andragogy'. One of the basic elements of this person-world relationship is the family.

Family and adult education

The family is one of the most natural and basic spaces to construct and experience everyday life. Przybylska and Wajsprych (2018) distinguished the most important aspects establishing the family as a place of lifelong learning. The family, in their view, implements different dimensions of learning – as a result of what we have learned within the family, as a mental process, as a social interaction between family members and the social environment, as an integrated process involving direct and indirect interactions and the processing of the knowledge acquired within the family. According to the authors, the family is an area of adult education practice in which different learning styles are revealed, e.g. reflexive learning through the experience of, for example, problem situations in the family, transformative and discursive learning, e.g. in a situation of change experienced by family members. The family is also a source of collective cognitive patterns and learning motivators, manifested, for example, in the meanings attributed to education by family members. Finally, the family is the space where learning lasts the longest, it takes part in every area and every form of adult education and different models of teaching work:

It is a subject, a touchstone and a source of formal education understood as social development (technological model) and non-formal education as an individual consciousness (humanistic model), it can be a critical model in non-formal education in the case of, for example, oppressive living conditions (thinking, reflectiveness, intersubjectivity of meanings) (Przybylska & Wajsprych, 2018, p. 20)

Despite the natural predisposition of the family to form the space for adult education, until recently, as Nuissl states, it was not very often present in andragogical reflection, while at the same time posing the question of 'whether families are too complicated to be the subject and context of andragogy' (Nuissl, 2016, p. 200, for: Przybylska & Wajsprych, 2018). One of the reasons for this 'under-representation' of the family is that it is seen primarily as a space for children and young people, their development, socialisation and upbringing. Exploration of the meaning of the family as a space for adults to function has so far dominated mainly in sociology (e.g. analysis of lifestyles, health behaviours, pathologies, family roles), psychology (e.g. well-being, identity shaping, role strategies, marital selection), or social pedagogy (parenthood, family relations, intergenerational transmission of patterns in the family), i.e. using the theoretical achievements of these sciences. In recent years, however, there has been an increasing amount of research and reflection, internationally (e.g. Bodner-Johnson, 2001; Furedi, 2012; Gabb, 2010; Ličen, 2014; West, 2007) and in the Polish family discourse, where the analysis of, for example, the above-mentioned strategies of functioning in social roles or parenthood emphasizes the contexts of adult education, for instance, the role of the family in the education of adults, learning parental roles by parents (Jurgiel-Aleksander & Ilkiewicz, 2018), fulfilling the role of a parent as an opportunity to develop in the family as a space for adult learning (Kozubska, 2015) and being a parent as a teaching experience (Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2017), patterns and types of intergenerational relations between older parents and their adult children (Krzyżowski, 2013), learning between family generations (Aleksander, 2013), the role of intergenerational learning in the process of hominization (Jarosz, 2015), parentification (role reversal) in the family in the experience of young

adults (Sapia-Drewniak & Żarczyńska-Hyla, 2017), the importance of generativity in attaining adulthood by contemporary man (Wąsiński, 2015).

Adults in the family and their learning processes are therefore progressively becoming a subject of research both in the international and Polish areas of adult education, where the main focus is on adult learning strategies, biographical construction of family roles, development of one's own concepts of family and family life, and ways of experiencing change and conflict within the family in the context of their developmental potential. This has a very positive impact on the development of the Polish discourse of the family, complementing the hitherto existing prospects for family research with andragogic issues. It is worth emphasising that an increased interest in family explorations in the field of adult education was connected with the development of interest among adult education researchers in the issue concerning informal education and informal learning of adults which, as Livingstone (2001) states, 'have been relatively little explored to date and warrant much fuller attention from those interested in comprehending the nature and extent of adult learning' (p. 4).

(Informal) learning of adults in a family

The family as an educational environment is a culturally determined space with a partially stable but variable boundary; a space that is the source of the daily experience of individuals, which determines the conditions, causes and contexts of learning/activity; a space that is filled with permanent and impermanent as well as material and non-material results of learning and activity (Przybylska & Wajspych, 2018; Ostrouch, 2005). The family is also a natural place of social life and a space of multifaceted relations, creating an 'interpersonal space' (Sztompka, 2016) – everyday life in the family is most often realised in close and immediate surroundings with other people and always in some kind of relationship. It is in these relationships that the experiences that form the basis of adult learning are created; learning directly 'in co-presence, co-participation and interaction: in events, in life situations, through contact and interaction at the same time and space, through meetings, conversations, dialogue, observation, action, etc.' (Dubas, 2011, p. 7).

