

# Adult Education Research and Neo-Institutional Theory. An Introduction to the Topic

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Volume 45 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education is dedicated to adult education research and neo-institutional theory and is edited by Dörthe Herbrechter from the University of Heidelberg, Germany, as a guest editor and Michael Schemmann.

Neo-institutional theory advanced to be a firmly established theory in various disciplines such as educational studies, political and social sciences, economic sciences and organization studies (Hasse & Krüger 2020b, 9). The theoretical approach is considered to be very dynamic and productive triggering and inspiring both empirical studies as well as theoretical reflections. Only recently, these dynamics led to debates and initiatives both nationally and internationally, which aimed at critically discussing the current state of development of neo-institutional theory and its potential to cover and explain current societal developments (e.g. Hasse & Krüger 2020a; Alvesson & Spicer 2019). With this volume we want to contribute to the above-mentioned debate focusing on neo-institutional theory and adult education research.

This introductory article will start off by giving an overview of the development and the discussions on neo-institutional theory. Following, the outline of the concept of this year's volume and the articles will be highlighted. The article will conclude with some remarks by the editor.

## 1 Brief History on the Development of Sociological Neo-Institutional Theory

Neo-institutional theory can be characterized by the plurality of its approaches and manifestations. Thus, it does not comprise one consistent body of theory or a clear-cut research program. A prominent model to differentiate the various approaches and levels of analysis was developed by Türk (2004). He distinguishes a micro approach (Organizations as Institutions), a meso approach (Organizations and Institutions) and a macro approach (World Polity) of sociological neo-institutional theory.

Even though there are different levels of analysis, the approaches draw back on similar theoretical foundations and perspectives. DiMaggio and Powell sum up the core of sociological institutionalism as follows:

“The new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations and an interest in properties of supraindividual units

of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals' attributes or motives" (DiMaggio & Powell 1991, 8).

Although controversial in the aftermath, DiMaggio and Powell coined the difference between "old" and "new" institutionalism with their 1991 volume "The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis". The difference is seen in the fact that the new institutionalism emphasizes the importance of the institutionalized environment for organizations in a special way and sees it as the cause of organizational processes (Koch & Schemmann 2009).

With DiMaggio and Powell, a pair of authors who wrote one of the fundamental contributions to the constitution of neo-institutionalism in 1983 is already named. This is complemented by a paper by Meyer and Rowan from 1977 and another by Zucker, also from 1977. In their analysis of the development of sociological neo-institutionalism, Greenwood et al. (2013) summarize the phase from 1977 to 1983 as "Foundations". In this phase, central concepts and terms such as institution, institutionalized environment or isomorphism were unfolded, which were decisive for further theory development. The primarily conceptual texts have sometimes been criticized for inconsistencies, conceptual vagueness and lack of systematics. Without question, however, they have provided the development of the basic idea and the unfolding of the "new" perspective (Koch & Schemmann 2009). From this first phase, Greenwood et al. (2013) distinguish two more phases. They refer to the second phase from 1983 to 1991 as the "Early Years". They note that the basic articles initially caused little response. Only gradually did the basic considerations receive broader attention and were confronted with empirical data (ibid.). Greenwood et al. (2013) characterize four groups of studies, all of which revolve around the concept of institutions as rationalized myths. The first group focuses on the motivation of organizations to experience legitimacy by adopting procedures and practices that are assumed to be rational. The second group includes studies that addressed the proposition that nonprofits are particularly susceptible to institutional influence (Greenwood et al. 2013). Studies in group three examined practices in different countries and took on the question of whether specific cultural values also entail different organizational behaviors. Finally, group four gathers studies that examined how ideas are transferred between and across organizations.

The third phase is then dated from 1991 to the publication of the article in 2013 and is entitled "Expanding horizons". This phase is characterized by a continuation and expansion of theory building as well as the presentation of further empirical studies, which above all expanded the range of industries studied. With a view to sharpening central concepts, the notion of isomorphism came into focus in this phase with the question of how and why organizations respond to their environment in different ways being of particular interest. Furthermore, the concept of legitimacy was further differentiated and given a more action-related accent. The same is true for addressing institutional change. For this purpose, the concept of the "institutional entrepreneur" was developed. Finally, interest in the concept of "institutional logics" was renewed (Greenwood et al. 2013).

## 2 On the Concept and the Individual Contributions

When developing the concept for volume 45 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education, the main intention was to contribute to the debate on the current state of development of neo-institutional theory and its potential to cover and explain current societal developments by focusing on adult education research. Thus, the volume will focus on theoretical developments as well as reflections on research methods and methodologies. Additionally, the volume includes the presentation of recent studies and their findings. These contributions also represent the latest research questions and perspectives when using neo-institutional theory in adult education research.

