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## Experiences of intrinsic values in education for older adults: insights from a Swedish senior university

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### Abstract

*This study aims to acquire more knowledge about the meaning of intrinsic values in organised post-work non-formal educational activities for older adults. Observations and focus group interviews were conducted at a senior university in Sweden. John Dewey's concept of experience and theory of value are used to facilitate a deeper understanding of the intrinsic values that were identified. The results of the study demonstrate what intrinsic values in education for older adults can be, as well as how they are experienced. Several intrinsic values were identified: (i) new insights and widened perspectives, (ii) the reflective process, (iii) enrichment, (iv) meaningfulness, (v) enjoyment, (vi) peacefulness, (vii) existential awareness, (viii) relational support and (ix) sense of community. The results further reveal how the values of education are experienced in the interactions and relations between older individuals and the social environment in the ongoing education and that the activities themselves are valued by the participants.*

**Keywords:** Dewey, education, experience, intrinsic values, older adults



## Introduction

As the world population ages, non-formal education for older adults in post-work life is becoming a growing activity (Formosa, 2019a). In contrast to the regular school system and formal education, where a tendency to focus on the instrumental values of education exists, many older adults do not participate in non-formal education to achieve professional credentials or skills (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Thus, other values seem to be central in post-work non-formal education. From a pedagogical perspective, understanding how older adults experience and value their participation in post-work non-formal education and what the consequences are for educational practice is essential. A recently published research review exploring post-work education reveals that *intrinsic values* of education are emphasised as crucial for older adults' participation in education (Schoultz et al., 2020). The results of the review indicate that a majority of studies highlight intrinsic values of learning, such as the joy of learning and learning for its own sake, as important (see also McWilliams & Barrett, 2018; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010).

However, research on post-work education for older adults seldom considers intrinsic values of education as a point of departure, and few studies have been conducted on how these values are experienced by older adult learners in educational practice (Schoultz et al., 2020). Intrinsic qualities of education for older adults are thus at a risk of being overlooked if the research exclusively foregrounds instrumental justifications, like for example improved memory or mental alertness (Manheimer, 2008). In this manner, the tendency is to focus exclusively on the individual.

In this study, we instead want to shift the focus from reasons and causes to the *experience of intrinsic values* in the educational activities and the ongoing pedagogical interactions and relations between the individual and the social environment. Therefore, this study aims to acquire additional knowledge about intrinsic values experienced by older adults in organised non-formal education activities, giving meaning to their participation. The research questions explored in this study of post work non-formal education in Sweden are:

- Which intrinsic values of education are central in post work non-formal education?
- How are intrinsic values of education experienced in post work non-formal educational practice?

To facilitate an in-depth understanding of the intrinsic values, we use John Dewey's philosophy and his concept of *experience* and *theory of value*. This combination makes it possible to understand older adults' participation in educational activities regarding the relation between the individual and their social environment. By connecting Dewey's theory of experience to his theory of values, we can shift our attention from exclusively focusing on individual values and instead consider the continuous process between the individual, the environment and the interplay between them. Consequently, values cannot be separated from action and the context in which the action takes place. This manner of exploring education for older adults can facilitate an understanding of how different values become essential parts of education and, subsequently, make meaning of post-work education.

The setting for the study is a senior university in a medium-sized Swedish city. Older adults in Sweden constitute a large part of the participants in the setting of Swedish *Folkbildning* activities (Bjursell, 2019a). Learning in study associations and folk high schools can be referred to as *Folkbildning*, where free and voluntary participation are

important cornerstones and *Bildung* is a core value (Bjursell, 2019a). In Sweden, senior universities are formally linked to *Folkuniversitetet* which is one of the ten study associations in Sweden. The senior universities in Sweden consist of 34 non-profit and voluntary associations and can be seen as part of the global University of the Third Age (U3A) movement (see e.g. Formosa, 2019b). They offer various non-formal education (Findsen & Formosa, 2011) courses for people aged 55 and above (Bjursell, 2019a). The research presented in the study focused on courses on ‘music and poetry’, ‘religions in the world’, ‘third ageing’ and ‘literature and religion’. To enable participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives of participating in these courses, we have used focus group interviews as a data production method (Barbour, 2018).

