

**ZOFIA SZAROTA**

ORCID: 0000-0002-6342-3135

University of Warsaw, Poland

## **ON POLISH RESEARCH INTO ADULT-LEARNING SPACES**

The aim of this research was to identify leading problems within Polish andragagogical discourse.

The chapter's content was guided by answers to the following questions: what topics are most commonly being explored, and what most interests Polish andragogues? Academic articles published from 2014 to 2018 in four specialist journals were examined in the research. A qualitative method was used in the process of analysing the content of the articles. The keywords listed were grouped into clusters and issues, and analytical categories were identified for use in developing a typology of research issues: 1) the domain of andragagogical reflection, with subcategories: theory, methodology, subject of analysis; 2) formalised teaching processes; 3) competences, consultation, labour market – a subjective perspective; 4) development tasks, problems and conflicts in social roles; 5) spaces of development, animation and personalised learning. The present research highlights the vast area of Polish andragagogical research, thus widening the boundaries of the research field, going beyond formal learning spaces and exploring microworlds of individuals and social problems.

**Keywords:** andragogy, research, contents analysis, adult education and learning, typology

### **INTRODUCTION: STATISTICAL DATA**

In Central and Eastern Europe, the enrolment rate is high. Poland is at the forefront of European countries in terms of the educational level of the population. According to Statistics Poland (GUS, 2019, p. 33), in 2018 the percentage of people ages 25 to 64 who had completed at least secondary school was 92.4 per cent – with the average for EU countries being 78.1 per cent. Though this is certainly a high figure, another fact is noteworthy: in the 2019/20 academic year, across 1231 schools for adults (primary, lower secondary, general education) run by central (government) administration units, local government units and social organisations and associations, a total of 118,333 people were learning in order

to supplement their formal education (GUS, 2020, pp. 38–40). According to the results that year of the Labour Force Survey (BAEL, in Polish), 5.7 per cent of people ages 25 to 64 declared participation in education covering formal learning (school and higher education) and non-formal education. In 2016, 43.3 per cent of people ages 25 to 64 participated in education covering all forms (including various courses, training and self-education) (GUS, 2019, p. 31). Adult education outside of schools is not part of the Polish educational-policy system, but is instead part of the sector of free market, largely commercial educational services. The practice of adult education is in large part one that develops in non-formal environments, as adult education and training, and in the informal sector. Declarations concerning self-education indicate a 31 per cent level of involvement among adult Poles (GUS, 2019, p. 33).

Duccio Demetrio defines andragogy as the area of knowledge dealing with adults involved in the learning process. Andragogy provides “suggestions for the most appropriate ways and conditions to improve, change, speed up, optimise adult teaching and learning” (Demetrio, 2006, p. 181). This indicates that among researchers in the field, some are convinced that andragogy, or adult education, deserves autonomous and theoretical learning status. It is a position is not unfamiliar to many in the Polish academic community.

Adult education today serves a number of social functions, particularly for individuals and groups who for various reasons have not been able to obtain a suitable education, need or want to find employment, or are looking to change their profession; alternatively, they might be seeking to improve their qualifications. Educational participation is also important for people who want to broaden their cognitive horizons, pursue a hobby and satisfy their interests. Participation in education gives adults the opportunity for personal growth, for the achievement of goals and to socialise, and it contributes to raising the level of an individual’s life – along with that of society in general. Such learning takes various organisational forms and covers various content areas. It is an integral part of lifelong learning (Szarota, 2019).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research that aims to establish the identity of contemporary adult education requires not only a focus on what is determined by historical heritage and the discipline’s humanist-social origins, it also requires answers to questions about what the object of interest is for contemporary andragogical theory. Which categories should be considered key to its development? What is the specificity of this (sub)

discipline? The moorland metaphor reflects the essence of the problem well (see: Edwards, 2006), for non-formal and informal educational activity can be disorderly and uncontrolled, as with a wild heath.

These questions determine the area of analysis undertaken in the present study. "Adult education operates within a set of social, cultural, and economic relations and is shaped by cultural and economic influences. Education also shapes how adults experience social, cultural, and economic forces" (Nesbit, 2010).

