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The Impact of Welfare State Regimes on Barriers to Participation in Adult Education

A Bounded Agency Model

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Quantitative and qualitative findings on barriers to participation in adult education are reviewed and some of the defining parameters that may explain observed national differences are considered. A theoretical perspective based on bounded agency is put forth to take account of the interaction between structurally and individually based barriers to participation. The Bounded Agency Model is premised on the assumption that the nature of welfare state regimes can affect a person's capability to participate. In particular, the state can foster broad structural conditions relevant to participation and construct targeted policy measures that are aimed at overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers. Features of the Nordic model of adult education and empirical results from the 2003 Eurobarometer are discussed in relation to this theoretical perspective.

Keywords: *barriers; participation; welfare state regimes; bounded agency; adult education structures; adult education policy*

This article reviews evidence on barriers to participation in adult education and the defining parameters that explain the observations. An international comparative perspective is used by contrasting results from the International Adult Literacy Survey as well as the Eurobarometer data between Nordic and non-Nordic countries.¹ Emphasis is placed on the constraining and enabling elements to participation and how these may explain why certain groups participate more or less than others. A theoretical perspective based on bounded agency is put forth to take account of the interaction between structurally and individually based barriers to participation. The Bounded Agency Model is premised on the assumption that the nature of welfare state regimes can affect a person's capability to participate. In particular, the

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state can foster broad structural conditions relevant to participation and construct targeted policy measures that are aimed at overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers. Features of the Nordic model of adult education are discussed in relation to this perspective.

Background and Purpose

A review of national and supranational policy documents reveals the increasing importance attributed to the role of adult learning in promoting the well-being of nations and individuals. Policy makers all around the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries seem to agree with Tony Blair that “education is the best economic policy we have” (Martin, 2003, p. 567). Economic concerns are heightened by current demographic changes that are resulting in a rapidly aging workforce. As a response, the European Union (EU) identified lifelong learning as a key instrument in making Europe the strongest knowledge economy in the world by 2010 and has established very ambitious long-term training goals for all member countries (European Commission, 2007). Although the new economy may promise increased productivity and an improved standard of living, there is a growing awareness that it also introduces a set of transitions and adjustment challenges for individuals. These have the potential to cause the permanent exclusion or marginalization of segments of the population and exacerbate socioeconomic divisions. On this point, policy makers can draw on welfare researchers who maintain that adult learning is part of the solution to the exclusion dilemma (Esping-Andersen, 1996, p. 259). Adult learning can be seen to promote competencies that help individuals adapt to the demands of the new economy and enable full participation in economic and social life. Esping-Andersen (1996) suggests that under a knowledge economy and knowledge society the accent of social citizenship might move from a “preoccupation with income maintenance towards a menu of rights to lifelong learning and qualification” (p. 260).

The promise of adult learning in fostering economic growth and higher living standards has resulted in the development of major national and supranational policy-driven surveys focusing on the extent and distribution of adult learning, the performance of adult education and training systems, and the effect of different policy levers on participation (e.g., Chisolm, Larson, & Mossoux, 2004; OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005). Meanwhile, the contribution from the scholarly community to the new policy interest in adult learning has overwhelmingly consisted of critical discourse analyses laying bare the economic and neoliberal underpinnings of recent policy initiatives. Judging from what has been published in major scholarly journals during the past two decades, with few notable exceptions, there has been little interest from the scholarly community to engage with the topic of participation and barriers, two classic issues in the field. This is in sharp contrast to the 1970s and first

half of the 1980s, when a considerable body of conceptually oriented work on participation was produced. However, this latter interest was fueled more by concerns regarding a lack of scholarly progress in adult education than issues of inequality and life opportunities.

As evident in repeated state-of-the-art reviews, Cross's (1981) seminal work, *Adults as Learners*, remains the most frequently cited work on barriers and participation, and little theoretical development has occurred since (e.g., MacKeracher, Suart, & Potter, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This is not to deny that there have been large empirically driven studies on participation since then. But there has been little interest in putting forward alternative theoretical models on participation. Thus, it is high time to take a renewed interest in reflecting on how participation and barriers can be understood.

Comparative Evidence on Barriers and Participation

Our attempt to construct a model of participation will be grounded in comparative evidence on barriers and participation patterns, which we briefly review in this section.

Barriers

Empirical evidence on barriers originates primarily from large-scale national and international comparative surveys of representative samples of the adult population. There also exists qualitative studies that provide valuable complementary insights, but these are not comparative. Interpretations of findings vary depending on the methodology and design used. Although most studies use some version of the Cross (1981) classification of barriers, which are situational, institutional, and dispositional, there are structural design differences that affect which subpopulations are asked about barriers to participation.

One design is based on the view that barriers exist only for adults who wanted to participate but could not. In these surveys, questions on barriers are only directed to nonparticipants who wanted to participate. A different conceptualization is that barriers lower the extent of participation but may not entirely prohibit participation. Surveys based on this view also ask participants about possible barriers that may have caused them to lower the extent of their learning activities. There is also the issue of whether those who have indicated no interest in participating should be asked about barriers.

