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# On older learners' naïveté: an examination of the emancipatory function of critical older adult education

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## ABSTRACT

Many critical educational philosophies assume that learners are naïve and unable to critically read their social reality. Critical educational gerontology (CEG) aims to emancipate learners from oppression, to which they are oblivious. This strand of older adult education charges teachers with the task of raising learners' naïve consciousness, by leading them on the (Freirean) path of critical reflection and critical action. Literature employing CEG concludes that this path often ends with learners being reluctant to engage in critical action because of their ongoing (internalised) oppression. In this paper, we adopt a critical stance towards CEG's logic of emancipation guided by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. As such, we question the inability of older learners to understand, and act on, their social reality independently from teachers. Starting from Giddens' theory, we apply a reflexive thematic analysis to interview data tackling the socio-economic reality of 11 older learners at a university for the third age in Lebanon. The results support the conclusion that older learners at the U3A can decode their social reality and reflexively engage in social change, but their efforts or reluctance are influenced by constraints, not necessarily naïve consciousness. Consequently, we recommend a revisit of CEG's logic of emancipation.

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Emancipation; critical educational gerontology; freire; giddens; U3A; Lebanon

## Introduction

Lebanon, a small east-Mediterranean Arab nation, is undergoing severe crises. News from Lebanon report on the COVID-19 pandemic, power blackouts, sharp inflation and currency devaluation, fuel and food shortages, political unrest, and casualties.<sup>1</sup> In this context, older Lebanese are particularly vulnerable to existential, social, and economic challenges (ILO, 2020). Their emancipation becomes an unavoidable subject of scholarly debate.

Emancipation is a fundamental goal to many modern educational theories (Biesta, 2010). The definitions of this concept vary, but a general definition that may be used to provide a broad framework for this article is that of emancipation as concerning 'critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power' (Inglis, 1997, p. 4), individually or collectively. UNESCO's proposal for a new social contract for the futures of education (International Committee on the Futures of Education, 2021) reflects an acknowledgement of the emancipatory function of education on an international political level; a function of which, Lebanese policymakers seem to be oblivious.

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To date, this nation struggles with policy development on and implementation of quality adult education (UNESCO, 2022), to the point where private initiatives such as the University for the Third Age (U3A) act in lieu of a national comprehensive plan for adult education in Lebanon. This U3A is a university-based private educational institution that offers a liberal style of education to older people in the retirement phase.<sup>2</sup> The U3A's mission is not overtly concerned with emancipation (Hachem et al., 2017); at the same time, it strives to provide 'older adults with educational and cultural opportunities in a sociable environment' (Chahine & Sibai, 2019, p. 184). Curricula cover a wide range of subjects and employ different teaching methodologies (Chahine & Sibai, 2019). In terms of impact, learners at this U3A experience knowledge-related benefits, improved self-concepts, and enhanced socialisation (Hachem & Vuopala, 2016). Notwithstanding this impact, critical educational gerontology would argue that it falls short of emancipation.

The requirements for an emancipatory logic in the education of older people can be found in the philosophical principles of critical educational gerontology (CEG; Formosa, 2011a; Glendenning & Battersby, 1990). Heavily influenced by Freire (see, Findsen, 2007), the promoters of CEG start from a predominantly structural explanation of social reality, often implicitly assuming that older learners are victims of ideological confusion. The latter manifests in the form of (usually internalised) ageism/oppression by an 'other' from whom liberation is warranted (see, Cerletti, 2005; Higgs & Gilleard, 2022; Wheeler-Brooks, 2009). In formulating its educational aims, CEG favours learners' collective liberation and conscientisation over the supposedly domesticating liberal education that fails to lead older learners to 'analyse the relationships between personal contexts and the wider social forces of marginalisation' (Formosa, 2021, p. 195).<sup>3</sup> Hence, CEG strives to emancipate older learners from structural and internalised forms of oppression to which older learners are presumably oblivious. As a result, CEG charges a more knowing teacher with the task of leading older learners to analyse their oppressive socio-political context as a precursor to changing it. Such capacities are known as critical reflection and action (Freire, 1972). Together they form an educational path to emancipation that is cherished by CEG.

CEG's emancipatory ambitions inspired empirical studies that examined attempts to emancipate older learners. Such studies have commonly been based on educational interventions that are grounded in Freirean (1972) notions of emancipation that set learners on the path of critical reflection and critical action. The results indicate that this path is difficult to complete (see, Formosa, 2012). Even though older learners reach a certain level of critical awareness, they are reluctant to engage in critical action (Brown, 2020; Formosa, 2005, 2012; Formosa & Galea, 2020; Nye, 1998), which is understood as collective and revolutionary measures to change their social reality. The reluctance of older learners to liberate themselves (with action) from oppression is explained by the tenacity of their internalised oppression. However, this explanation raises further questions regarding the critical consciousness of older learners, which this paper addresses.

