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## **CELEBRATION OF ESREA'S THIRTY YEARS. AN (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT ON ADULT EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF STUDY**

**ABSTRACT:** This article is the story of a leading European association of researchers on the education of adults and adult learning. The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary in 2022. By looking back and recalling how the association started, who its initiators were, and using an (auto)ethnographic and biographical method of data collection and narration, the aim is to introduce a debate on adult education as evolving towards social sciences. At the same time asking a question how crucial was ESREA's impact on adult education research, if at all. In the concluding part, a state of adult education as a social science discipline is presented and discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** ESREA, adult education research, adult learning, ESREA's researchers, social sciences.

In 2022, the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, by, among other things, organising its conference in Milan (ESREA 2022). Why do we celebrate ESREA's anniversary? This article considers the story of a leading European association of researchers in learning and education of adults. ESREA's anniversary is an appropriate time to write about its role in forming and contributing to the discipline by empirical research on education and learning of adults.

### **The aim and the method**

The aim of this account is to contribute to the 30th anniversary by looking back and recalling how the association started, who its initiators were, and how big ESREA's impact and its significance on adult education research has been. This account is based on my own recollections and a biographical story, but also on several documents I had managed to collect in the beginning when the whole idea emerged, such as letters, ESREA's newsletters and photos, as well as on references to articles and books. Moreover, an inspiration for this article has been the interview questions I received from Barbara Merrill and Fergal Finnegan about my involvement in ESREA (e-mail from June 2022). It is a point of interest for the association to have a record of its founding members and initiators; the video interviews will be placed on ESREA's homepage.

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In this account, I am also trying to explore how ESREA has contributed to/or had an impact on the scope and quality of adult education research. Additionally, I am attempting to understand what adult educationists had expected from such a development and how they (or at least some of them) perceive adult education as a field of social science.

### **What is the background of and the reasons for starting ESREA?**

Adult education as a field of study has quite a long tradition that dates back to the late twenties of the last century. According to Kjell Rubenson and Maren Elfert (2015), it began in the USA and went through a process of growth and importance. First due to the establishment of university programmes at several universities, granting PhD's and advancing research, and second thanks to the interest from the field of practice in new research findings and their applicability to adult educators. The boom and importance of the discipline reached its peak in the 1990s' and was predicted to continue (Rubenson & Elfert, 2015). Similarly, in Europe the 1990s' were considered optimistic years for the discipline, as reflected by the active involvement of the EU in funding research (Hake, 1998). New positions in adult education were created, *e.g.*, at Bremen University, Germany as many as 12 professors in adult education were appointed (see Mader, 1992). Martin G. Haindorff (1992: 237) wrote: "The University of Bremen has the largest full-time staff and the widest choice of subjects of any department of adult education in the united Germany of 1991". There was a huge interest in the development of the discipline and engagement from the academic world as well as from political powers.

Exactly at that time Barry Hake, from Leiden University, came with an idea to involve some scholars in Europe to start an association for research in adult education. But what was the reason? One can speculate that first there was a boom in empirical research on adult education and an interest to study a growing practice of the field, as well as clearly increasing numbers of academic staff (Rubenson, 2000). Second, there was a general lack of organisations dealing solely with adult education researchers. And third, Barry's initiative to mobilise a handful of European researchers who, through their networks, could together build an association, was obviously a temptation. Who were the people behind ESREA, and what organisations existed already?

### **What organisations existed at the time?**

There were already several national and international adult education associations, but they were committed to involving mostly practitioners (*i.e.*, adult educators). The best known is International Council for Adult Education founded in 1972. "ICAE (online) represents more than 800 organisations working on the promotion of the right to learn,

literacy, youth and adult education and lifelong learning. It has seven-member organisations at regional level and national members in 75 countries” (ICAE). Three major regional bodies were included: The European Bureau for Adult Education (EBAE), the African Adult Education Association, and the Asian and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education.

An important society in Europe is the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), set up in 1953, previously known as EBAE – it “is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European nongovernmental organisation (NGO) with 120 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide” (EAEA). For more on EBAE’s history, please refer to the works of Derek Legge (1989) and G.H.L. Schouten (1978). In Europe many countries have not only one but several national associations for professional adult educators. They usually are included in EAEA which associates mostly practitioners involved in NGOs, formal and non-formal adult education institutions but also researchers. These associations aim to contribute to policy making in their countries and to the wellbeing of their members and participants of adult education.

