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## Understanding unskilled work as a condition for participation in adult education and training

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### Abstract

*This article discusses how to comprehend why people working in unskilled jobs are less likely than other groups to position themselves as educable subjects and engage in adult education and training. The article outlines how different research traditions examining recruitment to and participation in adult education and training reveal and explain distinctive participation patterns. These traditions are critically reviewed to identify how they provide specific understandings as well as certain blind spots. The review reveals a striking absence of research into unskilled work and thus a tendency to overlook how engagement in particular kinds of work condition people's perception of adult education and training. It is finally argued that future research must pay closer attention to people's specific work-life and examine how engagement in specific historical, social and material (changing) work practices condition their perception of adult education and training.*

**Keywords:** adult education and training; participation research; work life experience; motivation; unskilled work

### Participation in adult education and training - a political issue

There is a general consensus amongst politicians and researchers that lifelong learning and training is a prerequisite for the transformation of industrial-based societies to knowledge-based ones, and for the development of competitive economies promoting both individual and societal prosperity and welfare (Field, 2006; Desjardins, 2009). The need for continuing learning is substantiated by intensified global competition, demographical and technological change, industrial transformation and new forms of organisation that increase the demand for qualified labour (Bélanger & Tuijnman, 1997). The pace of change implies that the value of knowledge and skills becomes temporary - they quickly become obsolete. Therefore qualification through education can no longer be isolated to particular life-phases, childhood and youth, rather it

becomes an on-going demand throughout life. This makes it incumbent upon all working age individuals to engage in lifelong learning, not just a minority of skilled workers or specialists, but the entire workforce (Field, 2006). This is a widespread but not absolute consensus. Some dissenting arguments exist. For example, some researchers point to underemployment (Livingstone, 2000) and question the presumption that an increased level of formal education will increase the supply of high skilled jobs (Brown, 2003). Though contested, there is an educational optimism – proclaiming education to be the locus for future welfare and prosperity – that constitutes a hegemonic consensus in both national and transnational policy documents and in most research on lifelong learning (Desjardins, 2009).

Despite the widespread consensus, that people need to engage in lifelong learning to maintain employability in the knowledge economy, there are severe inequalities in the distribution of adult education and training. Access to adult education and training is characterized by a ‘Matthew-effect’: people working in unskilled jobs are less likely to participate than other groups, and relatively less motivated for or more reluctant towards participation in adult education and training (Desjardins, Rubenson & Milana, 2006; Larson & Milana, 2006; Hefler, Róbert, Ringler, Sági, Rammel, Balogh & Markowitsch, 2011).

Whether knowledge societies and lifelong learning are considered a reality or a goal is subject to politics. The way lifelong learning is conceptualised and the way the challenges it has to overcome are defined constitute what become possible answers and solutions (Salling Olesen, 2002). The discourse forming the policies and the research in the field is thus not irrelevant. It defines what kind of knowledge and skills are considered valuable and who are perceived as educable subjects, just as it defines who has the responsibility to ensure the necessary learning to take place and who should bear the risk of the increased international competition.

The hegemonic discourse forming current policies on lifelong learning, both transnational and national policies, defines lifelong learning as a means to increase the employability of the labour force by investing in human capital. Studies examining the changing discourse in the policies on lifelong learning reveal that the target group – people being perceived as educable subjects – has changed over time. Today everyone is defined as educable subjects (Fejes, 2006). Moreover, lifelong learning has gone from being a right to becoming a duty (Biesta, 2006). People not participating are defined as a dual risk: they risk being marginalised in a labour market with an increased demand for formal qualifications and they become a societal liability for the development of a competitive knowledge economy. ‘The mirror image of the knowledge economy discourse of hope and promise is one of exclusion, risk and fear. Those most at risk from the new (knowledge) economy are themselves constructed as the threat’ (Brine, 2006, p. 657). Additionally, in order to be employable, qualifications have to be formalised. This means that everyone is obliged to engage in formal learning activities, typically in educational settings in order to obtain certificates documenting their qualifications (Kondrup, 2012).

