

# Chapter 2

## Examining the “Weak Field” of Adult Education



Kjell Rubenson and Maren Elfert

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we will discuss the state of adult education as a scientific field.<sup>1</sup> This topic seems timely against the background of ongoing and current debates about the field of adult education and international and comparative adult education research (Fejes and Nylander 2015; Field et al. 2016; Nylander et al. 2018; Schemmann 2017, see also the other chapters in this book) and a sense of crisis that is prevailing in the field (Käpplinger and Elfert 2018). Methodologically, our discussion is based on a review of previous articles of a similar nature. Theoretically and conceptually, it builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical understanding of a scientific field (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 2004; Camic 2011). A field is shaped by agents (individuals, groups of actors or institutions) who aim to maximize their position. Their success will depend on the extent to which they possess of the capital by which power and status are conferred within the field. Bourdieu was concerned with the degrees of autonomy of scientific fields, that is the extent to which they can generate their own values and definitions of success free from economic and political influences. Maton (2005), drawing on Bourdieu’s study of the field of higher education in France, highlights a second role of autonomy focusing on competing principles of hierarchization. Bourdieu distinguished between an autonomous principle looking

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K. Rubenson (✉)

Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

e-mail: [kjell.rubenson@ubc.ca](mailto:kjell.rubenson@ubc.ca)

M. Elfert

School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London, London, UK

inwards to the disinterested activities of the field (such as knowledge for its own sake) and a heteronomous principle looking beyond the field's specific activities and towards economic and political success (such as generating research income or wielding administrative power). Bourdieu (1984) showed how French higher education is being structured by the struggle between agents who are high in scholastic capital (scientific prestige) and academic capital (institutional control over funding and appointments) (Maton 2005, p. 690). Thus to understand the field of adult education one would have to look at two (interrelated) forms of autonomy, the extent to which adult education is free from direct influences from the two dominant fields in society, the economic field and political power, and secondly how the competition between those with scientific prestige and those with administrative power impacts on adult education. In a similar vein, Camic (2011, p. 281) notes that understanding the production and use of knowledge within a specific scientific field requires looking not only at the field as such, but also at its relation to other fields, disciplines and groups such as practitioners and policy makers.

Although not having completed a full field analysis we will argue in this chapter that adult education is a weak field. Drawing on Vauchez (2011), we define a weak field as “deeply interwoven with neighboring fields and rather undifferentiated internally” (p. 342). As a sub-field of education (which is a weak field in itself), the legitimacy of the field of adult education has long been contested for several reasons. The question whether the adult learner actually exists as a specific “species” of learner is still being debated (Bowl 2017, p. 8). The field has a weak disciplinary core. Although the American Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) has set standards for adult education as a field of study, these standards are not well known even in North America and not followed in the conception of adult education university programs, which speaks to the lack of a disciplinary tradition and rigour of the field (Sonstrom et al. 2012; Tisdell et al. 2016, p. 87). The question asked by Abbot Kaplan in the first meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education in 1957, “What is the content, the essential ingredient of adult education, that marks it off from other fields or disciplines?” (cited in Hansman and Rose 2018, p. 1) haunts the field to this day. Adult education programs are embedded in a variety of departments and a “jumble of program names and the assortment of organizational settings, embeddings, and affiliations” (Sonstrom et al. 2012, p. 157), which speaks to the heterogeneity of the field and its particular susceptibility to institutional politics. In other words, those with administrative capital will be strong while those who are high in adult education scientific capital will be marginalized. Many scholars have argued that the field has been weakened by the shift from adult education to lifelong learning (Edwards 1997). A further indicator of the field's weakness is its regional fragmentation. We will discuss these issues in more detail below.