One way to determine the condition of a scientific discipline is to analyse the internal processes of knowledge generation. The theoretical basis of each discipline involves the identification of key problems, leading definitions and methodological categories.

Here, the research task was to identify dominant threads within contemporary andragogy (adult-education theory) and to establish current areas of research. To this end, the query of peer-reviewed scientific texts published in recognised academic journals between 2014 and 2018 was conducted and their content analysed.

The database for the analyses was created from 702 articles in the following Polish periodicals: 1) *Rocznik Andragogiczny / Andragogy Yearbook* (106 texts); 2) *Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów / Adult Education Discourses* (130 studies); 3) *Edukacja Dorosłych / Adult Education* (144 articles); and 4) *Edukacja ustawiczna Dorosłych / Journal of Continuing Education* (322 texts). Each article had keywords assigned by the author(s). These were juxtaposed to form a set of 1769 terms. The quantitative analysis looked at the frequency of each term's appearance, indicating its specific popularity in the sub-discipline's meta-language, and thus became an interpretative guide for further conclusions. The conceptual analysis showed the importance of a specific issue, outlining areas of interest for those researching and publishing on adult education in these journals.

Qualitative content analysis is one method used to analyse data and interpret its meaning (Schreier, 2012). It is part of a non-reactive method of analysing documents which are public texts (records). "Document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). These texts are seen as "Cultural artifacts produced by members of educational communities in order to communicate meaningful content" (Seredyńska, 2013, p. 8).

A prerequisite for successful content analysis is that the data can be reduced to concepts describing a research phenomenon by creating a category, concept, model, conceptual system or concept map (Elo et al., 2014).

Using content analysis, it is possible to quantify and analyse the presence, meaning and relations of specific words, topics or concepts. On this basis, conclu-

sions can then be drawn about messages contained within the texts. The source of the data can be material obtained from interviews, notes from field research, and any text of the communication language, including scientific or academic publications. “Document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis is the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research” (Bowen, 2009, p. 32).

The research was carried out according to the following stages: 1) reading the texts, 2) keyword collection, 3) contextual keyword grouping, 4) determining the essential features of clusters of keywords, 5) a regrouping phase based on the context of each article’s abstract and title, 6) the phase of labelling various analytical categories, and finally 7) the stage of relating selected categories to andragogical theory.

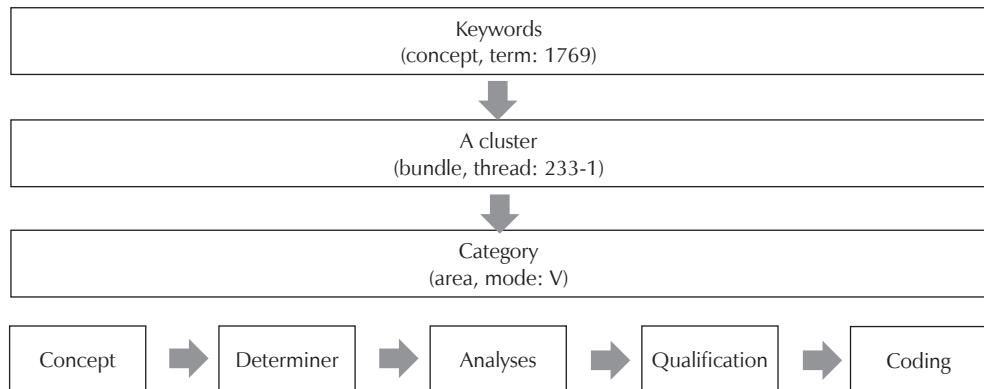
## RESULTS

Scientific issues “closed” within the keywords were “opened” through the analysis of the accompanying terms, the title of the article, the context resulting from the summary, and finally the factual content. As a result of this operation, in the selected perspective of meaning, it became possible to separate first a set of notions (1769), then a network of threads (from 233 to 1), which in turn created problem categories (V). In the first, analytical distribution, XIV problem categories were obtained. An in-depth analysis showed that the key concepts formed a crop that was too broad and too dispersed. The regrouping and development of synthetic categories led to a reduction in their number.