Among other national associations we can find the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), founded in 1982, as the result of a merger between the National Association for Public and Continuing Adult Education (NAPCAE) and the Adult Education Association (AEA).

The only research associations at the time were only at the national level. The most famous was the Adult Education Research Conference in the USA. They present themselves as “an annual North American conference that provides a forum for adult education researchers to share their experiences and the results of their studies with students, other researchers, and practitioners from around the world” (AERC). The association has a very long tradition and goes back to the 1950s. Today it “is also a retreat for members of the adult education community; an informal, collegial gathering [...] over the future direction of research in adult education” (AERC).

There was, however a worldwide International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE) from 1992 (originated in the USA), with its first conference in 1995 in Bamberg, Germany. The society has around 200 members from 35 countries. Similarly, to AERC and SCUTREA, the ISCAE focuses on international conferences and the publication of papers (ISCAE).

## **The beginning of ESREA**

Seeing this lack of associations dedicated to research on the education of adults in Europe, the unique initiative of Barry Hake was to approach academics devoted to

research and to try to cover the whole of Europe. We, that is the founding members, created several research networks, and the first ESREA conference was held in 1995 in Strobel, Austria. After that, triennial conferences were held in Brussels, Lisbon, Wrocław, Seville, Linköping, Berlin, Maynooth, Belgrade and this year (2022) in Milan.

But who were the people of ESREA? To begin with, I happened to be a *founding mother* alongside the eight men who initiated ESREA. I got involved, both as a founding member, an interim and elected steering committee member, as well as a convenor of some networks, while being active in initiating and running many others. Let me start with my background to be able to narrate my personal story of ESREA. Today I am Professor Emeritus at the Department of Education at Stockholm University (SU), where I had worked for 30 years. However, my career began in Poland at the University of Warsaw at which I defended my PhD and worked as a lecturer, whereas I received my habilitation from Uppsala University.

How did I become involved in ESREA in the first place and why? In my research I concentrated on adult learning and education from the beginning. I believed that the status of adult education as a discipline depends on stringent research to understand learning as a social process happening in real life. As psychologists limited their interest in human learning to children and adolescents claiming that a person develops fully already in his/her twenties, many of us adult educationists turned to sociology. The latter gave us prospects of seeing an individual as a social being, constrained by society and yet being able to develop by using agency, and to understand learning as a process in which gender, class and ethnicity become very important.

In March 1989, already in Sweden, I received a letter from Barry Hake. He asked me if I wanted to be involved in the project on *Historical perspectives on social movements and adult education (1750-1800)* that he and Jindra Kulich (UBC, Vancouver), were launching. I was working then at both Uppsala University and Linköping University (LU). My part covered Sweden, while other scholars embraced other parts of Europe. However, the financial contribution never materialised, either for collecting the data or for publication. However, I managed at least to publish my part in August 1991 through LU (Bron-Wojciechowska, 1991). I think that Barry's historical project was the beginning of the creation of a network of adult education researchers.

A few years later, Barry asked me if I was interested in the idea of establishing a European Society. On the 15th of March 1991, Barry Hake addressed a letter to me:

I write to you at this point of time with regard to the establishment of a European Society for Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (ESTREA). This idea has been doing the rounds informally among a few well-known figures in universities from a number of countries who meet one another regularly at conferences and are involved in ERASMUS projects etc. It would be a society similar to SCUTREA with an annual conference, seminars and workshops, and possibly a European journal for research in adult education (Private letter to A. Bron).

He wanted to explore the possibilities for such a society for academics and asked me to recommend “some competent and internationally oriented academics from Poland”, which I did, and I warmly welcomed his initiative. I also introduced some colleagues from Belgium (Etienne Bourgeois) and Germany (Peter Alheit) to Barry Hake, and we exchanged several letters. By March 19th 1991, Barry had had seven supporters – all males. We all were involved in recruiting more members.