This relational context of functioning in the family, as well as the fact that the family provides natural conditions for the daily activities of its members, means that adult learning in the family is carried out primarily in an informal way. Informal learning is connected with everyday routine and experience of everyday life, it is often unconscious, as it is not the aim of the activity, but accidental, and it contains a certain level of reflection and action (Livingstone, 1999). Its important feature is the independent assimilation of new meaningful beliefs, attitudes, values, knowledge and skills because it is based on working out one's own experiences through reflective activity. Informal learning is also an individual matter that can rarely be predicted in advance (Colleta, 1996; Kluzowicz, 2017). It is underlined in the discourse of andragogy that shaping behaviours and attitudes is a process that occurs more efficiently in the environment of informal education (Kurantowicz & Nizińska, 2012).

Informal education, like the family, is sensitive to the changes taking place in the world. It responds much faster to the problems and challenges of today's world than formal education and uses the experience of adults, which makes it easier to overcome life difficulties and promotes their personal development. Informal learning in the family is also known as 'family learning'. Ličen (2014) defines it as a process 'that takes place in all phases of the family life-course, where it is more intensive in some phases and less intensive in others' (p. 121). The author also describes the areas of family learning, which

are ‘relationships and communication, support and supervision, decision-making and ‘emotional management’ or affective strategies, conflicts, cohesiveness of the group or dyad and attachment, diet, finances’ (ibid.).

The primary objective of informal adult learning is to meet the demands of emerging situations and life problems. Since family life, although in different configurations, accompanies a person throughout his or her life, informal learning within the family is a lifelong process, an autocreative activity of people who reflectively organise their experiences which make up a coherent identity. They are characterised by the subjectivity of actions, a sense of causality and responsibility of learners for independently produced knowledge, which Malewski (2010) links with their proactivity. In this author’s opinion, it should be based on reflective criticism, which consists in adopting a cautious attitude towards recognised patterns of problem-solving and its own pre-courtesy shaped on its basis. This ‘reflexive criticism’ also becomes the basis for learning in family relationships, which are embedded in the experiences and biographies of individual family members. Learning from the biography of others, as well as from one’s own biography, is an example of biographical learning (Alheit, 2010; Dubas, 2017b) and is a practice which, according to Dubas (2017a), guarantees the dual subjectivity of relationships in the educational process, as well as the discovered field of non-formal learning of adults, who, strongly rooted in their often difficult and changeable family life, want to function better in it and discover new knowledge about themselves and about others (Usher, Bryant & Johnson, 1997).

The development of a learner’s biography is strongly intertwined with the biography of the family, which makes a universal reference point in everyday life, associated with a strong emotional bond, for a new identity. Informal learning, based on the impact exerted on the individual by the surrounding world, culture and the experience gained from intra-family relationships, also allows the individual to acquire information about gender constructs. Through all kinds of informal learning, whether is it self-directed learning, incidental learning or socialisation, following the typology proposed by Schugurensky (2000), people can construct tacit knowledge, including the learning of gender messages.

A discourse based on the socio-cultural background of gender differences emphasises the key role of education and socialisation in shaping female and male identity (Bradley, 2007), especially in the family. The socialisation messages received by learners include intellectual training to develop the intellectual qualities of women and men, emotional training to indicate the gender-approved expression and strength of emotions and social training to determine one’s place in society. Their content relates to gender-specific desirable personality attributes, characteristics and behavioural styles and the typical or expected types of activities and interests of each sex (Brannon, 1999). The sustainability of socialising messages about gender roles is also determined by their form, contained in the structure of family life, (social) relationships within the family, patterns of behaviour, control system, daily practice and interactions. This also applies to adult learning.

Gendered learning of adults and gender approach in adult education

In the late 1960s, searching for the answer to the question concerning the sources of male domination, researchers, influenced by women’s movements, rejected the understanding of gender as an unchangeable natural fact and defined it as a social fact, and as a process in which the meanings associated with it are created in personal, political, historical, cultural and linguistic contexts (Bradley, 2007). Gender pattern has become more a

feature of the interaction/situation than a feature of the individual. The subsequent stage was to challenge the homogeneity of the 'female' and 'male' categories and to explore their different social meanings. Acknowledging that the definitions change with the social context, they are no longer considered as universal categories on the basis of which specific gender relations are constructed, and the social processes that constitute them are considered to be identical to processes that produce differences between women and men (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Research shows that gender plays a major role in the ways that people function in adulthood and in the nature of the challenges undertaken by them (Bem, 1993; Johnson-Bailey, 2005; Oesterle et al., 2010; Schoon, 2015). The process of defining, constructing and conditioning education and learning is also gendered (Dybbroe & Ollagnier 2003; Merrill, 1999), as well as socially constructed developmental standards, strategies for dealing with crises, experiences and biographies (Brannon, 1999; Mandal, 2008; Ollagnier, 2013). As gender is an important perspective of understanding and giving meanings to everyday life by women and men, the research focused on the construction of gender could build a theory grounded in real men and women's experiences and their language.