Large-scale surveys, such as the U.S. National Higher Education Survey, the Canadian Adult Education and Training Survey, and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), pose a battery of questions on barriers but only to persons who indicated that they failed to take courses or programs they wanted to take. These surveys

Table 1
Percentage of Adults Reporting Specific Types of Barriers to Participation,
by Various Classification Variables, European Union Region
(15 Member Countries Plus Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland), 2003

	Situational Barriers				Institutional Barriers	Dispositional Barriers
	No Barriers	Job-Related Barriers	Family-or Household-Related Barriers	Combined		
Total	29	23	28	42	21	43
Age						
16-25	38	23	20	37	23	37
26-35	28	27	36	52	22	37
36-45	28	28	36	50	21	40
46-55	28	23	23	38	21	46
56-65	29	10	19	25	21	56
Gender						
Men	32	27	20	38	20	44
Women	27	19	37	46	23	41
Education						
10 years or less	23	18	29	39	25	54
11-13 years	30	23	29	43	22	42
14 or more years	35	28	27	44	17	33
Employment status						
Employed	31	32	26	46	19	40
Unemployed	33	9	27	33	30	38
Outside the labor force	16	4	50	52	28	52
Retired or unable to work	26	3	19	20	22	56
Student	49	17	23	31	13	22
Occupation						
Blue-collar low skill	23	25	30	44	25	52
Blue-collar high skill	29	34	24	46	21	43
White-collar low skill	32	29	28	45	19	39
White-collar high skill	36	36	25	47	15	33

Source: Eurobarometer survey data, 2003.

concentrate on situational and institutional barriers and pay little attention to psychological impediments. This is because adults who are not interested in participating are not asked about barriers. The other major approach in large-scale surveys found

in, for example, national adult education surveys in Nordic countries and the United Kingdom and in the Eurobarometer treats lack of interest as a barrier. In this approach, barrier-related questions are posed to three groups of respondents, persons who have not participated, those who have considered but not participated, and those who have participated. Consequently, more interest is given to dispositional barriers in these latter studies.

When barrier-related questions are only posed to nonparticipants who wanted to participate, situational and institutional barriers tend to dominate. In many countries, the strongest reason for not participating is a lack of time. In the IALS study, about 60% identified this as the major reason for not having started a non-work-related education one had wanted to take (Desjardins, Rubenson, & Milana, 2006). This depends however on one's life situation, such as being in the early or late stages of a career or on one's family situation (Merriam, 2005). The most intense barriers appear to be family related and these are concentrated among early- to middle-career-aged adults (see Table 1). According to the Eurobarometer, family-related barriers like "my family commitments take up too much energy" tended to be mentioned more frequently than job-related ones, but there were national differences in this respect (Chisolm et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, women have been found to be more prone to refer to family responsibilities than men.

Institutional barriers are also significant but to a lesser degree than situational barriers. In the IALS study, about 45% of adults who wanted to participate in some form of work-related studies but did not mention at least one institutional barrier. The figure was about 30% for non-work-related studies (Desjardins et al., 2006). Among institutional barriers, financial reasons are the most prevalent, particularly in North America. However, as evident from the Eurobarometer data, cost is also a major barrier in Europe. Only between 12% and 21%, depending on purpose, were willing to pay all of the cost for studying whereas close to 50% would pay none of the cost (Chisolm et al., 2004, p. 86). Other frequently identified institutional barriers are a lack of appropriate courses and the scheduling of them.

It is problematic however to interpret the implications of these findings for policy. Time and money are not endless resources, so people have to make choices regarding how they want to spend their resources. For many people, mentioning "lack of time" or "lack of money" is as much a statement of the value they ascribe to education and the expected outcome of such an activity. This is not to deny that some people, because of work or family conditions, may have very little time or money left over which they can freely decide. But it is interesting to note that in several studies, participants mention situational barriers to the same extent, and in some studies, even more often than nonparticipants (Rubenson, 2007). This was also the case with institutional barriers, where participants slightly more often reported this as the reason for not having taken other courses.

Similarly, Jonsson and Gähler (1996) found that there were as many people with "objective" barriers in terms of handicaps, young children or working hours, who

participated as those who did not. “Instead of barriers, that might have to do with cost, lack of time, it is probably differences in expected rewards that can explain why some choose to participate while others remain outside” (p. 38). This places emphasis on dispositional aspects including values and the subjective interpretation of one’s opportunity structure to achieve what matters for them. Although many would agree with Jonsson and Gähler’s (1996) interpretation, it is important not to deny that some people do face major hindrances, like child care and cost, that makes it very hard for them to participate. For example, the fact that fewer people in upper-income brackets mentioned financial reasons is an indication that the answers reflect not only the willingness to pay but also the ability to do so (Rubenson, 2007).

Although situational and institutional barriers tend to be consistent regardless of survey approach, this is not the case with dispositional barriers. Surveys that also pose questions on barriers to those who have no interest in participating point to the significance of psychological deterrents. Dispositional barriers refer to perceptions like little to gain by participating, concerns about own ability to succeed, belief that one is too old to go back to study, and bad previous experiences with schooling. Several studies comparing participants with nonparticipants indicate that negative attitudes and dispositions toward adult education are by far the most deterring factor (Rubenson, 2007). Similarly, in the Eurobarometer data, dispositional barriers are mentioned to the same extent as situational barriers and twice as often as institutional barriers. Dispositional barriers are particularly dominant among older adults, low-educated adults, as well as low-skill and blue-collar workers (see Table 1).