As a next step, I joined an inaugural meeting which was held at the beginning of December 1991 at the residential college near Leiden. We were 13 persons including two women (Sallie Westwood and me). Our male colleagues were Peter Alheit, Pierre Dominicé, John Field, Basitaan von Gent, Barry Hake, Walter Leirman, Françoise Libert, Kjell Rubenson, Richard Taylor, Jukka Tuomisto, Bjarne Wahlgren. All of us were employed as professors or senior lecturers by universities at Adult Education or Education Departments, and one person in Social Pedagogy. Each of us was involved in research, thus we were adult educationists and sociologists. There is a myth spread by some colleagues, who were not from the very beginning in ESREA, that the initiating group consisted of practitioners, which was not the case. To the inaugural meeting an additional 12 invited people could not attend, including three women. They were all university professors and researchers. At that meeting the provisional steering committee was established. Kjell Rubenson became Chair of ESREA, while Barry Hake was appointed its Secretary (*ESREA Newsletter*, 1993).

In May 1992, the first Newsletter was published and presented our European association as “a major new initiative by academics at universities throughout Europe who are engaged in research on the education of adults” (*ESREA Newsletter*, 1992). Barry Hake knew that the community of researchers in adult education was very small, so he welcomed all researchers interested in the education of adults, *e.g.*, those from Sociology and Anthropology, Political Science, Social Work, Human Geography, and generally Arts and Humanities, as well as Education (*ESREA Newsletter*, 1992). Thus, all researchers interested in the education of adults were invited.

As a member of the steering committee, I recall an interesting incident. In 2004, ESREA held a triennial conference in Wrocław, while the Steering Committee met beforehand to prepare the event. It is customary to engage speakers from the host country, so Ewa Kurantowicz and Mieczysław Malewski put forward two Polish names for the keynote speakers. We discussed that proposal, but we did not agree, as the persons were unknown to some members of the committee. As I recall, I came with the solution, which I thought would be acceptable to all of us, namely, to propose Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-English sociologist from Leeds. Some of us were not sure if we would be lucky enough to convince Zygmunt to come to our conference. I took this task upon myself, as I knew Zygmunt and Janina Bauman personally. It was a success

and in the book after the conference, the keynote address is there (Bauman, 2005). Later Zygmunt came several times to the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław and the friendly bond developed.

### **ESREA today**

The association was established in 1992, and today it combines 12 research networks, hundreds of individuals and 39 institutional members from across Europe. There are 22 countries engaged in the association, including 18 European and four non-European ones (e-mail Alexandra Ioannidou, October 2022). ESREA is a non-governmental organisation whose goal is to promote and disseminate empirical research on the education of adults and adult learning in Europe through research networks, conferences and publications. The *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (RELA):

is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends (RELA).

This open-access journal encourages article submission from non-English speaking authors. Within ESREA and through its networks numerous books have been published. The ESREA's Secretariat is located at the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) in Bonn, Germany, and its secretary is Alexandra Ioannidou (see ESREA).

Each year ESREA's 12 research networks organise their conferences or seminars. Below you can find a list of the networks, in an alphabetic order, and more about each of them one can learn at <https://esrea.org>:

1. Access, learning careers and identities;
2. Active democratic citizenship and adult learning;
3. Adult educators, trainers and their professional development;
4. Between global and local – adult learning and communities;
5. Education and learning of older adults;
6. Gender and adult learning;
7. History of adult education and training in Europe;
8. Transformation and emancipatory adult education;
9. Life history and biography;
10. Migration, transnationalism and racism;
11. Policy studies in adult education;
12. Working life and learning.

The networks' seminars and/or conferences attract far more people than the number of ESREA members, and very often also PhD students. Moreover, at the triennial conferences there are always a few pre-conference days addressed to PhD students. This is in accordance with one of ESREA's mission statements: to support young researchers.

As I wrote before, I have been personally involved in ESREA from the start. First of all, I sat in the interim steering committee until we had a proper election (1993), and I was elected several times. I think my career in the steering committee ended in 2005 or 2006. But I also was involved in networking from the start or even before. ESREA's structure consists of networks that are crucial for the association. It is through networking that one builds social capital of researchers, opportunities to be involved in common research and publication, and, what is more, the ability to co-operate between cultures, research traditions and languages. Let me then look at my own role in contributing to some of the networks and at the same time describe the role of adult educationists who were involved in them.

