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## To Network or Not to Network in German Adult Education: Rethinking Networks as learning opportunities based on Stäheli's sociology of de-networking

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Die Diskussion in der Erwachsenenbildung wird über Jahren unter dem Diktum der Arbeit in und an Netzwerken geführt. Netzwerke werden dabei sowohl als individuelle und organisationale Kooperationen, lokal, regional, transnational als auch empirisch-analytisch im Rahmen relationaler Theorie oder Educational Governance Ansätze diskutiert. Die Arbeit an und in Netzwerken wird als große Chance gesehen, schnell auf gesellschaftliche Veränderungen reagieren und pädagogische Aktivitäten bündeln und gestalten zu können. Die 2021er Veröffentlichung von Urs Stäheli kann in diesem Zusammenhang als eine Kampfansage an dieser beharrlichen Zuversicht in Netzwerke verstanden werden. Urs Stäheli richtet in Soziologie der Entnetzung (2021) seinen Blick auf die Phänomene, die sich mit dem Abbau und der Destabilisierung von Netzwerken feststellen lassen. Der Autor stellt ein analytisches Begriffsinventar zur Verfügung, mit dem der Diskurs um Netzwerke nicht aus den Angeln gehoben, aber doch zumindest erweitert werden kann. In diesem Beitrag wird die Soziologie der Entnetzung Perspektive für die Erarbeitung von Entnetzungsthemen in Form eines Systematic Literature Reviews herangezogen. Dieses richtet den Blick auf die Schattenseiten des Netzwerksdiskurses in der Erwachsenenbildung und das Nicht-Netzwerken als funktionale Praktik zu integrieren.

For years, the discussion in adult education has been conducted under the dictum of working in and on networks (Ebner von Eschenbach et al. 2023). Networks are discussed both as individual and organizational collaborations, locally, regionally, and transnationally, and empirically and analytically in the context of relational theory or educational governance approaches. Working on and in networks is seen as a great opportunity to be able to react quickly to social changes and to consolidate and shape educational activities. In this context, Urs Stäheli's 2021 publication can be seen as

a challenge to this persistent enthusiasm for networks. In *Sociology of de-Networking* (2021), Urs Stäheli focuses on the phenomena that can be observed when networks are dismantled and destabilized. The concepts expand the discourse on networks, rather than to overthrow it. In this paper, the Sociology of de-networking is regarded as theoretical background for the identification of de-networking topics in the form of a systematic literature review in german adult education. This approach renders it feasible to rethink the 'dark side' of network discourse in adult education and to integrate denetworking as a functional practice.

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# To Network or Not to Network in German Adult Education: Rethinking Networks as learning opportunitites based on Stäheli's sociology of de-networking

JULIA KOLLER

**Abstract:** For years, the discussion in adult education has been conducted under the dictum of working in and on networks (Ebner von Eschenbach et al. 2023). Networks are discussed both as individual and organizational collaborations, locally, regionally, and transnationally, and empirically and analytically in the context of relational theory or educational governance approaches. Working on and in networks is seen as a great opportunity to be able to react quickly to social changes and to consolidate and shape educational activities. In this context, Urs Stäheli's 2021 publication can be seen as a challenge to this persistent enthusiasm for networks. In *Sociology of de-Networking* (2021), Urs Stäheli focuses on the phenomena that can be observed when networks are dismantled and destabilized. The concepts expand the discourse on networks, rather than to overthrow it. In this paper, the *Sociology of de-networking* is regarded as theoretical background for the identification of de-networking topics in the form of a systematic literature review in german adult education. This approach renders it feasible to rethink the 'dark side' of network discourse in adult education and to integrate de-networking as a functional practice.