Qualitatively oriented studies provide more in-depth insight into a person’s subjective rationale regarding participation. A lack of interest can reflect a subjective rationality that is constructed around the person’s life context. Several studies have pointed to how a lack of stimulating employment opportunities, in the form of unemployment, a reduced likelihood of becoming employed, and/or a monotonous job, discourages participation (Paldanius, 2007). Not participating becomes a highly rational act and it is only when participation will result in better and higher paying work that it is meaningful. Carlén (1999) found that among the automobile workers she interviewed, work and education were viewed as separate praxis related to class identity. They believed that wage earners should produce and not enter into education. Studies that were unrelated to their work challenged their routine and were perceived to encompass the threat of change. Similarly, Paldanius (2007) reported that nonparticipants predominantly viewed education as something that was to be done while waiting for real life to start, which is when one leaves school and enters working life.

These findings suggest that although individuals have a degree of agency with regard to their learning behaviors, they are also bounded by structures and contexts and by features of the self that constrain choices (see, e.g., Salling-Olsen, 2004). Unfortunately, there are no comparative qualitative studies, as these could have helped provide insights into the extent to which differences in structures, life opportunities, as well as policies affect individuals’ consciousness of barriers. However,

there are comparative findings on participation in IALS that are highly important for exploring this issue.

Participation

A comparison of participation reveals some interesting national differences with consequences for the theorizing of barriers. First, there are substantial differences in participation between countries at comparable stages in the modernization process and with quite similar economies (Desjardins et al., 2006). Based on a review of comparative evidence the authors grouped the countries as follows:

- Group 1: A small group of countries have overall participation rates that are consistently *close to or exceeding 50%*. The Nordic countries, including Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, comprise this group.
- Group 2: Countries of Anglo-Saxon origin, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, have overall participation rates that fall into the *35% to 50%* range. A few of the smaller Northern European countries, including Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Switzerland are also among this group.
- Group 3: Has overall participation rates between *20% and 35%*. It features the remainder of Northern European countries, including Austria, Belgium (Flanders), and Germany. Also among this group are some Eastern European countries, namely Czech Republic, Slovenia, and some Southern European countries, including France, Italy, and Spain.
- Group 4: Finally, there is a group of countries with overall rates consistently *below 20%*. These include the remaining Southern European countries, namely Greece and Portugal, as well as some additional Eastern European countries, like Hungary and Poland (p. 36).

We find the spread in participation rates larger than might be expected. It is not surprising that there are major differences between countries that are at different stages in the modernization process. However, the large variation between highly developed Northern European, North American, and other Anglo-Saxon countries suggests major differences in learning cultures, learning opportunities at work, adult education structures, and public policies.

Second, the IALS data on participation suggest that although age, family background, educational attainment, and work-related factors are linked to inequality in participation in all countries, the level of inequality varies substantially between countries (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, 2005). In particular, inequalities are substantially lower in the Nordic countries than in the other countries, especially the Anglo-Saxon countries. Furthermore, the data suggest that patterns of inequality in adult learning mirror broader structural inequalities in society, like inequalities in income, education, and skill attainment (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000).

Participation patterns in a country thus seem to reflect its particular welfare state regime (Rubenson, 2006a).

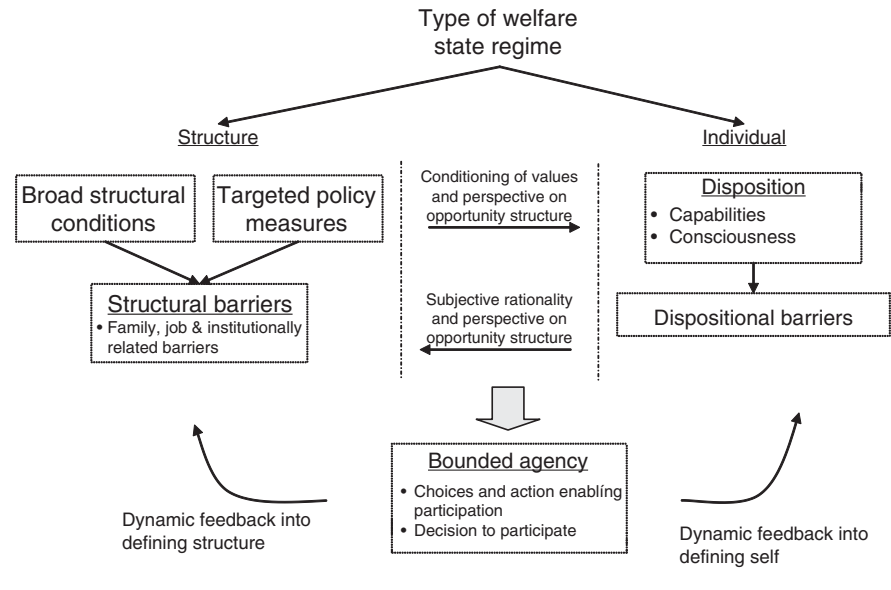
The results can be viewed in the context of Esping-Andersen's (1989) three distinct welfare state regimes characterized by different arrangements between state, market, and the family. These distinctions can be linked to differences in structures and policies in adult education. However, it should be noted that his classification has been subject to debate. The main criticism has been on its gender blindness and the fact that it is based only on a review of 18 OECD countries (Abrahamson & Wehner, 2006; Bamba, 2007). As a response, he has incorporated a fourth type, namely the Asian welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1996 **IAQ: II**), and responded to the feminist criticism by introducing the concept "defamiliarization" to more directly address how availability of child care and care for elderly affect women's lives (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Despite the development of alternative welfare state typologies, this classification remains the most widely used in the literature as it provides a broad way of classifying general welfare conditions (Abrahamson & Wehner, 2006), even under present conditions of globalization (Greve, 2006).

