

[Review] Boeren, Ellen (2016) Lifelong learning participation in a changing policy context: an interdisciplinary theory (1st Ed.)

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Book Review: Boeren, Ellen (2016) *Lifelong Learning Participation in a Changing Policy Context: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (1st Ed.) Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. (1544 words)

Boeren (2016) seeks to integrate insights from sociology, psychology and economics to develop a theory of why some adults do (or do not) participate in lifelong learning globally, encompassing micro (the psychological-behavioural accounts of decision-making, class-based explanations of individual decision-making), meso (the role of educational institutions in creating and removing institutional barriers) and macro (national education policy) levels. The scope is therefore ambitious and provides a comprehensive, but accessible, introduction to the field of lifelong learning studies. The book is divided into three sections. Part one provides the necessary background information: definitions of the key terms used, and an overview of global participation rate statistics as collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Commission, along with recent developments in participation models. Part one thus provides the rationale for the book and an explanation of the policy drive to compete in the knowledge economy. Part two comprises an extended systematic literature review of the contribution of the disciplines to the study of adult lifelong learning participation, institutional barriers and country level determinants. Part three includes calls for further research and makes policy, practitioner and research recommendations. This division initially makes sense, after all, to fully understand the complexities inherent in such a large-scale synthesis a solid understanding of the context, current trends and existing literature is necessary. However, the limitations resulting from both scope and structure hinder the text's ability to critically navigate this field.

Part one provides the rationale, outlining the reasons behind the focus on adult lifelong learning (hereafter LLL) differentiating social cohesion and citizenship from human capital concepts in a knowledge-based economy and arguing that it is the latter that has come to dominate policy. This section then prepares the reader for the central theme of the book: why is it that highly skilled people are more likely to engage in LLL, resulting in a widening skill gap? But, if - as Boeren states - 'those with high levels of skill and education are most likely to participate in adult lifelong learning activities' (24) why is only cursory discussion of the reasons for unequal attainment in the compulsory sector and post-compulsory included? Compulsory educational attainment strongly correlates to social characteristics, including class (Blackman, 2017). Thus, the decision to progress to Higher Education may be traced back to GCSE results and the decision to take or not take A-levels (Gorard et al., 2006). Boeren makes it clear that compulsory and post-compulsory attainment is likely to have a lasting impact on participation rates, yet Boeren could have probed deeper.

Global evidence regarding this 'problem of participation' (p. 23) is then presented, combining a literature review and overview of statistical data. Boeren teases out the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers to participation (55-7). Overall, part one provides a clear and accessible introduction for those new to this area of study – including those interested in Widening Participation. However, some may find the lack of critical engagement with the individualisation and increasingly economic rationale in education frustrating. Having acknowledged the dominance of the human capital rationale, Boeren then relies on this position. For example, Boeren details the argument made by Field (2012) that LLL results in two beneficial impacts: (1) economic and (2) well-being (16). The former is discussed at length throughout the book, while the latter less so. This may result from the dominance of economic theory in the included literature and the statistical data, but it is not until part three that the dominance of the positivist paradigm is fully acknowledged. Furthermore, it is left unclear why mixed-method or qualitative research (such as the excellent volume edited by Livingstone, 2010) or work that challenges the individualising and economic rationale (such as Holmwood, 2014) are not included.

Part two turns to the disciplines to explore how they have theorised barriers to participation, focusing on psychology and 'micro-sociology'. While this section aims to provide a comprehensive introduction to decision-making, the interplay between agency and structure, and institutional barriers and country-level determinants, result in *déjà vu* as we revisit themes (and literature) - albeit from a different angle - already covered in part one. This section includes a rapid, and ultimately superficial, review of the behavioural psychology literature regarding decision-making models. In just twenty pages Boeren covers rational choice theory (64-5), expectancy-value theory (68-71), self-determination theory (71-3), the educator as facilitator (75-7), life-cycle theories (77-80) and biographical research (80-2). Those new to psychology may find this a useful introduction, but others may wish for a more detailed explanation and evaluation of each approach. Breadth here is achieved at the expense of depth. Furthermore, the tripartite structure means that the explanation of the difference between the disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches on which these chapters rely are not tackled until part three.

Boeren then turns to the 'micro-sociological' perspective, which while extensive in its review, is similarly limited in depth. Comprising just eighteen pages, this chapter summarises class theory (84-5), inter and intra-generational social mobility (85-7) and the importance of early educational experiences (88-9). Worryingly, Boeren appears to conflate the social capital theory of Putnam (2002) with that of Bourdieu (1986) and both with human capital approaches (84-5). For Bourdieu social capital refers to the network of actual or possible connections that any person may possess, and such networks provide individuals with either material or symbolic credentials both directly and indirectly convertible with the other forms of capital. For Bourdieu, capital is synonymous with power (Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, for Putnam, social

capital refers to membership of church groups, unions, and Parent Teacher Associations; in Putnam's conceptualisation social capital refers to civic engagement. Human capital instead refers to the skills and knowledge possessed by an individual, or their capacity, which can be translated into economic worth via labour. While each approach to social capital arguably share common themes, they also differ substantially. However, Boeren does not pause to explore these tensions in any detail: again, breadth comes at the expense of depth. This section is also undermined by its lack of deep engagement with macro (or indeed critical) sociological approaches, without which the structural constraints on adult decision-making are left unexplored until the (very concise) overview of Bourdieu's habitus and field and Giddens structuration theory in part three (138-40).

Having next provided a quick overview of the institutional barriers to participation, Boeren then summarises country-level participation trends. Boeren argues that the welfare regime typologies initially developed by Epsing-Anderson (1989) seem to hold for LLL as Liberal (USA & UK), Conservative (western continental Europe) Social Democratic (Scandinavian) LLL participation patterns are apparent. Boeren also finds that these models can usefully be extended to include Eastern Europe, Asia and the Mediterranean (120-7) while also arguing that extending such typologies necessitates further research and may minimise differences within and between countries.

Promising to integrate the findings into one interdisciplinary theory, part three contains a necessary auxiliary to part one as it engages critically with the data on which the book relies. Boeren concludes that there are broad similarities in the findings of the different datasets but acknowledges the underlying positivist paradigm and calls for more qualitative, interpretivist research. Again, it is not made clear why so few were included. Just three pages (146-8) are dedicated to integrating the previous insights into one interdisciplinary theory. The closing recommendations for policy (including public intervention in the planning of adult provision; the need for longitudinal data collection; greater focus on mature and part-time learners), practice (flexible course offers and improved dissemination of course information) and research (increased use of multilevel analysis to integrate diverse factors into one analytical model, along with greater use of in-depth qualitative and longitudinal research to inform policy) are consistent and appropriate, if possibly unlikely in the current funding and regulatory context.

Throughout the book, the prose used is clear and accessible, which delivers a comprehensive review of the literature, but one wonders if it should be published separately from the research that will no doubt follow. Boeren is to be congratulated on the extensive scope included here, but such scope inherently entails a loss of depth: in attempting to provide a systematic review of the literature on global patterns of lifelong learning very different theories are merged and it is not always made clear on what basis literature

is included or excluded. On the other hand, it provides a clear and comprehensive springboard for further research.

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