### Research on intrinsic values in education for older adults

In research on education for older adults, the concept of values is not used considerably. Instead concepts such as motivation and needs are used to discuss why older adults participate. In general, two main motivations are suggested in the research on lifelong learning: expressive motivation and instrumental motivation (Tam & Chui, 2016). Narushima and colleagues (2013) state that: ‘Older adults’ motivations are an intricate blend of both intrinsic=expressive and extrinsic=instrumental aspects’ (p. 582). However, in a research review on the relationship between learning and health for older adults, Schoultz et al. (2020) argue that several aspects of older adults’ education, including motivation, can be categorised as intrinsic values of education (e.g., Leung et al., 2006; Tam & Chui, 2016). The review further demonstrates that the intrinsic values of education are crucial for understanding older adults’ learning. In this vein, Leung and colleagues (2006) argue that:

Obviously, “learning something new” and “develop personal interests/hobbies” are broad terms and do not specify the types of skills to be learned. These terms, however, do refer to “general interest in subject matter” and do not refer to skills leading to career advancement. Thus, all top 5 reasons can be considered to be representative of ‘expressive motivation.’ (p. 11)

Intrinsic values, such as learning for its own sake and the joy of learning, have been highlighted as important aspects of older adults’ learning (McWilliams & Barrett, 2018; Perkins & Williamon, 2014; Richeson et al., 2007). In their research, McWilliams and Barrett (2018) show that taking part in education is important for the participants’ age-related identity, and aspects, such as the love of learning, are emphasised. Older participants also highlight that they defined themselves as more committed than younger students and more appreciative of the intrinsic aspects of education. Social aspects, such as fellowship, are further stressed (Åberg, 2016). Boulton-Lewis and Buys (2015) include interactions in the groups and communication with other participants as crucial elements. Finding and developing new interests are also regarded by older adults as essential parts of the value of education (Hachem & Vuopala, 2016; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2016; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010). Sloane-Seale and Kops (2010) outline the importance of participating in education to pursue an interest or hobby.

Accordingly, several values of education can be considered as intrinsic (Schoultz et al., 2020); however, studies seldom take the intrinsic values of education as their starting points. The few articles that explicitly pinpoint the intrinsic aspects of learning and education have often used concepts such as motivation or needs. According to Findsen and Formosa (2011) this indicates a psychological and individual understanding

of the learning process. However, participating in educational settings involves both knowledge and values, since the participants also experience the content of the education and its context. The complexities of learning processes are thus often overlooked (Schoultz et al., 2020), which indicates a need to further explore the meaning and importance of the intrinsic values of older adults' education. Dewey's theory of experience and his theory of values are here helpful as these theories shift our understanding of values from something psychological and individual to something relational, created in the continuous interplay between the individual and the environment.

## Theoretical framework

This study builds on the work of John Dewey and his theory of *value* and how different values can be understood as essential parts of education. To connect his understanding of value with educational practice, we turn to his conceptualisation of *experience* and further the work of the Studies of Meaning-making in Educational Discourses (SMED) research group (e.g., Larsson & Öhman, 2018; Maivorsdotter & Quennerstedt, 2012; Quennerstedt et al., 2011).

Pragmatic philosophy underlines the essential role that values play for human beings and their activities. Dewey has extensively developed the importance of values in education in *Democracy and Education* ([1916] 2004); he argues that:

To value means primarily to prize, to esteem; but secondarily it means to apprise, to estimate. It means, that is, the act of cherishing something, holding it dear, and also the act of passing judgment upon the nature and amount of its value as compared with something else. (p. 228)

Dewey distinguishes two forms of values: intrinsic and instrumental. He further discusses the distinctions between them and states that we must sometimes make a choice that 'establishes an order of preferences, a greater and less, better and worse' (p. 229). Things that are evaluated about a third thing and that are judged can be seen as means and thus understood as instrumental values-- in that they are valued to a further end. Objects or things that cannot be judged or compared can be understood as intrinsic values. Dewey states that:

Intrinsic values are not objects of judgment, they cannot (as intrinsic) be compared, or regarded as greater and less, better or worse. They are invaluable; and if a thing is invaluable, it is neither more nor less so than any other invaluable. ([1916] 2004, p. 229)

Dewey ([1916] 2004) argues that the intrinsic values of education play a vital role in the quality of education and that '[c]ontribution to immediate intrinsic values in all their variety in experience is the only criterion for determining the worth of instrumental and derived values in studies' (p. 258). Thus, intrinsic values can be understood as a good in themselves and cannot be judged or compared in relation to anything else from the viewpoint of the respective learner. However, to understand Dewey's concept of value, we need to 'grasp rather fully the meaning that he attaches to the term experience' (Smith, 1922, p. 339).

During an ordinary day, we can experience a multitude of things, since interaction is a natural part of the living process. Dewey ([1934] 2005) argues that an experience must be understood in a holistic way that has a unity and that '[t]his unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can

make within it' (p. 38). Only afterwards, on reflection, can an experience be characterised by one of the dominant dimensions of that experience:

In discourse *about* an experience, we must make use of these adjectives of interpretation. In going over an experience in mind *after* its occurrence, we may find that one property rather than another was sufficiently dominant so that it characterizes the experience as a whole. ([1934] 2005, p. 37, emphasis in original)

Dewey further elaborates that different modes of experiences exist. This attribute implies that several dimensions of human life are vital and real. However, human knowledge has often been regarded as the norm for how we experience the world and has therefore overshadowed other dimensions. It is therefore important to pay attention also to emotional and practical aspects of experience in order to mirror what it is to be and become a human being.