The Anglo-Saxon countries follow what Esping-Andersen (1989) calls a liberal welfare state regime, where means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, and social insurance plans predominate. The benefits are mostly moderate and often associated with stigma. Another distinguishable regime type can be found in nations such as Austria, France, Germany, and Italy. Strongly influenced by the church and with old corporatist traditions, there is less concern with market efficiency, and granting of social rights has seldom been a contested issue in these countries. The tendency for the state however is to not interfere until the family capacity to help its members is exhausted. The third category of countries follow what Esping-Andersen (1989) labels the social democratic or Nordic regime type. In this group of countries, we find less dualism between state and market and between working class and middle class. The state sets a very demanding equity standard and not equity of minimal needs as pursued elsewhere. The citizen's right to services and benefits has traditionally been defined according to the pattern of the middle class. A defining character of the social democratic state is the integration of welfare and work. It is in this context that a bounded agency model on barriers is presented in the following section.

Bounded Agency Model: A Theoretical Perspective on Barriers

The empirical findings bring into question the usefulness of trying to understand barriers by focusing solely on how the individual interprets the world, which most theories on barriers and participation tend to do. Instead, the findings suggest that

Figure 1
Bounded Agency Model



we also have to consider broader structural conditions and targeted policy measures, and analyze the interaction between these and the individual’s conceptual apparatus. Following this logic, the Bounded Agency Model presented in Figure 1 suggests that each of the above welfare state regimes will have their specific impact on barriers to participation.

The impact of welfare state regimes on barriers can be understood in the context of power resources theory, which claims that although the capitalist class is by far the most powerful actor in society, other collectives, particularly labor, have potential access to political resources, “which can allow [them] to implement social reform and alter distributional inequalities to a significant degree” (Olsen & O’Connor, 1998, p. 8). Korpi (1998) suggests that “the extent of bias in the functioning of the state can vary considerably as a reflection of the distribution of power resources in these societies and thus politics can be expected to matter, e.g., for the distributive processes in society” (p. 54). Thus, there are crucial differences in what adult education attempts to do and can do in different social–political structures (Carnoy, 1990), and it seems plausible to suggest that both the nature and severity of barriers as well as citizens’ capabilities to overcome them are affected by the nature of the welfare state (Rubenson, 2006a). According to our model, broad structural conditions and

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targeted policy measures are seen to directly affect the extent and impact of institutional and situational, or job- and family-related, barriers. Structural conditions play a substantial role in forming the circumstances faced by individuals and limit the feasible alternatives to choose from, and therefore they can bind individual agency.

A particular welfare state regime can be found not only to be implicated in social structures, adult education systems, and life chances but also in individual consciousness (see arrow from welfare state regime to individual disposition in Figure 1). From the perspective of individual consciousness, we draw on Bourdieu (1990), who points to the interaction between an individual's habitus and field, or social context. Simply stated, the latter structures and conditions the habitus, which can be seen as a system of dispositions that governs how a person acts, thinks, and orients himself or herself in the social world (see Figure 1, arrow from structure to the individual). Thus, we see individual dispositions as both directly and indirectly affected by the welfare state regime. The system of dispositions is a result of social experiences, collective memories, and ways of thinking that have been engraved in peoples' minds.

According to Sen's (1999) capability approach, the interaction between habitus and social system regulates the perceived opportunities and liberties that individuals face, and hence their *functioning*, or what people can actually do. Sen's (1999) concept of human capability and functioning is defined not only as having resources available—internal (i.e., knowledge or skills such as literacy) or external (i.e., money)—but also in terms of individuals knowing about the range of possibilities of how these resources can be used to realize things that matter to them and knowing how to do so. In this sense, dispositional barriers can be seen as factors that restrict a person's capability and hence freedom to participate. Furthermore, dispositional barriers can be affected and even caused by structural barriers, such as institutional and situational ones.

Adult education can be instrumental in fostering capabilities, but likewise, capabilities can play a crucial role in the decision to participate. In Figure 1, this interaction is indicated through the middle column, namely, in the conditioning of values and subjective rationality, which is an outcome of the interplay between structure and individual and results in what we have termed "bounded agency."