**Keywords:** networks, adult education organizations, systematic literature review, loosely coupled systems

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kann. In diesem Beitrag wird die *Soziologie der Entnetzung* Perspektive für die Erarbeitung von Entnetzungsthemen in Form eines Systematic Literature Reviews herangezogen. Dieses richtet den Blick auf die Schattenseiten des Netzwerksdiskurses in der Erwachsenenbildung und das Nicht-Netzwerken als funktionale Praktik zu integrieren.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Netzwerke, Organisationen der Erwachsenenbildung, Systematisches Literaturreview, Lose gekoppelte Systeme

## 1 Introduction

The network society describes the profound changes in modern societies in which networks represent the primary form of organization (Feld 2011a). Originally introduced by Manuel Castells (2009), the term refers to the increasing importance of global networks that transcend traditional hierarchies and territorial borders. This development is also understood as a reaction to digitalization, which enables new forms of networking and interaction (Feld 2011a). As a means of interpreting modern times, networks offer a powerful explanatory and solution-oriented approach in many scientific disciplines and in adult education, particularly with regard to their diverse forms of organization, funding, and types of cooperation in Germany (Feld 2011b, p. 127). These networks are regarded as vital instruments for responding to social transformations and of integrating educational initiatives (Feld 2011b).

The emergence and further development of adult education is generally placed in the context of social transformations related to modernity (Schrader 2011, p. 127). Therefore, the traditional references of adult education to diagnoses of modernity, theories of transformation, and theories of modernization are only reasonable (Schäffter 2001a, 2001b; Wittpoth 2001; Schrader 2011; Koller 2021a). On the one hand, references to transformation theories in the broader sense form an important basis for the practical design of further education offers and programs. On the other hand, social diagnoses enable the analysis and reflection of the importance of adult education in social change.

In his 2021 publication, *Sociology of de-networking*, Urs Stäheli challenges the assumption that networks are modern solutions to social problems. Instead, he examines the phenomenon of the erosion and destabilization of networks. In this context, his 2021 publication can be understood as a challenge to this persistent trust in networks. Stäheli provides an analytical inventory of concepts that can be used to expand the discourse on networks, if not to unhinge it. In this respect, the sociology of de-networking is linked to processes of social transformation and diagnoses of modern times, although Stäheli's work is explicitly focused on developing an analytical perspective, rather than a concerned diagnosis of society.

This paper addresses the discourse on networks as a form of expression of modernity and as a principle of German adult education. It explores the question of which strategies of de-networking and opting out of networks are being discussed in adult education. The objective of this article is to elaborate on the theoretical framework of

the sociology of de-networking and to apply them to the concept of networks within the context of adult education. This is based on a systematic review of the literature on adult education publications about networks.

The procedure is as follows: in a first step, findings on networks in adult education will be presented to illustrate that the concept of networks has essentially positive connotations. In a second step, the concept of de-networking will be presented on the basis of Urs Stäheli (2021). Next, these findings are applied empirically. To do this, the method of systematic literature reviews will first be explained. The empirical results will then be presented with a focus on topics of de-networking in German adult education research. In the conclusion, the findings will be discussed and, in particular, open questions regarding a sociological perspective of de-networking on adult education and beyond will be raised.

## 2 Network society and adult education in networks

The concept of the network society, as put forth by Castells (2009), is a pivotal element in sociological analyses of contemporary times. It elucidates the significant transformations in the structure and dynamics of modern societies. In the network society, social, economic and political processes are increasingly shaped by global networks that transcend traditional hierarchies and territorial boundaries. The analysis of the network society as a diagnosis of modern times aims to understand the implications of this far-reaching interconnectedness. It examines the ways in which networks transform structures of power, identities, and social relations, as well as the new forms of social organization and governance that emerge from them (Feld 2011b).

The concept of networks has an appealing power to explain and solve problems in everyday life and in many scientific disciplines, as well as in adult education. This is particularly true regarding the diverse forms of organization, funding and types of co-operation in Germany (Feld 2011b). Networks are discussed both as individual and organizational cooperation, locally, regionally, transnationally, and empirically and analytically in the context of relational theory or educational governance approaches.

In this context, networks serve as a foundation for elucidating the social and organizational processes of connection and association. Dollhausen, Feld, and Seitter (Dollhausen et al. 2013, p. 10) emphasize the importance of prioritizing theoretical models and methodological approaches that facilitate the understanding of the procedural and developmental dynamics of cooperation and networks in adult education. This is crucial for gaining insights into how these social formations can function in a self-regulating manner.

The concept of networks is closely linked to the concept of cooperation in the sense of a functional and educational policy-related requirement for adult education institutions. The term 'cooperation' refers to the collaboration of an adult education institution with at least one other institution or organization. It addresses the collaboration of independent partners with a shared perspective on a common goal. Cooperation

is a consciously planned and established collaboration (Dollhausen & Mickler 2012, p. 9). In particular, the focus is on interorganizational cooperation and networks (Franz 2014; Alke 2015; Jenner 2017).