In this article, we explore the implicit assumption of older learners' naïveté – defined hereafter as naïve consciousness – in a sample of older learners at a U3A in Lebanon. We raise the following research questions: (1) How do older learners explain their social reality and how do they act towards changing it? (2) How do older learners explain their reluctance to act towards social change? Our empirical investigation of older learners' consciousness, which informs our critical position towards CEG, is guided by Anthony Giddens (1984) social theory. Employing structuration theory, we analyse 11 older learners' accounts of their social reality. We address the issue of their critical consciousness and empirically examine the knowledgeability of older learners in understanding, (re)producing and changing their socio-political context. We also investigate their reluctance to undermine the oppressive relationships they endure from the perspective of constraints, rather than ongoing internalised oppression.

Inspired by the Rancièrian notion of equality of intelligence between teachers and learners (Rancière, 1987), this paper builds on existing research in different ways. Most importantly, it continues the foundational work on CEG and the rethinking of its Freirean logic in the context of late modernity conducted by Marvin Formosa (Formosa, 2011b). Secondly, it answers the call of

Schoultz et al. (2022) to further investigate the role of teachers in older adult education; specifically, concerning their emancipatory role in adult and community education (Wildemeersch, 2014).

### CEG: naïve consciousness and emancipation

Published in two subsequent versions, the philosophical principles of critical educational gerontology (CEG) address the emancipatory function of education and the role of the teacher in fulfilling this function (Hachem, 2020). Glendenning and Battersby (1990) devised the first version of CEG in response to the lack of philosophical foundations in the education of older people. CEG's Freirean-inspired ethos is socio-politically grounded and draws on critical gerontology.<sup>4</sup> It is dedicated to the examination of the oppression of older people by society and aims to 'unsettle the complacency that older people feel about social conditions . . . ' (p. 228) so that they become the subjects of their own lives. The Freirean subjectification of learners entails the process of conscientisation; that is, the transformation of learners' consciousness from a false/naïve to a critical one. Freire stated that

many persons, bound to a mechanistic view of reality, do not perceive that the concrete situation of individuals conditions their consciousness of the world, and that in turn this consciousness conditions their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality. They think that reality can be transformed mechanistically, without posing the persons' *false consciousness* of reality as a problem or, through revolutionary action, developing a consciousness which is *less and less false*. (Italicised for emphasis, Freire, 1972, p. 130)

The praxis involved in the conscientisation process includes critical reflection and critical action. Critical reflection is an understanding of learners' reality and its causes, rendered visible by a teacher. Critical action is a revolution against such a reality. Thus, conscientisation is the antidote to naïveté or naïve consciousness.

The second statement of CEG principles remains loyal to Freirean ideals. Formosa (2002, 2011a) elaborated on the role of the teacher. According to CEG, emancipation requires the intervention of a critical teacher and an initial unequal knowledge balance between teachers and students. CEG argues that the teacher is not on equal footing with learners because the teacher has the authority of his or her competence. Competence allows the teacher to 'direct the learner's education towards a political goal' (Formosa, 2002, p. 81) and to help them develop a critical reading of their reality, which they cannot do on their own. Formosa (2011a) capitalised on the educator's role to actively construct, organise, and persuade learners in the sphere of practical life; for that, he insisted on calling teachers educators rather than facilitators. Only educators can address learners' naïveté, since learners' 'popular consciousness is grounded in a hegemonical neo-liberal ideology' (Formosa, 2011a, p. 325), from which teachers must free the learners.

Apart from these theoretical formulations, the emancipation of older learners was also examined in several studies that intervened to lead older learners on the path of critical reflection and critical action. In a Jewish community centre for older people, Nye (1998) conducted action research using 'liberation writing' to engage older learners in their world. Nye reported that learners developed more trust and comfort with one another, they got in touch with their creative side and experienced what she called individual empowerment. However, the teachers' call for social action in this group was not answered. Nye explained this by claiming that in older age political engagement is not as attractive as social connectedness and concluded 'it could be dangerous to impose a paradigm of compulsory revolution on seniors' (p. 113). Nye added that learners might not have as much in common to fight for, especially when they might have occupied the position of oppressors as well as of oppressed during their working life.

Notable studies were also conducted in Malta by Marvin Formosa and other scholars addressing the emancipation of older people/learners. Formosa (2005) recruited a group of older women with the aim of raising their consciousness on social issues related to womanhood, particularly elder abuse and self-neglect. Formosa reported that his 'practice of critical gerogogy succeeded in making them [learners] more aware of the hegemonic nature of "normal" learning in older adult education'

(p. 402). However, he also argued, 'I approached the women as personas to be liberated when this might not be the case' (p. 404). His argument was in relation to some participants' concerns over being 'othered' by the teacher via an emphasis on their gender, but also by being shaped as oppressed when they did not identify as that.

In another study, Formosa (2012) sensitised his study participants to age-friendly projects and invited them to develop ideas on age-friendly practices at the local municipal level. Although the participants demonstrated critical reflection by laying out an inclusive age-friendly plan for policy advocacy, to the disappointment of the author, the path from critical reflection to critical action was incomplete. Formosa claimed that the reluctance of his rural older participants to 'act' (by submitting their proposal to the local council) is due to their conservative nature and to their hesitancy to 'rock the boat' (p. 48); that is, to bring about change.