From this perspective, public policy has a role to play in attenuating both structurally and individually based barriers to participation. Public policy as represented by different types of welfare state regimes can directly affect the contextual (structural) conditions that individuals face (on the job, in civil society, at home) but through this it can also indirectly affect individuals' subjective rationality and view (disposition) of their opportunity structure. Only through this structure–agency interaction does public policy affect the take-up of learning. This model recognizes the nonlinearity and feedback mechanisms associated with an individual's decision to participate.

Referring back to Sen's capability approach, there is also a dynamic process whereby the development of an individual's capabilities feeds back into defining structural conditions, especially situational ones such as job and family but also

institutional ones if only at a collective level. It also feeds into the disposition of the individual toward further development. This dynamic aspect is critical for Sen's notion of positive freedom. In terms of participation in adult education, positive freedom combines the idea that people are free to define, choose, and control what is good for them and that they can only be really free if they have the basic level of capability needed to define, choose, and control what is good for them.

In summary, participation is often regarded as a voluntary act that a person chooses. The decision to participate however must be seen both in its reference to the purposeful, reasoning behavior of agents and its intersection with the constraining and enabling features of the social and material contexts of that behavior (Giddens, 1984). The capability approach helps us to draw attention to the fact that dispositions and preferences are not independent of economic and social conditions (Nussbaum, 2002). In the context of dispositional barriers, the latter can be regarded as a form of habitus that restricts people's freedom in considering the possibility to participate. Our theoretical perspective is that the welfare state regime can affect a person's capability to participate through the way it constructs the material, social, and institutional environments and the way these result in situational and institutional, or structural, barriers as well as a person's internal state of readiness as expressed in dispositional barriers.

A Comparative Look at the Success of Nordic Welfare States in Overcoming Barriers

As mentioned, the Nordic countries have positioned themselves at the top of the EU and OECD when it comes to the incidence of participation in adult education. The distinctiveness lies in the attenuation of differences among disadvantaged groups and thus in the level of inequality. Building on the Bounded Agency Model, the following outlines the broad structural conditions and targeted policy measures associated with Nordic welfare states and how these may have affected structural and individual barriers. Data on barriers from the Eurobarometer are also interpreted from this perspective. Despite its limitations of topics and questions driven by policy questions, for purposes of this study, we deem it appropriate. Furthermore, these are the only comparative data available that ask questions on barriers to both participants and nonparticipants. The survey population sample is representative of the population over the age of 15. It comprised about 18,000 face-to-face interviews carried out in people's homes in the national language. The average number of respondents in each country was 1,000.

Broad structural conditions and targeted policy measures

Although less generous because of recent economic and social challenges, the Nordic welfare state is still very much in place with its institutional arrangements

and traditions (Timonen, 2003). It is therefore of interest to reflect on aspects of the Nordic welfare state that have profound effects on barriers and thus participation.

First, a founding pillar in the Nordic welfare strategy is the full employment concept. Accordingly, adult education policies have been closely integrated with active labor market policies. It is interesting to note that in accordance with the Nordic regime type, the education and training offered to the unemployed in recent Nordic reforms are quite extensive (Rubenson, 2006a) and not of the minimalist nature found in many other countries. This broad offer of education can be seen to be in accordance with a labor market based on a high-skill equilibrium (Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001).

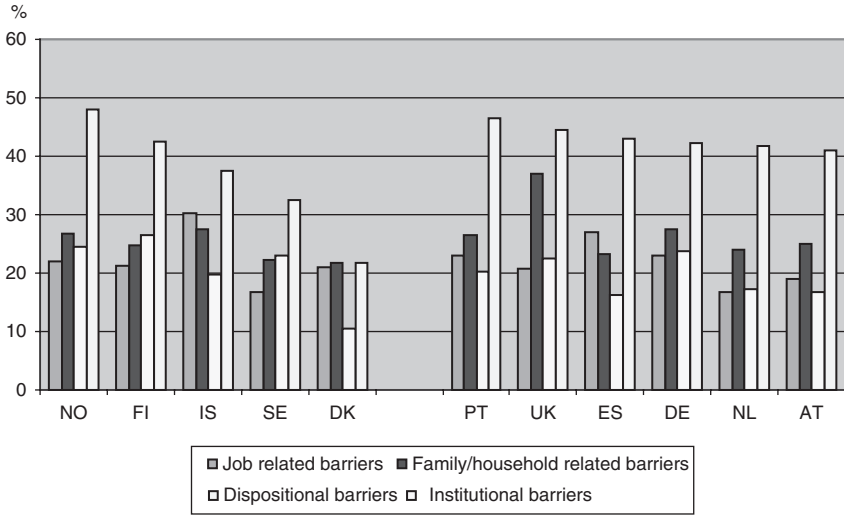
Second, Nordic countries feature industrial relations that are anchored in a highly developed corporatist structure, involving negotiations among the state, employers, and unions, which are either decentralized but centrally coordinated (e.g., Denmark, Sweden) or based on tripartite concentration at the central level (e.g., Finland, Norway). Strong trade unions capable of engaging in public debates have influenced their members' opportunities for adult education. In particular, their central involvement has made adult education an instrument serving to form and develop workers' individual and collective consciousness. In their struggle for individual and/or collective change, this structural condition has enabled workers to reflect on the role adult education may play in bringing about change. The corporatist tradition has also enabled adult education issues to become part of negotiations between unions and management on the introduction of new technology, changes in production processes, and work organization.