In the field of German adult education, Wolfgang Jütte's 2002 study on networks represents a seminal contribution to the literature on networks. It examines the underlying structures of informal networked interactions (Jütte 2002, p. 330). The concept of networks is understood in empirical and analytical terms as a set of local relationship and interaction structures within the adult education system. Networks are understood empirically and analytically as local relationship and interaction structures in the adult education system. Jütte assumes both cooperation as a fixed organizational form, i. e. cooperation with a cooperation agreement, and empirically and analytically based on network analyses. We learned from this study that networking and cooperation activities not only take place between adult education organizations but are also maintained with relevant other actors in the extended social field or so called the "adult education network". In further studies, for example by Alke (2018), interorganizational cooperations were considered, which create a stronger link between educational, professional and life worlds. These create the structural conditions for expanding access to education and new possibilities for individuals to shape their educational, professional and working biographies well into old age. Working on and in networks is seen as a great opportunity to react quickly to social changes and to combine and structure educational activities (Feld 2011b). In general, networking and cooperation aim to achieve synergies between different actors, to combine resources or to exchange knowledge and experiences. In the field of adult education, the intention is to reach out to new target groups, develop collaborative programs and activities, ensure educational quality, and improve learning and educational opportunities for adults overall (Alke & Jütte 2016, p. 2). Dollhausen, Feld and Seitter (2013, p. 9) posit that institutionalized adult education is inherently characterized by cooperation and networking, insofar as it is established and maintained in collaboration with a multiplicity of actors.

Moreover, collaborations are regarded as a strategy for ensuring the future viability of adult education organizations, enabling them to secure resources and legitimacy within institutional environments (Alke 2015). As evidenced by a study in the field of literacy and basic education, this phenomenon can be observed in the context of regional cooperation structures (Bickeböller 2023). It may be reasonably assumed that a positive and optimistic attitude is conducive to both the formation and the development of networks.

The increased prevalence of networks and networking activities in the domain of German adult education is attributable to various factors, including the role of national education policy in fostering these activities. Illustrative here are state and federal programmes such as the *Lernende Region – Förderung von Netzwerken 2001–2008*<sup>1</sup> (Learning Regions – Support for Networks) programme, as well as numerous funding programs, in which networking between continuing education institutions and social partners is mandatory (Koller & Arbeiter 2023). European education policy places par-

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bildungsserver.de/innovationsportal/innovationsprojekt.html?innovationsprojekte\\_id=269](https://www.bildungsserver.de/innovationsportal/innovationsprojekt.html?innovationsprojekte_id=269)

ticular emphasis on the need for networking and cooperation (Cedefop – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2023). This is mainly addressed through public-private cooperation and international policy cooperation. Co-operation require Multiple actors including companies, educational institutions, training centres and research institutions (Pépin 2007).

Ebner von Eschenbach and others confirm this in 2023: There is an unshakeable belief in networks, which, just like the suppression of problems and blockages in networking activity, reflects the attitude that people must adopt in order to successfully maintain networks. They assume that networks have an inherent positive attitude, which is related to both the investments (in terms of time, money, and emotions) that they make in order to establish them and the efforts that they subsequently make to ensure their continued viability. Zaviska (2018, p. 22) also summarizes: Interorganizational networks are predominantly associated positively in the research literature, but at the same time they are associated with potential problems and challenges.

### 3 The sociology of de-networking

The euphoria described above – or network fever – is the topic of the work by sociologist Urs Stäheli (2021) entitled *Sociology of de-networking*. The necessity of networking in modern societies and the inherent challenges and problems of the network are the focus of the analysis of de-networking in networks. In the following, some basic assumptions of Stäheli's analysis will be presented.<sup>2</sup>

The starting point is the basic assumption that modern networks – or networks of modernity – are a paranoid structure in which zones of de-networking are created under the conditions of the network. The central thesis states that thinking in networks has become a practical rationality that obscures the view and practices of de-networking that are inevitably associated with networks. In this process, the network itself becomes its goal – a self-referential drive towards hyperconnectivity in order to maintain the network for the sake of the network (Stäheli 2021, p. 54). Network fever describes the rationale of a constant expansion of connections, which can also be understood as a reaction to over-networking.