Two principles are vital in Dewey's philosophy of experience: interaction and continuity (Bassey, 2010). Both are fruitful in an understanding of the interactions and encounters in educational situations and help us see how experiences in and of education can influence further experiences, thus relating past, present and future experiences together (Dewey, [1938] 1997). The principle of interaction illustrates that learning and education can be viewed as ongoing processes, where both knowledge and values are constructed in the interactions between human beings and the environment. Hence, we acquire knowledge about the world and create meaning through our actions (Dewey, [1938] 1997). In interaction, we turn to our earlier experiences for support as to how we could or should act. We can then meet resistance in various ways, where we need to reflect on our actions and where continuity concerns how earlier experiences affect future experiences.

Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formations of attitudes of desire and purpose. But this is not the whole of the story. Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had. (Dewey, ([1938] 1997, p. 39)

The principle of continuity further entails that participation in education not only changes the participants but also their environments. This principle implies that with new experiences, the learners approach future learning situations in new ways, and the very meaning of education may also change. The intrinsic values focused in this article are something that are continuously created and re-created through experience in the encounters and actions that take place in older participants' different learning environments and activities. These experiences then potentially influence further experience. Thus, intrinsic values of education are already present in the learning processes in the ongoing educational practices and not exclusively in the aims and goals of learning (see also Sandell & Öhman, 2013).

In conclusion, the experience of values cannot be separated from action and the context in which the action takes place. This manner of exploring education for older adults can facilitate an understanding of how different values are made as essential parts of education and what meanings the participants subsequently attach to education.



## Methods

The study was conducted at a senior university in a medium-sized Swedish city, as such senior universities provide rich information that follows the purpose of the study. A purposeful sampling strategy and a snowball strategy were used (Patton, 2015). Accordingly, we communicated with a teacher in the senior university who offered the contacts of teachers who could be interested in participating. The collection of data for the study occurred during the autumn of 2019.

As methods of data collection, observations and focus group interviews were chosen since they allow exploring the participants' experiences and provide clarification through group interactions (Barbour, 2018). The following five courses were the object of investigation: one course each on 'music and poetry', 'religions in the world' and 'third ageing' and two courses on 'literature and religion'. The number of participants in each course varied between six and twelve.

To gain an initial insight into the educational practice, we initiated the study with observations of the courses. A methodological approach based on the pragmatic philosophy (see Quennerstedt et al., 2014) enabled us to pose follow-up questions about some of the aspects observed during the courses, such as the teachers playing the piano or topics discussed, for example, religion. A total of 16 occasions in five courses were observed and documented in field notes. When possible, hand-outs from the teachers were collected to acquire a deeper understanding of the context of the courses. These handouts tackled various topics, such as musicians, poets and different religions. The observations were followed by semi-structured focus group interviews. In total, five focus groups were conducted with broad questions about the participants' experiences of the courses and their participation in non-formal education (Östlund-Lagerström et al., 2015). The focus groups lasted between 36 and 54 minutes.

Focus group interviews are recommended as a suitable way of exploring participants' experiences, opinions and concerns (see Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Participants can endorse their experiences in a focus group interview so that they can support and encourage each other to both speak and share (Barbour, 2018). A central element in our pragmatic understanding of learning and education is that participants create and make new meanings in present situations by recalling their previous experiences (e.g. Quennerstedt et al., 2011). Capturing the context and creating an appropriate conversation climate are crucial to explore the participants' experiences in education. In view of this, we argue that a focus group interview can be understood as a situation in which the participants can re-actualise their earlier experiences, especially if it relates to one of the course occasions. Thus, participation in a focus group can be understood as an experience of values, since it allows the participants to relate to their previous experiences and thereby give meaning and value to their participation in education.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The numbers of participants in each focus group interview varied between two and eight (see Table 1). The interviews were held on the same day as the last observed course occasion and in the same room in which the course took place. The participants who volunteered for the study remained in the room after the course occasion.

Table 1. Number of focus groups and members.

Focus Group	Course	Members
FG1	Music and Poetry	5 (4 women, 1 man)
FG2	Literature and Religion	5 women
FG3	Literature and Religion	8 women
FG4	Third ageing	3 (2 women, 1 man)
FG5	Religions in the world	2 (1 women, 1 man) <sup>1</sup>

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained from all willing participants. Ethical approval was given by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All empirical materials were anonymised to meet the confidentiality criteria (Patton, 2015).

### **Analytical procedure**

The analysis followed the pragmatic methodological approach created by the research group SMED (e.g. Larsson & Öhman, 2018; Lidar et al., 2006; Maivorsdotter & Quennerstedt, 2012; Quennerstedt et al., 2014). The analysis was a purpose-driven content analysis, which searched for overarching themes (Patton, 2015) and was conducted in three steps.

First, the field notes from the observations and the transcripts from the interviews were analysed, and the first author documented the initial impressions from the courses. To obtain a comprehensive picture of the participants' experiences, all the authors then coded the interview data by focusing on instances in which various aspects of the participants' experiences of the education were expressed.