## 2.2 The Social World of Adult Education Research

The Bourdieusian perspective suggests that the evolving configuration of adult education research is directly impacted by changes to the internal structures of the field as well as by changes to the social context of the field. The latter refers to the social and economic role awarded to adult learning and education by the policy community. It is therefore important to note that as adult learning and education has come to the forefront of public policy two interrelated areas of adult education research, participation and its economic benefits, are of vital interest to the broader policy community (see e.g., European Commission 2011; OECD 2003). The emergent discussions in policy circles on the relevance of adult education research is part of a broader movement, partly driven by supranational organizations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), to build a tradition of evidence-based policy making anchored in research findings. The central role afforded to the PISA and the PIAAC<sup>2</sup> programs should be seen as reflections of this shift. The call for policy relevant educational research is driven by data, benchmarks and indicators and new data-collecting agencies such as the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (CRELL) (in addition to older ones such as Eurostat and Eurydice) (Grek and Lawn 2009). The drive for evidence-based policies induced countries to introduce changes to their educational research and development (R&D) system. For example, in England the government has changed the balance between pure basic research and pure applied research through creating what is being labelled “use-inspired basic research” that is carried out at dedicated research centres such as the Centre for Wider Benefits of Learning (OECD and CERL 2002). The same ambition has been driving the EU’s Sixth and Seventh Framework Programme research agendas, as well as the most recent Eighth agenda, titled *Horizon 2020*. The European Union’s *Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning*, outlining the EU’s vision for adult learning from 2015–2020, states: “Evidence-based policy-making in the field of adult learning calls for comprehensive and comparable data on all key aspects of adult learning, for effective monitoring systems and cooperation between the different agencies, as well as for high-quality research activities” (Official Journal of the European Union 2011, p. C 372/2). The EU’s report *In-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe* calls for “hard evidence” as “a key ingredient in policymaking... about what does and does not work to achieve specific policy goals” (European Commission 2015, p. 157).

As policy-making relies more heavily on “big data”, driven predominantly by supra-national organizations, in particular the OECD, a tension is notable in the field between the policy community and the academic research community in terms of what research is deemed relevant (Desjardins and Rubenson 2009). Research money, as in the case of the EU, is contingent on policy relevance. At the same time,

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<sup>2</sup>PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment; PIAAC for Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies.

policy relevant research is lacking, as has been pointed out in the national reports submitted by developing and developed countries in preparation for the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) and in the reports submitted for the CONFINTEA VI midterm review carried out in 2017 (UIL 2017a, p. 63; UIL 2017b, p. 41; UIL 2017c, pp. 36–37). This apparent disconnect between the academic research community and the policy community speaks to adult educators distancing themselves from policy relevant research. It also means that existing research is considered irrelevant to the policy community. From a Bourdieusian point of view, we see a paradoxical situation. On the one hand there is a certain autonomy of the field, in that adult education researchers carry out research irrespective of the policy realm, but at the same time we are likely to see a greater marginalization of the field as funding is increasingly tied to policy relevance.

There has been a long-standing criticism of the limited relevance of the research enterprise for the practice of adult education. Sork and Caffarella (1989) suggested that the gap between research and practice was widening rather than shrinking. This could be an outcome of the calls during the late 1970s for the field to become more theoretically sophisticated so that it might gain more respect in the scholarly world (Rubenson 2011). Thus, in a response to this call university departments of adult education tried to affect the institutional structure of the field by recruiting new faculty into adult education who often had less connection to the field of practice than the outgoing faculty. Field et al. (2016) make the point that adult educators used to be scholars as well as practitioners, but that this is no longer the case. The merit system for academics was increasingly focused on academic merits (articles in preferably refereed journals, acquiring research grants, etc.), while practice-related, developmental work was less honoured by the university system. The situation is not deemed to have improved since the Sork & Cafarella article. Amy Rose (2011), reflecting on the *2010 Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Kasworm et al. 2010), of which she was one of the co-editors, notes: “Adult educators have a vibrant and impassioned calling, yet the researchers fail the field.” She sees this partly as a result of the fact that researchers “have not been able to move beyond a critique of power and oppression” (p. 44). Her harsh conclusion is that “adult education has eschewed any attempt to bring its research into areas that have implications for the actual practice of the field” (p. 44). Looking at the development from a Bourdieusian perspective the changes to the composition of faculty would suggest that the more recent faculty have their roots in surrounding academic fields rather than the field of adult education. In their struggle to amass scientific capital outside of adult education they may have lost the kind of capital that made earlier faculty members more relevant to the field (see also Chap. 3). Furthermore, some might argue that we are seeing a “scholarly” exit from finding solutions to real-life problems as a consequence of the post-structuralist turn of the field that we will refer to below.

