Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon: A structurationist perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the barriers older learners experience at a University for the Third Age (U3A) in Lebanon. Contemporary literature often categorizes these barriers into dispositional, situational, and institutional realms, arising as individual or structural phenomena. This article envisages barriers as the (un)intended consequences of (inter)actions among different institutional agents — namely, learners, teachers, and administrators — within the learning environment. Following Anthony Giddens’ dualistic understanding of agency and structure, the article aims to transcend the typical dichotomic approach in understanding barriers older persons face when engaging in lifelong learning. Shedding light on this new perspective on barriers as (un)intended consequences of agents’ (inter)actions at the U3A, this work raises two research questions: (i) what barriers confront older learners when engaging in non-formal learning? Moreover, (ii) taking older learners’ perspective, how are these barriers (re)produced in the (inter)actions of different institutional agents? Following a reflexive deductive thematic analysis of interview data with ten members at a U3A in Lebanon, this article generates two types of barriers. First, barriers as outcomes of interactions involving learners with teachers and administrators (curricula issues, teachers and teaching methods, language of instruction, class protocol, and accessibility). Second, barriers as outcomes of interactions involving learners (unwillingness and inability to socialize, as well as social bias and prejudice). This paper concludes that the actions of institutional agents at the U3A (re)produce its modus vivendi and modus operandi and calls for the promotion of continuous dialog and reflexivity as countermeasures against bias and exclusion to enhance the U3A’s age-friendliness.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; Older adult education; Barriers; Age-friendly university; Educational gerontology; Structuration theory

1. Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, older persons increasingly participate in formal, non-formal, vocational, and leisure-oriented learning opportunities (Montayre et al., 2022). Consequently, the demand for age-friendly learning opportunities not only at higher educational institutions (HEIs), especially universities, but also elsewhere, reached unprecedented levels (Formosa, 2019a). HEIs cater to older individuals’ educational
Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon

Notwithstanding the positive impact of learning and the quest of educational gerontologists to widen the umbrella of opportunities for late-life learning, various barriers confront older learners and hinder their learning experience. Research on such barriers typically categorizes them into situational (the circumstances experienced by a person at a particular time, such as a life crisis), institutional (the obstacles unintentionally erected by educational institutions, thus excluding certain groups of learners), informational (institutions’ failure to properly communicate learning opportunities they have on offer), and psychosocial barriers (dispositional or attitudinal beliefs, perceptions, values that inhibit a person’s participation) (Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). These typologies of barriers are widespread in educational gerontology research.

Despite the pragmatic usefulness and analytical validity of the above-mentioned typologies of barriers, they raise some concerns. Studies using the above typologies of barriers to late-life learning commonly report physical disabilities, insufficient financial support, previous educational experiences, lack of confidence and motivation, embarrassment, time constraints, insufficient information, and absence of social support (encouragement by family and friends) (Hu, 2023; Wang et al., 2016). Moreover, findings consistently underline how women, retirees, non-ethnic groups, and especially older persons with higher educational attainment, who are living in urban localities and physically mobile, are more drawn to lifelong learning programs than their peers (Hansen et al., 2019), signaling covert social and exclusionary dynamics at play. The praxis in the literature is to examine the roots of identified barriers in individual action or structural and institutional policies and practices (e.g., Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016). Such examination of barriers is reductive since it showcases older learners grappling with psychosocial or enduring institutional barriers at different times. As such, they risk falling into the trap of the subjectivist-objectivist antinomy (Findsen & Formosa, 2011), examining social realities as separate on the continuum of agency or structure. Besides presenting with an analytical antinomy, current literature calls for changes in the modus operandi of educational institutions. However, it simultaneously fails to pinpoint the role of other responsible agents, namely older learners (e.g., Hu, 2023), in driving these changes, apart from completing exit-evaluation questionnaires (e.g., Hachem & Vuopala, 2016; Silverstein et al., 2002).

The common belief that “you cannot teach old dogs new tricks” on the one hand, and the age-unfriendly teaching methods, choice of curricula, and premises that often characterize learning engagements on the other, do not arise independently. Instead, this paper argues they are but the results of interactional and intersectional dynamics within which institutional agents (henceforth, learners, teachers, and administrators alike) enact roles and exhibit specific interests. After all, when key factors such as social
class, gender, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, urban-rural divide, and disability operate to restrict learning opportunities, they always operate in tandem with each other (Findsen & Formosa, 2016a; 2016b). Indeed, it is essential to recognize that the issues of participation and non-participation in older adult learning interlink with a myriad of dualistic structural and individual relations; the separation of which is antecedent. Although older persons' decision to engage in learning manifests as an individual decision, the surrounding policy, institutional, and environmental context directly impact the availability and nature of educational programs, and institutional agents, in turn, can impact this context.