Education has been a central policy tool to meet both economic and social objectives since the formation of the nation state. The economic importance of education has been stressed since Adam Smith but has intensified since the 1950s especially with the growth of neo-liberalism from the early 1980s (Desjardins, 2009). Focus on the importance of adult education in the 1950s and 1960s emerged at a time when welfare and the standard of living had increased after the Second World War, while the public had a growing awareness of education as a means to sustain social and economic development (Desjardins, 2009). This created a new demand for adult

education to enable a second chance for those who had not completed professional training in their youth. At this time, demand for trained labour grew out of industrialisation and implementation of new technologies. This created what Bélanger and Tuijnman named the ‘silent explosion in the demand for adult education’ (Bélanger & Tuijnman, 1997).

The growing demand for education led to a drastic rise in public expenditure and formed a dual challenge. The first challenge was to combine the ideal of education as a public good with the growing demand for education while keeping the increased cost publicly acceptable. This piqued interest in the societal benefits derived from education and thus for human-capital-studies:

The rationale was largely based on the notion that increased education was an investment and that there were economic rewards to be had at the societal level. From this perspective, educational research and policy became deeply entwined around economic issues [...] This logic has intensified since then, and has in general set the tone for reforms in education, and the discourse surrounding the purpose and objectives of publicly financed education. (Desjardins, 2009, p. 21)

The second challenge was to manage the resources spent on education and training to achieve political goals and ensure efficiency.

The spread of neo-liberalism since the early 1980s has intensified the relation between education and economic policy so that education today is a key tool in different welfare policies (e.g., employment and social policies). The close relation between education and economy is manifested in the discourse forming educational policies and the perception of the role of the nation state vis-à-vis education. The discourse has changed from a primarily social rationality to an economic rationality (Biesta, 2006; Rubenson, 2006; Desjardins, 2009). According to Desjardins this shift is substantiated by reduced possibilities for applying traditional macro-economic tools to regulate employment and national labour markets:

By reducing the effectiveness of conventional policy tools, the capacity of national government to afford protection to their citizens has been substantially reduced in a liberalised context, and therefore, people are faced with increased risks. For example, because of a decoupling of local labour and global capital, combined with an increased level of technological development, people are more likely to lose their jobs. (Desjardins, 2009, p. 28)

This has altered the opportunities for national governments to regulate the national labour market, ensure full employment and thus protect the population from social and material risk. Therefore the role of the national governments has changed. Instead of ensuring full employment by regulating the demand for labour, the government’s new focus is to provide opportunities for the labour force to develop and maintain employability (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2002). According to this logic employability becomes the means to ensure both individual and societal welfare and prosperity, and employability is produced and maintained through lifelong learning and training ‘...this has increased the significance of education in many regards, but the importance of a well-functioning economy for sustaining overall welfare has ensured that economic significance of education has dominated’ (Desjardins, 2009, p.19).

## **Understanding participation – different research traditions**

The widespread consensus that everyone must engage in lifelong learning and training in order to be employable has intensified the interest in examining why and how people engage in adult education and training, how participation and especially non-participation in adult education can be explained and how participation rates can be raised particularly amongst non-traditional learners (e.g., low and unskilled workers). The aim is to understand the distribution of adult education and training and explain different patterns of participation, especially why groups most at risk – people working in unskilled and low skilled jobs – tend to be least likely to participate.

In the following sections I will outline and discuss different traditions within research on recruitment to and participation in adult education and training. The presentation is mainly based on a review conducted by Rubenson (2011); though it is complemented with present, primarily European studies examining participation in adult education and training focused on low and unskilled workers, and studies examining policies on adult education and training. The intention is to examine how they contribute to and condition the understanding of participation and non-participation in adult education and training.