Networks threat to become entangled in themselves, to the point of paralysis, and seek relief in developed techniques of de-networking (Stäheli 2021, p. 8 transl. JK).

Stäheli is interested in what practices of disconnection from networks can be observed and in understanding why this is functional. He approaches this through social phenomena that can be identified by terms such as information overload, burnout, exhaustion, the inescapability of networks – the so-called network fever – and its opposite,

<sup>2</sup> The summary presented here necessarily remains incomplete, since Stäheli develops his project of a sociology of de-networking in a complex theoretical way and also deals with various fields, phenomena and figures in an exemplary manner. Some, but not all, of these examples will be presented here.

network fatigue. Among other things, he observes the digital detox movement, which he sees as an analytical focus rather than a romantic one. It is less a time-diagnostic, problem-solving or life-coaching approach than an analysis of the practices and strategies of this disconnection. A central element of its analytical approach is the idea that de-networking is not simply the opposite of networking, but rather an active and organized practice that takes place within existing networks. The particular sociological challenge here is not to think of de-networking in terms of new networks and practices of connectivity, but to find analytical perspectives completely outside of network rationales<sup>3</sup>. A joint reflection is required on the structural (im)possibilities of establishing forms of cooperation that are situated beyond the pressure to be permanently connected.

Heuristically, he introduces the so-called double agential cut (Stäheli 2021, p. 301). When actors are removed from the network, they lose their original form and transform into elements called discursive ruins. Stäheli distinguishes between the differentiation of units within a network (momentarization) and the detachment of elements from a network (elementarization). The first agential cut (momentarization) produces a cutting out of units from networks, through which their relata are generated. The double cut then consists in the fact that the moment of cutting out the units from the network is followed by the creation of de-networked units (elementarization). This second cut makes the isolated units visible, classifiable and expressible. This often happens in a problematizing and pathologizing way. Understanding the relationship between the two cuts is essential to focus on what happens between them. Stäheli refers to this as the passage of de-networking – the transition from a networked to a de-networked unit. In other words, initially, an individual or entity assumes a position of observation outside the network, becoming the *other*. This other is then also definable and describable as such by the network itself.

According to Stäheli, one way in which uncoupling could become exemplary, particularly for adult education, is through “loosely coupled systems” (Weick 1976). Loosely coupled systems describe systems or organizations whose elements are only weakly connected or connected by a few variables. These connections are often irregular, indirect and fragile, which means that changes or disturbances in one part of the system are not necessarily immediately or strongly transmitted to other parts of the system. This concept has been particularly influential in adult education (Lockstedt et al. 2022) and is applied as a perspective on the adult education system in Germany (Hartz 2005). Loosely coupled relationships and their practical implementation in the concept of modular organization can be seen as strategies of disconnection. The essential question that arises is how to loosen a relationship without immediately dissolving and damaging it (Stäheli 2021, p. 331). One practice that Stäheli examines is the formation of zones of indifference as a buffer zone that creates temporal space for decision-

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3 This seems to be an open project for Stäheli as well, so it seems paradoxical to think of de-networking as a consequence of networking and at the same time to do so without relational explanatory approaches. This is also evident in Stäheli's introduction of social types (see below), which only acquire their contours through thinking in relations and without which they cannot exist. Based on relational theories such as actor-network theory, systems theory, Deleuze's rhizomatics, post-structuralist discourse theory and Simple's sociology of interaction, Stäheli develops approaches to *unrelationalities*.

making. Its counter-model would be the so-called open offices, where Stäheli observes the maximum networking of shared desks, coffee corners, meetings, etc., and the creation of spaces for privacy and practices of less networking (home office, unavailability, etc.).

## 4 Method

The aim of this paper is to explore approaches of de-networking in adult education. The basic assumptions of Stäheli (2021) serve as a perspective on de-networking. However, these can initially only be developed exploratively in terms of the fields, objects and phenomena of de-networking. This perspective makes it possible to explore possible intersections and dissonances in the network discourse in german adult education. On this basis, further research should develop the practices and types (Stähli 2021) that are related to de-networks.