### **Active Democratic Citizenship Network**

Already in 1990, in summer, just one year after the revolutionary changes in Poland, a colleague from Wrocław University Mieczysław Malewski organised a conference in Karpacz on *Adult education as a social movement*. International guest speakers at that conference included Chris Duke, John Field from the UK, and myself from Sweden. Mieczysław wanted to start research on how democracy could be built and established in Poland after the Round Table and Solidarity victory. That particular conference of researchers became eventually an embryo of *the Active Democratic Citizenship Network* that we connected to ESREA in 1992 with John Field becoming a convener. The network's history is described shortly in Agnieszka Bron's article (1998b). Our first ESREA network conference was held also in Poland, in Wrocław in 1994 (Bron & Malewski, 1995), and at the same time I took over as a convener and had that function until 2005. My Chair in Bochum, in Germany, organised the *Active Democratic Citizenship network* conference there in June 2001 (Schemmann & Bron, 2001).

### **Life history and Biographical Research Network**

Moreover, as the idea of ESREA was to build an association based on active research on education and the learning of adults in specialised networks, I was actively involved in other research networks as well, such as *Life history and Biographical Research* which I joined and started together with Pierre Dominicè and Peter Alheit in 1993. That year we had the first conference which was held in Geneva. Pierre and Peter wanted me

to be a convenor with them to be responsible for recruitment of Swedish and Nordic colleagues as well as Polish ones. I recruited researchers from Sweden to the first conference: Maria Gustavsson, Maj Klasson, Gunilla Härnsten, and Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman, while from Poland Wieslaw Theiss. There was also Laura Formenti who, as a young PhD student attended the first conference, became a network convenor several years after that. Next time we met was in Vienna where such scholars as Linden West and Tom Schuller joined us. This network is one of the most active and productive. Linden West became a very important member for the network as its convener, in the beginning together with Pierre, and later with Laura, for many years. The first book we published after the conferences in Geneva and Vienna was edited by Peter Alheit, Agnieszka Bron-Wojciechowska, Elisabeth Brugger and Pierre Dominicé (1995).

### **Access Research Network**

In 1996, Chris Duke started another network: *Access Research Network*, as he led a project on the comparative study on non-traditional students' access to higher education (HE), in which I was also involved, thus it seemed natural to join that network as well. Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois and Barbara Merrill became its first convenors. The first conference was held in Leeds in 1996 (see Hill & Merrill, 1997) and every second year a new conference was organised. In 2006, the network changed its name to *Access, learning careers and identities*.

### **Gender and Adult Learning Network**

The gender and adult education network was first announced in 1995 but was dormant and inactive. In April 1992, the second interim steering committee meeting of ESREA was held in Manchester. There, I met Edmée Ollagnier who came instead of Pierre Dominicé. That was the beginning of our long friendship and research cooperation. In 1996, Barbara Merrill and Edmée Ollagnier came to Stockholm, to a conference on *Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* participating with their papers in the section: *Gender and women studies* which I chaired (Wulf et al., 1998; Bron, 1998a; Merrill, 1998; Ollagnier, 1998; Hake, 1999). Over lunch in Ulva Kvarn near Uppsala we decided to activate the network: *Gender and Adult learning*. Edmée recalls:

We started to point out some theoretical points we would like to work on and share, such as gendered learning, gender in higher education, gendered biographies, gender in adult training. We met again during ESREA Conference in Brussels in September 1998 where concrete decisions took place. We were 10 researchers interested (6 women, 4 men) and listed what would be interesting for the future related to gender: knowledge, adult learning, gendered education,



men in a gendered perspective, masculinities-femininities, life history, roles and stereotypes (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003: 7).

As Chair at Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB), I organised the first conference of Gender Network in 1999 there, and Edmée became a network convenor, and the two of us, Barbara and I, as well as later Linden West were helping us for several years. We called ourselves “the big four”. The network still functions very well today and has two convenors Joanna Ostrouch-Kaminska and Cristina Vieira. The first publication we had in 2003, after the three conferences (in Bochum, Germany, 1999; Roskilde, Denmark, 2000 and Geneva, Switzerland, 2001), contained a selection of papers presented at those conferences (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003).

### **Looking back and in the future**

Let me start with ESREA's current mission that can be found on its homepage:

ESREA's mission is to support the advancement of high-quality research on the education and learning of adults in Europe by sustaining:

- co-operation among researchers, in the European context conceived in the broadest geographical terms;
- development of research and dissemination of results in all areas of adult and continuing education;
- training of early researchers and continuing professional development of researchers;
- relationships with other European organisations and the appropriate national organisations (ESREA).

