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Researching (multiple) coordination of action in adult education organizations—Theoretical approaches, empirical findings and future perspectives

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Abstract The paper aims at analyzing how coordination of action is conceptualized and researched in the context of adult education. Selected perspectives from organization theory are explored with regard to their conceptualizations of coordination of action. Based on a narrative synopsis of studies from adult education research, the paper then shows that there are various actor constellations, coordination mechanisms and influencing factors marking coordination of action as a multi-faceted, multi-level and multi-perspective research phenomenon. Following, key parameters of a research program focusing on multiple coordination of action in adult education organizations are presented.

Keywords Coordination of action · Adult education · Organizational theory · Adult education organization

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(Multiple) Handlungskoordination in Weiterbildungsorganisationen – theoretische Zugänge, empirische Befunde und zukünftige Forschungsperspektiven

Zusammenfassung In diesem Beitrag soll analysiert werden, wie die Handlungs-koordination im Kontext der Erwachsenenbildung konzeptualisiert und erforscht wird. Ausgewählte Perspektiven der Organisationstheorie werden hinsichtlich ihrer Konzeptualisierungen von Handlungskoordination untersucht. Basierend auf einer narrativen Synopse von Studien der Weiterbildungsforschung wird gezeigt, dass ver-schiedene Akteurskonstellationen, Koordinationsmechanismen sowie Einflussfakto-ren existieren, welche die Handlungskoordination als ein vielschichtiges, mehrebe-nen-bezogenes und multiperspektivisches Forschungsphänomen kennzeichnen. Im Anschluss werden Schlüsselparameter eines Forschungsprogramms vorgestellt, das sich auf multiple Handlungskoordination in Weiterbildungsorganisationen konzen-triert.

Schlüsselwörter Handlungskoordination · Erwachsenenbildung · Organisationstheorie · Weiterbildungsorganisation

1 Introduction

Organizations are of pivotal importance in modern societies since most parts of mod-ern lives take place in and depend on organizations. This holds true in particular for the realms of law, health and education. And even though informal learning as well as workplace learning have become very important, formal learning in organizations is a central part of adult education (Hahnrath and Herbrechter 2022). Following Henry Mintzberg (1979) as well as other social scientists, division of labor and coordination of action are constituent characteristics of organizations. Both factors are of particular significance within organizations in the context of adult education. The central question for organizations is how to oblige the members of the organi-zation to the overall goal of the organization. For adult education organizations the question is how to oblige actors within and outside the organization in order to plan and realize educational offers. The institutional arrangement *within* adult education organizations is distinct against the background of the division of labor between permanently employed program planning staff and mostly free-lance teaching staff. The teaching staff significantly contributes to the overall goal of the organization by planning, realizing and evaluating the seminars even though they are only loosely tied to the organization (Hahnrath and Herbrechter 2022).

Consequently, organizations need coordination of action that is directed straight at the provision of adult learning (e.g. program planning) as well as forms of co-ordinated action that mediate successful teaching and learning processes in adult education more implicitly (e.g. management, leadership).

However, as regards research, we argue that classical concepts of organizational theory as well as structurally focused concepts of organization and management do not allow for an adequate observation, analysis and change of conditions of realizing

adult education seminars. This is particularly the case since adult education has experienced a change of governance in recent years which led some authors to claim a new governance regime of adult education (Schrader 2008a). Developments like the increasing importance of international organizations, decrease of public funding, necessity of quality management in organizations and an increase of cooperation and network structures dramatically changed the conditions of coordination of action for organizations of adult education and call for innovative research approaches (Schemmann 2020, 2019).

Research on coordination of action in adult education organizations is coined by diverse theoretical and conceptual foundations as well as various empirical approaches. Although hardly any contributions explicitly refer to 'coordination of action' in their terminology, various studies focus on coordinative practices, forms of cooperation and collaboration or patterns of interaction between different actors in adult education organizations and beyond.