The present study aligns with a recent theoretical undertaking framing older adult education in a Giddensian structurationist perspective (Hachem, 2023) and takes stock of the above research gap. Cognizant of the possibility that life chances can lead older persons to be excluded, or exclude themselves, from late-life learning (Hansen et al., 2019), this work, among others, investigates insufficiently examined difficult personalities acting as possible barriers (Brady et al., 2013). First, it evades the literature's standard practice to separate barriers into individual and structural levels, thus their oversimplification. Second, it unpacks their complexity by proceeding at a more illuminating angle, that of Anthony Giddens' (1984) notion of duality of structure. Subsequently, it examines the barriers older persons encounter during non-formal learning activities when barriers correspond to the outcomes of (inter)actions (or the lack thereof) among institutional agents.

Drawing from empirical data at a University for the Third Age (U3A) in Lebanon, this study answers two research questions: (i) what barriers confront older learners when engaging in non-formal learning? Furthermore, (ii) taking older learners' perspective, how are these barriers (re)produced in the (inter)actions of different institutional agents?

2. Literature review

The literature dealing with barriers to older adult learning is primarily premised on Cross's (1981) typology of dispositional, institutional, and situational barriers or Darkenwald & Merriam's (1982) typology of situational, institutional, informational, and psychosocial barriers. A summary of this literature shows that a dualistic perspective on barriers to learning in older age may be timely. For instance, Purdie & Boulton-Lewis (2003) interviewed 17 older Australians about the barriers that prevent them from accessing learning activities. Informants pointed toward age-related physical and cognitive limitations, personal complications, and social difficulties — most of these accompany aging. If physical obstacles included reduced mobility, sight, hearing, and illness, the most frequently cited were cognitive. They touched on personal issues, such as failing to concentrate, being overwhelmed by information, forgetting procedural sequence, and needing to "be taught in language they understood" (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003, p. 136–137).

In this study's sample, older women struggled more in using computers and phone banking and accessing the premises, signaling a differential gender-based experience of barriers.

More recently, and focusing again on the Australian context, Boulton-Lewis et al. (2016) reached similar results. The authors reported personal barriers, such as health, money, and a lack of time, and structural barriers, including long travel distances to learning venues (especially for older persons living in rural areas), non-interesting subjects, lack of computer skills, limited information on curricula, and employment schedules. In this case, individual and structural barriers were highlighted separately. Other institutional barriers experienced by the sample, which the survey quantified, consisted of "administrative bureaucracy (26.4%), not being able to get into one's course of choice (24.7%), being ineligible for admission (18.8%), having a low educational background (18.1%), having had bad experiences at school (13.1%), and not feeling welcomed on campus (10.3%)” (p. 191).

In the North American context, Silverstein et al. (2002) evaluated the age-friendliness of the University of Massachusetts in Boston by focusing on the barriers older adults face when pursuing higher education. Findings showcased dispositional, situational, and transportation- and technology-related barriers and classroom-related difficulties. The program schedule, caring for grandchildren, and other family obligations were perceived as significant hurdles by respondents, especially those aged 50 – 59, as were the difficulties concerning their transportation and commuting to and from the university campuses. As expected, digital competency was reported as a barrier inversely related to age. It followed that the majority of respondents aged 60+ (58%) expressed greater interest in the opportunity to enroll in classes through television in community centers or colleges compared to 51% of respondents aged 50 – 59 who preferred the Internet as the medium. Finally, respondents highlighted how difficulties in locating classrooms, scheduling appointments with professors, and the demands of assignments were additional obstacles for them. While acknowledging the study's limitation in that the sample was healthy and relatively highly educated, results noted a significant break when persons surpass their 60th birthday as far as barriers are concerned, where
Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon

International Journal of Population Studies

Volume X Issue X (2023)

a significant percentage of older learners cited “hearing what other classmates said,” “reading what was written on the board,” and “hearing what professors said” (Silverstein et al., 2002, p. 24). Here, preferences, for instance, concerning the medium of learning, whether through the internet or television, emerge as a problematic issue for the institutions, also observed in other studies below, albeit in various forms.

The barriers older learners face when attending Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLIs) also received scholarly attention. One consistently reported barrier in U3As is elitism, as both survey and ethnographic data generally uncover a compounding middle-classness in U3A membership bodies (Formosa, 2019d; 2019e), even when U3As do not restrict admission. Indeed, to middle-class older people, joining U3As means returning to an arena where they feel confident and self-assured of its outcome and development; meanwhile, their working-class peers are apprehensive about joining an organization whose name bears such “heavy” class baggage. A qualitative study on a U3A in North-East England uncovered three exclusionary factors which acted as barriers to enrolment and participation, namely, “lack of knowledge about group presence and purpose (both locally and nationally), organizational name and location” (p. 1598) (Patterson et al., 2016). Echoing the results of other international studies, the authors identified this U3A as a middle-class entity frequented mainly by older persons with higher-than-average levels of educational attainment. Their results align with the previous research stressing how health, caring responsibilities, transportation, and the formal nature of late-life learning constitute critical barriers to older adult learning.