Third, the supply of adult education opportunities extends into the domain of civil society but with state support. The Nordic countries have a strong tradition of sustaining a publicly supported sector of adult popular education in the form of folk high schools and adult education associations. Through this structural condition, individuals in the Nordic countries have access to a form of adult education that can respond to different aspirations and needs than the formal educational system or the education and training that is supplied by employers.

Fourth, the emphasis on equity has a deep impact on the funding regimes of Nordic countries. Tuijnman and Hellström (2001) found that public support has a crucial effect on the participation of those least likely to enroll. "Thus it may be the case, more generally, that public support for disadvantaged groups is the main, defining characteristic of Nordic approaches to adult education" (p. 9).

Recent reforms in Denmark and Sweden provide further insight to suggest that targeted measures may partly explain the comparatively higher participation rates among certain groups, namely the unemployed, immigrants, older adults, less educated workers, and low-skilled adults. Most public funding in Denmark and Sweden is targeted and has a highly compensatory focus, addressing primarily the unemployed, persons with functional impediments, low levels of education, immigrants, and persons who experience difficulties in receiving formal recognition of education

Figure 2
Percentage of Adults Reporting Specific Types
of Barriers to Participation, by Country, 2003



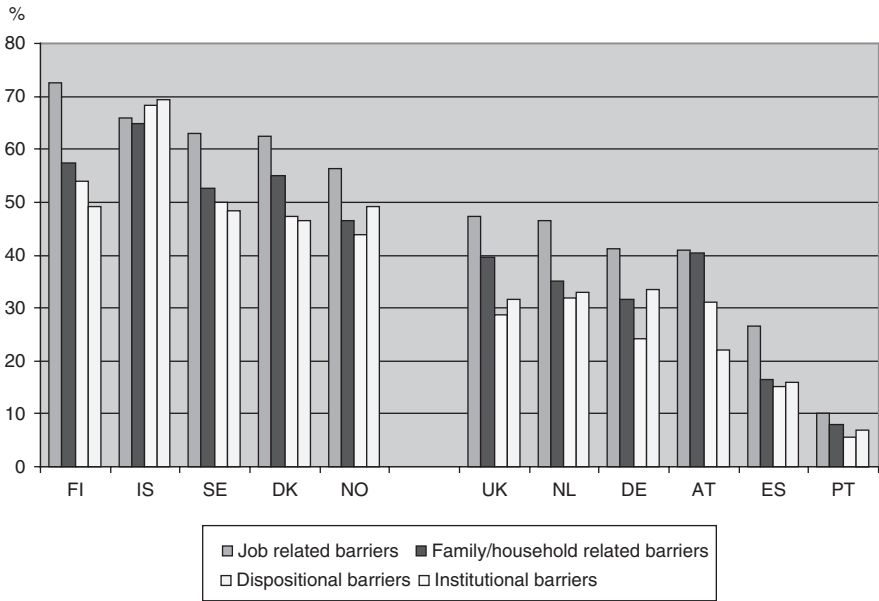
Source: Eurobarometer, 2003.

Note: Ranked by proportion of adults reporting dispositionally related barriers. Except for Group 1 (Denmark, DK; Finland, FI; Iceland, IS; Norway, NO; and Sweden, SE) where all Nordic countries are included, two countries are selected from each group outlined above as follows: Group 2 (Netherlands, NL; United Kingdom, UK); Group 3 (Austria, AT; Germany, DE); Group 4 (Portugal, PT; Spain, ES).

received in other countries (see OECD, 2000, 2001). More broadly, the policy emphasis is on subsidizing participation for those who need it most (by eliminating fees, providing targeted study assistance, and financing outreach activities), guaranteeing student spaces, and reducing credit constraints. This strategy compensates for a tendency by employers to offer little or no financial support to low-skilled employees.

In reviewing the national reports produced for the OECD’s *Thematic Review of Adult Learning* (OECD, 2003, 2005), it is evident that the targeted Nordic policy strategy is defined by its interpretation of the equity goal (Rubenson, 2006b). The issue of combating inequalities is addressed in a comprehensive way and linked to broader democratic ambitions. The broader goals of adult learning are expressed in a very similar fashion to the goals of general education. This is not to say that concerns about knowledge and skills are in any way in the background in the Nordic countries but that issues around skills are situated in a broader social agenda.

Figure 3
Percentage of Adults Participating in Adult Education and Training
During the Year Preceding the Interview, by Various Barriers, 2003



Source: Eurobarometer, 2003.

Note: Ranked by proportion of adults reporting job related barriers.