The second step responds to the first research question and contains two parts. We focused on *which* experiences and values the participants conveyed when making statements about the content, describing their learning or expressing the motives for their participation. The experiences were first categorised as modes of experience, and different *themes of experiences* were generated. John Dewey's theory of experience guided our analyses and understanding. The themes were revised and adjusted several times by all the authors independently. Second, the values inherent in these experiences were collectively classified as either *instrumental* or *intrinsic* in accordance with Dewey's definition. We used a so-called *deliberative strategy* (Goodyear et al., 2017), where each researchers' classifications were compared and deliberately discussed to reach a collective agreement before the study's final categorisations were decided. Values separated from the learning activity itself, and judged in relation to a further end, were classified as instrumental. The values bound with the learning activity and the education, and esteemed as good in themselves, were classified as intrinsic. The expressed intrinsic values were then specifically focused on, categorised and named to capture each of their core content.

In the third step, we explored the second research question about *how* the participants attached intrinsic values to their experiences of education and gave meaning to their participation. The analysis in this step focused on the encounters, interactions and processes that the participants related to when expressing the different intrinsic values of the education in which they were involved.

## Findings

In this section, we present the results of the analysis of how older adults experienced the intrinsic values of education in the studied settings (see Table 2). The following themes of the value experiences of education are presented and outlined as follows: *intellectual value experiences*, *emotional value experiences*, *existential value experiences* and *social value experiences*. We acknowledge that these categories are analytical distinctions of experiences that are intertwined and formed together in practice. In relation to each theme, we present the different intrinsic values attributed to the specific experience by the learners and how they were expressed by them. The results are supported by illustrative examples. The quotes are translated from Swedish to English by the authors and proofread by a professional translator.

Table 2. The distribution of intrinsic values in the themes of value experiences.

Value experiences in education	Intrinsic values
Intellectual	New insights and widened perspectives, The reflective process
Emotional	Enrichment, Meaningfulness, Enjoyment, Peacefulness
Existential	Existential awareness
Social	Relational support, Sense of community

Source: The authors

### ***Intellectual value experiences***

Intellectual value experiences are related to the knowledge and insights the participants acquired when taking part in the various courses, and the consequences of these insights and knowledge. Two intrinsic values were identified in relation to their intellectual experiences of education: (i) *new insights and widened perspectives*, and (ii) *the reflective process*.

The participants in the study highlighted the value of *new insights and widened perspectives*, which involved learning new things and at the same time enjoying themselves. As no goal was set, the value of the education was in the learning activity itself, where the intrinsic value occurred, for example, in the discussions about literature and religion. One focus group discussed the excitement of seeing the connection between literature and religion, as well as the value of reading new books.

Patricia: It was exciting with religion as I hadn't seen it in that way before... [she continues by clarifying that the teacher is important and that she would never have read these books otherwise, and outlines further] The books should be a bit complicated, I think. Books that give tips about things you haven't seen. This makes such a course really very valuable.

The quotation illustrates that Patricia appreciated that the course offered an encounter with new perspectives. She further stated that it was of value that the books were complicated, which helped her see and understand new things.

In the 'music and poetry' course, one musician and one poet were covered in each course occasion. The course teachers often gave the participants background information about the poets and the musicians. They also played songs and read poems, and the background stories gave the participants a context to interact with, which then supported

their learning. However, the participants also took their own experiences from the learning activity 'home'. In the focus group, they discussed what they had learned from the teachers about the poets and the musicians. One member of the group outlined that her experiences during the course also affected and contributed to her experiences outside it:

Linda: I usually do this when I get home. I check to see whether these songs are on YouTube and then I do the same with the poets. I read more about those I'm unfamiliar with on Wikipedia. There have been Polish musicians and I had no idea about them. There's a lot to learn and get acquainted with.

After a brief discussion between three of the focus group members about their encounters with the content in the classical music course, she continued:

Linda: But then sometimes I think that I get stuck in a music genre and play the same songs over and over again, like a teenager. Then it can be nice to add a playlist from Spotify with these songs if you're cooking or doing something else. And there are so many that I like that I've not heard before.

Linda's experiences in the course changed her taste in music and broadened her repertoire of music styles. Hence, a continuity had provided her with new and extended experiences. In this example, the intrinsic value was identified in the encounter with new music genres and the interactions with the course content when the teachers played music and read poetry, thereby demonstrating the significance that values play in non-formal education.

The *reflective process* in the educational practice had a recurring intrinsic value. Here, reflection was highlighted as an important value in itself. One focus group from the 'literature and religion' course discussed the opportunity to listen to others' views and impressions of a particular book. One member highlighted that it was not only the interaction with others that was valuable but also the reflections that these discussions gave rise to:

Selma: But also, to find out what I really think. Because if I'd read such a book on my own it would have left me feeling pretty empty. But now I have to reflect: What do I really think? What was it that made me carry on reading?