The questions raised by these results regarding older learners' critical consciousness have been reproduced in another project in Malta. In a vibrant Maltese town, Maria Brown (2020) conducted a series of workshops with active older citizens. Following a critical community-based approach to teaching older adults, Brown (2020) reported that her poetry-based methodology led to some form of emancipation. She testified that her participants engaged in planning for the future when they wrote 'proposals for possible avenues for praxis', but that they also benefited in terms of 'increased networking, pursuit of independent leads and engagement with broader society' (p. 27). According to Brown, these are obvious signs of critical reflection. However, she also mentioned that age (immanence) was the reason for shown reluctance to dwell on plans for social action. She added that participants' engagement in the project witnessed fluctuations between 'domestication' and 'emancipation'. Despite her positive appraisal of this fluctuation, her conclusion signals that emancipation did not fully occur.

Similar challenges were faced by Formosa and Galea (2020). Starting from a senior centre in Malta, Formosa and Galea's action research explored the possibilities and limitations of critical consciousness with 12 older adults. This time, participants selected generative study themes of their choice such as transport, communication, and Tai Chi. The authors opted for an 'egalitarian' position with the learners, offering non-directive support when needed. They reported that, with the help of CEG, older participants developed a deeper understanding of inequity with respect to life chances, and they questioned and analysed the dominant status quo and the embedding of power dynamics within normative ways of living. Lastly, they embraced their identity as older individuals, rather than escaping it. Even though learners engaged in self and social questioning, Formosa and Galea noted that 'no ability or potency to act upon structural constraints was perceived at the end of the learning program' (p. 67). Eventually, the authors justified the limitations of critical consciousness, especially critical action, with immanence and self-limiting narratives, internal ageism, and political activism as a narrative identity that reflects a lifetime commitment to progressive action, rather than a competence to be developed overnight. The latter included the possibility of a dual positioning of older learners as oppressors as well.

Such results encourage a critical examination of CEG. Our critical position towards CEG maintains the following. Works involving CEG presume that older learners are naïve as they internalise oppression by an 'other' from whom liberation is warranted (see, Higgs & Gilleard, 2022; Wheeler-Brooks, 2009). In doing so, CEG unintentionally discounts learners' agency on two levels. CEG's logic assumes that older learners lack critical consciousness and then requires a teacher (endowed with critical consciousness) to nurture this quality in the learner; this teacher is then the one who gauges learners' intelligence (see, Vlieghe, 2014). Consequently, CEG's logic typifies the emancipatory relationship between learners and teachers as one of perpetual dependence between two unequal intelligences (see, Biesta, 2010; Cerletti, 2005): one that is continuously naïve, and another that knows what can be done and what should be known (see, Ellsworth, 1989). Of significant importance for this article are the concerns raised regarding the relevance of Freirean emancipation – on which CEG is built – to current adult and community education (Wildemeersch,

2014). These concerns extend to whether CEG risks imposing a future-oriented compulsory agenda of social revolution on older learners.

### **Structuration theory: the (re)production of social reality**

In this article, we use the framework of Giddens's structuration theory to empirically examine problematic assumptions on older learners' naïveté, and to explore their knowledgeability, and how they reflexively (re)produce their social reality. Most importantly, the structuration theory provides insights into the role of older learners in producing and reproducing social practices and relationships, oppressive and empowering. This is possible because Giddens did not define structure as an external entity to human action, but rather as rules and resources that are implicated in the (re) production of social systems (Giddens, 1984). Social systems, reproduced across time and space, are defined as 'relations between actors or collectivities, organised as regular social practices' (p. 25). Accordingly, agency and structures form a duality rather than a dualism, since social structures are both the medium and the outcomes of the actions that humans engage in. This dualistic feature of human action ensures 'the continuity or transmutation of structures, and therefore, the reproduction of social systems' (p. 25).

One of the main premises of structuration theory, which forms the basis for our analysis in this paper, is that agents usually act knowledgeably and reflexively when they (re)produce social systems. This means that 'actors will usually be able to explain most of what they do, if asked' (Giddens, 1984, p. 6). Reasons for action are split between two levels of consciousness: discursive and practical (Giddens, 1984). Discursive consciousness is the awareness and verbalisation of knowledge about agents' social conditions, and the conditions of their own actions. Practical consciousness consists of everyday knowledge 'inherent in the capability to "go on" with the routines of social life' (p. 4). This form of consciousness characterises most of the knowledge that agents have and use in their daily encounters as they (re)produce social reality. In either case, actors keep a theoretical understanding of why they act. This understanding is a form of knowledgeability known as reflexivity. Reflexivity is defined as 'not merely self-consciousness but as the monitored character of the ongoing flow of social life' (p. 3). Knowledgeability and reflexivity imply that agents understand their social conditions, and the conditions governing their (re)productions of social practices, but also when they act to change their social reality. Such understanding of one's role in social (re)production constitutes the Giddensian take on critical consciousness.