According to Rubenson the past 50 years of research on participation in and recruitment to adult education can be divided into 5 partly overlapping traditions (Rubenson, 2011). It is suggested that a sixth tradition can be identified and must be added to Rubenson's mapping in order to get an adequate overview of the current research field.

Based on a critical review of the six traditions, this article concludes that it is necessary to be more aware of peoples' engagement in specific work practises when examining their engagement in adult education and training. Or more specifically, in order to understand the distinctive orientations towards adult education it is necessary to examine how unskilled work embodies certain conditions for engagement in adult education and training. It is therefore necessary to refine what Rubenson defines as the fifth tradition, by examining the significance of peoples' specific work-life, and by examining how engagement in unskilled jobs gives rise to certain work-life experiences that form peoples' perceptions of need and opportunities vis-à-vis participation in different kinds of learning activities including adult education and training.

## **Understanding participation by examining participations patterns**

The first tradition examining participation in adult education is preoccupied with who participates in different kinds of learning activities and why. This led in the 1970s to the production of national statistics on participation in adult education. Researchers in this tradition are preoccupied with comparing participants to non-participants. In this tradition's seminal work *Volunteers for Learning* by Johnstone & Rivera (1965), the authors examined how different groups described their motivation for taking part in adult education (Rubenson, 2011). They found that the expectation of being able to apply the acquired skills and knowledge in practise was the greatest incentive for participation. They also found that low skilled workers view education in primarily functional terms, which implies that it should be strictly applicable to their job:

The average lower-class person does not perceive education in terms of personal growth or self-realization, and this may explain why the lower classes are much less ready to turn

to adult education for recreational purposes than they are for purposes of vocational advancement. (Johnstone & Rivera cited in Rubenson, 1975, p.113)

The studies within the first tradition are predominantly descriptive and have subsequently been criticised for lack of theoretical foundation (Rubenson, 2011).

### **Understanding participation by examining motives and needs**

The goal of the second tradition is to examine how participants are motivated to participate in different types of adult education and how motivation can be conceptualised and measured (Rubenson, 2011). Research on motivation within the second tradition aims to examine what determines human action. Rooted in a general theory on need satisfaction, it is assumed that everyone has certain basic needs and are attracted to activities that will satisfy these needs. Therefore the decision to participate in adult education depends on whether an individual perceives it as a means to address actual needs (Doray & Arrowsmith, 1997). A central work within this tradition is Houle's theory on different motives for participation published in 1961. In his study Houle finds three different kinds of motives or orientations amongst participants: goal-orientation, activity-orientation and learning-orientation. Goal-oriented participants take part in order to reach specific personal goals and perceive education as a means to achieving something more. Activity-oriented participants ascribe value to the activity itself. They take part because they enjoy these kinds of activities and often perceive education as a means to satisfy their need for social contact. Learning-oriented participants have a general interest in learning and seek knowledge for its own sake (Rubenson, 1975; Boeren, Nicaise & Baert, 2010). The second tradition is continued by Boshier, who distinguishes between "deficiency" and "growth" motives for participation. People participating based on a deficiency motive see work and education as means to meet their primary need for security. While people with a growth motive have satisfied their primary needs and use education as means to self-realisation. Accordingly, the value people ascribe to education depends on the particular need it is meant to satisfy (Rubenson, 1975). It is a general conclusion within the second tradition that low skilled workers primarily participate in adult education because of deficiency motives, they do not ascribe education any value in itself (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990). The second tradition has been criticised on several points. For one, it mainly focuses on people participating in education and assumes that their motives can be generalised to include non-participants (Rubenson & Xu, 1997). This implies that non-participation is interpreted as lack of motivation. The psychological motivation research is also characterised by methodological individualism reducing participation to a question of individual motivation and thus it ignores the broader societal context (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Hefler, 2010; Rubenson, 2011). Finally, critics have pointed out that it is not concerned with how human development during different life cycles affects people's orientation towards adult education (Hefler, 2010; Rubenson, 2011). This implies that the tradition does not take into account how participation is embedded in predefined social trajectories, where certain circumstances – both at work and in the private sphere – affect the motives for participation (Antikainen, 1998, 2006; Hodkinson, Ford, Hawthorn & Hodkinson, 2006; Lynch, 2008; Hefler, 2010).