### 2.3 The Scientific Field of Adult Education

Turning to the maturity and evolution of the field, Rubenson (2011) suggests that since adult education began to emerge as a field of study in the late 1920s, it has undergone three quite distinctive phases. He notes that these phases are most noticeable in the United States but also discernable in parts of Europe. When looking at the developments in the US and Europe it is important to note that until the 1990s US scholars gave substantially more attention to adult education as a field of study than their European counterparts.

The first phase starting in the 1920s was a response to the beginning professionalization of adult education. With a small but growing number of adult education programs, faculty started to focus on how to generate a body of knowledge that would help in the growth of the evolving field. In 1961, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education had two dozen members. By 1972 that number had grown to 156. While in 1963 86 adult education dissertations were reported, that number increased to 173 by 1969 (Long and Agyekum 1974, p. 100). Long and Agyekum (1974) observed an “increasing sophistication in adult education research” (p. 106) between 1964 and 1973. Some European countries, particularly the UK and Germany, saw a similar development although it came a decade or two later.

Guided by funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Commission of Professors of Adult Education in the US set out to define the conceptual foundations of adult education (Jensen et al. 1964). Officially titled *Adult Education: Outlines of an Emerging Field of University Study*, this book is popularly called the “Black Book”. The “Black Book” can be seen as ushering in the second phase of adult education. We can understand this development as a process by which a field of study begins to emerge as a direct response to the needs emerging in adult education as a field of practice. With the faculty in the newly created units of adult education being closely connected to the practice of adult education there were no or only small conflicts during this period between the field and the profession regarding values and markers of scientific achievement. Seeking solutions to primarily teaching and learning issues the emerging field was closely embedded in the field of educational psychology and strongly connected to external professional organisations. What is noticeable in the “Black Book” is the almost total lack of attention to work done outside of North America. As pointed out by Hansman and Rose (2018), “the North American field limited itself to North American interests” (p. 1).

Between the release of the Black Book and the publication of its follow up, *Adult Education: Evolution and Achievements in a Developing Field of Study* (Peters and Jarvis 1991), the number of adult education graduate programs in the US and Europe increased rapidly, yearly scholarly conferences were initiated and research journals were launched. Thus, this gradually maturing process of the field of study reflects and is affected by internal shifts of the field, primarily with regard to its location and presence in the broader university structure and are less a result of external forces. The Peters and Jarvis book, co-edited by a British and an American

scholar, noticed some work done outside of the US and the Anglo-Saxon sphere, but also keeps a quite insular orientation.

The 1991 review painted a very positive picture and ended on an optimistic outlook and with expectations of continuous growth and solidifying of the field of adult education over the coming 25 years. While there does not exist any comprehensive review of what has happened since the 1991 book, there are several indications that the field of study has not progressed as anticipated and that it has entered into a new phase, the third, in its development. In North America and those parts of Europe where the field had expanded and matured during the second phase, the last two decades have not seen a continuing growth in specialized adult education departments. Instead, the trend has been to amalgamate adult education programs with other fields into larger departments or in some instances to close them down. In a Bourdieusian perspective this could be taken as an indication that the field of study has lost some of its academic capital and thus its legitimation within the university structure.