The participants further explained that discussing and reflecting on the content using religion as a lens were valuable. In the above quotation, the intrinsic value of the reflective process was related to the resistance encountered during the reading and the succeeding discussions. The observations highlighted how the participants were presented with new ideas to reflect on. When they read a book in the 'literature and religion' course, they reflected on the content and the characters they encountered and discussed the various situations in the literature. The participants also turned to earlier experiences to understand and describe situations that were similar to those mentioned in the book.

The focus group from one of the 'literatures and religion' courses also discussed the meaning of participating in the course and highlighted different ways of reflecting on the books:

Jeanette: If you've read the book you have to come here to talk about it and listen to what others think about it.

Hilda: It feels like self-development. You broaden your perspectives.

Wilma: You're forced to reflect when you are reading.

Hilda: Yes, why did I think it [the book] was bad and then you came and said it was good. It's that kind of thing that makes you reflect.

This dialogue illustrates how the participants started to reflect when interacting with the content of the book and with other participants' views and how it broadened and transformed their view of the world, thus making the reflective process an intrinsic value.

### ***Emotional value experiences***

This theme involves the participants' emotional reactions to the learning environment or content. In the interviews, the participants often related to the feelings they had when listening to music or reading a book. These emotional reactions made the participants reflect on their actions or situation. Feelings of (i) *enrichment*, (ii) *meaningfulness*, (iii) *enjoyment* and (iv) *peacefulness* were intrinsic values that were identified in relation to emotional experiences of education.

The intrinsic value of *enrichment* was emphasised in several of the interviews. In one focus group, a participant suggested that the reason for his participation was that it was interesting:

George: The answer is simple, it's interesting, it's educational. Basically, there is an interest, we read books and do a lot of other things as well. Now I also think it sounds like fulfilling a duty, but it's not that. We're now starting to get lots of people from other countries due to all the recent immigration. Then you should possibly try to understand them a little better. But that's not been the main motivation. But I think it's good if you can get a bit more insight than you had before. We haven't been very quick, but I think it's good to know a little more. But in general it's an interest in education. It's exciting to know all about this.

George stressed that learning was interest-driven and thus enriching. The participants also highlighted that emotions were connected to enrichment in their encounters with other participants in the course. In a focus group with members of the 'literature and religion' course, the importance of hearing other people's thoughts was discussed, as Jeanette stated: 'It's always exciting to hear other people's impressions of the book that I would never have thought about reading on my own. Yes, it's very enriching'. Thus, in the interactions with the learning environment, the book or the other participants in the course created feelings of enrichment and as a consequence, generated a desire to learn more.

*Meaningfulness* was also highlighted as an essential part of the educational experience. The participants discussed that their participation in education gave meaning and structure to their lives. In one focus group, this theme was discussed as follows:

Irma: One thing that I've often thought about is that you can sit at home and think that the weather is awful and...nah I don't want to go out today, but that thought never enters your head when going to a presentation or a course. That would be very strange.

Selma: But it's also something that you've committed yourself to and plan to do, so you do it.

Irma: Yes, but it's not just a commitment.

Selma: No, it's got to be both meaningful and fun.

Irma: Yes, both meaningful and fun.

Ethel: Because that's the difference between working or studying. Work was something you had to do, but here I can sit at home and do nothing. But the idea doesn't exist when it comes to these courses.

Here, education has a value by being meaningful. It is something important that is worth the struggle, regardless of the weather, and is therefore an intrinsic value.

The intrinsic value *enjoyment* occurred in the empirical material, for example in the 'literature and religion' course, where one participant explained:

Doris: It's really nice to do a course, I didn't do anything like that when I was working. I'm an engineer. That was my profession. But now I can do something else and I like it. I dreamed that when I retired I'd be interested in things like this.

This response illustrates that the course content was completely different from her work as an engineer. To give meaning to their experiences in education, the participants often turned to their previous life experiences. Experiences from former occupations and formal education were sometimes recalled as an experience in contrast to their experiences of older adults' education. This response shows that recalling previous experiences in the continuum can develop the same experience but can also turn it into something completely different. These experiences also continued to contribute to the participants' environments outside the course. When they discussed why they participated, one person explained that it was to enjoy herself, as Irma said: 'It's fun to come here and you feel energised when you're here and you can take that back home' (Irma). Thus, the joy that was experienced in the course also continued at home. The participants expressed enjoyment in various ways in the observed lessons. For example, in the observations from 'music and poetry' course, they showed it when swaying their bodies and tapping their feet when a tune was played on the piano.

Some of the participants emphasised the intrinsic value of *peacefulness*. The focus group with members from the 'music and poetry' group discussed the peacefulness of participating in the course and said that this experience was in complete contrast to their earlier and more stressful working lives. The participants also discussed the healing and solace that music can provide. One member explained that she sometimes thought of her parents when the music that was played was something that her parents had liked and listened to:

Edna: It has brought back so many memories and feelings of my parents. It's often been very poignant because you... time is running out now and I've been able to relive some of it. On many occasions when listening to the music I've had a lump in my throat.