Formosa’s (2021b; 2021c; 2021d) research at a U3A in Malta approached the barriers to older adult learning from a gendered perspective. His findings underlined how U3As not only fail to attract a learning body that represents the Maltese population gender ratio but are also marked by a double exclusion of older women and men. On the one hand, U3As tend to perpetuate patriarchal ascendency since older women learners remain less visible during learning programs, as male peers are more likely to dominate any discussion despite being in the minority. On the other hand, most U3As’ curricula reflect the interests of older women (especially health literacy), so men’s interests in the natural and physical sciences are overlooked. The author noted that many married women were often prevented from pursuing their wish to start learning. Their husbands, the gendered role expectations of their families, and, surprisingly, same-aged women in their social networks encouraged them to interact with family members rather than join learning centers.

At a U3A in Lebanon, Hachem and Vuopala (2016) uncovered institutional, infrastructural, dispositional, and situational barriers. The authors analyzed “end-of-term evaluations” by 247 older learners. They grouped the barriers that active U3A members experience into situational barriers such as the lack of time, dispositional barriers such as inabilities to grasp certain subjects and to follow the language of instruction, and institutional barriers concerning course logistics and the infrastructure of the premises. This study provided an additional example of conflicting choices and preferences concerning the language of instruction.

Turning our attention to OLLIs, several studies reported barriers that inhibited or prevented learning in such institutions, namely, space, staff, situational barriers, competition, difficult personalities, and resistance to change (Brady et al., 2013; Hansen & Brady, 2013; Hansen et al., 2016). Space was a frequently-mentioned barrier to participation in that many OLLIs could not expand their premises despite the growth in enrolment, thus being obliged to turn away learners or to hold social gatherings and extra-curricular activities. A lack of parking spaces and the fact that institutes in rural geographical areas included multiple campuses or program centers separated by vast geographical distances were also highlighted as working against a sense of community among learners. Furthermore, staff was reported to be “stretched beyond the levels of human endurance to keep the existing programming of high quality” (Brady et al., 2013, p. 636).

Other barriers earmarked by Brady et al. (2013) constituted situational barriers. These referred to personal circumstances that prevented full and active participation of OLLI members and ranged from ill health to a return to employment. Competing programs also hindered the growth of learning possibilities among older learners, especially when OLLIs and other local external entities where OLLI members reside offer similar and competing courses. The competition was also heightened because many institutions have tuition-reduction or tuition-exemption policies for retirement-age people. The external competition manifested in public provision of adult education, community colleges, retirement facilities, hospitals, museums, local parks and recreation programs, and other providers in their geographic region. Nevertheless, difficult personalities mean some members have a private agenda that may not support the OLLI community’s overall health. If older learners are hypercritical of OLLI or classmate and vocal about it, it can impact the atmosphere at the institution, but so can
forming cliques and unpenetrable groups of friends. Citing an OLLI administrator and informant:

One of the biggest obstacles I find is gossip. This inhibits a solid community and lowers morale. Many of our members have been here for years and have formed cliques. My hope is for new members to be welcomed but this does not always happen. (Brady et al., 2013, p. 637)

Finally, resistance to change when teachers were stuck in their ways and were unwilling to reconsider content and instructional methods — such as not dedicating any time for discussion at the end of the lecture, even in the face of critical feedback, resulted in a consistent drop in attendance rates. Still, within OLLIs, Hansen et al. (2019) analyzed the responses of 65 directors about their perception of the challenges that shackled the learning experience of older adults. Findings were in accordance with Formosa’s (2021e; 2021f) conclusion that older persons with lower-than-average levels of educational attainment register lower participation rates due to the education begets education phenomenon. Older adults from ethnic minorities were similarly under represented, so Hansen et al. (2019) iterated that “age-friendly universities will have to address longstanding issues of intersectionality when addressing structural racism in higher education” (p. 233).

The body of literature presented above has several implications that justify this research study’s undertaking. On the one hand, findings highlighted how socioeconomic status, infrastructure, the regulations/requirements set by educational institutions or organizations and their operations, failure to communicate available learning opportunities effectively, and course content are significant deterrents to late-life learning. On the other hand, crucial relevance to this study are cautions raised against de facto categorization of “barriers […] as being ‘structural’ in nature and other barriers as ‘non-structural’” (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016, p. 195). Classifying barriers as individual or structural may potentially and erroneously responsibilize solely individual learners or educational institutions (Hu, 2023). The latter fragments the mitigation of educational barriers by seemingly treating older learners as clients who, at the end of their experience, are invited to review educational services provided by the institution by completing exit evaluation questionnaires (e.g., Hachem & Vuopala, 2016; Silverstein et al., 2002). In contrast, the reality is much more complex and requires delicate treading in examining barriers, not least among older learners enrolled already in campuses, which have conventionally been a hotbed for younger generations. One way forward is applying a structurationist perspective to the barriers to older adult learning, which involves institutional agents ceaselessly and reflexively examining and mitigating such barriers.