Outside North America and parts of Europe the process of developing adult education as a field of study began later. This is the case in several African and Latin American countries. In some instances, like in Brazil, there is an acceleration of programs and departments specializing in adult education (Torres 2009, p. 29). In China, the first MA program in adult education was launched at East China Normal University in 1993; a PhD program followed in 2004. The number of universities with graduate programs of adult education has increased from seven in 2003 to 23 in 2008 (Huang and Shi 2008, p. 505). In 2008, China reported to have some 100 specialized institutions for adult education research (Chinese National Commission for UNESCO and Chinese Adult Education Association 2008, p. 23). A somewhat similar development can be noted for the Republic of Korea (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the National Institute for Lifelong Education 2009, p. 72ff.).

## **2.4 Previous Findings Regarding Adult Education as a Scientific Field**

Numerous articles examining the scholarly field of adult education have appeared since the 1960s, employing content analysis of adult education journals (Dickinson and Rusnell 1971; Long and Agyekum 1974), country comparisons (Brookfield 1982), and citation analysis (Boshier and Pickard 1979). Some articles looked at subdisciplines such as adult basic education (Fisher and Martin 1987) or specific aspects such as the impact of feminism on adult education (Hayes 1992). Rubenson (1982), among other things, found that there was an overwhelming influence of psychology with the consequence that the territory of adult education research was defined primarily through assumptions of the characteristics of the learner and, thus, teaching was reduced to learning; empiricism and research methodology was

emphasized in order to build a discipline of adult education; there was strong skepticism against borrowing from other disciplines and fields of study; and North American scholars dominated the landscape with little international exchange. The lack of international exchange is supported by Zeuner (Chap. 3) in her chapter about the development of the field of adult education in Germany without any clear influences from the US. A book about the field of adult education in Germany, *Adult Education in the Federal Republic of Germany: Scholarly Approaches and Professional Practice* (Mader 1992) does not make any references to scholarship in US-Anglo-Saxon or Nordic countries, which corroborates Zeuner’s point. However, for several European scholars the North American field of adult education constituted an important reference point at the time. For example, the majority of works cited by Husén (1958) were American, including only two references from Germany. In a similar vein, Knoll (1989), looking back at the 1970s, deplored that “the discussion about professionalization in the Federal Republic of Germany would certainly have developed differently if work had been based on material from England, the USA and Canada available at that time” (p. 146). Roby Kidd, one of the leading Canadian adult educators, tried to interest his American colleagues in internationalizing the field of adult education in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, but “became disillusioned” (Hansman and Rose 2018, p. 2) and focused his efforts on Canada and his work with UNESCO. This speaks to the development of different regional maps.

In a second study, revisiting the previous one, Rubenson (2000) noticed, not surprisingly, that the map was changing in accordance with the general drift of the social sciences. More specifically he noted a shift to more articles invoking a post-structural tradition with its emphasis on gender and critical race theories and a major impact of the new economic paradigm with a rapidly increasing number of articles focusing on workplace learning which resulted in a broadening of the conceptualisation of learning in adult education. He further noticed a major change in the attitude towards borrowing from other disciplines and that policy-oriented studies were less predominant in North American journals than European. The former might suggest that the field was becoming more porous and less able to define its own criteria for what counts as successful scholarship. His second observation could result in a more autonomous situation for the north American scholars. The dominance of North American scholars by the sheer numbers of their publications was seen to be less obvious than it was two decades earlier as European scholars were gaining more visibility in the journals, books and conference proceedings analyzed by Rubenson.