This reaction was an example of the course producing an emotional experience that connected to previous meaningful personal experiences.

### ***Existential value experiences***

In many of the courses, questions of an existential nature occurred in terms of a good life, ageing and death. In the courses, the participants sometimes encountered ethical dilemmas that made them uncertain about how to proceed. For example, they expressed doubt about how to understand and judge different religions. *Existential awareness* was identified as an intrinsic value connected to existential experiences of education.

The intrinsic value *existential awareness* was related both to the content in the courses and the discussions about existential issues. Existential issues as content occurred when the participants analysed the books they were reading. In the 'literature and religion'

course, the participants sometimes commented on the destinies of the characters. The book entitled “The Underground Girls of Kabul” by Jenny Nordberg was about girls growing up as boys and hiding their gender identity until this was no longer possible. Discussing ethical dilemmas about religion also became an important way of encountering existential issues. In an interview from the ‘literature and religion’ course, the participants discussed how people were influenced by religion. One member (Wilma) explained: ‘I think it’s interesting to be aware of how much we are influenced by religion and ethics. You don’t consciously think about it, but discover it when you analyse the books’. This reaction is an example of how participation in non-formal education provided existential experiences.

Participants in the ‘literature and religion’ course related their earlier experiences in life to their encounters with the content. This context was also discussed in the interview as shown by this sequence:

Sandra: I think it’s exciting because it [religion] affects our lives so much all the time. So, you have to keep yourself up to date with what people think and take a stand on... There are a lot of things in the religions that are the same, and some of the contradictions that have arisen are a little unnecessary, I would say. Because they... in reality we think the same in many respects, but this is not always obvious.

Susan: I’m interested in how religion affects people’s lives as well. Without thinking about it, it has always been there since childhood and relatives and so on and I’ve been influenced by it...

The participants turned to their previous experiences to give meaning to being on the course and explained their interest in religion. In this example, they related to the contradictions that existed between the different religions and also recalled experiences from their childhood that had been influenced by a religious environment.

Discussions about existential issues were vital for the participants’ experiences in some of the courses. Topics discussed in the courses could be religion, gender, class or culture. In the focus group from the ‘literature and religion’ course, they talked about the importance of discussing deeper thoughts with the other participants.

Ethel: I think it’s interesting with the kinds of questions that go a little bit deeper than an ordinary dinner conversation with people who you don’t really know. Even though we didn’t know each other before, we can go a little bit deeper. There are some questions about life and some existential questions. And I think it’s very exciting to discuss these things with other people.

In the ‘third ageing’ course, questions of an existential nature were discussed, such as how to deal with death and what happens when you lose someone close to you, as well as positive aspects of ageing. They discussed and tried to grasp how these existential moments in life could be met. When considering ageing in the focus group with members of the ‘third ageing’ course, they thought that it was interesting to hear other people’s thoughts about getting older. In the interview, one participant said:

Barbara: I feel that I am 79 years old and soon 80 and it was interesting to take part in and listen to how it works and what you should talk about. Because this thing with age is a bit exaggerated, I think. But I believe that this has been enormously fruitful. Because we’ve encountered different and much deeper ways of thinking than are usual in ordinary life.

In this example, the participant turned to experiences outside the course, highlighting the intrinsic value of existential awareness.

### **Social value experiences**

This theme highlights the importance of social interactions between the participants in terms of the communication and the social context of the educational experience. This theme implies that people communicate with other human beings to give meaning to and understand the educational content they are working with. Here, (i) *relational support* and (ii) *sense of community* were identified as important intrinsic values.

*Relational support* was emphasised in the ‘literature and religion’ course focus group. They discussed that they developed an understanding of a book when listening to the other participants’ ideas.

Wilma: And I agree of course, what others think about a book is also very interesting.

Gertrude: It’s great fun and gives me another dimension too. Oh, how can you think like that, I wonder. What makes it so fun is that every time I’ve been on a course, whatever it happens to be, I’ve learned something new and that it’s never too late. Even if I didn’t like the book, there have been really interesting discussions and the topics of literature and religion are really exciting.

Pauline: It becomes a whole new book after discussing it. I hadn’t thought of it like that... so it’s very rewarding.

The participants highlighted that the discussions about a book were interesting as social interaction. The discussion itself was the value, and liking the book they were reading in the course was not even necessary. In the ‘literature and religion’ course, the participants not only discussed religion and the structure of society but also the characters and the content of the literature they read. The point of the communication between the participants in the courses was to understand the content of the books they were reading. Members of the literature and religion focus group highlighted the value of hearing other participants’ opinions. Gaining new insights from others was thus a vital intrinsic value.