3. Theoretical framing

The previous literature is undoubtedly commendable for eliciting the social and individual barriers that older persons face when engaging in late-life learning. However, one consistent lacuna is the neglect of how obstacles arise from the dialectic interplay between structure and agency and how this dialectic may influence their mitigation. For example, if caring duties and assuming responsibility for the welfare of loved ones in older age emanate from individual choices, such choices are enacted within and primarily influenced by structural impetuses and social rules that constrain choice and limit personal maneuvering. Similarly, a lack of time for learning due to occupational commitments may also be inextricably linked to structural income security issues brought on by restrictive and agist retirement policies. Even dispositional and situational barriers arising from the pretext of personality traits and personal preferences intertwine with structures reinforcing institutional and infrastructural barriers, making their separation highly reductive.

This study avoids addressing structure as an external entity beyond the reach of institutional agents (learners, administrators, and teachers). Thus, it investigates so-called “agentic” and “structural” barriers to older adult learning through a dialectic and structurationist approach instead of conceiving their relationship as a dualism. Inspiration for this move is founded on Anthony Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory concepts: duality of structure and reflexivity, as well as manifest and latent action functions.

First, the duality of structure holds much potential in examining barriers to older adult learning in terms of individual action that (re)produces structure, which itself can constrain action to learn in older age. According to Giddens, institutions are “the more enduring features of social life” (1984, p. 24) as they witness interactions between agents who assume different positions. Giddens (1976) also describes institutional interactions as occurring at different levels and include the habitual actions of each institutional agent, the set of these agents, and the relationship of interdependence between the actions of any one agent and the actions of other agents. Hence, structures (including so-called structural barriers) primarily result from individual actions enacted at institutions, whereas they become the milieu where such actions occur. Structuration implies that people actively make and remake social structures in everyday life, implying that action and structure are necessarily intertwined rather than being opposite to each other (Giddens, 1984). If structuralism emphasizes a pre-eminent role of the social over its parts, that is, human subjects, humanism is rooted in hermeneutic traditions where agency and meanings are
attributed a paramount importance in explaining human conduct. As a compromise to this "monolithic" one-sided emphasis, Giddens (1984) claims that "the basic domain of study of the social sciences, […] is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time" (p. 2). These social practices are recursive and continually recreated by social actors as they express themselves as actors. Consequently, structural analyses of a social phenomenon, including barriers to older adult learning, would be more complete when considering individual agents' motives and reasons for action.

The second vital concept for this study is reflexivity. Giddens argues that agents are knowledgeable about why they engage or not in a specific action; one type of knowledgeability in Giddens' sociology is called reflexivity. Giddens (1984) stresses reflexivity as a form of knowledgeability, which he defines as "… not merely self-consciousness but as the monitored character of the ongoing flow of social life," and accordingly, he grounds it "in the continuous monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display" (p. 3). Knowledgeability underlines that humans are purposive agents, and they have reasons for the activities they undertake. In other words, when asked, agents can discursively explain these reasons, even when/if they lie about them. Indeed, this reflexivity is neither perfect nor absolute since sometimes the intentions behind an action and its consequences do not match.

The functions of action, the third vital notion in this study, must be clarified to understand how consequences escape the intention of actions and become barriers to learning in older age. Action, according to Giddens (1979), has latent and manifest functions, and that is why he emphasizes that we "investigate the effects of the 'escape' of activity from the intentions of its initiators upon the reproduction of practices …" (p. 216). Sometimes, actors may not be aware of the consequences of their actions as they (re)produce social systems; thus, these are called unintended consequences of action. Such a latent function is distinguishable from a more manifest function to action, which is the initial intention behind an action. The more reflexive agents are, the more aware they become of possible unintended consequences of their actions and, hopefully, ways for their mitigations.

Taking cues from Giddens (1976; 1984), this study posits that barriers at lifelong learning institutions for older people are henceforth defined as intended or unintended consequences to the (inter)actions of institutional agents (learners, teachers, and administrators). Barriers, which older learners experience, are then formed when the actions of other institutional agents limit an individual learner's agency. Structures mediate such (inter)actions but, in turn, (re)produce them across time and space, obeying the duality of structure.

4. Methodology and methods

To examine the barriers that confront older learners, this study opted for a qualitative research design, employing a reflexive deductive thematic analysis with ten older learners at the U3A in Lebanon.

4.1. The empirical context

Inaugurated in 2010, the U3A in Lebanon offers educational opportunities for older adults aged 50 years or older. Its modus operandi runs, to a large extent, in parallel to U3As in other countries (Hachem & Vuopala, 2016). The U3A operates under the continuing education center at a prominent private university in Beirut, offering tertiary educational programs in various academic disciplines. The first of its kind in Lebanon, this lifelong learning program provides an age-friendly academic environment where older learners can exercise their passions and share their wisdom as they interact with other older learners, faculty members, and traditional university students. Each academic term (two per year) has a rich palette of lectures, study groups, field trips, book clubs, and online house parties. Even during the pandemic, the U3A moved its educational activities online and organized socially-oriented events called house parties over Zoom, and at the time of writing, it plans to continue offering education following a hybrid model. The curriculum covers diverse subjects encompassing humanities, arts, sciences, health, and politics. Teachers, who consist of university staff, faculty members, and younger university students, in addition to those recruited from wider social spheres, provide their services free of charge and enact their teachings with a large margin of freedom. Over the years, the U3A attracted more than 800 older learners. However, its membership remains characterized by the dominance of the educated middleclass living in the capital, Beirut (Hachem et al., 2017).