The structuration theory also enables a critical analysis of the emancipatory function of older adult education based on what Giddens terms the dialectic of control. According to Giddens (1984), agency concerns events that are initiated by individuals, knowing that they could have chosen to act differently. Acting differently means 'being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs' (p. 14), either positively or negatively. Action requires power. According to Giddens, power is 'the means of getting things done and, as such, directly implied in human action' (p. 283). Power is not necessarily noxious, and it does not inherently serve sectional interests. As such, power is no longer conceived as dominating structures that 'grind "docile bodies"' (p. 16). Instead, the patterning of social life relies on authoritative and allocative resources that mediate power. Authoritative resources are non-material and used in the system organisation and coordination of individuals in a society. Allocative resources are material power sources that are employed in the (re)production of social systems (Giddens, 1984). Power and action are bound through the dialectic of control since social systems embed relations of autonomy and dependence between actors in social interactions. This indicates that all kinds of dependence allow subordinates to influence the actions of their subordinates (Giddens, 1984). Actors almost always have a margin of action whereby they mobilise resources to exercise power towards change, although they might face constraints while doing so.

The concept of constraints within structuration theory justifies the reluctance of agents in acting in response to undesired conditions. Giddens addressed three types of constraints: material,

punitive, and structural (Giddens, 1984, p. 174). Material constraints are body-related and constraints of the physical environment. The first punitive type of constraints is sanctions, which include threats and direct application of force or violence; they can alternatively be as simple as a mere disapproval. Another kind of punitive constraints are those which, on very rare occasions, render helpless those subjected to them, but only for a brief time. Third, structural constraints are drawn from the manifestations of structural properties of systems and their interaction with situated actors (Giddens, 1984). One common characteristic of the three types of constraints is their dependence on the motives and reasons for agents to do what they do. They simply do not act ‘as forces of nature to “compel”’ (p. 181) actors to behave in one way or another. Another characteristic of constraints is their obedience to the dialectic of control that gives constraints coercing but also enabling properties. Consequently, the exercise of power can take the form of strategic inaction, one that is nevertheless based on the knowledgeability of constraining conditions that govern the context of (in)action.

## **Methodology and methods**

Starting from structuration theory, we use a qualitative deductive reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to investigate the knowledgeability of older learners about their social realities and their willingness to engage in critical social and political action. Based on interviews with 11 older learners at a U3A in Lebanon, we analyse the experiences of individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) regarding their understanding of social reality, their attempts to change it and the constraints they face from the perspective of structuration theory.

### **Positionality**

Our application of the RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2021) is informed by the assumption that the researchers’ social positions influence knowledge production (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Starting from this assumption, our motivation for authoring this paper should be clarified. First, a Giddensian rationale in the field of education (see, Day Ashley, 2010), and specifically in older adult education, remains insufficiently explored. Second, we write this paper as our ‘acting otherwise’ (Giddens, 1984), to project an image of knowledgeable older learners who are capable of social change, as we attentively avoid labelling participants as domesticated or free.<sup>5</sup> Third, in times where social reality remains understood from the polarity of agency and structures, Giddens reconciled this dualism (Shilling, 1992). His structurationist viewpoint invites unusual ways to perceive critical consciousness, power relationships, and recursive processes (see, Wheeler-Brooks, 2009) that are considered useful for the education of older people in late modernity.

### **Participants’ socio-economic context: a society in severe crises**

When critically examining issues of naïve consciousness and emancipation in older adult education, Lebanon is a particularly interesting case. First, Lebanese older learners endure severe socio-economic conditions. The (in)actions of a democratically elected political elite engendered major systemic inequalities (Nuwayhid & Zurayk, 2019), to the point where currently most Lebanese have scarce access to basic amenities such as electricity, fuel, and Internet (ILO, 2020). Following the horrific port explosion in Beirut on 4 August 2020, which caused 190 casualties and 6,500 injured and damaged the residences of around 300,000 citizens (Ghantous, 2020), the Lebanese President Michel Aoun warned that Lebanon was going to hell (Francis & Perry, 2020). This combination of socio-economic challenges, and a tradition of a relatively open society, presents a rare opportunity to examine older learners’ ability to understand, and act on, their social reality.<sup>6</sup> This is because ‘revolution’ and efforts towards change gain meaning only in the context of continuity and structuration of social practices (Giddens, 1979).



The study participants, consisting of nine females and two males, had enrolled at the U3A in Beirut, Lebanon, for at least two terms. The majority held a bachelor's degree, reported being healthy and self-identified as middle-class. Most were married and lived with their families. Participants had held white-collar professional positions before retirement, which contributed to their once affluent (but currently deteriorating) lifestyles. They spoke no fewer than one foreign language in addition to their native Arabic. Most attended cultural events and festivals and spent their spare time volunteering in their community. They travelled regularly for tourism, to visit family, or move between countries as many of them held an additional nationality of a Western nation. However, the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon had severe consequences on their socio-political and economic reality, not least in relation to vanishing lifesavings. Nevertheless, this scenario provides fertile ground for social change initiated by crisis-ridden older learners.