But in the beginning the mission was slightly different. On several of ESREA's book covers one can still read that:

ESREA is an association which brings together the numerous researchers involved in study of the education of adults at universities and other institutions of higher education. Its aim is to:

- support a European-wide network for research on the education of adults;
- link specialist research networks, organise seminars and workshops;
- stimulate a range of research publications; encourage co-operation in graduate training for research students;
- organise a biennial research conference;
- ESREA is devoted to the promotion of high-quality interdisciplinary research on all aspects of the education of adults (Schemmann & Bron, 2001).

Examining ESREA's mission over time we can obviously see some changes. In the beginning the focus was on high quality interdisciplinary research, which was in accordance to recruiting to ESREA researchers from various fields of study interested in education of adults. Today, a new focus is on co-operation between researchers from a broad spectrum of geographical areas, which seems understandable as ESREA was dominated by the North of Europe. Another aspect is a focus not only on adult education but also on continuing education. But this means that there might still be focus on formal education and not necessarily on the informal and non-formal one, and not even specifically on learning. What is more, the emphasis is not only on development of research, but also on the dissemination of its results. Still another aspect in today's mission is about cooperation with other European and appropriate national organisations. This means more connection with practice and having more utilitarian goal.

### **ESREA's impact on academic staff**

ESREA was an important researchers' association and obviously had positive impact on numerous researchers in their home universities, both by encouraging networking with others and by having common projects, by seeking European funds, as well as involving their own students to participate in research events. Engagement in ESREA and its networks also influenced my own academic work and the universities I worked for. It was especially evident at the SU and at the RUB, mainly through international research networking.

In Stockholm, the Department of Education, gradually became an institutional member of ESREA<sup>1</sup>, and many young and senior researchers were able to join network and triennial conferences. In 1995, I started to run a research seminar dedicated to adult learning in my department. This seminar is still functioning very well and is an important forum for our Research Group on Adult Learning run by Camilla Thunborg and Gosia Malec Rawinski. In our research group on adult learning at Stockholm University, however, we are dedicated to a wide interest in adult learning. This ranges from younger to older adults, starting from the learner's perspective, focusing on adult learning institutions, national and international policy, with a specific interest in issues of equality in education, comprising participation, inclusion and society. There is also an interest in transition between different life periods: education, working life and leisure time. We see our involvement in the field as a mosaic of adults learning landscape (see Bron et al., 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> I was an individual member.

During all those years that we in Stockholm were involved in ESREA, it was possible to cooperate internationally with researchers, inviting them for shorter and longer periods to Stockholm (by the way, many Polish researchers visited us), and to be involved in many European projects sponsored by the EU together with ESREA members. This was in accordance with Barry Hake's dream when he initiated ESREA with the idea of a common strength of European research and a research community dedicated to education and the learning of adults.

My Bochum experience is also noteworthy when thinking about ESREA. I was there as the chair in Adult Education with European Dimension (1999-2002), at the Department of Education, at Ruhr University Bochum (RUB), Germany. We organised several ESREA conferences, for the Gender Network and for the Active Citizenship Network. We published a yearbook, which we called Bochum Studies in International Adult Education (see Bron & Schemmann, 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003). Many scholars from the fields of sociology and adult education published in these volumes, which became an important contribution to the field and its internalisation.

The influence from ESREA is definitely seen in our field, most of all through the engagement of scholars and the formation of opportunities for young researchers to develop especially in European projects. Barbara Merrill and I once presented a paper, quite critical though, on what we learned from EU projects (Merrill & Bron, 2008).

### **ESREA impact on my own research**

Even my own field of research on adult learning and education was also enlarged by involvement in ESREA. Since the beginning of my career, I have believed that the status of our discipline depends on solid empirical research to be able to understand adult learning as a social process happening in real life. Thus, the focus of my research was to understand such processes by studying non-traditional students' access to higher education in the beginning, and gradually their biographical learning, identity construction and reconstruction, its transformation by experiencing being in floating and anchoring both in themselves as students and adults (see Bron, 2000).

My current research took me to a different field, namely, to study educational and life careers of young adults (18-25) in disadvantaged rural and urban areas in Sweden. Two elements are new here: combining spatiality with biographical learning and identity formation, as well as comparing rural areas with urban ones from young people's perspectives and experiences. To elaborate on young adults' formation of identity in everyday life we combine a biographical and a socially situated learning perspective (*cf.* Bron, Thunborg & Osman, 2021; Thunborg, Osman & Bron, 2021).