Quantitative analysis proved that the keyword most frequently used in the analysed articles was education. The term appeared 233 times. Almost a third of occurrences of the term had the context of adult education, interpreted as an idea, system, social phenomenon or didactic process. The ambiguity of application of the term gave education the status of a travelling concept. The term “travelling concept” was introduced by Mieke Bal (Bal, 2002), referring to the idea that meanings acquired by words or terms depend on their use in research practices and descriptions, rather than being derived from the word’s definition. Bal defines this as a process of movement of specific concepts and research categories from one discipline to another. This movement is neither linear nor static. Concepts evolve, influenced by the methodology of the discipline in which they operate, and under the influence of specific research problems. At the same time, they might be found to belong to different disciplines, or to move from one to another (see: Szarota & Pierścieniak, 2020).

Relational analysis allowed the identification and characterisation of V contemporary research areas (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.** Procedure for selecting thematic areas

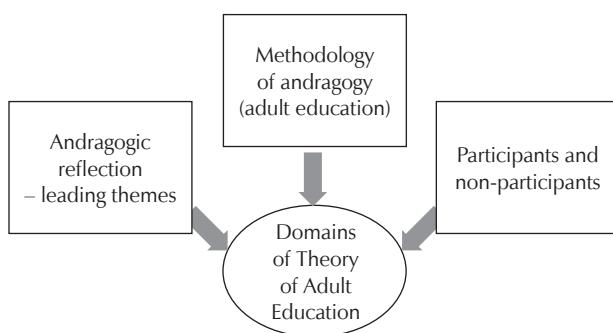


Source: the author's own study

## ANALYTICAL CATEGORY I: DOMAINS OF THE THEORY OF ADULT EDUCATION

The Domains of the Theory of Adult Education, as a set of concepts of a high degree of generality and supra-disciplinarity, were recognised as an overarching category and thus provided the theoretical framework for analysis. This space was filled with beams of 359 terms. Properly grouped into subcategories, they allowed for insight into the contents of the theoretical and methodological concepts (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2.** Subcategories of the Domains of the Theory of Adult Education



Source: the author's own study

### **SUBCATEGORY: ANDRAGOGIC REFLECTION - LEADING THEMES**

The review of the literature demonstrates that there is a patchwork of theories, models and paradigms. Andragogic theory is fed by results of the observation of all social processes and phenomena. This thesis can be based on an analysis of the contexts of the use of the term "theory": of biography, critical, Habermas's social theory, social learning, structuring, complex systems, adult-learning theories, the theory of professionalisation; or of the term "world": contemporary, public, social, hidden, etc. The most important clusters for researchers were andragogy, biography and time. Migratory movements and public policy were important issues. Another frequent term was experience, occurring in various contextual configurations: biography, existence, education and work. The problem of an ageing society was often addressed. Other terms, although they formed numerous clusters, were not very capacious. Terms used sporadically included constructivism, demography, emancipation, history of adult education, globalisation, gergogy, and everyday life.

### **SUBCATEGORY: METHODOLOGY OF ANDRAGOGY**

An important complement to the above findings are conclusions from the analysis of methodological issues raised in the articles analysed. The retreat from positivist research is clearly visible. In the set of keywords concerning research strategies, two-thirds – the large majority – mentioned the model of qualitative research. The remaining terms generally defined the nature and subject of research (e.g. andragogic, international, adult education, scientific, pedagogical and educational, empirical and comparative).

### **SUBCATEGORY: PARTICIPANTS AND PEOPLE EXCLUDED FROM ADULT EDUCATION**

The primary subject of interest among researchers was, understandably, adults and those in late adulthood: the elderly and seniors. The subjects profiling the analysis were: a person, a woman and a working adult. Next was an adult learner, then less frequently people in early adulthood and students. The keywords with the lowest frequency were unemployed, emigrant (immigrant, migrant), refugee, Other, Alien, person with disabilities, lesbian, man, convicted and citizen, as well as party activist and agitator.