### **Online zoom interviews and ethical considerations**

We acquired access to the study participants via the U3A in Beirut. During the spring of 2020, the U3A compiled a list of emails of older learners (past and present) who did not mind receiving an online survey in conjunction with the present study. The survey received 40 replies, and 11 of these consented to sit for semi-structured online Zoom interviews. The interviews took place during a COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown in the summer of 2020. Throughout the interviews, which lasted for approximately 40 minutes each, the interviewer posed questions ([Appendix 1](#)) relating to the socio-political context of older adults in Lebanon. Interview questions tackled participants' 'critical reflection' and their (dis)engagement in 'critical action', in a Freirean sense. The questions solicited thoughts on participants' rights' as older citizens of Lebanon, the probable causes for the socio-economic conditions they endure, and the ways in which they address(ed) social change.

Before data collection, we secured ethical approval in Sweden and in Lebanon. Participants had consented electronically to be interviewed, but at the start of each interview, the interviewer introduced the participants to the study and guaranteed their rights to skip a question, stop the meeting or revoke their consent without repercussions. Their anonymity was warranted by giving them an alias of their choice (Lobe et al., 2020), which was used consistently once the recording started. The interviews were conducted either fully in English, or with a mixture of English, Arabic and sometimes French, as participants use this mixture in their daily life.

Even though it proved fruitful, conducting interviews during stressful situations was not an easy undertaking. The Beirut port blast on 4 August 2020, happened midway through the data collection process. Some of the participants were among the blast survivors, but they fortunately only sustained minimal health and material damages (small wounds and home-related material damage). Considering the events, the interviewer dedicated a small part of the interviews to off-the-record small talk, where participants shared their feelings about the situation. Zoom, as a data collection tool (Archibald et al., 2019) was easy for the participants and the interviewer to use, which enabled an intimate and emphatic rapport with the participants. In line with Archibald et al. (2019), the success of collecting data with older adults during challenging times testifies to the convenience and effectiveness of Zoom as an online data collection tool.

### **Reflexive thematic analysis: structuration theory**

After transcribing the interviews, the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was conducted on interview data to examine participants' accounts on the social reality that reflects their wider socio-cultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). RTA is an interpretive approach to data analysis that helps researchers identify and analyse themes in a given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The RTA was guided by concepts from Giddens' structuration theory in the coding and theme generation processes.

Using NVivo, interview data was coded keeping in mind central concepts to the structuration theory that are relevant to the research questions. Codes were created in relation to older learners' understanding of their social reality (experience and causes), the steps they took to change it, and the challenges they faced doing so. After creating the codes, they were grouped and revised as analytical units under themes of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Byrne, 2021). Each theme corresponded to one concept from structuration theory: the duality of structure, knowledgeability and reflexivity, the dialectic of control, and constraints. Duality of structure showcases the active role of older learners in (re)producing their social reality. Knowledgeability and reflexivity explain that such undertaking is grounded in a theoretical understanding of the conditions (experience and causes) governing action. The dialectic of control examines the actions that older learners took to enact social change. Finally, constraints justify their reluctance in starting or persisting in their efforts towards change. Our engagement with RTA followed six analytical steps (Byrne, 2021): Familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing the themes, naming, and defining of themes, and finally, reporting of findings, which we do in the following section.

### Older learners' social reality: knowledgeability and constraints

Our findings, presented below, are structured in accordance with the concepts of duality of structure, knowledgeability and reflexivity, dialectic of control, and constraints. Evidently, these concepts enable us to examine how older learners understand their social reality and their capabilities to influence it, despite constraints. Most importantly, they help us postulate that learners' attempts towards social change face challenges that exceed CEG's notion of naïve consciousness.

#### *Older learners (re)produce their social reality*

Our analysis indicates that older learners were certainly aware of the social challenges they faced in Lebanon. This included the lack of welfare provision. At least since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, the Lebanese state had not been involved in providing any older age welfare. Some participants stated ironically that third agers in Lebanon lose their health insurance right upon retirement. Hope ponders:

Who has old age welfare? Who has a pension in older age? In Lebanon when you are 64, they tell you to retire at home. It means go sit and die at home. This is what happens. What does an older person in Lebanon get? They don't have parks, they don't have activities, they don't have health insurance, they have nothing ...

