

Chapter 13

The Research Field of Adult Education and Learning: Widening the Field



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13.1 Introduction

We began this book by launching a series of questions on what the adult education and learning research field looks like, how it has emerged historically and how it is transformed through contemporary policy and research practice. The chapters have, in different ways, contributed to answering these questions by case studies, as well as by looking at the transnational power relations across countries. In the debate on comparative adult education research finalising this book, Field, Künzel and Schemmann posed the rather provocative question of whether the chapter of international comparative adult education has now come to a close (see Chap. 10). We would argue that such research is still alive and possible to carry out, but that the conditions under which research is conducted also need to be taken into serious consideration. In the various contributions to this book, several chapters show how a comparative perspective on the field of research can contribute to our understanding of how knowledge about adult education and learning is produced. They also demonstrate how this knowledge is stratified across regional and national borders, as well as between individual scholars positioned in relation to one another.

This book clearly centres on the scholarship of adult education and learning that has been conducted in the dominant Northern European and North American research communities. As such, it should not be read as an effort to summon the global “state-of-the-art” within adult educational research, nor do we answer all problems raised in the book. While some questions have been addressed, others have emerged. In this final chapter of the book, we will revisit some of these issues and offer a synthesis based on what we have learned.

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The various chapters of the book illustrate how the field of adult education and learning is biased in terms of who is publishing as well as who is picked up and deemed worthy to cite. These results are not entirely surprising, especially when considering the sample on which most of the analyses in this book are based. As English has established itself as the *lingua franca* of most transnationally oriented research communication – since the post-Second World War era – we have come to focus on publications in the English language, and foremost those published in research journals indexed and ordered in large-scale databases (Scopus and Web of Science). As such, much of the research in the field as it presents itself to scholars all over the world is omitted. This is probably a particularly striking feature for scholars from larger countries outside the anglophone universe, as they tend to entertain their own domestic publication systems that make them less dependent on international scholarly recognition, as compared to researchers from smaller countries (Heilbron and Gingras 2018). In a way, the dominance that English-speaking scholars from western countries exercise can be seen as a logical consequence of the current production system. They are big enough to not be incentivised to give scholarly recognition to researchers in the semi-centre or global periphery, while scholars positioned in smaller and more peripheral countries are more dependent on international scholarly recognition, which in many cases are equated with entries and citations in certain English language peer-reviewed journals.

By writing this book, choosing to focus on English language journals and concluding that it is an uneven playing field, we are in a way ourselves also contributing to further reproduce the biases that we aim to criticise. Take, for example, the content of this book. Not only have we limited the samples in our analyses to English language publication outlets, we also have a limitation in terms of who has been invited to contribute. The authors in the book mostly represent North European countries (Sweden, Germany, UK, Scotland), albeit with some contributors from Italy and Canada. In one way, this book differs from earlier publications on the research field, as they have previously been authored predominantly by scholars from the US (see Chaps. 1 and 2). However, in this book, we not only leave out US-based authors, but also authors from large parts of Europe and, not least, authors from larger continents such as Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹ In order for future endeavours that compare research on the field of adult education and learning to be ‘international’ in any meaningful way, we believe it is important to overcome both eurocentrism as well as the tendency to equate international scholarly recognition exclusively with British and North American publication outlets.

¹ This could partly be explained by us, as editors, selecting contributions which were already available and published in the English language, based on empirical research on how the field is constituted. Such selection is also based on who we know, i.e. research we have encountered (and thus we are limited to research published in English or any of the Scandinavian languages).