4.2. Recruitment of informants, interviews, and ethical considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was secured through Sweden's national ethical review board and through the host university's institutional review board in Lebanon. After informing current and previous members of the U3A about this study and the possibility of participating, an online survey link was sent to older learners who had responded positively to the call. Out of the 40 replies received, 11 consented to participate in semi-structured interviews. Since one of these 11 informants
Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon

International Journal of Population Studies

Volume X Issue X (2023)

7

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did not meet the eligible criteria—“experiencing barriers to participation in older adult learning” and “enrolled at the U3A for at least two terms” — this study only included the responses of ten participants. The ten informants consisted of two males and eight females. Most held at least a bachelor's degree and came from a middle-class background due to their past white-collar professional positions before retirement. Table 1 presents basic information on each research participant.

All informants consented electronically to be interviewed online using the Zoom platform. U3A members are tech-savvy since their registration process at the U3A occurs online. Thus, no member was left uninformed about the study. At the start of each interview, one of the authors introduced the study and guaranteed the informants’ right to skip a question, end the meeting, or withdraw from the study without any aftermath or having to provide a reason. In addition, each informant was given a pseudonym of their choice used during the interview to safeguard their anonymity. Interviews lasted approximately 40 min and were transcribed afterward and analyzed using NVivo. The relevant parts of the interviews concern questions soliciting challenges that informants encountered on various levels (educational and social) at the U3A.

4.3. Reflexive thematic analysis

Data analysis followed a “reflexive thematic analysis” (RTA), constituting a type of content analysis with a high theoretical flexibility. RTA shows affinity toward a critical orientation for qualitative research, is interpretative, and deepens the understanding of individual experiences by identifying patterns and themes in a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA distinguishes themes from codes in the knowledge production process, whereby codes are “entities that capture (at least) one observation, display (usually just) one fact,” while themes “are like multi-faceted crystals — they capture multiple observations or facets” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 13). The decision to use RTA was based on its usefulness in framing personal accounts in broader social contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA consists of six steps (Byrne, 2022).

This study followed a deductive approach to RTA that, to some extent, is inspired by but transcends Cross’ (1981) typology of barriers: institutional, dispositional, and contextual. However, data analysis mainly drew on a structurationist perspective of barriers (Giddens, 1984), where they are understood as (un)intended consequences of (inter)actions among institutional agents. Hence, data analysis was not only cognizant of the individual and structural nature of late-life learning barriers (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016) but also premised on the duality of structure whereby individuals (re)produce structures while acting within structures (Giddens, 1984). This theoretically guided analytical approach overcame the individual/structural dichotomy at the intersection of dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers through the following steps. First, a familiarization with interview data, and second, following thorough and repeated readings, the initial codes were laid down so that observations were coded as barriers. After grouping different barriers, the third and final step was to generate themes, review them, and revisit the codes’ distribution across such themes. Table 2 categorizes the emergent themes — interactions involving learners with teachers and administrators and those involving learners together — which shall be presented in the subsequent two sections.

5. Results

5.1. Barriers: Interactions involving learners with teachers and administrators

The first theme of barriers this study identified are those emerging in (un)intended consequences that originate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Living arrangement</th>
<th>Educational attainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaker</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nour</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sansoum</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>Joumana</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Living alone</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thérèse</td>
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<td>Partnered</td>
<td>Living with partner</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oula</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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in the (inter)actions of institutional agents, including learners, teachers, and administrators. Regarding such barriers, the informants cited accessibility to campus, class protocol, the language of instruction, curricula, and teachers and teaching methodologies.

Barriers pertaining to accessibility to campus were physical and impeded informants’ timely attendance at their chosen classes. Older learners living outside the capital, Beirut, experienced congested traffic on their way to the U3A and were often confined to their cars for over an hour. Moreover, as Maria and Shaker were often late to classes, they claimed that traffic was not the only reason for their delay but also pointed out that the difficulty of finding adequate parking space was even a more significant obstacle: “the thing is you go around and around to find a parking, but there is none. No parking spaces on the streets neither in parking lots” (Maria). Indeed, traffic and lack of parking spaces make the U3A less accessible to the point where participants often skip sessions altogether for fear of disturbing the classroom, breaching the class protocol, and, as a result, being reproached by the U3A administration or teachers.