Healthcare, entertainment, social work, and education are all the de facto responsibility of older people and their immediate families. With the advent of the latest economic crisis in 2019, participants protested that the socio-economic conditions have become much harder than before against the backdrop of total state absenteeism, which is worsened by diminishing support from immediate family members due to economic migration.<sup>7</sup>

Applying the structuration theory to participants' interview data reveals that older learners under study actively (re)shaped their social reality by reiterating certain social practices but also by refraining from changing them. Two participants highlighted that the issue of the individualisation of ageing is cultural and longstanding. Hope, Maria, Oula, and others mentioned that they take care of their parents and cover most of their needs, but for them the situation is different. According to Maria, this is the case because of state absenteeism but also since participants' descendants cannot be there for them in the same way as participants are there for their parents. The generation of economic migrants who left Lebanon cannot offer support (other than financial transfers when needed) to their parents. Meanwhile, some participants underline the cultural importance of caring

for one's parents. Christine mentioned that leaving one's parents in a nursing home is a shameful act in Lebanese society. Maria went further by saying that 'this is a sacred issue.'

In addition to reproducing and reinforcing social practices such as those mentioned above, most participants expressed guilt/regret about not changing their social conditions when they could have tried to do so. When asked to identify the reasons for poor socio-economic conditions, seven participants shared their feeling of partial responsibility for the deteriorating conditions they endure. Oula stated: 'We the people, we decided to join this system, we went in with the politicians in this system 40 years ago. After the war, we voted them in, and we followed them.' Similarly, Nour noted that older people have a say in who is governing, and that previous elections represented missed opportunities to induce change.

The concept of duality of structure highlights how the study participants often acknowledged that they accepted the circumstances they endured for a long time, while missing many opportunities for peaceful change through democratic elections. Instead, they repeatedly voted in the same politicians and reinforced certain ageing-related social practices as culturally salient. In Lebanon, ageing is a private responsibility that is handled within the borders of family. By reproducing this practice, it became a medium and an outcome to action; a pervasive and systematised practice to the point where placing one's parent in a nursing home is socially undesirable. Although participants accepted/reproduced age-related social norms, when faced with the current economic crisis, they seemed to no longer accept state absenteeism, especially when their ageing needs can no longer be fully addressed by their direct descendants. This combination of reproducing social practices while simultaneously lamenting some of them, challenges CEG's view of older adults as essentially oppressed. Although participants were aware of the structures that make their positions vulnerable, some of them also acknowledged their own role in sustaining such structures. These findings blur the borders between oppressor and oppressed (Formosa & Galea, 2020; Higgs & Gilleard, 2022; Nye, 1998), and domesticated and emancipated (Brown, 2020) that are constructed by CEG. Instead, older learners bear partial responsibility (see, Wheeler-Brooks, 2009), based on the predicament that they had the choice to vote differently and to challenge state absenteeism, whereas they missed many opportunities for change.

### ***Older learners 'know' and 'reflect' on their social reality***

In reflecting on this social reality that they themselves took part in reproducing, the participants were far from naïve. When asked, participants demonstrated a certain critical discursive knowledgeability about their social reality, by identifying recurrent patterns that shape their social reality and listing their underlying causes. Participants reflected on the oppressive tactics used by the political class to reproduce itself. According to some of them, politicians in Lebanon solicit loyalty by using scare tactics and then offering protection to their voters against other Lebanese who belong to different religious factions. Shaker and Oula added that these politicians endorse nepotism and adopt populist discourses to bribe and seduce voters. Overall, participants agreed that they have no older age-related rights and feel deceived by the political elite and regret their earlier support for it.

In addition to their decoding of the tactics used by the political elite, participants were aware of the multifaceted discrimination in Lebanese society, with respect to age, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Among these, their biggest concern was ageism and older people's rights. Joumana objected to employers' ageism 'if you lose your job in your 40s or early 50s, it's over for you, do you think you can find a new job again?' All participants stated that minority groups should have equal rights as everyone else, apart from one participant who provided a religious argument for not supporting gay marriage. Some participants pondered class issues well enough to notice the absence of colleagues from lower social classes at the U3A. They justified this by describing the U3A as sustaining some form of elitism with which they were not pleased. Additionally, four participants exhibited awareness about inequalities that Lebanese women endure. Shaker, Laura, and Thérèse shared their disappointment with the fact that Lebanese women cannot pass on citizenship to their

descendants of foreign fathers. Nevertheless, Maria noted that older women acquire more power in daily encounters ‘as the role of the man within the family diminishes.’

Participants’ accounts seemed reflexive. They mirrored knowledgeability on a discursive consciousness level. Even Oula’s objection to gay marriage is reflexive, as it is based on a theoretical moral grounding and cannot be dismissed as naïve nor as the fruit of ideological confusion. Apart from indicating participants’ knowledgeability, which is conceptually comparable to the Freirean critical reflection, we note that it was almost certainly not the fruit of a direct ‘intervention’ by a critical teacher in the CEG sense (Formosa, 2005). In this context, we are reminded that learners assume an entrepreneurial role of themselves in times when essentially right answers or actions are contested (Wildemeersch, 2014). This renders the role of teachers as interpreters of social realities less relevant. To this, we add that all participants knew that they deserve free healthcare, free access to nursing homes, pension, and older age community centres; rights that they not only know about and miss but were even willing to fight or have already fought for.