In two previous papers Rubenson and Elfert (2014, 2015) analyzed the changing characteristics of the map of adult education research based on a two-pronged approach: a reading of four seminal articles written by adult education scholars who have conducted bibliometric analyses of selected adult education journals: Taylor 2001; St. Clair 2011; Fejes and Nylander 2014; Larsson 2010; and to some extent, Mulenga et al. (2006); and their own review of 75 articles, covering a one year period (2012–2013) in five adult education journals: *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ), the *International Journal of Continuing Education & Lifelong*



*Learning* (IJCELL), which is published out of Hong Kong, the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (IJLE), the *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (RELA), and the *International Review of Education* (IRE). In relation to the two Rubenson (1982, 2000) articles discussed above, the authors focused their analysis on the categories of authorship, research focus, research methodology and theoretical orientation. Their findings suggested that adult education research is increasingly being governed by a set of regional maps. As Mulenga et al. (2006, p. 82) and Fejes and Nylander (2014) observed, there continues to be a tendency for authors to publish articles in a journal of their home country. Taylor (2001) found that the submissions in AEQ during the 1990s originated almost exclusively from North America, and predominantly from the US, but a slight increase of articles from Western European countries could be noticed. The 2012–2013 review showed that out of fifteen articles published in AEQ during that period ten were by Americans and one by a Canadian. Similarly, St. Clair (2011) noted a very strong dominance of Canadian scholars publishing in the Canadian journal. Given the pattern of “home grown publishing” it is not surprising that a vast majority of authors in the AEQ, IJLE and SICE, all hosted in Anglo Saxon countries, were from those parts of the world (Fejes and Nylander 2014). Similarly, Larsson (2010), Mulenga et al. (2006) and Fejes and Nylander (2014) pointed to the overwhelming dominance in the core adult education journals of scholars from the Anglo-Saxon world. An interesting finding in Larsson’s review is that not only do the authors predominantly come from Australia, Canada, UK and the US but in their work they almost exclusively cite other authors from one of these countries. Moreover he noted that well over half of the references in the AEQ, the only adult education journal that was indexed by ISI at that time, are from articles published in the AEQ, which from a Bourdieusian perspective highlights the reproduction of the dominance of Anglo-American scholars. This pattern also shows that research coming from outside universities is not being cited.

Rubenson and Elfert (2014, 2015) found that almost half of the authors in the five reviewed journals came from European countries and about a third from North America. Of the European authors 12 originated from the UK, only two from Eastern Europe (Bulgaria and Russia) and 11 from Scandinavian countries. Portugal was the most represented country from Mediterranean Europe with four articles. Seven authors were from Asian countries, which tend to publish for the most part in the Hong Kong-based IJCELL. Only three articles came from Australian scholars who tend to publish in their own journal, which was not included in the review. Looking at differences between the five journals the study found that authorship in the IJCELL, the IJLE and the RELA is by majority European, with the IJCELL having a higher proportion of articles coming out of Asia, especially China. Only the IRE shows a more balanced geographical distribution of articles although with a strong dominance of authors from Europe and North America.

Another finding in this work that it is worth drawing attention to is that not only are the authors publishing in local or regional journals but the scope in the majority of the articles in the AEQ, the IJLE and the IJCELL is national. Similarly, Fejes and



Nylander (2015; see also Chap. 7) characterize these journals as “rather national/regional” (p. 119). Rubenson and Elfert (2014, 2015) have defined articles as national when they focus on national or local issues or when the database on which they draw was collected in the country they originate from. In accordance with Mulenga et al. (2006, p. 83), the authors found that few articles qualified as international in that the research and used data involved more than one country. Only a couple of articles were co-authored by researchers originating from two different countries. These findings are supported by recent research on the situation in higher education. Thus, although research studies on international higher education have grown considerably, “networks among researchers of higher education continue to operate largely within national borders and are still dominated by a few Western countries[...]only 11.3% of articles were authored by researchers from at least two countries” (Kuzhabekova et al. 2015, pp. 878–879).

In terms of the research focus Elfert and Rubenson found a clear dominance of articles addressing adult learning with 60% of the articles in the AEQ and more than 40% in the RELA dealing with learning. Surprisingly, very few – four – articles focused on teaching, one each in all journals analyzed except for RELA. This may be an indication of a change from Taylor’s (2001) review which had found that teaching and curriculum was among the major topics in the AEQ. With workplace learning evolving as a separate scholarly field it may not be that surprising that relatively few articles reported on work- and skills-related research.