The participants sometimes supported each other in their learning and understanding. One example of this is from the ‘music and poetry’ focus group. In the course, the teacher had read a poem by Tomas Tranströmer, a famous Swedish poet who had worked at a detention centre in his youth. One of his poems is about a fugitive (a character in the poem) who was captured with his pockets full of mushrooms. One of the participants expressed that it was hard to understand why the fugitive had his pockets full of mushrooms:

Linda: ...when we read those Haiku poems and the thing about the chanterelles. And now you say this so that it seems quite natural to put them in the pocket.

Betty: Those boys didn’t have anywhere to go, so they hid in the forest.

Linda: It was so funny to hear that.

This participant shared her experiences of working at the same detention centre as Tranströmer. She explained that the boys often ran away and hid in the forest because they did not have anywhere else to go. When doing this she also supported the participants’ understanding of the poem and created continuity between earlier experiences and the experience from the course.

Social experience, as in a *sense of community*, was further identified as an intrinsic value. Meeting other people was of great importance for the participants, and in the



interview with members of the ‘third ageing’ course, the participants discussed how rewarding this experience was. One member declared:

Barbara: I think that being on a course when you are older is a bit different. We don’t read a course, or don’t go on a course about language or whatever to be able to go to university. But much of our learning is about meeting new people and at the same time becoming more knowledgeable. We are not result-oriented in the same way as your generation is. I think that this is very important when choosing a course.

In this quotation, the participant related to society outside the course to give meaning to her experiences in the course. In the ‘literature and religion’ focus group, they discussed the importance of social interaction. To explain the social value of participating and the companionship they created in the courses, the participants also related to the world outside. One member (Patricia) of the focus group explained: ‘Then you become one of ... by just taking a course like this or what you do, you become part of society’. The importance of community was also discussed in the ‘music and poetry’ focus group, where the participants underlined that life as a pensioner could be quite lonely.

In some cases, the social experiences in the course also contributed to their experiences outside it. In the interview with a ‘literature and religion’ focus group, some of the participants emphasised that the social aspect was important and that they now knew more people to say hello to in the town. Although they might not know each other well, they now had some things in common. One member (Gertrude) of that focus group explained that ‘this is also a kind of loose tie as well. I haven’t seen some of you before, but I will probably nod and say hello’. After a brief sequence, during which one participant mentioned that she enjoyed talking to people more now, Gertrude elaborated further and said, ‘and when I meet you then I’ll know that we have the same interest, and can talk a little about which book we are reading’. The social connections they made during the course extended their experiences, which also meant that participation in the course transformed their social world outside the course and increased their sense of community.

## Discussion

The results of the study offer an understanding of what intrinsic values of education for older adults can be and how these values are related to the educational process. The findings show that the participants experience a number of different intrinsic values in non-formal education: (i) *new insights and widened perspectives*, (ii) *the reflective process*, (iii) *enrichment*, (iv) *meaningfulness*, (v) *enjoyment*, (vi) *peacefulness*, (vii) *existential awareness*, (viii) *relational support* and (ix) *sense of community*.

Several of these values have been identified in previous research. For example, Park et al. (2016) have found that emotional satisfaction is important and Åberg (2016) has underlined social aspects, such as fellowship. Feelings, like joy and interest, have also been outlined as crucial by McWilliams and Barrett (2018). However, in our study, a more comprehensive picture of the range of potential intrinsic values in post-work education has been identified. These values should not be viewed hierarchically, but instead as vital parts of the total learning experience. Our study further indicates that these values co-exist, deepen the educational experience and occur differently depending on the learning activities undertaken. The value experiences thus help us to understand the meaning older adults make in participating in post work-education.

Furthermore, our results indicate that values, which from a third-person perspective may be viewed as instrumental, may appear as intrinsic from the participants' perspective. Some interesting aspects noted in the results are, thus, that meaningfulness in education does not necessarily have to be connected to the usefulness of the content (see Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010). For example, discussing and reflecting on the content of a book are emphasised by the participants' as a value in itself rather than as a way of keeping the brain alert (Hardy et al., 2017).

Schuller (2004) suggests three capitals – human capital, social capital and identity capital – as a framework for understanding the benefits of learning. Other research focusing on non-formal education implies that older adults can perceive higher gains in social capital compared with younger adults (Hachem & Manninen, 2020). The intrinsic values *social support* and *sense of community* confirm that social aspects are crucial for older adults' education. Being in a period of post-work, educational participation is one way to become or remain a part of society. However, older adults' education may contribute to other dimensions, and our results demonstrate that it is not just a question of feeling enjoyment all the time (see McWilliams & Barrett, 2018), as other emotions, such as the intrinsic value of *peacefulness*, can be a vital part. Experiences of learning about existential aspects have been explored, and research outlines that learning can contribute to compensatory changes in life (Narushima et al., 2018). The findings on intrinsic values in our study indicate that the content and the discussions about existential issues, rather than objectives such as daily coping, are valuable. This finding is in line with that of Mackowicz and Wnek-Gozdek (2019), who argue that including topics and subjects that can be considered challenging to discuss is important for senior universities. An example from our study is the discussions about the sensitive issue 'how to deal with death and what happens when you lose someone close to you', which the participants considered as an *existential* value.