If I look back at my research experiences I find, however, one exception. Though previously I was much more interested just in empirical studies and good quality methodology, I later became additionally interested in analysing the results more theoretically. Thus, theorising human learning became an important issue and a contribution to understanding the socially situated learning of adults. Our research is not only driven theoretically, but also focused on empirical and theoretical discovery by generating theories. We hope to contribute to the theory of adult learning and most of all biographical learning. One of our contributions is developing a concept of floating which we combine with a concept of anchoring, and another one is biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017).

### **The status of adult education research in social sciences**

However, during my career, and quite soon, I realised that internationally we are very few who were genuinely involved in the research on education of adults. Instead, there were mostly practitioners who dealt with teaching of or instruction for adults, and generally they were interested in adults' qualification and requalification, focusing on employability. But, as a result, utilitarian and normative studies dominated while there was less focus on knowing how adults learn from their own perspective or their state of mind.

Still, adult education is often seen as an economic and political issue, and as such can get political recognition and support. But in general, there are fewer funds for academic research on adults than on children and youth, and more funds for teaching than learning as well as more funds for quantitative studies. As a result, research on adult education and learning has less financial support and fewer opportunities to contribute to our knowledge about adult learning. Perhaps the reason is too much focus on the discipline's scientific development and less contribution to the field of practice, as Rubenson and Elfert's (2015) study reveals. According to them, the research on education of adults had its start in the USA and went through three unique phases: 1. professionalisation of adult education, when several programmes were established at universities, and the staff needed to be advanced in research by obtaining PhD degrees; 2. as a direct response to the needs of adult education as a field of practice in the late sixties; and 3. beginning with the 1990s, characterised not by the continuing growth of adult education departments, as it was predicted, but rather by stagnation and merging with other fields and losing its legitimisation within university structures (Rubenson & Elfert, 2015).

It was also the USA scholars that directed their focus on the discipline from the beginning. But while the emphasis there was on psychology, in Europe a crucial role

for adult education was played by sociology (Rubenson, 2000; Rubenson & Elfert, 2015; Malewski, 1998, 2010; Bron, 2005a).

In Europe, according to Rubenson & Elfert (2015), the field developed in the 1960s and on other continents even later than that. If we date the beginning of the discipline's development from the establishment of chairs at universities, the first professorship in adult education in England went to Robert Peers in 1923 at the Nottingham University (Kelly, 1962: 271). The real boom in Europe came first in the 1950s' both in Western (Tuomisto, 2005), as well as Eastern and Central Europe (Malewski, 1998), however "the golden years of adult education" are dated to the 1960s' (Leirman, 1987).

According to Bron, "adult education as a discipline, similar to the general field of education, is both an academic discipline and a field of practice" (Bron, 2005a: 19). The status of the discipline is attained by Chairs in adult education at the universities. However, the tricky or problematic characteristics of this discipline is its connection to both theory and practice similar to such disciplines as education, medicine and technology. Thus, adult education is definitively an applied and not basic discipline, according to the definition.

However, adult education is situated in social sciences, and not connected in the first place with education, even though most adult education departments and chairs are placed in educational sciences. Malewski (2016) makes an important point about why the dependence on education can be critical for the discipline to be independent and fruitful. If we follow his critique, we can also see how American scholars were influenced by education and dependent on psychology. For Malewski (2016), adult education as a discipline gained much more, including its independence and contribution, from being connected with social science disciplines.

Malewski defines the adult education discipline as: "the andragogy is the science of adult lifelong learning" (Malewski, 2016: 31). It "is a consequence of paradigmatic change that field has been experiencing for over two decades. Although the concept of lifelong learning remains an unfounded category" (Edwards, Reason & Strain, 2002). This shifts the focus towards non-formal adult education, which makes adult education different from education. The latter has its field of study in formal education.

Moreover, generally adult educationists became good at theorising adults' learning (Bron, 2005b). Educationists still are using learning theories from the field of psychology while adult educationists developed their own theories more or less advanced in research. These theories shed light on human learning all together. We can name here such theories and their core concepts as biographical learning (Alheit, 2011), floating (Bron, 2000), floating and anchoring, and biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), social learning (Jarvis, 2006; 2011), situated learning (Lave & Wegner, 1991), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). However, while all of them are connected to

the learning of adults generally, learning in a broad sense seems to be a core of adult education as a discipline.