With regard to the research methodology and theoretical orientation, for the period 1989–1999 Taylor (2001) observed a sharp increase in the share of articles that employed some form of qualitative methods and a corresponding decrease in work using a quantitative methodology. This finding is echoed in all of the more recent reviews as well as Boeren (Chap. 8). Presently adult education scholars are almost exclusively relying on qualitative methodologies, with a few using a mixed method and an almost total absence of pure quantitative research (Fejes and Nylander 2014, 2015; see also Chaps. 6 and 7; Rubenson and Elfert 2014, 2015).

In Chap. 7, Fejes and Nylander report that the three most common theoretical perspectives are socio-cultural (23%), critical pedagogy (17.5%) and post-structuralism (15.5%). Looking at the disciplinary base, Rubenson and Elfert (2014, 2015) classified about 40% of the reviewed articles in the five journals as broadly sociological and about 33% as psychological. There were noticeable differences between journals with the majority of the articles in the IJLE, the RELA and the IRE being sociological, whereas the AEQ had a strong psychological orientation. This speaks to the strong psychological tradition of adult education in the United States that has been noted by Rubenson (2000) and is being reiterated by Fejes and Nylander (2015, p. 106).

Rubenson (2000) had noted an increase of post-structural research, a trend that seems to be supported by the review by Fejes and Nylander (2015). It is noteworthy that the post-structural turn was mostly absent in articles published in IJCELL which includes a large number of authors from Asia as well as a greater number of non-academic authors who are less likely to employ a post-structuralist perspective.

## 2.5 Discussion

Overall the findings suggest that the scientific field of adult education finds itself in a precarious situation. This is reflected in a continuing regional fragmentation of the field, an accelerating hollowing out of the field and what can be labelled as a relevance deficit. By this we refer to a seeming inability of the field to respond to the needs of adult education practitioners and the policy community. Below we will discuss these findings in more detail.

### 2.5.1 *Regional Fragmentation of the Field*

As noted, the move to develop adult education into a field of study accelerated in the US in the 1950s but by the mid-1990s it had become at least as vibrant in the Northern part of Europe as in North America. Our findings indicate that this shift has resulted in the creation of two quite distinguishable regional maps, one US or North American map and one European. While the AEQ remains the bastion of North American scholarship in adult education all the other journals are dominated by European authors. Scholars keep publishing in their local or regional journals without trying to engage with each other in a discussion of the regional differences. This seems to suggest that adult education does not possess one authoritative map of its territory, a finding confirmed by Larsson (2010, p. 109). Several developments in Europe suggest that Europe is overtaking the US as an authority for adult education. The European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA), founded in 1991, and especially the creation of its journal, the *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (RELA), which published its first issue in 2010, have greatly contributed to forging a European identity of adult educators (see also Field et al. 2016, p. 124; see also Chap. 10) and stimulating debates among European adult educators. International cooperation is stronger in Europe as the “funding programmes of the European Union encourage transnational projects, exchange of best practices and capacity-building” (UIL 2017d, p. 25). In the US, it is much more difficult to obtain research funds for adult education. These developments seem to contribute to the decline and isolation of the US on the map of the territory of adult education research.

The differences in maps should be understood in the larger context of differences in social and cultural traditions and the impact of these on research practices (Popkewitz 1984). The US (and Canada, although to a lesser extent) with their decentralized political and economic systems and emphasis on social mobility promote a research focus on the individual. The strong focus on psychologically-oriented perspectives by American adult education researchers, as noted in the review, is in accordance with the dominant tradition in educational research in general. To use Kuhn’s (1962/1996) concept of paradigm at the meta-level the tradition within adult education research is part of the dominant “Weltanschauung”. As

Brookfield noted already back in 1982, the North American literature draws “a clear distinction between an audience interested in research and theory, and one interested in practice” (p. 157), which is why it tends to identify practitioners, instructors and/or administrators as the usual target groups. Consequently, the process by which adult education has become a specialized field of study in North America has been linked to the professionalization of adult education.