## Understanding participation by examining situated decision processes

The third tradition addresses the critique of the methodological individualism and the tendency to assume the same motives that drive participants can also apply to non-participants. The ambition is to develop more heuristic models in order to explain why somebody participates while others do not (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007). Rooted in Levin's field-theory it is claimed that participation is a result of interactions between specific subjects and their context. Therefore the aim is to identify different forces affecting the decisions of participation or non-participation in adult education and training. Two significant contributions within this tradition are Cross' "Chain-response-model" and Rubenson's "Expectancy-valence-model" (Boeren et al., 2010; Hefler, 2010).

In the Chain-response-model Cross illustrates participation in adult education as a result of a cyclical decision process where psychological and environmental variables affect the decision. The first factor in the model is how a person's self-perception affects their attitudes towards education. The second decision-affecting factor is the expected gains; and the third set of factors is opportunities and barriers for participation. Cross found three kinds of barriers: "situational barriers" relating to peoples' actual life situation (e.g., economic barriers or lack of time); "Institutional barriers" relating to the organisation of the education (e.g., lack of interesting or relevant courses); and "dispositional barriers" referring to individual attitudes (e.g., insufficient self-esteem) (Cross, 1981).

In the expectancy-valence-model, Rubenson explains the degree of motivation and the force by which it affects a decision as a function of "expectancy and valence" (Rubenson, 1979; Hefler, 2010). Valence refers to the value a person ascribes to the potential result of a given action, while expectancy refers to the extent to which it is believed that a certain action will actually lead to a desired result (Rubenson, 1979). The decision to participate thus depends on the value ascribed to a given education or course in addition to expectations of whether it would be possible to accomplish it. Both valence and expectancy are situated: the value ascribed to adult education, the formulation of motives and the perception of barriers are determined by the "psychological field" constituted by the individual's specific experiences and attributes and by the actual situation.

Both models have been criticised for not directly addressing how 'the main constructs in the model [attitudes, motives and barriers] are related to, and interact with, the broader structural and cultural context' (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007, p.12). They do not, to a full extent, manage to grasp the significance of participation and learning in the individual life history. The individual's subjective orientation towards participation is simplified by, for instance, defining non-participation as resistance, and they furthermore insinuate too simplistic mechanical relations between the factors determining participation (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007). The models presume that the decision to participate is based on conscious reasoning and agency, thereby running the risk of overlooking how decisions, reflections and actual practices are always embedded in a complex of individual life historical experiences and a certain cultural framework forming the perception of one's self and their situation as well as both conscious and unconscious life strategies. Finally, the individual focus involves a risk of overlooking the structural factors:

Structural factors or public policy decisions are not directly addressed but are at best treated as a vague background when explaining whether or not an individual will

participate. An understanding of how these factors might constitute barriers is commonly ignored. (Rubenson & Xu, 1997, p. 80)

A similar critique is provided by Desjardins et al. (2006) and Boeren et al. (2010).

### **Understanding participation by examining transnational participation patterns**

The fourth tradition addresses the critique of the mainly individual approaches to understanding what determines participation. This tradition examines participation rates and aims to explain patterns and differences. It expands the focus of previous traditions with the emergence of transnational surveys and increased amount of data, which enables comparative cross-country studies and the examination of transnational patterns and differences (Desjardins et al., 2006; Rubenson & Desjardin, 2009; Boeren et al., 2010; Hefler et al., 2011). This has illuminated transnational differences and similarities (e.g., how different welfare state regimes affect participation rates and patterns). Research in this tradition reveals one's likelihood to participate in adult education and training is significantly affected by 'the long arm of the family', 'the long arm of the job' and 'the long arm of welfare state regimes' (Desjardins et al., 2006). It thus reveals that politics matters, how position in the labour market and social background is relevant, and why participation cannot be explained solely by focusing on individual motives.