### *Older learners can change their social reality*

Participants seemed to reflexively reproduce their social reality but could/did act otherwise. They drew on the rules that they knew very well and the resources they possess to exercise a certain level of power in their attempt to revolt against their social reality and overturn oppressive relationships. Despite the severe crises (economic and COVID-19-related) that participants endured, they nevertheless capitalised on resources (allocative and authoritative) to resist and change their social conditions on an individual but also on a societal level.

On an individual level, Antar authored an online book discussing oppression in Lebanon. Christine reported being politically active on Twitter. Hope defended her father’s right for hospitalisation by arguing with a hospital director who happens to also be a religious figure. She fiercely demanded that her father get a hospital bed, as she shouted to the face of the head nun, ‘whose behind do I need to kiss to get my father a bed in this hospital?’ Hope was not successful until she used her social connections to reach out to the hospital director in other persuasive ways. In another incident in a different hospital, Oula filed a complaint against a nurse who behaved in an ageist fashion against her father.

Participants also reported acting at the societal level. Most participants regularly vote(d) in national and local elections (a few already against the ruling class), and some volunteer(ed) for different social causes, including gender equality and older-age issues. Several participants organised themselves with other U3A members and joined street demonstrations (not under the U3A flag) to ask for a decent life in older age.

Additionally, some participants started a WhatsApp mutual support group for COVID-19-related relief to U3A members. The group allowed them to check on each other and intervene when necessary through visits and logistical help during lockdowns. Hope insisted that ‘checking on and taking care of each other feels like belonging to a family’ especially for newcomers like herself when she first joined the U3A.

Participants supported their community members in need through fundraising and other ground interventions, including visits to lonely older neighbours. They acted independently from the U3A (and from teachers’ instructions) despite instances of what CEG would frame as oppression in the form of ‘immanence’ and ‘internal ageism’ (Brown, 2020; Formosa & Galea, 2020), such as when participants referred to the group of older people as ‘them/they’ rather than ‘us/we’. This is in line with the scepticism with which Higgs and Gilleard (2022) approach the notion of ageism as oppression. Additionally, following the collective emancipatory logic of CEG and the collective nature of critical action, learners who acted on an individual level (twitter; book authorship) would have evaded critical action, and enacted a ‘mindless activism’ (Freire, 1972). However, participants’ actions reflect a deeper commitment to community engagement, which Formosa’s (2011b)

postmodern appraisal of CEG describes in terms of individualised or small group meaningful attempts towards social change.

### **Older learners face constraints**

In their reflexive efforts towards social change, study participants faced constraints. Consequently, participants refrained from acting, remained determined to act, or changed direction. Interestingly, constraints that challenged participants' actions towards social change could, in some cases, enable other actions. Thérèse and Maria were genuinely disinterested in Lebanese politics. Whereas Maria refrained from demonstrating, Thérèse eventually demonstrated with her U3A colleagues against the ruling class despite her saying 'I do not like Lebanese politics; it's not my thing. I am very disappointed.' Citing physical constraints, Christine mentioned her health as a deterrent for her participation in street demonstrations. Instead, she believes that political lobbying on Twitter helps create awareness and drives change.

Reflecting on their experience of political demonstrations, the participants had differing opinions. Samsoum and Oula regretted being subjected to punitive sanctions by police forces in the form of violence and tear gas bombs, and therefore decided to no longer participate in demonstrations. When Oula is clearly deterred by sanctions, Samsoum stated that she is against violence to start with, but she intends to pursue peaceful acts. She cited, as an example, her participation in a change-oriented human chain that connected several Lebanese coastal cities.

Despite constraints in the form of violence, Laura and Hope insisted on demonstrating, voting, and raising their voices. They remain hopeful that change will occur in the coming elections and that they would have contributed to it. Laura illustrated her continuous readiness to protest with the following:

I am someone who has a lot of hope and bitterness at the same time. So, I find myself politically ready. I'm not sure if I can be called politically active, but if you hold a sign and you are asking for something that I too want, in this case I can stand next to you.

While all participants believed that voting can be a way out of the crisis, Shaker referred to structural constraints found in the 'flawed' electoral law. He argued that the law is undemocratic and sectarian-based, and for these reasons he believes his vote makes a lesser difference. Joumana, Christine and Thérèse believed that the pandemic increases uncertainty surrounding the usefulness of demonstrations, especially in the context of fear for one's health and safety. These examples show that, in addition to being enabling, knowledgeability about structural and physical constraints can hinder participants' efforts towards social change. In this case, it is not naïveté in the Freirean sense that limits change-oriented efforts, but rather realistic insights into the possible consequences of political action.