Accessibility and class protocol intertwined in a rather complex way, especially for participants who wished to follow the recommendations in an administrative document that proposes guidelines for proper conduct during learning sessions. Concerning this protocol, informants raised two opposite notions. On the one hand, learners expressed support for implementing the class protocol because it serves a much-needed function. For instance, Nour remarked that when learners arrived late, they disturbed the learning session as their entrance interrupted the teacher or rendered the teacher’s voice inaudible for a short while. On the other hand, Maria, who lived far away from the learning venue, disagreed with Nour and claimed that she was often late due to traffic, something that she had no control over, and was regretful that her late arrivals solicited negative communications from the U3A administration, a reaction which she described as “infantilizing.” To avoid such communication, Maria misses the sessions whenever she is late. She thus wished for leniency and understanding for older learners who arrive late. Nevertheless, Laura, Samsoum, and Nour insisted that the class protocol be strengthened further to reduce late arrivals, classroom chatters, and phone disturbances.

Apart from timely attendance, finding a parking spot, and respecting the class protocol, making the most out of this learning experience depends on learners’ language skills; hence, the barrier of the language of instruction. The U3A attracts older adults with higher-than-average educational attainment who tend to speak one foreign language besides their native one. Some informants highlighted that the language of instruction is decisive for their choice of classes, regardless of their interest in the subject. Samsoum, for instance, pointed out that while scientific subjects are typically offered in English, topics within humanities and the arts are offered in Arabic and that this resulted in some tension between those who are proficient in Arabic and others who are more comfortable studying in English. Many older Lebanese speak French as a second language rather than English and, consequently, struggle with English courses. Case in point, Nour and Laura are two participants who make their case from opposite sides. Nour has limited knowledge of Arabic and can only attend classes in English. Meanwhile, Laura’s English skills leave room for improvement, as she is more comfortable in classes instructed in Arabic.

In addition to the language of instruction, curricula contributed their share to the barriers informants experience at the U3A. The curriculum content was deemed relatively boring by some participants for lack of what they called the “wow effect.” Despite the richness and diversity of the topics offered at the U3A, Joumana and Antar claimed that when they returned home, their inspiration did not last long: “the times when I was really blown away or wowed by the information that is being presented were few.” Some participants did not remember
much information, nor was their “curiosity ignited” to further read up on an issue discussed in the classroom on their return home. While Antar stressed that the type of education being offered to him serves his primary goal of socializing through learning instead of the “actual learning programs,” Joumana confessed to adjusting her expectations from learning at the U3A and claimed that despite the benefits, it falls short of “education in the real sense.”

Concerns were raised regarding classroom instruction over and above curricula issues. Most informants voiced several problems concerning teachers and their teaching methods. One grievance is that teachers’ relatively young life experience was perceived as problematic and insufficient to intrigue much more life-experienced older learners. Antar was very critical of younger teachers at the U3A. According to him, despite the commendable academic knowledge they possess, their life experience does not necessarily impress him and is hard to relate to, as younger teachers seem to lack the “life dimension” deemed necessary to inspire older learners:

At least [teachers] must have some life experience. Not someone who has not been married, for example, does not have children, never got divorced, does not have a mortgage, you need somebody to give you a life dimension concerning the material in context for it to make sense. (Antar)

Teachers’ instructional techniques also resulted in a range of objections. For informants, teaching methodologies and practices are central to the learning experience since they “can make or break a session” (Antar), and they cited “boring teaching methods” (Samsoum) as a significant deterrent to their learning experience since it causes them to lose interest. Although grateful for the teachers’ voluntary work at the U3A, Joumana added that their instructional techniques were sometimes mediocre. Together with Samsoum and Antar, she experienced much boredom due to teachers’ instructional methods and referred to techniques that often fail to reflect a logical flow of ideas since many teachers are not necessarily “organized in their thoughts.” In agreement, Christine remarked that some teachers “hop illogically from one step to the other, especially during practical demonstrations,” and protested about most teachers’ “mediocre” classroom management skills.

In summary, when considering the (un)intended consequences that originate in institutional agents’ (inter) actions involving learners, teachers, and administrators, informants reported several barriers grouped into accessibility, class protocol, the language of instruction, curricula, and teachers and teaching methodologies.

5.2. Barriers: Interactions involving learners

Barriers did not only result from (inter)actions among learners, teachers, and administrators but also interactions involving learners. Hence, this study identified the second theme of barriers engendered by (un)intended consequences that originate in the (inter)actions involving mainly learners with other learners. These barriers included unwillingness or inability to socialize and the overlapping attitudes of social bias and prejudice.

Learners’ (inter)actions, or the lack thereof, although favorable in principle, may also have a darker side. They may be detrimental to the social experience at the U3A as informants reported difficulties forming friendships with fellow learners for different reasons. On the one hand, some learners were not interested in socializing in general, and on the other hand, some learners at the U3A socially distanced themselves from their colleagues. Antar, whose goal at the U3A was chiefly academic, was not interested in the social aspects of learning there. A second obstacle to forming social bonds incurred from attending different classes at different times. Christine noted that members she liked and wanted to befriend did not attend the same classes as her. A third difficulty in making friends was related to cliques among the U3A members, as informants testified to impenetrable groups of friends. Maria reported that some members are part of long-lasting groups of friends and distant family members, which restricted her access to them. Nour called these groups “an ongoing classer union of university alumni,” for they consist of returning students who once upon a time studied at the U3A host university. In addition, some participants described their relationships with other U3A members as mere “classmates” or “study comrades” rather than friends. This perception is partially due to a decision to refrain from investing in forging friendships at the U3A against the backdrop of possible social detachment and aloofness amongst the learning community.