As shown, the discourse on networks in German adult education is essentially characterized by an unshakeable belief in the power of networks (Zaviska 2018; Ebner von Eschenbach et al. 2023). In order to enable an unbiased view and systematic analysis of the discourse, the method of systematic literature review was chosen to answer the research question (Newman & Gough 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al. 2020). The purpose of this controlled approach is to reduce bias caused by a particular literature selection and to increase its reliability (Tranfield et al. 2003). Its origins and widespread use lie in medical research, but the approach is increasingly being applied in social and educational science contexts (Vetter et al. 2023). There are different versions of the method, here the basic distinction “between reviews that follow a broadly configurative synthesis logic and reviews that follow a broadly aggregative synthesis logic” (Newman and Gough 2020, p. 7) is followed in favor of the second variant.

The approach involves first formulating the initial situation and questions and then conducting an operationalized search in defined databases (Newman & Gough 2020). The following figure shows an overview of the research, the exclusion criteria and the texts included in the analysis.

The research was limited to German texts because the context in which networks are discussed in Germany is essentially related to national educational policy and structural conditions in adult education. International research would not have been comparable in view of these conditions. However, this should be considered in a next step, as an international comparative study would also provide insights into the structural challenges of networking and de-networking.

Identification	<b>Results of the database search (n = 90)</b>	<b>FIS Education:</b> Free text: Erwachsenenbildung oder Weiterbildung und (Netzwerk* oder Entnetz* oder Koop*) [[Transl. JK] ADULT EDUCATION and network* or de-net* oder coop*] Year: 2018–2024
Preselction	<b>Remaining after removal of duplicates (n = 82)</b>	
	<b>Screening of titles and abstracts (n = 77)</b>	<b>Excluded (n = 5)</b> <b>Exclusion of:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media (3x)</li> <li>• No reference to content (2x): <i>Netzwerk Köln e. V.; Critical life events</i></li> </ul>
Entrance	<b>Full texts assessed for suitability (n = 77)</b>	<b>No full texts excluded</b>
Included	<b>Studies included in the lexicometric discourse analysis (n = 77)</b>	

**Figure 1:** Table of search results SLR

In this study, some methods of lexicometric discourse analysis were used to examine the fields, topics and phenomena of de-networking in adult education science and practice-oriented research on the basis of word frequencies and word contexts (Dzudzek et al. 2009; Breyer 2020). In order to achieve the analytical objective, the texts were analysed according to the topics of the challenges and subjects of de-networking. The terms used by Stäheli served merely as search parameters, and the analysis was conducted in a thoroughly explorative and inductive manner. Such analyses have the advantage of making a large text corpus manageable and exploring topics.

The full texts found using the systematic literature review method outlined above were analyzed with the technical support of the analysis software Maxqda Dictio. First, the literature data was evaluated (frequencies of authors, years, publication organs, etc.). Then, the frequencies, collocations, multi-word units and concordance were analyzed using lexicometric methods (Breyer 2020, p. 210). Frequency lists are used to inductively evaluate word frequencies based on lemma and stop word lists. Collocations and multi-word units showing single or multiple terms in their contextual environment were analyzed. In addition, exemplary concordances were examined, which were analyzed in terms of content in a larger context. The following chapter shows the main findings of the analysis in summary.

## 5 Reframing De-Networking: From Deficit to Learning Opportunity

The corpus includes 77 texts published since 2018. The majority, 55.7% of these, are journal articles (47% of them peer-reviewed), 7% books and 37.3 % articles in edited books. Most of the publications in 2023 belong to a volume of the erwachsenenbildung.at on the topic of networks.