### **ANALYTICAL CATEGORY II: ADULT EDUCATION – FORMALISED LEARNING PROCESSES**

Out of the 399 descriptions assigned to this area, a conceptual educational polyhedron was created with individual elements strongly correlated to links with the

didactic process. A characteristic feature of this phenomenon was the lack of indication of the subject. The dominating elements of this category were educational systems and processes (e.g. continuing education, vocational education, staff training), and terms defining organisational forms of work with adults (a variant of the term "school": from training to university). The next bundle covered qualifications (professional qualification standards, qualification framework, recognition of qualifications, increasing qualifications). The scope and content of environmental, gerontological, global, historical, IT, cultural, moral, museological, civic, natural, regional, sexual, dance, technical, multicultural, visual, inclusive, and health education were apparently of importance to the different researchers. The methodological thread was defined through the application of concepts related to methodological activities and teaching measures, including those taking into account contemporary technologies and the methodology of vocational training. Among the roles defining a lecturer were: educator, mentor, master in craft, adult teacher, academic teacher, teacher in an attached school, tutor and lecturer. Scattered keywords (educational policy, tasks of adult education, educational strategies, core curriculum, teaching, education, educational process, certification, evaluation, etc.) allowed the authors to consider properties of the technological-didactics model in adult education both binding and current.

### **ANALYTICAL CATEGORY III: COMPETENCE, CONSULTING, LABOUR MARKET – A SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE**

In the third cluster, consisting of 265 terms, the term with the highest frequency was competence. The word appeared in various contexts: professional and emotional, European, key, advisory, educational, enculturation, innovative, communicative, media, civic, personal, cognitive, labour, social and creative competences. The clusters of "learning" (adults, situational, on-the-job, reading and writing, seniors, old age, biography, as an event) and lifelong learning were characterised by high frequencies. Growing interest in the roles of adviser, guidance, and counselling was noticeable. The bundle of keywords including self-creation, self-education and educational needs reflected the essence of individual educational preferences. The remaining keywords occurred individually but in contexts that define the humanistic-didactic model and personalised learning as an expression of goals and aspirations for individual social and professional development.

### **ANALYTICAL CATEGORY IV: DEVELOPMENT TASKS, PROBLEMS AND CONFLICTS IN SOCIAL ROLES IN EVERYDAY PEDAGOGY**

This category was created by drawing together 220 terms connected with daily life and referring to family situations and social roles. There were no threads in

this category characterising formal and non-formal educational situations. Family roles, referring relatively often to maternity, attracted the majority of attention from researchers. Analyses concerning gender, particularly femininity and the social entanglement of these terms, are of particular interest. Further threads concerned the developmental tasks of early adulthood (preparing for adulthood, postponing adulthood) and ageing, illness, disability and coping strategies. Among the remaining terms, the following were isolated: identity, experience of existence, experience of separation, and experience borrowed, as well as a bundle of notions concerning body and corporeality, quality of life, developmental tasks and border situations, transit, existential anxiety, feeling and the sense of suffering. There were reflections on spirituality, generosity and wisdom, transcendence, and the spiritual dimension of elderly people's lives. Developmental periods, critical events, social roles and related conflicts (e.g. partnership, parentification, NEETs) were analysed. Reflections and research were situated in the pedagogy of daily life, in natural living environments.

#### **ANALYTICAL CATEGORY V: SPACES OF DEVELOPMENT AND ANIMATION AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING AMONG PEOPLE AND GROUPS**

This widespread area included both typical and novel environments and forms of cultural and social activity for groups and individuals. Authors of the studies analysed, through their application of 156 keywords, created a perspective for readers to achieve insight into the individual interests and spaces of amateur artistic and intellectual movements, as well as insight into cultural proposals, and to see the problems connected with participation in local community life. Individual terms such as culture and its institutions, places of learning (e.g. U3A, folk university), animation processes (including activation and sociocultural activity) had little representation (each occurring about twenty times). Development and amateur creative and artistic activity appeared several times in the texts analysed. Terms that remained could not be used to create larger, contextually coherent and logically ordered bundles. However, the collection remains homogeneous in the area that characterises contemporary sociocultural activity of individual communities, groups and individuals. Processes were examined of educational involvement taking place in educational and cultural institutions, knowledge-dissemination centres, associations, clinics, organisations, etc. This exploration also included "learning communities" (see: Kurantowicz, 2007).