Today, and thanks to research promoted by ESREA, we definitely have more knowledge about adult learning and education; however, this huge volume of research is quite diffused – spread all over a large area of interests without any systematisation or arrangement, and not necessarily connected to a core issue. We need to put in some effort and see how various and sometimes diffused results can be tied together. Perhaps, we might focus on a synthesis of what is valuable in this research for social sciences generally and adult education specifically. Kjell Rubenson was already involved in examining the field as a whole which is a significant contribution (Rubenson, 2000; 2011; Rubenson & Elfert, 2015), but we still need more such attempts.

In a paper from the year 2000, when examining North America, Rubenson concludes that adult education was mainly dominated by psychology with an emphasis on the learner's characteristics and that it reduces teaching to learning. In order to build a discipline of adult education, empiricism and methodology was emphasised; adult education practice was approached usually from an actor/agent perspective; to borrow from other disciplines and fields of study was seen with strong scepticism and there was very little international exchange while North American scholars dominated the landscape (Rubenson, 2000: 397).

What is more:

ESREA's review of trends in adult education research in Europe shows that not only has practice-related research dominated, but there is a general move towards a predominance of applied research Rubenson (2000: 400).

Rubenson's (2000) and Rubenson and Elfer's (2015) analysis to map the territory of adult education research takes as a point of departure Pierre Bourdieu's (2004) theory of field. While Malewski's (1998) analysis concentrates on adult education as a separate discipline on the one hand, or as a discipline included in education and dependent on it, on the other. According to him it is the first to be preferred in building an independent discipline from that of education. By trying to evaluate how theories influence the discipline, Malewski's starting point is in shifting paradigms in the adult education approach to research, namely: positivism, interpretative paradigm; critical theory, and post-modernity. However, these paradigms, while dominating in various times, are not linear, according to him, but operating in parallel. However, in accordance with Thomas Kuhn's notion, they do not communicate or interact with each other but operate separately.

Rubenson and Elfert (2015) furthermore built their analysis on four original texts written by adult education scholars which are based on a bibliometric analysis of

selected adult education journals, and their own review of 75 articles from the period of one year (2012-2013), which also use a bibliometric analysis. Interestingly, however, they found very few articles that draw on the post-structural paradigm; while in the previous study it was dominated by such (Rubenson, 2000). Also, there are differences in American scholars' approaches still with focus on psychology, with European based on sociology as a point of departure (Rubenson & Elfert, 2015).

There is still a clear domination of American contributions to the field. One of the conclusions and explanations why this is so, is offered by Rubenson and Elfert:

We should also point out that just because of the difference in the number of countries in the regions the North American map could be seen as more cohesive than the European. However, with the increasingly central role taken by an organisation like ESREA, the contour of the European map may become more fixed (2015: 134).

### **ESREA's challenges with contributions to the field**

So, what has happened more with ESREA's role and contribution to the field? First of all, there is a shift in accordance with the mission which now by focusing more on formal education perhaps neglects non-formal learning in the research. Still another aspect in today's mission is about cooperation with other European organisations and appropriate national organisations. This means more connection with practice and being more useful or having practice as a point of departure. If so, European researchers in adult education are coming closer to their American colleagues, and the political demands put on them by their countries and the European Union.

The introduction of Barry's brilliant idea, 30 years ago, to enlarge the scope of disciplines to a newly established association included a catch. Let me just point out that adult education researchers with a background in education became a minority. This was advantageous, as many other social science disciplines enriched adult learning and education research. But the very mosaic of disciplines, that we wanted to have, contributed somehow to diffusion and loss of focus, and to some extent to a loss in quality. Still, by networking, by involvement in European research and publications, ESREA has strengthened the discipline. There is huge, uncovered potential to be evaluated, structured and examined. Thus, we need to elaborate again on a state of the art. Otherwise, the field can seem disintegrated and diffuse.

Consequently, two arguments about ESREA's impact on the field of adult education are competing and do not exclude but rather complement each other, namely:

1. ESREA has contributed to strengthen the field;
2. ESREA's role made the field fragmented.

Nevertheless, ESREA by associating important for the discipline adult educationists, has had a considerable role in strengthening and promoting the field in Europe. If we only look at the list of reviewers in *Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów/Adult Education Discourses*, we can see how many prominent researchers there are from ESREA. Moreover, promotion and support for young researchers is also a mission of the Discourses much like ESREA's. I hope the association will continue to flourish and expand, and most of all that it will work towards good quality research on adult learning.

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