In Europe, a different “Weltanschauung” governs the research tradition. While European research has also been affected by the professionalization of adult education, it has been more influenced by the broader policy realm, as Rubenson observed in his 2000 review. Thus, the differences in topic and theoretical orientation that we observed between the publications in AEQ and RELA speak to differences in what Bourdieu has labelled the “social cosmos” (Camic 2013, p. 186) of the field. Similarly, the articles in IJCELL suggest the beginning of a newly evolving map that emphasizes a technical-practical perspective and the promotion of adult learning as a tool to adapt to a changing economic and technological environment in the context of free market capitalism. This map reflects yet another social cosmos affecting the specific regional field of adult education in Asia. The regionalisation of the field suggests a lack of maturity where, in Bourdieu’s words, the scientific universe of the field of adult education is rather weak and as a consequence it becomes strongly influenced by the social cosmos in which it is embedded.

### 2.5.2 *Hollowing Out of the Field*

Two current processes work in tandem to weaken the field, a fragmentation of adult education research and the changes to the institutional structure of research. Returning to our observation regarding the absence of workplace- and skills-related research, which is unexpected given the dominance of the skills discourse in the policy realm (Elfert and Rubenson 2013), this absence suggests a fragmentation of the field into subdisciplines, which have become fields of study in of themselves. The trend might be most obvious in the area of workplace learning which has started its own scholarly conferences and research journals, e.g. the *Journal of Workplace Learning*. Areas formerly associated with management and business studies are being subsumed under adult education, such as human resource development (HRD) and career development, in particular in the US, where numerous professorships combine adult education and HRD. This development has also been observed in other regions of the world, e.g. China (Boshier 2018). Several academic journals serve the field of HRD such as the *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (HRDQ). The lists of members of the editorial board of the HRDQ contains many adult educators. The overlap between adult education and HRD is noteworthy, as these constitute fields that are based on different logics. HRD has a strong focus on organizational and managerial performance and employee training. It is rooted in somewhat different theoretical foundations (Yang 2004) and has less of a critical tradition than adult education (Fenwick 2004). Fragmentation is also apparent in

other traditional core areas of adult education like adult literacy. These subfields that struggle for their own legitimacy are challenging the field of adult education which increasingly finds it difficult to be guided by its own values and criteria.

The general restructuring of university departments into larger structures or closing down of adult education graduate programs in some countries, especially in the US but also in Australia and some European countries, further hampers the building of a field of adult education. Milton et al.'s (2003) study shows that adult education departments in the US undergo a changing of perspective, often reflected by name changes indicating a broader perspective of lifelong learning. Butterwick et al. (2018) describe the merging and diluting of the adult education program at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Field (2005) confirms this trend for the UK, where the “coherent and bounded field of adult education is being displaced by the more open and decentred domain of lifelong learning” (p. 207). This development is in line with our finding that only one third of the authors worked out of adult education departments. As Field et al. (2016; see also Chap. 10) state, drawing on Edwards (1997), “the shift from the ‘field’ of adult education to the ‘moorland’ of lifelong learning is clearly an obstacle to [a] tidy categorial approach” (p. 129). Consequently adult education has been losing much of the administrative capital it had gained over the previous decades.

### 2.5.3 *Relevance Deficit*

Earlier in the chapter we alluded to the “policy relevance” of adult education research. Our findings point to a disconnect between the policy discourse and academic adult education research. So for example, the outcome-based perspective that is being promoted by supranational organisations such as OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank is largely absent in the core adult education journals. The lack of statistically sophisticated empirical research in adult education (see e.g. Boeren 2018) further contributes to its perceived “irrelevance” to the policy community.