In detail, volume 45 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education comprises the following articles:

The article *Recent Developments in the Relationship between Comparative Research on Education and Neo-Institutional Theory* by Alexander W. Wiseman explores the link as well as the exchange between comparative educational research and neo-institutional theory. It takes its starting point in the 1970s when comparative research started employing neo-institutional theory. The early focus was very much on the organization and brought common aspects and attributes of organizational as well as national education systems to the fore. However, the paper argues that new developments related to power, empirical approaches and the identity of the “schooled” person can be observed. After discussing these recent developments, the paper explores the theoretical and empirical potential that neo-institutional theory provides in the context of comparative education research.

Dörthe Herbrechter focuses on the institutional in her article titled *Empirically Grasping the Institutional – Methodological Reflections on Institutional Research Using Grounded Theory*. Following up on the idea that teaching processes are affected by institutions, the main research question of the article is how the institutional can be grasped in qualitative data. The author focuses on grounded theory as both a method and a research attitude.

The article *Three Tales of Lifelong Learning as a Travelling Idea: Diffusion, Mimesis, and Translation* by Mike Zapp focuses on lifelong learning as a program. Developed in the 1960s, it took until the 1990s to spread widely and find its way into national policy approaches. The article is interested in the adoption of lifelong learning by nation states and draws back to three modes of adoption within neo-institutional theory. As such, diffusion, mimesis and translation are focused on. The article also presents both recent and more historical empirical data.

The article *Institutional Entrepreneurship in Adult Basic Education. Recent Theoretical Developments and Empirical Analyses* by Jakob Bickeböller, Dörthe Herbrechter and Michael Schemmann employs neo-institutionalism and in particular the concept of institutional entrepreneurship as a theoretical framing when trying to shed more light on processes of institutionalization in adult basic education. Methodologically, the article is based on a guided-interview study with stakeholders in regional contexts which were analyzed under a new research question in a secondary manner. The findings

refer to the characterization of the field, the projects that are being carried out as well as the skills of institutional entrepreneurs. The article is a good example of how institutional theory helps to understand processes of institutionalization in adult education.

Finally, *Martin Reuter* focuses on the ascribed efficacy of quality management systems in adult education organizations. In the article *Quality Management in Adult Education Organisations: Modes of Integration in Different Organisational Fields* he poses the question whether these ascriptions vary depending on the organizational contexts they can be assigned to. Reuter employs organizational field and loose coupling as key neo-institutional concepts for his analysis. What is more, the contribution draws back on an analysis of data from the *wbmonitor* survey 2017.

Next to the key subject articles this year's volume of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* also comprises one article in the section *Miscellaneous*. In his article titled *Who publishes what? – A bibliometric study of papers from the Global South in international journals of adult education research*, *Tim Vetter* follows up on the thesis of the underrepresentation of adult education researchers from the Global South. The author uses bibliometric methods and analyzes seven established journals of adult education regarding the frequency in which researchers from the Global South get published in these journals, what visibility their articles gain, and what topics they address.

### 3 On our Own Account

Finally, a heartfelt thanks goes to all actors who contributed to this year's volume of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*. In particular, I would like to express gratitude to the co-editor of this volume and distinguished colleague *Dörthe Herbrechter*. The cooperation was very fruitful and thanks to Dörthe's expertise and knowledge the concept could be developed and realized in its current form. This year's volume was particularly challenging because of several necessary changes and adaptations due to COVID-19 infections.

A warm thank you goes to all authors of contributions who prepared their manuscripts within the deadlines. It guaranteed that the *Yearbook* could be published in time. What is more, a thank you is to be said to the reviewers of the articles and to the authors of the review section.

Once again, my personal thanks goes to *Eva Bonn* who runs the editorial department of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*. Her engagement and her constant effort to improve the quality of processes guarantee the standard of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education*.

As regards the publication of the *Yearbook* I am particularly happy to announce that volume 45 of the *International Yearbook of Adult Education* is the first one to be published as a fully-open-access-journal. At the same time, the previous volumes 44 and 43 will be available in open access, too. I wish to express my gratitude to our pub-

lisher W. Bertelsmann Verlag for the support in developing and realizing the open-access strategy.

Volume 46 of the International Yearbook of Adult Education will focus on the topic “*Researching Participation in Adult Education*”. We welcome contributions to this volume as well as contributions to the sections Miscellaneous and Reviews.

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