Participation is interpreted as a result of bounded agency (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, Rubenson, 2011) or a match between supply of and demand for adult education and training (Boeren et al., 2010). Both interpretations apply the expectancy-valence model in order to explain individual agency and demand for education and training. But they emphasise that individual readiness is not enough to ensure participation. On the contrary, it is necessary to 'consider broader structural conditions and targeted policy measures, and analyse the interactions between these and the individual's conceptual apparatus' (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 195). Likewise Boeren et al. conclude that it is crucial to take the national supply of adult education and training into account in order to explain cross country differences in participation rates (Boeren et al., 2010).

Both studies draw on a human-capital approach in their specific analysis and explain individual demand for education as a result of (bounded) rational cost-benefit calculations. This is not unique. Human-capital-theory is dominant in research aiming to explain demand for adult education, both when it comes to individuals and companies/employers (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007). But human-capital-theory has limitations when it comes to research on recruitment and participation in adult education. It builds on an educational optimism (Paldanius, 2002) that assumes a direct relation between increased human-capital and increased productivity and mobility, further presupposing that everybody has opportunity to utilise (sell) their acquired knowledge and skills in the labour market. This is challenged by research revealing a widespread underemployment and thus questioning the assumption that investment in human capital automatically can be exchanged in the labour market (Rainbird, 2000; Brown, 2003; Livingstone, 2000). Educational optimism tends to overlook how division of labour and ambiguous changes in the labour market form distinctive opportunities for realising human capital acquired from adult education and training. The human-capital approach also assumes that people have clear and unequivocal preferences and that they make conscious and free choices. Hereby it tends to overlook the fact that decisions are



not always conscious (Paldanius, 2002), that the situation can be ambiguous (Kondrup, 2012), and that participation in work related adult education and training are often other-determined (Stalker, 1993).

Besides examining participation rates and patterns, the transnational surveys about adult education and training have sought to gather information about motivation: how people are motivated and what hinders their participation. Cross' definition of different barriers features in the design of these surveys (e.g., Larson & Milana, 2006). The dominant approach to explain non-participation in adult education and training takes a hindrance or barrier perspective (Ahl, 2004). People are assumed to have an innate motivation to participate in adult education, which is adversely affected by certain hindrances and barriers. It thus presupposes that the question of what motivates people is meaningful to the informants, just as it assumes that motivation is an individual attribute, which can be understood and measured out of context (Ahl, 2004, 2006).

But evidence resting on survey data yields little or no knowledge of the consequences or meaning of participation in adult education and training (Field, 2006). In order to understand how people perceive the meaning of adult education and training, research needs to account for their need and possibility to participate; a qualitative approach may be applied. This is the underlying premise for the fifth tradition.

### **Understanding participation by examining the meaning of education**

The fifth tradition examines how participation and non-participation can be understood from the perspective of different target groups. The general research interest is to explain the lack of motivation or non-participation in adult education and training, especially why many unskilled and low skilled workers have an instrumental and restrictive view of education and training.

The arguments forming this tradition hold that orientations toward adult education and training must be researched as an element in specific life-histories or biographies, where certain habitual dispositions (Paldanius, 2002; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004), cultures (Christensen, Dupont, Gale & Hansen, 1997; Larson 2004; Klindt & Sørensen, 2010), significant learning activities (Antikainen, 2006) and changing value contexts (Lynch, 2008) constitute how people perceive adult education and training. Research within this tradition reveals severe discrepancies between the dispositions, rationales, cultures and value context of low and unskilled workers on the one hand and the educational optimism forming the policies on lifelong learning on the other (Paldanius, 2002; Lynch, 2008).