In this conceptual and theoretical paper, we intend to explore this research field by bringing together diverse bits of research that thematize single aspects of action coordination in adult education which integrate elements of, for instance, leadership and management, (organizational) governance or interactionist research. Like this, a synthesis of existing studies is provided and desiderata can be identified in order to specifically inspire further research on coordination of action in adult education organizations. The overall goal of this paper is to develop a research program that allows for an appropriate observation and analysis of conditions of adult education practice by bringing the aspect of coordination of action to the fore.

We will kick off the paper by analyzing different organization theories concerning their conceptualizations of the ability of an organization to oblige actors within and outside the organizations to its overall goal. Thus, the notion of coordination of action is at the center. In doing so, we appreciate both the ideas and perspectives that organization theory offers in informing research on coordination of action, but we also recognize the blind spots and shortcomings.

Following the theoretical explanations, findings from a narrative synopsis of studies in adult education focusing on the constellation of actors and the coordination of action in adult education organizations from both national and international contexts will be presented. Specifying the context of action coordination in this paper, adult education is understood as a multi-level system following Schrader (2008b). Teaching and learning processes in adult education are thereby distinguished from the organizations of adult education. As a next level, Schrader (2008b) identifies the direct environment of the organization which is followed by adult education policy on the national and international level. The identified studies are grouped based on the multi-level model and analyzed focusing on theoretical and methodical approaches as well as essential results.

Based on the findings from the narrative synopsis and its discussion, the paper will develop key parameters of a research program focusing on multiple coordination of action in adult education organizations. The program takes its starting point in the basic assumption that a comprehensive picture of the coordination of action in organizations and the resulting complexity of demands faced by the actors can only

be examined by analyzing the various constellations of actors, their coordination of action and the interdependencies within these coordination processes.

2 Actors and coordination of action in organization theory

Since the beginnings of organizational theory, division of labor as well as coordination of action have come to be considered constituent characteristics of organizations. However, starting with division of labor, one crucial question in organization theory concerns the ways in which the various members of an organization and their respective actions can be coordinated towards the central goal of the organization. Organization theories give different answers to this question and we intend to highlight these answers by exploring three theoretical approaches in an exemplarily way. Following Scott's (1961) differentiation between classical, neo-classical and modern organization theories as a three-phase scheme, we picked one theory of each phase. Being aware that this procedure is necessarily selective, we still argue that it is worth appreciating the potentials and the shortcomings of organization theory. The selected theories provide valuable theoretical insights into coordination of action in organizations and, as by their period of origin, cover a diverse range of perspectives and approaches with regard to the phenomenon. Thus, they also make an important contribution to the development of a research program. Our analysis will focus on a general account of the fundamentals of the respective theory, on the actors and actor constellations that are considered as well as their coordination of action.

2.1 The classical phase—Weber

The classical phase covers those theories that are considered to be the foundations of organization theory. As such, Weber's bureaucracy approach is subsumed here as well as the administrative approach by Fayol and the scientific management approach by Taylor (Schreyögg and Geiger 2016). We concentrate on Weber's bureaucracy approach since it is "the first systematic interpretation of the rise of modern organizations. Organizations, he argues, are ways of coordinating the activities of human beings, or the goods they produce, in a stable way across space and time" (Giddens 2001, p. 348). What is more, in contrast to Fayol and Taylor, Weber's explanations quite explicitly look at the relationship between an organization and its members.

In his general effort to analyze the relationship between industrialization and society, Weber anticipated that rational-legal authority would follow the forms of traditional and charismatic authority. "Societies based on rational-legal authority would, in principle, ensure the appropriate behavior of those in charge binding them to the same laws and rules that define their right to lead" (Hatch and Cunliffe 2013, p. 24). This kind of rationalization of society also relates to bureaucracy and the expansion of bureaucracy since Weber saw bureaucracy as the most rational and efficient answer to regulate and oversee the more and more complex tasks of social life (Weber 1964). Weber identified certain characteristics of the ideal bureaucracy as follows: A bureaucracy has a clearly defined hierarchy of authority in the sense of a chain of command which leads from top to bottom. What is more, there are

written rules which guide the behavior of all officials of an organization. Thirdly, all officials are fully employed and paid with options of promotion based on capability or seniority. Fourthly, there is a clear segregation between work life and private life of officials of the organization. And finally, the members of the organization do not own the resources which they use to do their work (Giddens 2001, p. 349).