More covert dynamics than an apparent unwillingness to socialize reveal social bias and prejudice, consequently influencing the social experience at the U3A and structuring additional barriers. Social bias materialized in the (inter) actions of some older learners who seemingly avoid socializing with other learners based on their background, opinions, or for finding some learners to be “annoying.” Four participants reported experiencing first- and second-hand instances of social bias and prejudice that were based, in their opinion, on presumed sexual orientation, religious beliefs, socio-cultural background, and simple is enchantment. For instance, Joumana shared her annoyance at a classmate for asking too many questions, which, in her view, were unnecessary. Even though she confessed that
her feelings originate in some bias, she justified them with his — the annoying classmate’s — lack of social awareness and skills: “So sometimes you think I should be better than this, but to what extent can you be the better person? I don’t know how you want to consider this, but it does happen.” In disagreement, another participant cautioned that all classmates deserve respect, for they are at the U3A to learn and not to be judged.

Other more articulated forms of social bias and prejudice emerging from the data pointed toward social divisions amongst the learning body. By ticking the “wrong” boxes on one’s socioeconomic background checklist, a learner can risk social rejection by fellow learners. Some study participants were concerned that the educational experience at the U3A is designed to suit the educational and social needs of what they called the “elite.” One participant recalled that on its launch, the U3A membership was characterized by the dominance of middle-class older persons. Later, when learners from lower social classes began to join, many middle-class members did not renew their membership at the U3A. For instance, Thérèse claimed that most members did not favor the participation of less affluent colleagues at the U3A. She recalled that when a new female member from a “not-so-dominant cultural background” joined the U3A, she “did not know how to behave to integrate” and, hence, “could not fit in.” Not only were social divisions based on socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, but social bias and prejudice were based on presumed sexual orientation and even certain religious beliefs, the undermining of which evoked feelings of alienation for some older learners. Oula allegedly felt excluded from a field trip because of her religious opinions, which were not looked on favorably by the group members overseeing the trip organization.

Although she dismissed the incident by saying that “people are free,” she poignantly added that there was no doubt that such findings are herein discussed from three analytical viewpoints.

First, there is an expected but striking similarity between the barriers identified in this study and those reported in the previous literature, including an earlier examination of the educational barriers at the same U3A (see Hachem & Vuopala, 2016), meaning that little has changed. Traffic, traveling distance, and parking space availability arose as critical issues hindering the timely attendance of learners (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016; Brady et al., 2013; Hansen et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2016; Silverstein et al., 2002). Moreover, members who commute from relatively far distances are disadvantaged compared to peers who live nearby or in the capital (Beirut), where the learning avenue is situated (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016; Hachem & Vuopala, 2016). The same also applies to teaching mismanagement and class organization and protocols, as difficulties tend to be addressed in a puerile manner, such as admonishing late arrivals for disturbing the classroom (Silverstein et al., 2002).

Findings also included insufficient offerings of interest and poor instructional techniques that seem to fail to evoke a sensational effect in participants and, on the contrary, diminish their interest levels (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2016). The satisfaction with teachers, teaching methodologies, and curricula content is a matter of personal preferences but tends to wear down the learning experience of those whose needs and desires remain unmet. Similarly, the language of instruction arose as an essential barrier that remains difficult to resolve (Hachem & Vuopala, 2016). The language of instruction can be problematic to those who do not speak it well enough, leading to a language-based course attendance and participation rather than an interest-based one. Findings also highlight teachers’ lack of life experiences and, consequently, the relevance of such experience to the lives of older learners, which signals dynamics of intergenerational discord. Taken together, these barriers not only threaten the learning experience at learning avenues targeting older persons but they hamper the educational ethos of late-life learning institutions and,
most importantly, impede its age-friendliness (Montayre et al., 2022).

Second, although the study’s results compare straightforwardly to previous research on learning barriers, social bias and the inabilty/unwillingness to socialize require particular attention, for they have not been sufficiently explored compared to other types of barriers. The study’s findings indicate other ways older learners impact later life’s social and learning experiences and can render them less than rosy on the social level. Many learners enjoy a rich social life outside their involvement in older adult learning and do not necessarily exhibit the need to widen their social networks. However, forming persuasive groups of friends and enacting personal agendas burdens the social experience in older adult learning with (un)intentional rejection and exclusion (Brady et al., 2013). On the one hand, this leads to learners giving up on the possibility of making friends. On the other hand, rejection seems to embed non-conscious forces that work on the strings of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, including sexual orientation and religious beliefs (Formosa, 2006; McAllister, 2018; Patterson et al., 2016). This bias is even noteworthy in the context of the relatively culturally diverse and open Lebanese society.