However, until recently there have not been enough gender questions in most adult education discourses (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003). As Ollagnier (2008) states,

It is reasonable to ask to what extent learning, throughout childhood to adulthood and particularly when occurring in training programmes, can significantly change the way in which an adult is recognised by his or herself, by relatives and friends or by the society in which he or she evolves (p. 19-20).

Following that statement, the situation has become to change in the late 1990s, especially in the English-speaking world research in which it was underlined not only the specificity of women in adult education but also gender differences in general in the elaboration of appropriate educative strategies (Leathwood & Francis, 2006; Ollagnier, 2008). The major themes relative to gender in adult education literature in the past years have been focused on feminist pedagogy, the hidden curriculum, the classroom climate, women's silence, women's voices and collaborative learning (e.g. Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2005; Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira, 2016) as well as men's learning (e.g. West, 2003, 2008; Foley et al., 2014; Golding, 2015). According to Bron (2008), most methods which are used by gender researchers in adult education can be defined as ethnographical and interpretative – many of them especially use life history and biographical methods (e.g. Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003; Merrill, 2011; Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira, 2015). In this way, they can reveal the process of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) to emphasise the different ways of experiencing the world by women and men. However, not only qualitative methods are used to explore the different worlds of adult women and men's education but in many quantitative studies, gender is treated mostly as a variable differentiating research results, which enable to catch the frame of the gendered world of education, but is not enough to better understand how adult women and men develop their relationships and biographies in the contemporary world (e.g. Maksimović et al., 2016; Ostrouch-Kamińska, Fontanini & Gaynard 2012; Endepohls-Ulpe & Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2019). This, of course, reflects the fundamental differences between the two types of research in social science in general and not just in gender research.

In Poland, as in Western adult education, research aimed at differentiating the educational experience of adult women and men began to appear in the late 1990s. Similar research approaches were also applied, in which gender was not treated as a variable in

statistical analyses but as a way of organising experience in the social world. Examples include international biographical studies – Gieseke, Siebers, Solarczyk and Wesołowska (2002) on women’s educational experiences in Poland and Germany, Skibińska (2006) on the interpretation of individual micro-worlds of older women: education, work, family and leisure time, distinguished in narrative studies, Mazurek (2013) on educational biographies of women affected by breast cancer, Wojciechowska (2018) on female and male patterns of biography reconstruction in the perspective of professional change, on learning processes of the rebelling women by Szczygiel (2017) and Litawa and Sygulska (2017) on the ways women of different generations perceive and experience adulthood. What is specific about these and other studies in adult education in Poland, which analyse ways of experiencing the world on the basis of gender, is that it is difficult to find a feminist or gender approach as an interpretative perspective. This also applies to family discourse in adult education.

Researching gender in family spaces of adults

The main reason for that lack of gender interpretative perspective in the interdisciplinary field of family research in Poland is because it is dominated by the normative-ideological discourse of knowledge about the family (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2002). It reveals a valuation instead of a description, clearly defined objectives mainly concerning its duration, as well as educational functions, models and attitudes. Writing about the pedagogical discourse of the family, Smolińska-Theiss observes that it refers, ‘on the one hand, to social reports and, on the other, to the social teaching of the Church’ (Smolińska-Theiss, 2014, p. 184), where, in different perspectives, an ‘academic description is mixed with religious values and duty’ (ibid.). Any deviation or change in the area of family life is considered mainly in terms of dysfunctions, crises and pathologies. This discourse favours the traditional family model, with hierarchical gender- and age-based systems and complimentary roles assigned on a gender basis. This simplified, universal picture of the family avoids, according to the author, ‘fundamental, controversial questions about the role and place of the family in the socialisation of children, about the transformations of the modern family, theories and the language used to describe these changes’ (ibid.). It also avoids questions about the role and place of the family in the process of adult learning, especially in the emancipation of women and men from the imposed versions of social roles in the family, often based on gender stereotypes.