Participation Rates of Adults Who Report Various Barriers

The Eurobarometer suggests that adults in Nordic and non-Nordic countries experience similar barriers to participation and nearly to the same extent (see Table A1). Two findings stand out in Figure 2. First, by and large, adults seem to have mentioned situational and institutional barriers to the same extent regardless of the country they inhabit. Second, contrary to expectations, dispositional barriers are frequently noted, not only in the non-Nordic countries, but also in several of the Nordic countries: Norway, Finland, and Iceland. However, dispositional barriers are somewhat less frequent in Sweden and particularly in Denmark. With regard to the Bounded Agency Model, the key question becomes the extent to which structural conditions and individual dispositions afford the individual the capability and freedom necessary to overcome barriers.

Figure 3 displays the actual participation rates of adults who report various barriers. These estimates provide some indication of the extent to which perceived

barriers are successfully overcome. In nearly all cases, adults from Nordic countries are more likely to participate in adult education even though they may perceive the same barriers as their counterparts in other countries.

Of the 22% to 27% of Nordic adults who reported family-related barriers as significant, 47% to 65% nevertheless participated in the 12 months preceding the interview (see Tables A1 and A2). This can be compared to non-Nordic adults who reported family barriers to about the same extent, but only 8% to 40% actually participated. What is interesting to note in this analysis is that there is a consistent pattern revealed between Nordic and non-Nordic countries. Although there are wide variations within each of the two sets of countries, the Nordic country at the lower end of the range is still higher than the non-Nordic country at the high end of the range.

There are various welfare state policies that shape the structural conditions related to family-related situations that may at least partly account for this observation. One that stands out is the public-supported early childhood education and care system in the Nordic countries, which is rather extensive (OECD, 2006). This frees up time from family commitments, which facilitates participation, especially for women with young children. There are also a range of other advanced policies to support a good balance between family and work life, like child allowances, support for lone parents, parental leave schemes, and flexible working hours, which culminate into favorable structural conditions.

A similar observation can be made for job-related barriers. Fifty-six percent to 73% of Nordic adults who reported this type of barrier (17%-30%) nevertheless participated, as compared to 10% to 47% in non-Nordic countries (see Tables A1 and A2). In addition, IALS and Eurobarometer data show that Nordic countries are comparatively more successful at reaching adults who are low educated and are either unemployed, out of the labor force, or in low-skill jobs (Desjardins et al., 2006). Again, there are various welfare state policies that can help to explain these observations. Especially since the early 1990s, a time when welfare states faced many challenges, such as globalization, Nordic countries increased support for active labor market measures (e.g., those aiming at improving access to the labor market and jobs, job-related skills, and labor market functioning). These were targeted precisely at getting adults, especially the unemployed and those with low education or low skills, back into employment by means of adult education. There are many other structurally related policies that facilitate workers' access to training opportunities (e.g., leave schemes, cofinancing schemes). As pointed out above, industrial relations in Nordic countries, which build on the corporate tradition, are also important in understanding the results. Rather than seeking a low-skill equilibrium, there are joint efforts by the three partners, namely the state, unions, and employers, to seek a high-skill strategy, which among other things serves to assist workers in overcoming job-related barriers. Contrary to commonly stated assumptions that globalization undermines national corporatism, Dølvik

and Stokke (1998) suggested, from a Norwegian perspective, that a renationalization of cooperative practices can be a viable strategy for coping with such pressures (p. 31).

Publicly supported family and active labor market policies, as well as tripartite negotiations, have a long history in the Nordic countries. In this way, the Nordic welfare state has played a pivotal role in enabling individuals to develop capabilities that are useful for overcoming various family- and job-related or situational barriers. The findings suggest that these are the types of barriers that Nordic citizens are most likely to overcome.

Institutional and dispositional barriers appear to be somewhat more persistent than situational barriers, although the Nordic countries appear to be comparatively more successful here as well. Forty-four percent to 68% of Nordic adults who perceive institutional barriers still engaged in some form of adult education. More impressive, about 43% to 69% of Nordic adults who reported dispositional barriers nevertheless participated. The comparative rate in non-Nordic countries was 7% to 33% (see Table A2).

Public financial support can be important for overcoming institutional barriers but as indicated by the apparent success of the Nordic welfare state in reaching older adults, so is meeting heterogeneous needs. Although adults aged 46 or older in most OECD countries are more than half as likely as youths to participate, the decline is less sharp in the Nordic countries (Desjardins et al., 2006). To a large extent, this is due to a publicly funded sector of adult popular education, because this sector complements labor market needs by responding to different aspirations and needs.

To sum up, the Nordic welfare state seems to be comparatively effective at resolving barriers, particularly job-related ones. Reflecting on the Bounded Agency Model, the type of welfare state regime may help to explain the results. The Nordic welfare states feature structural conditions under which a larger group of adults, as compared to non-Nordic countries, seem to value participation and hence see an expected reward. These conditions include a labor market structured around a high-skill strategy and a civil society that fosters learning for both social and personal development. In the Bounded Agency Model, the impact of these conditions on a person's capabilities and consciousness with regard to the beginning of adult education is referred to as the "conditioning of values and perspective on opportunity structure." Furthermore, Nordic welfare states support a variety of targeted policy measures designed to assist adults in overcoming barriers. These also affect the subjective rationality of adults and thus the perspective of their own opportunity structure. In particular, favorable access to financing and a wide offer of learning opportunities that can respond to the economic, social, and personal aspirations of individuals, as well as collectives (e.g., the labor movement, senior citizens, and immigrants), seem to have helped foster the capability among many, although far from all, to overcome barriers.