The tradition can be divided into different perspectives. One focuses on the meaning of education and training in the wider context of peoples' lives. This perspective reveals that the meaning of education and training can change during the life-course as a result of significant learning experiences and in relation to significant others (Antikainen, 2005). It also reveals that peoples' lives take place in a social realm organised into different value contexts, and that peoples' choices can only be understood in relation to these shifting value-contexts (Lynch, 2008).

Another perspective focuses on culture and habitus as explanatory factors, revealing a widespread wage earner culture or life form with a certain kind of working class habitus dispositioned for stability, righteousness, devotion to duty, quiescent toward education and reluctant to change (Paldanius, 2002, Klindt & Sørensen, 2010). The significance of culture is also in focus in studies examining how psycho-social factors in workplaces determine employees' orientation towards education. It is argued

that the wage earner culture is taught by socialisation at work in relation to peer- and pressure-groups (Larson, 2004).

The interest in explaining resistance or reluctance towards education has led to empirical studies with some methodological biases. The empirical studies are mainly conducted in workplaces where adult education and training are initiated, assuming that explanations for non-participation can be located amongst the employees and generalised to the target group. And even though how workplace cultures affect workers' perception of adult education and training is examined, the significance of the specific work is not explicitly addressed (e.g., the division of labour, the content and organisation of jobs, the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills or the degree of autonomy). By omitting the specific work there is a risk of naturalising the cultures and habitual dispositions revealed in the studies and, thus, overlooking how they are formed and maintained through specific subjective and collective experiences conditioned by specific historical changes in the labour market and in work places.

The absence of empirical studies examining the relation between the changes in the local labour market, specific jobs and peoples' orientation towards adult education and training is striking. It becomes even more striking when reviewing research examining learning cultures and training strategies in companies. They tend to have a more comprehensive approach and explain the use of adult education and training as affected by both internal (cultural) and external factors (e.g., the supply of labour, the content and organisation of specific work processes and technological changes affecting the skill need) (Kock, Gill & Ellström, 2007; Riddell, Ahlgren & Weedon, 2009; Hefler, 2010). This awareness of both organisational and societal factors is in contrast to studies examining unskilled workers and their orientation towards adult education and training. A rare exception is a Swedish study examining the relation between workers' engagement in and outside work and their specific jobs. It reveals that the content of the job, the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills in the job, and opportunities for job development play a significant role in the employees' engagement in and outside work. And this is assumed to be significant for their interests in different kinds of adult education (Larsson, Alexandersson, Helmstad & Thång, 1991).

Although the previous traditions reveal a correlation between labour market position and motives for adult education as well as the significance of the long arm of the job when it comes to participation in adult education, the fifth tradition addresses only to a limited extent how engagement in work practises conditions how people perceive their need and opportunity to participate in adult education and training. Although pointing to the necessity of examining the meaning of education from the perspective of the target-group, they do not explicitly address how this perspective is not arbitrary, but situated in and conditioned by the engagement in specific work lives. They thus fail to address how unskilled work is significant to how the employees perceive the meaning of education. Furthermore they tend to overlook the ambiguities and potential conflicts in peoples' actual work situation and what this means for their perception of needs and opportunities to engage in different learning activities.

### **Understanding participation by examining discursive change**

In addition to the five traditions outlined above, another tradition can be identified. The sixth tradition focuses on the discourses in transnational and national policies (Biesta, 2006; Fejes, 2006; Rubenson, 2006) and in the research field (Ahl, 2004) and how they define participation. This tradition is dominated by research drawing on post-