Meanwhile, in the modern world, a global lifestyle revolution is taking place with the epicentre in the area of privacy and intimacy (Giddens, 1992). The motives for family formation and its continuation are also changing – a transition from normative prescriptions to individual decisions of partners based on mutual attractiveness and emotional closeness, and from family roles, which were the result of assignments, to those resulting from achievement and negotiation, is evident (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Szlendak 2010). New dimensions of the dilemmas related to the disintegration of pre-existing reference systems and role models, as well as traditional determinants that help in the construction of a single biography, are also important for the shape of these roles and family relationships (Beck, 1992; Bauman 2000). As West writes (2008):

Men and women, mothers and fathers, are renegotiating roles and relationships, at many levels. What it means to be a parent, or for that matter a man or woman, is contested and people are forced to make many more choices about how to raise children and about relationships (p. 70).

In the contemporary family discourse, also found in adult education, the family is not considered as an institution and a basic unit of the social system, but as a space of multifaceted relations, constantly constructed in everyday processes of interaction. In this way, what becomes the aim of the analyses is an understandable and reflective insight into ‘the intersubjective experience that accompanies a human being in his or her family life’ (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2002, p. 46). Examples of problems undertaken in the area of gender research in family spaces of adults in Poland are social micro-worlds of mothers and learning the role of a mother (Pryszmont-Ciesielska, 2013), women’s biographical experiences related to motherhood (Sulik, 2017), daughter-mother relationships in biographical research from a feminist perspective (Ostrouch, 2004), intimate relationships of women of different sexual orientation (Grochalska, 2017), men from poor environments (Golczyńska-Grondas, 2004), men’s way of experiencing the middle-life crisis and developmental tasks (Chmura-Rutkowska & Ostrouch, 2009), fatherhood in generational perspective (Sosnowski, 2018), a husband as an informal carer of his wife with breast cancer (Zierkiewicz, 2020), daughter-father relationships (Ostaszewska, 2017) and constructing gender equality in marital relation (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2015).

Informal learning of spouses: An example of gender sensitive research

The above-mentioned research on constructing gender equality in marital relations provides an example of gender-sensitive biographical research in adult education, the aim of which was to find out how gender equality is constructed in everyday life becoming an individual project of a family, how the process of negotiating the shape of everyday life and marital relations is progressing. A dual-career family in the definition by Rapoport and Rapoport (1976) was the studied learning environment of the spouses. This model of a family was chosen on purpose, because in family discourse and research it is often identified with egalitarian type of a family/marriage (Gilbert 1993). Simultaneous engagement of spouses in family and professional life as well as their high and/or prestigious professional positions requires negotiations of the division of tasks and roles. So other working parents *can*, but dual-career spouses *have to* negotiate and (re)construct the shape of their relations within the family in the process of learning (from) each other.

Specifying the criteria of selection the interviewees I used the definition of above-mentioned dual-career family. During several meetings I conducted twenty in-depth biographic interviews separately with women and men, who were at the age of between thirty two and forty seven, highly educated and professionally active (full time job, high status: academics, lawyers, managers – executive officers, business owners, psychologists, doctors), who lived in cities, had been in relationship for minimum three years, had children and lived with them (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2015). Trying to reach the understanding and reflective insight in intersubjective family experience, I referred to the foundations of phenomenology of the family (Klein & White, 1996, p. 106-109).

According to Kaufmann (2001), conducting research into the sociology of the couple, a contemporary couple (spouses) and the relationship between them are becoming increasingly important in human biography. Permanent and informal interactions in marriage lead to the third type of socialisation, apart from primary and secondary socialisation, which is marked by creating a part of identity in a collective form. Marriage proves to be a space of three spheres of influence concerning identity: her, his and a common identity – ‘the marital self’ (Kaufmann, 2001; Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2017).

Przybylska and Wajspych (2018) or Petriglieri (2019) provide a similar description of marriage as a space for constructing a new ‘self’. Berger and Kellner (1964), situate

such a process in a biographical experience. According to the authors, families generate their intimate, individual meanings, which usually do not reveal themselves outside the family, and which are built by family members based on their shared history, perspective and interpretation of events. Within each micro-world, which also includes the family, there are certain assumptions and constructions of meaning to control and build experiences. The family sphere includes the sense of sharing both history and the future, as well as the sense of 'having a biography'. Therefore, entering into marriage implies a process of 'fusion of biographies', in which not only are common experiences beginning to be shared, but also ways of their constructing, understanding and explaining (Klein & White, 1996). Here understanding is a particular form of experience in which, as Schütz (2008) wrote, 'common sense thinking gets to know the socio-cultural world' (p. 9) as a result of the learning process.