Regarding actors and actor constellations we can conclude that Weber only saw members or officials of an organization as relevant actors which are in a hierarchical constellation of supervision (Weber 1964). As such, the coordination of action is indicated to already: members of an organization accept the structural terms of reference. For Weber (1964), the rational-legal authority on which the organization is based implies to find obedience for an order. Thus, a stable framework for the actions within the organization by means of formal-structural settings and a hierarchical order is assumed.

2.2 The neo-classical phase—Barnard

Barnard was chosen as a representative of the neo-classical phase here since he explicitly addresses the issue of how to coordinate a system consisting of various actors. Thus, actors and coordination of action are at the heart of his approach. The Barnard-Simon Theory of Organizational Equilibrium distinguishes itself from the classical phase of organization theories by focusing on the organization as a cooperative system which is fragile and unstable bringing a dynamic conceptualization into view.

In order to guarantee its reproduction both the central goal of the organization needs to be fulfilled and the state of an equilibrium needs to be kept up continuously. The equilibrium refers to internal and external relations, internal and external demands and to incentives and contributions. As such, the organization depends on the willingness of its members to cooperate (Schreyögg and Geiger 2016, p. 454).

Barnard differentiates between efficiency and effectiveness of organizations. Efficiency refers to the contributions needed in order to reach the goals. An organization is efficient when it provides sufficient incentives to receive the necessary contributions. Effectiveness refers to the ability of an organization to pick the right means to reach its goals (Schreyögg and Geiger 2016, p. 455). The theory also extends the idea of who can be seen as contributors or relevant actors. Barnard considered employees but also stakeholders, suppliers and clients to be participants of the organization. He understands the organization as a coalition of all parties and persons involved. As regards the coordination of action the concept of 'zone of indifference' is of particular importance. The concept can be understood as a credit of trust which is granted to the authorities of an organizations by its contributors. As long as orders stay within this zone of indifference, authority does not have to be renegotiated and the action remains calculable and reliable. Consequently, apart from structural aspects of the organization, the individual actor perspective is brought into the foreground here, as well.

Finally, Barnard also focused on the informal organization, understood as "the aggregate of personal contact and interactions [...] common results such as mores, customs, moral codes, and culture come from the effect of informal organization"

(Isomura 2020, p. 51). The informal organization is a necessary condition for successful communication within the organization.

2.3 The modern phase—Mintzberg

As an example of the modern phase, we focus on Henry Mintzberg (e.g. 1979) since he defines division of labor and coordination of action as constituent characteristics of organizations. Thus, his theoretical perspective is at the heart of our argument. As regards his understanding of an organization, he identifies five basic parts that an organization consists of. There is a so-called strategic apex which can be seen as the top management with the highest decision-making competence as well as the highest responsibility within the organization (Blomberg 2020). Underneath, the middle management can be found. Under that part, the operative core is positioned "wherein the operators carry out the basic work of the organization—the input, processing, output, and direct support tasks associated with producing the products or services" (Mintzberg 1979, p. 19). Additionally, the model comprises the technostructure and the support staff. The technostructure includes e.g. strategic planners, controllers or personnel training and is meant to control the operating core. Examples for the support staff are public relations, research and development or reception. "Support functions, in turn, lend their support to operational core activities rather than control them" (Blomberg 2020, p. 39).

Mintzberg made a contribution to the ongoing debate on whether there is a decline of the Weberian-style of organization or whether it prevails as the guiding concept (Giddens 2001, p. 368). Mintzberg objects the idea that there is only one bureaucratic model as assumed by Weber and argues that "there are a variety of organizational structures to suit different needs—from complex bureaucracies that handle the demands of multinational trade to professional bureaucracies made up of trained specialists such as social workers and teachers" (Giddens 2001, p. 368). In detail, Mintzberg singles out four types of organizational forms which are modifications of the Weberian model. With the form of adhocracy, he identifies one additional form though which does not resemble Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy but rather differs from it dramatically. Furthermore, Mintzberg also assigns prime coordinating mechanisms to the respective form.