structuralist approaches and policy analysis that reveals how the discourses concerning participation in adult education and training change historically. Contributions forming the post-structuralist 'turn' in research of adult education highlights the political nature of the concept of lifelong learning and the relation between the policy discourse, research, knowledge, available subject positions, distribution of power and inclusion/exclusion. By illuminating how the concepts (e.g., adult education, lifelong learning and educable subjects) applied in research and policy change historically and determine what counts as legitimate positions and knowledge, they contribute to the field of critical research on adult education and training. They reveal how changing discourses embody changing patterns of inclusion and exclusion and how the current discourse on lifelong learning individualises the risk of exclusion while requiring that everyone take responsibility for maintaining national competitiveness by engaging in lifelong learning through recurring participation in adult education and training, thus perceiving and conducting themselves as adult educable subjects (Fejes, 2006). But even though it reveals the social construction of legitimate subject positions, this tradition does not provide an adequate answer to the question of why some people and groups are less likely than others to position themselves as 'adult educable subjects'. Moreover researchers 'have to go further than just provide critical discourse analyses. What is called for is the construction of understandings of participation that can inform a counter hegemonic struggle aimed at affecting policies on lifelong learning for all' (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007, p. 1).

In order to understand why people working in unskilled jobs seem to be less likely than others to position themselves as educable subjects it is necessary to return to the research question forming the fifth tradition. It is necessary to try to understand the meaning of adult education from the unskilled worker's perspective and examine how their perspectives are embedded in specific life histories and conditioned by experiences gleaned through their engagement in a specific historical, social and material work life. In the following paragraph I will therefore argue for a refinement of the fifth tradition by emphasising the significance of specific kinds of work and work experiences.

### **Understanding orientations toward adult education by examining work experiences**

The claim, that everybody has to maintain employability by participating in recurrent education and training makes it crucial to understand how different kinds of work form distinctive conditions for workers to positioning themselves as educable subjects and engage in adult education and training. This can be done by examining how peoples' work life experience condition, their formation, maintenance or transformation of certain self-perceptions and orientations towards adult education and training.

Viewing work as a central sociological category when trying to understand peoples' self-perception and orientations has been contested by late- or post-modern sociological approaches, arguing that sub-cultures or lifestyles are more appropriate categories to understand identities. But this conclusion is too hasty. In globalised capitalist society, work (waged labour) is the most common form of societal and individual production, reproduction and means of societal inclusion (Nielsen, Larsen, Salling Olesen & Weber, 1994). Work forms the context for substantial social interaction, practical involvement and learning processes (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Billett, 2006) and it influences how people develop their capacity to act both

individually and collectively as well as how they perceive themselves and their situation:

Work is one of the essential activities in which the work capacity as well as the general capacities of the individual is produced, enhanced and developed. Each of the subjectively meaningful experiences in work comprises aspects of threat, aspects of consolidation, and aspects of learning. The identity process comprehends them all. (Salling Olesen & Weber, 2001, p. 47)

The content and organisation of a specific type of work implies specific affordances (Billett, 2006), learning environments (Jørgensen & Warring, 2002) or learning trajectories (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The character of the job has significant influence on the opportunities to participate in learning activities both in formal educational settings and in informal and non-formal learning activities on the job (Jørgensen & Warring, 2002; Illeris, 2004; Desjardins et al., 2006,). This implies that different jobs or kinds of work afford distinctive learning trajectories and contexts for the identity process (Archer, 2000; Salling Olesen & Weber, 2001). Therefore work has to re-enter the theoretical framework whilst examining how people form the perception of themselves and their needs and opportunities to engage in learning activities. It is necessary to view work not as an abstraction but as historical and material social practices where people are physically, practically and socially engaged (Archer, 2000) in jobs with certain content and organisation conditioning their performance and giving rise to specific experiences and concerns (Kondrup, 2012).

In order to understand how different groups have specific conditions for positioning themselves as educable subjects and how they engage in different learning activities it is therefore crucial to examine how peoples' self-perception and their perception of needs and opportunities to engage in adult education and training is conditioned by their engagement in specific historical, social and material (changing) work practices.