Gender equality and partnerships within the family, in different meanings and scopes, was such a 'result' of the learning process in my research. In this article it is not my intention to present the research results, but to emphasise the potential of using gender filter in researching family life of adults. When a woman and a man enter into the aforementioned marital, biographical fusion, they bring to the common relationship education, aroused cognitive curiosity, axiological capital in the form of the ethos of work and personal development and the conviction of the power of one's own actions. They also bring a specific concept of being a woman and a man in a relationship and in a role, which is established in the trajectory of life. In a process of learning gender equality and partnerships within the family, in their daily interactions, they modify them through participation in processes in which they together construct situational experience and transform it into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions, senses and meanings and integrate it into their own biography (Gutowska, 2013; Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2017).

By adopting the gender filter, it was possible to grasp what a certain piece of reality (in this case gender equality) is for/in the experience of women and what it is for/in the experience of men. My research has shown that in dual-career family, women seem to go far beyond the generic, stereotypical pattern of female devotion to more subjective relationships, based on respect and dignity of both sides of the relationship, self-development and out-of-home activity, as compared to men – modifying it in the sphere of emotions and power relationships within the family. According to the results (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2015), the partnership appears to be a highly complex construct reaching far beyond classifications related to power relations, domination, responsibility, role specialisation or emotional equality; a construct which seems to be a 'map' rather than a linear definition of gender equality; a construct based on the feeling of spouses' gender equality rather than its objective existing, and different for different interviewees. What is common to all spouses is the fact that it becomes a central part of the new, marital identity, which is constantly being constructed in the various dimensions of everyday life related to the professional sphere (and space of earnings, career, support, prestige and social recognition) and the sphere of private life (with spaces of sharing household duties, parenthood and marital relations). Its processual nature, its opposition to the dominant, stereotypical definitions of the roles of women and men in the family and also often to the individual, biographical achievements of the spouses, require them to develop reflective criticism and reflectiveness – a constant analysis of the reality of their own lives, initiating and deepening their self-understanding (Skolnick, 1992; Beck, 1992).

With reference to andragogical theories emphasizing the processual dimension of learning embedded in a broad socio-cultural context, family learning in the marital relation is related to everyday experience and the biographical formation of one's own

identity in the process of (self-)reflection. Reflection and self-reflection become the basis for biographical learning, which emphasises, as Alheit states, ‘learning as a (trans)formation of structures of experience, knowledge and action in the context of all aspects of people’s lives and the reality around them’ (Alheit, 2002, p. 65). Biographical knowledge, i.e. knowledge that has been experienced and realised, here becomes transformative knowledge, turning individuals into the ones that are transformed, depending on the changing life situation (Solarczyk-Szwec, 2015). What makes it difficult for both women and men to redefine the concept of gender roles in the family and to turn to partnership are the gender-stereotyped culture and patterns of family of origin rooted in that culture that influence the petrification of generic dichotomies.

Conclusion

An indispensable element of modern human life that enables adaptation to changing living conditions is the constant negotiation of everyday reality, analysing the circumstances of one’s own life and learning in the course of one’s own experience in everyday interactions (Illeris, 2002; VanEvery, 1999). The studies cited above show that the existence of modern families, especially those attempting to build, on the everyday basis, their own relationships in a way differing from those experienced in the families from which they originate, is linked to a process of constantly negotiating the shape of the family everyday life; an elusive process, often impossible to settle within a specific framework, conditioned by the individual experience of family members.

The gender approach in family research on adult education makes gender not only a differentiating factor in the experiences and biographies of women and men but also an important filter of interpretation, defining the perspective of understanding and meaning. This provides an opportunity to capture the changes in modern societies. It is one of the available forms of deepening and broadening the knowledge about what has been established so far and the importance of gender for the social functioning of women and men. It can be a source of new research methods to analyse the role of cultural scripts determining the place of women and men, as well as to analyse socio-political phenomena, their transformation and the processes of adult learning inherent to them (Bron, 2008; Titkow, 2011).

The gender-specific way of experiencing the social world, reflecting not only the biological but, above all, the social and cultural nature of differences between men and women, is the main framework in gender-sensitive research for the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained. The meanings attributed by adult learners in research on the family environment, e.g. marriage, motherhood and fatherhood, relationship with parents and aging allow insights into tacit, ‘hidden knowledge’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990) concerning the family relations of women and men with a focus on a different perception and way of experiencing the same activities on the basis of gender; knowledge not available in direct experience but it is revealed in everyday activities and the structure of family relations. This shows that the gender approach in researching family life and (informal) learning in adult education represents an important perspective for constructing a better understanding of the surrounding world and its processes, including adult learning processes.

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