13.2 Mapping Out the Field

Mindful of these limitations, the chapters provided in this book, nevertheless, provide strong empirical evidence of how the field of adult education and learning is shaped today. Overall, what can be concluded from the chapters is that the field, in terms of scholarship, is dominated by authors from four anglophone countries: Australia, Canada, UK and US. This pattern of geopolitical domination emerges as pivotal both when investigating the share of articles published by authors from any of these countries in the main international journals, as well as when looking at who is picked up and cited by others (see Chaps. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9). There is also male dominance in the citation patterns prevalent in the field, whereby male authors, to a much higher degree than their female counterparts, are being used as “standard references” (see Chaps. 4 and 5) despite there being more contributions from female authors. In terms of methodological approaches, the field can be characterised as rather uniform, as there is near total dominance of qualitative studies (see Chaps. 2, 7, 8 and 9). Theoretically, three perspectives have gained particular prominence and traction: socio-cultural perspectives, critical pedagogy and poststructuralism.

The various analyses presented in this book also clearly illustrate how the adult education and learning research field is rather loose and weakly defined. Communication across its leading journals and national borders is scarce and research in the field is borrowing extensively from neighbouring fields and disciplines such as sociology, social psychology and organisational studies. In a bibliometric sense, this open and inclusive feature of adult education and learning as a research field also makes it quite similar to sociology in that it combines disciplinary openness with strong national ramifications. This can be put in contrast with research fields, such as physics, that have strong disciplinary closure but are much more internationally-oriented in how they publish and cite other colleagues (Heilbron and Gingras 2018; Nespor 1996).

More specifically, we can see these field characteristics embodied in the bibliographic networks of the specific journals that have been scrutinised in this book (see Chap. 5). The citation practices that are most distinguishable lead to “gurus” that do not, themselves, contribute to the field (i.e. disciplinary openness) or are directed to scholars located in the same country as the editors of that specific journal, if not to the editors themselves (i.e. provincialism). Further, these standard references are mostly authored by (dead) men outside of the field, while the few standard references to female authors are actually scholars that themselves publish within the field (see Chap. 5). Aside from gurus and domestic scholars, the largest group of authors picked up and cited by others in these journals appear to be those who work in countries with close linguistic and historical connections to the country in which the journal is published.² Thus, the communication in these journals is to a high

²This is especially the case with the North American journal, *AEQ*. The analysis in Chap. 6 illustrates how US scholars to, a less extent, publish in the other journals in the field (located in the UK and Australia) and how *AEQ* contains few publications by authors from these other two anglophone countries (or any other country for that matter). Secondly, there is little communication across the journals, not only in terms of authorship, but also in terms of citations.

extent national, to some extent transnational and to a very limited extent “international” or “global”.

As educational systems and adult learning environments differ greatly across countries, the challenge to develop into a more globally-oriented research field is inscribed in the very object that is studied, such as the idiosyncratic labelling of educational forms and types. However, these differences are arguably more about nomenclature than in their functions. The prominent roles that editors have in their own journals also bear witness to a “weak” scientific field in Bourdieu’s (1997) sense of this term. According to his model of scientific production, if adult education and learning constituted a stronger research field, the implicit valuation procedures would not be as strongly linked to those very individuals who hold positions of administrative power and gatekeeping in each of the main journals. Instead, that collegial recognition would have been directed to those with most scientific capital – in a “purer” sense of this word. Those editors who now feel compelled to object that administrative power and scientific excellence happen to be heavily intertwined in this case would have to explain why these positions of collegial consecration are typically strongest in the particular journal they edit, while rarely recurring, with quite the same grandeur, in other journals in the field.

13.3 Widening the Field

As already noticed, the way the field of adult education and learning research is represented in this book is partly the result of the selection made in terms of what sources and empirical material we rely on. In most chapters, analyses are conducted based on article publication in journals published in the English language.³ Thus, the way the field is formed within other kinds of publications such as books, book chapters and enlightenment literature is, for the most part, left out. Furthermore, by focusing only on English language publication, the way the field is shaped in locations where other languages dominate is not made visible. Chapter 3 can serve as example. Here, Christine Zeuner introduces us to the history of the field of adult education as it has emerged in Germany where, at present, nearly 50 full professorships⁴ exist within the research realm of adult education alone. There are also dedicated journals to the field published in German as well as national conferences and collegial academic organisations that promote research within this area. The research field of adult education and learning as shaped in a German context, therefore, appears to have little connection with English-speaking research

³The exceptions are Chaps. 4 and 9. In Chap. 4, the citation analyses include other kinds of publication outlets such as books, book chapters and enlightenment literature. Chapter 9 includes analyses of conference proceedings.