One way of grasping the relation between the engagement in specific work practices, capacity building and the formations of perceptions of one's self and the world is to apply the dialectical concept of "experience" developed in the Frankfurt school's critical theory. It is crucial to underline that the concept of "experience" differs from the everyday notion, which is captured in the concept of "immediate experience". Experience, on the contrary, is a phenomenon with three modalities, relatively independent but mediated through each other: immediate experience, life (historical) experience, and objectified experience (cultural knowledge). The subject is continuously engaged in certain practices in specific social and historical situations giving rise to certain immediate experiences. Through this engagement the subject builds consciousness and internalises a certain version of cultural knowledge (e.g., language, concepts, beliefs, techniques, and norms). Life historical and objectified experiences become predictions for the perception of immediate experiences and subjective action. Experience is thus, per se, both historical and social (Salling Olesen, 2002).

By applying this concept of experience, the question of why people in unskilled jobs are less likely than others to position themselves as educable subject becomes a question of how engagement in unskilled work gives rise to certain experiences that form peoples' perception of the meaning of adult education and training. This approach acknowledges the significance of engagement in specific work practises, with attention to ambiguous or conflicting experiences that cause (potentially) ambivalent orientations towards adult education and training.

The significance of work experiences can be examined through a life historical approach by conducting life history interviews. This can illuminate how peoples' perception of their need and opportunity to engage in adult education and training are conditioned by their life historical experiences as well as their current concerns and notions about the future. And how these experiences, concerns and ideas are not arbitrary, but formed by experiences gleaned from engagement in specific historical, social and material work practises (Kondrup, 2012).

## Conclusion

Within the research field focussing on recruitment to and participation in adult education and training six traditions can be identified. They contribute with different perspectives and approaches to understanding and explaining why adults participate in different kinds of formal education or not, and how the meaning of education and training changes, both in the discourses that form education policies and in peoples' lives according to significant learning experiences or changing value contexts. They furthermore reveal that people working in unskilled jobs participate in adult education less frequently than other groups, are more reluctant to participation and generally have an instrumental orientation towards education.

Research aiming to explain this from the perspective of the target group tends to explain it by either motives or orientations formed by specific cultures, value contexts or habitual dispositions. But it tends to underestimate how these motives or orientations are produced and reproduced through a continuing experience process conditioned by people's ongoing engagement in specific historical work practices. Ignoring work as specific historical, social and material practices runs the risk of naturalising work and overlooking how both the content and organisation of jobs are results of historical social processes. Ignoring the significance of work experiences risks naturalising the habitual dispositions and cultures, making them the explanans instead of explanandums. This tends to make underlying conditions invisible (e.g., different kinds of work, the division of labour, the organisation and content of specific jobs and changes in the labour market), which are critical for how people experience needs and opportunities to participate in different kinds of learning activities and thus how they perceive the meaning of adult education and training. Finally, this review reveals a tendency to assume that people have unequivocal preferences when it comes to participation or non-participation in adult education and training. This is caused by a lack of attention to the conflicts and ambiguities in peoples' work life and to how these are internalised and generate ambivalent orientations towards adult education and training.

This article reveals a widespread tendency to underestimate the significance of peoples' engagement in specific work, and therefore ignoring how the labour market provides distinctive conditions for different groups to position themselves as educable subjects and to engage in adult education and training.

It is necessary to pay closer attention to peoples' specific work lives in order to comprehend why people working in unskilled jobs, most in risk of redundancy in a labour market characterised by increasing demands for formal qualification and re-skilling, are less likely than other groups to position themselves as educable subjects and engage in adult education and training. It is necessary because engagement in a specific work life forms specific historical, social and material conditions for peoples' experience processes, and therefore also for the formation, maintenance or transformation of orientations towards adult education and training. The relation

between engagement in work and orientations towards adult education and training can be examined by applying a dialectical concept of experience, emphasising that peoples' experiences forming their perceptions of themselves and the world are not arbitrary; they are situated in a specific (work) life history.

By applying a life historical approach based on a dialectical concept of experience, researchers within the field of work and learning, lifelong learning and participation research will be able to examine how orientations toward learning activities are situated in and conditioned by engagement in specific historical work practises. Thus new insight into how engagement in unskilled work provides certain (and maybe relatively poor) conditions for positioning one's self as an educable subject and engage in adult education and training can be achieved.

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