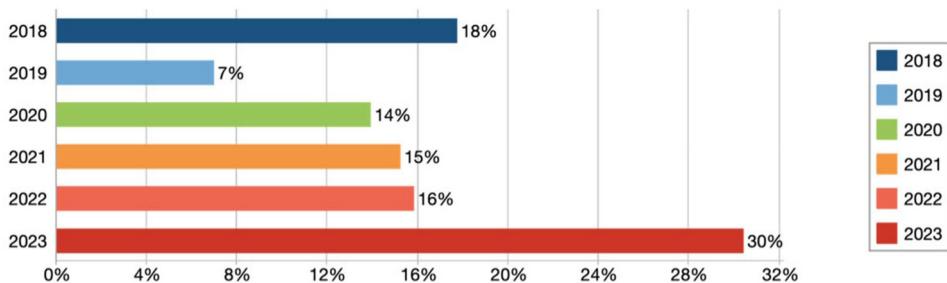


Figure 2: Publications by years

A review of the literature reveals that the authors address the topic of de-networking only in a cursory manner. The term *de-networking* (and related terms such as disconnecting, *de-networking*, *resistances*, and *conflicts*) is mentioned in only 16 of the 77 texts. In the aforementioned 16 texts, however, de-networking constitutes the primary focus. The studies either include a specific discussion of de-networking as a challenge to networking or do not address this topic at all.

As previously stated in the introduction, the authors employ the term *network* in a broad sense. They discuss contexts of cooperation, networks as loose affiliations of participants, and various theoretical references. These include, in particular, organizational theories, especially neo-institutionalism (Alke 2018), governance theories, especially the educational governance approach, in which the concept of networks is central (Koller et al. 2021; Bickeböller 2023) and classical network theories or the relational sociology approach in the form of actor-network theory (Koller 2021b). However, these are underrepresented.

The topic of loosely coupled networks, as described by Stäheli, is also treated as a characteristic of networks and cooperation (see above, Stäheli 2021, p. 330). Regarding this, Tippelt (2021) posits that adult education research has recommended a loose coupling of organizations to strengthen the culture of communication. An approach that may prove beneficial in addressing the challenges of de-networking. Nevertheless, the establishment of a shared cooperative culture among institutions is contingent upon the fulfillment of several conditions. These include the availability of financial resources through a diversified funding structure, an increase in public funding for adult education, transparency regarding costs, the enactment of further legal frameworks for adult education planning – such as those facilitating regional development

planning or adult education laws – and the assurance of quality standards and certification. Moreover, the establishment of support structures, comprising counseling and further training for personnel across all institutions, is imperative (Tippelt 2021, p. 21). On the one hand, this is associated with a culture of communication and cooperation between the actors. On the other hand, there are significant challenges at the macro level, including the need for adult education laws, transparency of financing, structural development for support, and so forth. These constitute the conditions necessary for the formation and maintenance of networks. In other words, the absence of structures at the macro level impedes the development of a culture of cooperation and fosters the dissolution of networks. Furthermore, a detailed analysis reveals that a high level of communicative competence at the individual level is becoming a central theme of this culture of communication. It can also be assumed that the requisite self-regulation of networks renders invisible and eclipses conflicting interests and power constellation (Bernhard-Skala 2019).

The analysis showed that the topics of demarcation, time effort, resistance and competition are essential in de-networking (see figure 3). These topics can be understood as relevant categories, although they are of course interrelated. For example, competition leads to resistance and/or vice versa. The separate illustration is to be understood here in an analytical and systematic way.

In most of the literature dealing with non-cooperation and de-networking, a deficit-oriented description is given that provides models and instructions for improving networking. A few exceptions describe de-networking as functional and as a learning opportunity. For this reason, and to illustrate the network-related appeal, the graphic below shows the problem-solving approach to overcoming a network problem (see figure 3).