Conclusion

The empirical findings suggest that the major difference between Nordic and non-Nordic countries are not the existence of barriers to participation but the conditions that allow a person to overcome these. Thus, the article brings into question the usefulness of trying to understand barriers by focusing solely on how individuals interpret the world and instead suggests we also have to include structural factors and analyze the interaction between these and individuals' dispositions. Our theoretical perspective is that welfare state regimes can affect a person's capability to participate through the way it constructs structural conditions and helps individuals overcome both structurally and individually based barriers.

The comparatively higher and more equal participation in adult education in Nordic countries has prompted inquiries as to why this might be the case. Although there is a distinctive and persistent pattern of nonparticipation, which is similar to a range of non-Nordic countries, the success of Nordic countries appears to lie precisely in their ability to overcome a variety of barriers to participation. The Nordic countries have a long shared history of supporting and fostering a rich adult learning culture. Although various historical, social, and cultural factors are behind this, Nordic countries also share a strong record of public policy that aims to promote adult learning, foster favorable structural conditions, target various barriers to participation, and ensure that disadvantaged groups have equal opportunity to take up adult learning. Together, observations indicate that the type of welfare state regime matters in fostering participation, especially among adults who would otherwise not participate.

Appendix

Table A1

Percentage of Adults Reporting Specific
Types of Barriers to Participation, by Country, 2003

	DK	FI	IS	NO	SE	AT	DE	ES	NL	PT	UK
There would not be any barriers	45	33	26	23	38	37	31	32	35	24	26
Situational barriers	34	39	45	40	32	36	41	42	35	40	49
Job-related barriers	21	21	30	22	17	19	23	27	17	23	21
My job commitments take up too much energy	16	16	24	20	14	14	15	24	14	19	18
My employer would not support me	7	7	8	2	4	7	4	5	3	5	4
Family- or household-related barriers	22	25	27	27	22	25	28	23	24	27	37

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

	DK	FI	IS	NO	SE	AT	DE	ES	NL	PT	UK
My family commitments take up too much energy	20	16	21	21	18	18	19	20	20	22	30
My family would not support me	2	4	6	2	2	5	5	2	2	4	3
I would need some equipment that I do not have (computer, etc.)	0	7	4	5	3	5	7	2	5	3	8
Institutional barriers	11	26	20	24	23	17	24	16	17	20	23
I do not have the necessary qualifications to take up the studies or training course I would like to	5	6	5	6	12	4	6	4	6	8	7
There are no courses that suit my needs	2	6	3	6	2	2	7	7	3	5	4
There are no courses available nearby; I could not get to them	2	9	10	8	5	4	7	3	2	4	5
I would not want to go back to something that is like school (double constraint)	3	12	3	10	7	9	8	5	8	5	9
Dispositional barriers	22	43	38	48	32	41	42	43	42	47	44
I have never been good at studying	4	9	2	11	8	4	5	8	6	10	12
I would not like people to know about it in case I did not do well	2	1	1	2	0	3	2	1	1	2	3
I think I am too old to learn	3	13	5	8	7	7	9	7	11	10	8
I would not want to go back to something that is like school	3	12	3	10	7	9	8	5	8	5	9
I do not know what I could do that would be interesting or useful	5	6	5	3	5	7	10	9	6	10	9
I would have to give up some or all of my free time or leisure activities	11	17	26	21	14	13	19	18	20	15	17
I have never wanted to do any studies or training	0	6	1	10	2	16	6	10	6	14	8

Source: Eurobarometer survey data, 2003.

Note: DK = Denmark; FI = Finland; IS = Iceland; NO = Norway; SE = Sweden; AT = Austria; DE = Germany; ES = Spain; NL = Netherlands; PT = Portugal; UK = United Kingdom.

Table A2
Percentage of Adults Participating in Adult
Education and Training During the Year Preceding
the Interview, by Various Barriers, 2003

	Situational Barriers				Institutional Barriers	Dispositional Barriers
	No Barriers	Job- Related Barriers	Family- or Household- Related Barriers	Combined		
Denmark	65	62	55	58	47	47
Iceland	77	66	65	65	68	69
Finland	61	73	57	62	54	49
Norway	49	56	47	49	44	43
Sweden	58	63	53	56	50	49
Austria	50	41	40	40	31	22
Germany	47	41	32	35	24	22
Netherlands	48	47	35	40	32	33
Portugal	28	10	8	8	6	7
Spain	44	27	17	16	15	16
United Kingdom	54	47	40	40	29	32

Source: Eurobarometer survey data, 2003.

Note

1. The Eurobarometer is a series of surveys conducted on behalf of the European Commission, which has since the early seventies monitored public opinion in the European Union. In 2003, the Eurobarometer's special topic was participation in lifelong learning (see Chisolm, Larson, & Mossoux, 2004, for more details).

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