Exhibiting reluctance to answer the Freirean call for 'critical action' (Formosa, 2012), as shown in the examples above, can consequently be interpreted in terms of different forms of constraints rather than necessarily through tenacious internal ageism and immanence (Formosa & Galea, 2020). To this end, Higgs and Gilleard (2022) propose that undermining these constraints would provide more opportunities and choices for older people. This was evident in participants' abilities to act even in the face of constraints. In contrast to the assumptions of CEG, our study consequently indicates that it is knowledge of such constraints, rather than naïveté, which may result in strategic inaction. This is akin to the reluctance to 'rock the boat' shown by Formosa's (2012) participants in a conservative setting.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored CEG's presumed naïveté of older learners; a naïveté that seems central to critical educational philosophies that present social emancipation as the main aim of

education. With the help of structuration theory, we then examined how older learners as knowledgeable agents (re)produce their social reality considering, and despite, constraints. We could thereby show how participants were not only able to decode oppressive patterns used by the political elite, but also assume responsibility for supporting this elite via votes. They recognised discrimination in the Lebanese society, in relation to life chances, but especially older age issues. They invested in efforts towards change even if they exhibited signs of what CEG calls internalised oppression. Therefore, this investigation clearly indicates that the study participants exhibited a form of critical consciousness, defined as ‘being actively aware of one’s agency and the role one has in creating social practices’ (Wheeler-Brooks, 2009, p. 131).

As a result, our findings problematised CEG’s conceptualisation of emancipation in three ways. First, CEG’s current logic of emancipation does not seem to accurately represent older learners at the U3A. The older learners in this paper, certainly had the knowledge and insights necessary to take active part in social change. As Kulmus (2021) also noted, older peoples’ accumulated experiences equip them with great abilities to manage crises. Second, teachers’ discounting of older learners’ agency and their lifetime accumulated knowledge as a pretext for liberating them is no longer justifiable, not least in adult and community education (see, Wildemeersch, 2014). Partly because the older learners that participated in this study acknowledged that they themselves had reproduced the structures that they criticised. Therefore, the terminology of constraints (physical, punitive, and structural) is more suitable to explain reluctance to change than is CEG’s naïve consciousness. Finally, it is therefore problematic to impose a Freirean revolutionary agenda on older learners, who might not even necessarily identify as oppressed (Nye, 1998). Henceforth, it is possible for oppression to be conceived as ‘a social relationship, a set of social practices maintained by members of society who participate in the relationship’ (Wheeler-Brooks, 2009, p. 131). Consequently, freedom from oppression would take the form of freedom *to* change social practices rather than freedom *from* oppressive structures (see Giddens, 1990; Higgs & Gilleard, 2022).

On the basis of this article, we consequently recommend revisiting CEG’s conceptualisation of emancipation in order to develop a language to describe the resilience and resistance of older learners in difficult times (see, Kulmus, 2021). Our bid to revisit CEG’s logic of emancipation capitalises on the usefulness of structuration theory in overcoming a dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed (Giddens, 1990). When learners actively and knowledgeably shape the relationships they engage in, a bigger emphasis is attributed to the role they have in creating social practices. A role that includes interacting with and changing structures, and ‘cannot be pinned down in a simple statement’ (Buffel et al., 2012, p. 24) such as the one of naïve consciousness. In such further efforts to reconceptualise emancipation, we also see the potential and relevance of Rancière’s (1987) notion of equality of intelligence between teachers and learners, which provided an impetus for this article.

While the naïveté of older learners may be contested based on this study, this does not apply to the ambition to use education to further the position of older learners. Thanks to the wealth of knowledge on emancipation that has been generated by the scholars who devised and revised CEG, we can continue celebrating critical ideals in the education of older people. Here, our wish is to reinvigorate discussions over the emancipation of older learners and merely note that there still remains a lot of potential to develop our understanding of what CEG is.

## Notes

1. These events correspond to a definition of crisis as conflict, unrest, and revolution (Koselleck & Richter, 2006).
2. See (Manninen, 2017) for a definition of liberal arts education for older people as non-formal and non-vocational.
3. Often offered at educational institutions for older adults including U3As.
4. According to Buffel et al. (2012) critical gerontology treats age-related outcomes not ‘as mere consequences of natural, organismic ageing, but of a complex interplay between social structural, cultural and interactional processes’ (p. 14).

5. Here, we confess to the risk of double-dealing by replicating the hierarchies that we strive to overcome in discussing learners' consciousness. Have we done so, our intention as researchers is to positively gauge the knowledgeability of learners using structuration theory, which, a priori, elevates learners' agency and volition, even if this agency manifests in a lack of action.
6. As an exception to its neighbouring Arab states, Lebanon has historically enjoyed a pluralistic and democratic parliamentary political system (see, Dekmejian, 1978).
7. See (Abdulrahim et al., 2015).

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## Ethical approval

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## Appendix 1

### Interview questions

Do you think older people in Lebanon have their full rights? Why or why not?

Can you do something to help yourself and the rest of older adults in Lebanon reach their rights? How?

Do you think education at the U3A helped you to do that?

Who is responsible for socio-economic conditions in which older people in Lebanon live?

Are you politically active? Do you vote regularly?

Do you volunteer for older adult issues? Or any other issues?

Do you think certain groups in Lebanon, maybe older people, are at a disadvantage?

Does age have to do with it? Do you think poor older adults can join the U3A, for instance?

Do you think all groups in society are equal? Should they be equal in your opinion? Why or why not?