The issue of the “policy relevance” of adult education research is contested. On the one hand are those adult educators who believe we should aspire to influence policies. As Boeren (2018; see also Chap. 8) argues, “in times where our field...is dominated by a focus on ‘big data’ and the use of benchmarks and indicators, both by the European Commission, the OECD and UNESCO, it would be a pity if our field would miss this boat” (p. 75). On the other hand, many adult education scholars resist the dominance of the “big data” such as the PIAAC study. Field et al. (2016; see also Chap. 10) point to the “clear limitations” of these large-scale surveys, “such as their inherent tendency to focus on a small number of measurable benchmarks” (p. 130). More importantly many in the adult education field feel like Mudge and Vauchez (2012), when they – referring to the weak field of EU studies – argue that the field is weak because it is entangled with European politics and therefore not autonomous as a discipline in the Bourdieusian sense.

A related concern is that when adult education researchers become involved in contract research, which usually contributes directly to policy formation for specific operating agencies, such policy research activities generally do not contribute greatly to the growth of generalizable knowledge. This position is rooted in an instrumental position on policy research which underlies much of this kind of research. However, it is important to note that there are also other approaches to policy research, such as the “conceptual position” developed as a criticism against the narrow interpretation of instrumentalism (Weiss 1977). According to this school of policy research the role of research is not primarily seen as coming up with a solution and/or answer to a specific issue but rather helps develop a broader understanding of the underlying problem. This involves widening the debate, reformulating the problem, clarifying goals, and analyzing eventual conflicts between multiple goals. Instead of being of direct instrumental use, the primary function of research is conceptual. What distinguishes this kind of policy-oriented research from “free” or basic research is not its theoretical sophistication or contribution to theory but that it has been initiated in the policy arena and addresses an issue that society has defined as being of relevance. The conceptual approach involves a shift from shorter R&D projects in adult education to long-term university based research programs giving emphasis to the relations between adult education and society as a whole not only the more narrow issue of its effect on the economy. For this kind of policy research to happen financial resources would have to be available, which as we know is rarely the case. However, it should be noted that most adult education research in Sweden up until quite recently constituted conceptually oriented policy research carried out in university departments that come to shape adult education as a field of study. As Offe (1984) notes, it is only a “secure state” that is willing to behave in this way. Thus, it is the logic of the dominant welfare state regime that will shape the conditions for policy research. While it is true that under most conditions economic and political forces may threaten the autonomy of the field of adult education, the Swedish case shows that this does not always have to be the case.

## 2.6 Concluding Note

It is always dangerous to speculate about the contours of the future map of adult education as a field of study, but we dare to provide a couple of speculations. The first is that the new subdisciplines will jeopardize the traditional field of adult education as they have more “capital” given that they are more in line with the policy discourse and therefore in a better position to obtain funding. The second is that there are no indications that the fragmentation process will come to a halt. On the contrary, it is more likely that it will intensify. One reason is that an Asian map might start to emerge. Our analysis of the IJCELL (Rubenson and Elfert 2015), which represents to some extent the developments in Asia with its specific characteristics, already points in this direction. This is by itself not a negative development but it is more likely to increase the number of maps than to contribute to the

development of an integrated map. Another reason is that we might see the European map becoming even more dominant due to the institutional changes in the US that further weaken American knowledge production in adult education. The strong emphasis in the EU on the economic and social role of adult learning in combination with the stress on evidence-based policy will fuel research activities within the EU while there are fewer opportunities for this kind of research in the US. This development in European adult education research carries with it some obvious risks. Thus, while the policy-related interest in adult education research may provide some new opportunities for the development of major research programs, something that has been lacking in the field, it also contributes to a weakening of the field in the Bourdieusian sense. This weakness entails a danger of moving the research agenda away from classical adult education concerns about democracy and social rights and forcing the researchers to focus on a narrow politically-defined instrumental research agenda. In this perspective the struggle is to find opportunities for research that can critically examine democratically taken decisions.

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