Regarding the question of *how* the values of education are experienced, complex pedagogical interactions must be considered. The relations between the individual and social environment in ongoing education are crucial. Previous research highlights the needs and motives of older adults' participation, indicating an understanding of older adults' participation where the individual is passive and is coming into action (like participation in education) when a need must be met (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). The participants in our study instead highlight that the value of the interactions and relations is in the activity itself. Reading a book, learning about music, a sense of community or joint reflections on different religions are considered and esteemed as valuable. The participants seldom value their participation in relation to anything outside the learning activity. Therefore, the activities and actions that occur in the educational situation can largely be said to be about intrinsic values.

Acknowledging that instrumental values also play an important role in older adults' post-work education and learning is important. In this study, some of the participants highlighted that participation in education is important as it worked as a means to stay active and get structure in life. This issue responds to previous research discussing that 'staying active' can be a strong motive for older adult learners (Bjursell, 2019b). Previous research outlines that older adults' motivation is a mixture of intrinsic/expressive and instrumental/extrinsic aspects (Narushima et al., 2013). However, in this study, the experiences of the intrinsic values of education are regarded as special occurrences that give the experiences in education a certain quality. Dewey ([1916] 2004) reminds us that the instrumental values of education, such as mastering a certain skill, are vital. However, a risk has also been observed, wherein education will merely become an instrumental rehearsal if the focus is exclusively on the justifications and goals of learning in later life.

This attribute is noteworthy, as learning later in life is included in policies as a way of solving social problems (Formosa, 2012; Tøsse, 2014). This finding resonates with Formosa's (2012) critique that late life learning must not be based on the ideology of the market or the economic needs of society.

An important consequence of our study is related to the teaching of older adults and how to plan non-formal education for them. Duay and Bryan (2008) argue that teachers play a vital role in older adults' education regarding the creation of interesting and meaningful learning experiences. Our study points in the same direction and highlights that the experiences of intrinsic value are vital for the quality of older adults' participation in education and must be taken seriously when planning and organising. In the educational interactions, the participants experience intrinsic values and then turn back to earlier experiences to make sense of their learning situations. Learning experiences should therefore be organised in ways that create continuity between past, present and future experiences. The experience of intrinsic values can contribute to this continuity and make participation and retention in the courses more intelligible and provide meaning to their participation.

The sampling of the study can, of course, have influenced the findings. Courses, such as 'music and poetry' and 'literature and religion', have another character than courses with more instrumental aims, where, for example, technical skills are focused. Thus, the courses in our study probably have a high proportion of intrinsic values. However, the sampling was related to the purpose of the study: to gain a deeper knowledge of the intrinsic values of older adult education. The way in which participants experience the values of education depends on their cultural and intellectual capital. In our case, those studying in senior universities (U3A) are often from the educated middle-class. Middle-class older adults in post-working life may have positive experiences of and feelings about post-secondary education and have the confidence and commitment needed to appreciate education as something valuable in itself (Formosa, 2014). In further explorations of the importance of intrinsic values in post-work education, study groups with different social and educational backgrounds must be investigated. Acknowledging that other older adults who are willing to participate in a course but do not have the possibility and the necessary resources due to time, fees and transportation is important. This factor could have excluded people who have other kinds of value experiences regarding education.

National differences in how the senior universities (U3A) are organised are also observed, and these differences must also be considered in further research. Organisations following the French U3A model have a top-down approach, where experts determine the programmes for older adults (Vellas, 2019). By contrast, in Sweden, senior universities are often organised by the members themselves and resemble the study circle courses of the popular/liberal adult education movement (Bjursell, 2019a). This procedure is similar to the British U3A model's bottom-up approach, where the education programmes follow the needs and interests of the members (Vellas, 2019). However, even if equality between participants is emphasised as vital, a paid teacher or study circle leader is often present (Larsson & Nordvall, 2010). The senior university featured in this study is no exception. As emphasised above, the teacher plays a crucial role in the creation of a fruitful learning environment, as they are responsible for the course layout and the content. Therefore, we regard this factor as important in further investigating the role of the teacher in different educational settings.

Educational activities involve complex pedagogical relations, and predicting whether a certain situation will lead to a certain outcome or value is difficult, if not impossible. The focus of this study has not been on correlations and causality. Instead, we have focused

on the participants' experiences of intrinsic values and the results outlined here must be seen as potential intrinsic values of education and how they can be experienced. Additional research is necessary to determine the role of teachers and older adults' experiences in ongoing educational activities and how different contents contribute to people's experiences of intrinsic values in education.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This group can be considered as a very small focus group (VSFGs) (Toner, 2009). More participants were invited but only two attended.

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