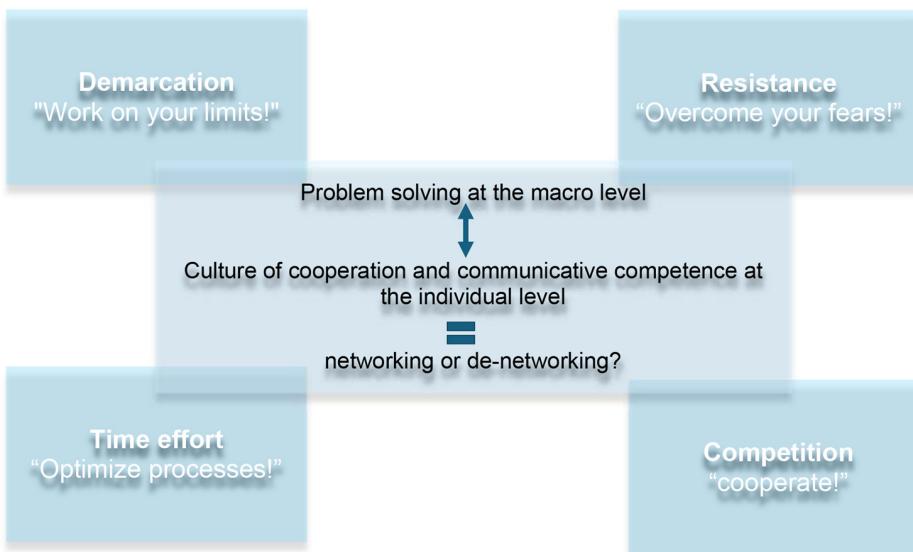


Figure 3: Themes and appeals of de-networking

### 5.1 Demarcation

Modes of demarcation serve to strengthen organizational identity and the culture of cooperation (Alke 2018). Conflicts of interest, distribution and values, as well as negative images and stereotypes are common points of conflict that arise in comparison to one's own identity and culture and that of other network partners (Alke 2021, p. 14). Implicit assumptions and stereotypes in interdisciplinary and multiprofessional networks often lead to conflicts and bad experiences (Duveneck & Schmachtel 2023, p. 235). Thus, the confrontation with the limits of one's own organization and the norms also raises questions of disciplinary and interdisciplinary action and interpretation (Spies & Wischmann 2023, p. 35). The actors are challenged to make the connections to the contexts found in the field in specific situations and to work on the conflicts between the different positions (Spies & Wischmann 2023, p. 40). This cultivated, shared knowledge is the basis for the actors to develop the ability to operate in the given situation based on their particular professional perspectives (Duveneck & Schmachtel 2023, p. 235).

The development of a common culture and identity can be crucial for the success of cooperation. Positions that are fundamentally different do not only lead to the risk of conflict, but also offer an opportunity to strengthen one's self-understanding and clarify one's purpose (Deigendesch et al. 2022, p. 85). Therefore, dealing with the boundaries of the organization in networks and collaborations can be understood as a chance for organizational learning (Jenner 2018).

### 5.2 Resistance

Trust and transparent communication are important for the success of networks, especially in heterogeneous, vertical ones. The level of participation, withdrawal or departure of actors is seen as an indicator of lack of interest and conflict (Zaviska 2018, p. 20).

Südekum (2018) has examined the concept of resistance in depth and provided an empirical framework for it. It is certainly the most densely defined concept in the context of de-networking<sup>4</sup>. Organizations and their members seek structural stability, cultural identity, and work-related autonomy. However, these aspirations are temporarily undermined by collaborative relationships, intensifying resistance (Südekum 2018, p. 92). Resistance can be understood as both a cause and an outcome of learning. The potential for learning lies primarily in the process of deceleration and the self-distancing and self-assurance (Südekum 2018, p. 101). Resistance occurs as a result of learning when the demands of cooperation are perceived as externally determined or restrictive (Südekum 2018, p. 101).

### 5.3 (Time) Effort

Networks are often characterized as time-consuming negotiation processes (Zaviska 2018, p. 22). These processes can lead to a conflict of interest if the individual benefit for the participating educational organizations is lower than the benefit for the target

4 The corpus includes a 2018 article that summarizes an extensive 2014 study by Franz (2014).

group. In such cases, the stability and existence of the network may be questioned (Zaviska 2018, p. 22).

Differences and conflicts need to be clearly stated in order to avoid subsuming all rationales under the appeal of networking without the benefit of such an action being obvious (Wunsch 2020, p. 40). An increasing amount of negotiation represents a significant area of tension in networks (Zaviska 2018, p. 14). Important influential factors are employee turnover and the exclusion of individual actors from the network. Strong regulation, standardization, formalization and bureaucratization can have a negative impact on activities in organizational networks. Due to the weak, informal and non-binding structures of (adult) education networks, professional network management is required to reduce structural instability (Zaviska 2018, p. 14).

#### 5.4 Competition

The topic of competition is strongly linked to the phenomena of resistance and conflicts of interest (Südekum 2018). These conflicts arise from the simultaneous need for competition and legitimization, resulting in conflicts of interest, distribution and values. Studies show that cooperation often occurs in hybrid forms, with fluid boundaries between cooperative coordination, hierarchical control, and service provision (Alke 2021, p. 13).