#### **THE CONTEMPORARY SPACE OF RESEARCH AND ANDRAGOGICAL THOUGHT**

The data thus arranged in analytical categories formed the basis for an attempt to identify the research spaces for contemporary adult education. In general, con-

siderations were given to the domain of social reality with the defined life phases of subjects and their activities, images, descriptions, judgements, interpretations, etc. Thus, they revealed the following subjects of research: 1) sociocultural conditions, 2) activity of an adult, with the aim and effect of 3) change, most often 4) experienced subjectively by an individual, and leading to 5) modification of their quality of life.

Several lines of research can be identified:

- Adults taught in institutions: traditional spaces of learning (the non-formal current) are still an important recognised area of research within Polish andragogy.
- Lifelong social and professional development, improvement of competences – this current analyses the learning processes of specific individuals whose aim is to acquire and improve competences and to engage in social and professional development, with possible support for this development through professional advisers. The learning environment is usually the area of professional activity and the labour market.
- Lifelong learning as self-education and sociocultural practice. Biographical aspects of a person's development are important to research in this area.
- Individual learning as a representation of learning for different groups and communities (the elderly, women, immigrants, prisoners, etc.).
- Learning communities, local communities, sociocultural animation.

Authors of the papers studied in the present research tended not to pursue an analysis of educational activity that took a formal form and occurred in institutions. The transition from formal adult-education processes to non-formal and informal forms of lifelong learning is visible in their analyses, in which the focus of attention was often the spontaneous, social and cultural conditions of adult activity, all resulting in subjectively experienced change.

The subject of research would generally be an individual or a group of adults, though not necessarily in a traditionally understood educational space (school and courses). Researchers in the field have moved from focusing on a defined social group of adults (e.g. characteristics of the learning group) to considering a specific adult, their biography and the subjective world of their experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The epistemological basis of adult education remains undefined. Philosophical thought does not seem to shape andragogic cognition. Andragogical theory has little representation in the texts, and researchers in the field make use of only

a small pool of paradigms, concepts and definitions from the field of social sciences. The fields of analysis are blurred, and it is not yet possible to indicate permanent properties of this discipline.

The process of methodological transition from scientism to a qualitative paradigm appears to be in the process of consolidation. Induction is a method of understanding the essence of andragogy and referring it to the domain of social sciences. The field of analysis is fed by the broadly understood concepts of adulthood and of the adult. The dominant model is a moderately empirical one with a predominance of descriptions of practical action.

The idea of lifelong learning has clearly been assimilated by researchers in the field. Andragogic discourse on the nature and diversity of contemporary forms of adult learning and cognitive activity has an inter- and transdisciplinary character. Researchers are presently engaged in broadening the boundaries of exploration, of entering spaces of social functioning of various groups and communities, into the microworlds of individuals.

The majority of authors of articles studied have recognised the language of technological didactics as both valid and current within adult education. There is a tendency to move away from descriptions of formalised and institutional educational processes. Research is directed towards learning acts in an adult's daily life. Reflections and research are situated in the pedagogy (andragogy) of daily life, in natural living environments, in spaces of the individual's disposable time, along with analyses of processes of natural learning immersed in social practice and in life.

Adult learning has been recognised as the subjects' personal (private) domain, which can be explored with scientific methods. Researchers have captured human development in many perspectives: collective, personal, professional, social, cultural and spiritual. Impressions and individual experiences are taken to be research phenomena with an equivalence to factual data.

As this exploration of the literature has shown, contemporary Polish andragogic discourse is characterised by non-linear, non-structural, trans- and interdisciplinary connotations and references, without a paradigmatically defined order of analysis and study. Researchers communicate poorly with other researchers and audiences by not reading each other. The individual approach to research is dominant. In their analyses, many researchers rely on obsolete scientific theories. Their studies refer to a short time period, and they tend not to define the knowledge of other researchers – as a whole, not suggesting the creation of a canon of knowledge.

Adult-learning theory, adult didactics, is not fed by discoveries and does not shape educational practice. Learning, discovering, naming and explaining all depend on a particular researcher, who commonly applies a “free” methodology,