⁴Professorship is here understood as full professors holding designated chairs in adult education research, i.e. the last and final step in the academic career structure. This should not be confused with assistant or associate professors, nor with university teachers in adult education in general.

communities that stand in the centre for the rest of the chapters in this book, not least because German scholars have largely been ignored in the specialised journals under scrutiny. The only exception to this lack of influence is the very high citation rates directed to “gurus” placed outside of the field (such as Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck), as well as some German scholars in the field who remain visible as long as one limits the study to conference proceedings in European conferences (see Chap. 9).

However, there are even larger language areas and parts of the world which are totally left out by this book: Asia, Africa and Latin America. On the one hand, research in these locations is obscured as scholars in these continents tend to be marginalised in the journals and conference proceedings analysed in the various chapters, both in terms of being authors of articles and papers published, as well as in terms of being authors of articles cited. However, despite there being surprisingly few contributions from these larger continents, the amount is increasing. As reported by Rubensson and Elfert (in Chap. 2), there were more authors from Asia, especially China, represented in the field when including an English-language journal edited from Hong Kong in the sample. On the other hand, scholars in countries where English is not the first language spoken most likely publish the majority of their work in their vernacular languages, which tends to be securely precluded from entering the English-speaking universe and instead serves other “markets” (national or regional journals, enlightenment literature, didactical books etc). This infrastructure probably still makes up the main publication system for non-anglophone authors, located in language regions with wide publication opportunities that exist in their native languages. Thus, although these scholars and their research do not become visible in the analyses presented in this book, that does not mean they do not exist.

We started this book by observing that the framing and composition of research fields are never fully fixed or saturated, and that this was a particularly salient feature of the research field that deals with the education and learning of adults. Looking ahead, we expect these constant transformations of the field to continue. Mapping out the field through publications and citations in the future will hopefully create a less parochial, provincial and nationally-constrained picture than has been the case here. In some ways, there are reasons to be hopeful. Let us end with a few examples.

One of the most highly-cited adult education scholars of all time is Paulo Freire. Freire’s influence is far from limited to Brazil, although he has been an important figure in the fight for literacy across Brazil and the wider South American continent.⁵ Besides a strong tradition of adult education (particularly radical popular education), there are also journals dedicated to adult education both in Latin America, e.g. *Revista Interamericana de Educación de Adultos*, as well as in Spanish, e.g.

⁵It should be noted that the success Paulo Freire had in exporting his ideas to the very heart of the “empire” of contemporary research probably lies partly on him having had multiple guest professorships in countries like the US and Switzerland during the years of military dictatorship in Brazil (see also Kane 2013).

Diálogos. In Africa, there has recently been an initiative to create an African society for research on adult education and a new journal has been launched called *Journal of Popular Education in Africa*. Perhaps even more destined to change the research field that deals with the education and learning of adults in the future are the countries across the gigantic Asian continent. We can already see some signs of this development as contributions from Asian countries to English peer-reviewed journals have increased dramatically in social science at large (Gingras and Mosbah-Natanson 2010; Heilbron and Gingras 2018; Vetenskapsrådet 2018).

13.4 Final Words

Throughout this book we have gathered texts that focus on knowledge production in the research field of adult education and learning, which is vital for scientific reflexivity (Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Such reflexivity needs to address both the epistemic underpinnings and methodological procedures based on which scholars tend to approach their object of study, as well as their institutional and geographical loci of enunciation and the conditions under which each researcher works and is evaluated. In order to avoid the many fallacies and pitfalls of social scientific labour, bibliometric data can be a valuable resource in making the ‘invisible colleges’ more visible than they have been previously. It is hoped this book will inspire further empirical investigations and debates about the field, and bring into visibility the diversity and richness of scholarship on adult education and learning.

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