Mistrust plays a central role in networks and cooperation, especially when competition and resistance need to be overcome. Networks in the adult education system compete for resources and target groups, even within their own institution. In urban areas, competition is stronger than in rural areas, where pooling of resources is more important (Alke 2021, p. 19).

Unequal power dynamics in networks typically manifest themselves less in a vertical relationship than in conflicts of interest between the center and the periphery. These conflicts affect both access to relevant information and the central or peripheral position in the network (Schäffter 2023, p. 14).

### 6 Discussion

The present article initiates a discussion about networks in German adult education. It aims to clarify that the concept of networks is essentially positive and that demands and expectations of increased networking are a characteristic of modernity. Subsequently, the concept of de-networking was presented based on Stäheli (2021), wherein theoretical assumptions, and practices of de-networking were delineated. Subsequently, these findings were empirically applied through the method of a systematic literature review.

It has been demonstrated that challenges, difficulties, and areas of conflict are occasionally addressed in German-language literature on networks and cooperation. Nevertheless, these are predominantly identified as deficiencies that require resolution. In certain instances, these areas of contention are situated within the context of learning opportunities, particularly those oriented towards organizational learning. The sub-

jects of demarcation, time, effort, resistance, and competition are pivotal elements of de-networking in networks of German adult education. A defining characteristic of networks in German adult education are the loosely coupled organizations, which is intended to reinforce a culture of communication. In contrast, a lack of structures at the macro level has been associated with de-networking and the absence of a culture of cooperation (Tippelt 2021, p. 21). The existence of high structural barriers necessitates the implementation of intensive cooperation. The occurrence of conflicts in cooperation, as well as the underlying rationales, interests, and motives of the participants, are significantly influenced by macro-structural factors. Consequently, we are confronted with a multitude of areas of tension at varying levels, oscillating between individual, organizational, and structural areas.

A significant opportunity for informed cooperation and comprehension of networks in adult education can be observed in the concept of de-networking as a learning opportunity for individuals and organizations. This leads to the question of which structural problems can be solved with networks and which cannot. In this context, the comprehensive response can be open-ended and non-prescriptive: increased networking is not the solution, but rather the reduction, dissolution, and temporary curtailment of connections. Stäheli (2021) emphasizes that de-networking involves practices that challenge the inherent positivity of networks by introducing elements of resistance and delay. He argues that buffering, which introduces a time delay into networks, can serve as a mechanism to manage the intensity and pace of interactions within networks. Additionally, Stäheli highlights the concept of shyness, which challenges the boundaries between the network and the individual's willingness to engage, thereby creating a space for reflection and selective engagement. These theoretical insights suggest that de-networking is not merely a reaction to deficiencies but a deliberate strategy to enhance the functionality and sustainability of networks. Südekum (2018) has described this as an effect of resistance, which can be viewed as a learning opportunity. Furthermore, these concepts (Stäheli 2021, p. 247) offers a multitude of connections by challenging the boundaries (demarcation) between the network and the individual's willingness to engage with others.

In sum, an analysis of the literature on adult education reveals significant potential in exploring de-networking practices. The key challenge lies in conceptualizing these practices not as deficiencies in networks, but as integral functional elements. The double agential cut (Stäheli 2021, p. 301) as mentioned above makes it possible to observe the transition from linked to de-linked units. This transition offers an opportunity for reflection and adaptation. By adopting an observational position outside the network, individuals or organisations can critically question their own practices and strategies and adapt them if necessary. The Reflection of the agential double cut provides learning opportunities by highlighting the processes of extracting and then visualising units, thus helping to gain new insights into the functioning of networks and develop innovative approaches to improve network structures. Organizational learning (Argyris & Schön 1978) offers a promising framework for understanding this phenomenon.

It should be noted that this is an exploratory work in which topics of de-networking were addressed through the analysis of literature from German-speaking adult education. It is not possible to identify any de-networking practices, as defined by Stäheli, through this approach. Moreover, further qualitative empirical research is required. The topics developed here can serve as initial starting points. Additionally, a specific section was selected for the systematic literature review. This encompasses both the time frame (the last five years) and the language and countries (the German-speaking area) of the analysis. It is recommended that international comparative studies be conducted, considering the respective structural conditions of the adult education systems.

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