Third, applying the concept of duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) to the barriers that older learners experience allows for a new perspective on conceptualizing and mitigating said barriers. This perspective transcends the otherwise conventional analysis of individual versus structural factors distributed across a typology of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Findings showed that learners, teachers, and administrators are all involved in (re)producing barriers (un)intentionally by acting or refraining from acting. Consequently, fragmenting individual and structural barriers may not capture the complexity of their origins, their repercussions, and, subsequently, ways for undermining their causes.

The following examples reveal the complexity of barriers to the point that, even if they originate on an individual level, they transmogrify into a common institutional barrier. As such, the personal barriers metamorphose into a problem for involved institutional agents, not only cascading barriers for other agents but also becoming fertile grounds for reproducing such barriers. For instance, the barrier of campus accessibility manifests in congested traffic and parking spaces. Seemingly, these are encountered by individual learners on their way to the U3A from a significant distance. On not finding a parking space, they arrive late to sessions, disturbing other learners and disrupting ongoing classroom teaching. In addition, late arrival or even skipping classes reduced participation rates. It disrupted efforts to maintain a class protocol by U3As administration and teachers alike, transforming such barriers into structural dilemmas, especially when learners complain about teachers’ inadequate classroom management skills. Simultaneously, interactions emanating from late arrival provoke administrative reproach of tardy learners, which, according to them, sounds infantilizing. Here, arriving late leads to disturbing the teaching and deviating from the class protocol; both are unintended consequences of driving to the U3A in one’s car. At the same time, upholding the class protocol by the administration has the unintended consequence of infantilizing older members, who may instead decide to skip the session altogether.

Moreover, individual preferences (language of instruction, preferred teaching style, and interest in subjects) that also seem like individual preferences cannot, in reality, be separated from the institutional context where they occur. These encompass decisions regarding the course offerings, the language of instruction, and delivery modes, in which administration and teachers have the most considerable say. The following cascade of barriers is illustrative. The choice of language is often cited as a barrier relating to the individual level of proficiency in the language of instruction. Meanwhile, this allegedly individual barrier affects how interesting the curricula are perceived, primarily since scientific subjects are taught in foreign languages, and Arabic is used for the humanities at the U3A. In the end, turning an individual preference into a problem that teachers and administrators could solve at a time when their actions to promote specific languages in some subjects have the unintended consequence of excluding learners deficient in course languages.

Similarly, individual choices, decisions, and behaviors allude to some form of bias, as with the social experience of informants within this study. In this case, bias is more or less intentional since it aims to avoid contact with particular learners, but its structural effect on the U3A level seems less so. Exclusion occurs when some older learners are not welcome to join groups of friends, for whatever reason, or even on the receiving end of mockery linked to how peers perceive their identities. Indeed, exclusionary forces are set out, including prejudice visible at the structural level when specific groups of older learners are underrepresented at the U3A. Even when learners from non-dominant profiles attempt to enroll, existing social bias threatens their ability to thrive. Often, new members are unfamiliar with existing rules and ways of being with which other learners are acquainted; their exclusion at the U3A by individuals reinforces exclusionary forces, where prejudice occurs at the institutional level.
7. Conclusion: Now what?

Although far from inventing the wheel, this paper addressed existing dichotomies in understanding individual and structural barriers to older adult learning across situational, dispositional, and institutional levels. It shed light on the relatively underexplored barriers arising from social interactions among older learners at a U3A. It proposed a new definition of these barriers, at least within the scope of this study, as (un)intended consequences to (inter)actions between institutional agents (learners, teachers, and administrators) — a perspective afforded via Giddens' structuration theory and its concepts of the duality of structure, latent and manifest functions of actions, but also reflexivity. The latter's significance is clarified in this conclusion as a tool for mitigating unintended consequences and further examining latent functions to actions enacted by older learners and other institutional agents, including so-called personal preferences, teaching methods, curricula, and protocols.

Embedding barriers in a structurationist perspective calls for continuous reflexivity over one's actions, attitudes, and beliefs and those of others within the U3A. Here, end-of-term or exit evaluations (Hachem & Vuopala, 2016; Silverstein et al., 2002) may not change much, as institutional agents tend to responsibilize others instead of thinking of themselves as part of the problem and the solution. If older adult learning, and hopefully so, aims to empower older learners, partially responsibilizing them and other agents at U3As is needed, unless the point is to treat them as clients and consumers of educational experiences ceaselessly. Therefore, if U3As and HEIs strive to become age-friendly, they must create continuous educational channels and opportunities for dialog to increase reflexivity over barriers and promote self- and social questioning on the interplay between individual actions and their significance on the structural level and their active role in inducing personal and structural change.

Finally, future studies should examine how all institutional agents simultaneously experience barriers. The present study faced the limitation of solely examining the perspectives of older learners, whereby those teachers and administrators remain missing, even if reported second-hand. One exciting research endeavor is investigating how institutional agents mitigate the barriers to older adult learning. Finally, apart from targeting older learners, applying a structurationist perspective with non-participant older people is another possible way forward.

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Author contributions

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Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon

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Barriers to learning at a U3A in Lebanon

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