He identifies the simple structure which is often found in small organizations run by their owner or founder. It usually has no technostructure or support staff and the employee's work is completely focused on the executive officer. What is more, it has "a loose division of labor" (Mintzberg 1979, p. 306). As regards the coordination, it can widely be described as direct supervision. "This person controls virtually everything and the employees do as the managers (founder/owner) says" (Blomberg 2020, p. 43).

The machine bureaucracy is in a way the opposite of the simple structure since it is very common in large organizations and consists of all parts including technostructure and support staff who play a significant role in the organization. Labor division is taken as far as possible in this organization, it is highly specialized and formalized and it is coordinated by vertical coordination via several hierarchical levels and the technostructure. The prime coordinating mechanism is the standard-

ization of work processes. As Blomberg points out, it is the closest to Weber's ideal type of a bureaucracy (Blomberg 2020).

In contrast to machine bureaucracy, the professional bureaucracy is more decentralized and does not rely too much on vertical coordination. The central part of the organization is the operating core rather than the technostructure which is not as developed. "It is not as easy to divide labor and formalize the production of goods and services that involve considerable uncertainty and complexity" (Blomberg 2020, p. 41). The prime coordinating mechanism is identified as standardization of skills.

The compartmentalized form differs from the three forms described so far since it is not an integrated organization but rather a number of units which are more or less autonomous and held together by a central structure. Thus, the key part of the organization is represented in the middle line. Due to the status of a quasi-autonomous entity, they are "free of the need to coordinate with the others" (Mintzberg 1979, p. 381). As prime coordination mechanism Mintzberg singles out the standardization of outputs.

And finally, Mintzberg identifies adhocracy as an organizational form which is seen as the opposite of machine bureaucracy and which is coordinated by horizontal coordination. In its pure from it has no technostructure, no hierarchy and no rigid or strict managers. It is conceived of as a very flexible organizational form which is agile and constantly changing since it brings on new experts or contributors when necessary. The prime coordinating mechanism is identified as mutual adjustment.

Apart from bringing the organizational form and respective coordination mechanisms into view, other modern organization theories focus on human relations or, such as neo-institutionalist approaches, further broaden the perspective by also considering environmental contexts of the organization.

2.4 Analytical summary

In conclusion, the analysis of theoretical perspectives shows that the actor concept quite significantly varies between the theories. Whereas Weber focuses on the members of the organization only, Barnard has a broader concept of actors and very much opens up towards actors in the environment of the organization. At least in the organizational form of adhocracy, Mintzberg also follows a broader concept of actors contributing to the organization.

As regards the constellation of actors, with Barnard we found that all involved actors on the individual, organizational and societal level form a coalition for the organization. Following Mintzberg, we also see that organizations vary internally regarding the actors or actor groups. He singles out the so-called strategic apex, the middle management, the operative core, the technostructure and the support staff. Thus, there are various actor constellations to be considered both within and outside of the organization.

And finally, concerning the coordination of action it can be derived from all three theories that hierarchy is an important mechanism of coordination of action in organizations when trying to oblige all involved actors to the goal of the organization. With Mintzberg, we also see that certain organizational forms bring about certain mechanisms of coordination of action. As such, he names supervision, standardiza-

tion of work standards, standardization of skill, standardization of output and mutual adjustment. However, it seems plausible that various forms of coordination of action coexist within an organization since there are also various constellations of actors.

3 Coordination of action in adult education research

Considering that the present paper has a conceptual approach, the following narrative synopsis of empirical studies aims at exemplary illustrating how existing studies in adult education research address the coordination of action. For this purpose, the respective theoretical approaches, methodical designs and essential results are analyzed.

Instead of pursuing the approach of a literature review aiming at identifying and analyzing approximately all studies related to a specific issue, we deliberately chose a selective approach aiming at providing anchor points of the current state of research that cover the spectrum of theoretically and empirically discoverable manifestations of different forms of action coordination in the context of adult education. The choice against a literature review is based on the preceding observation that the notion 'coordination of action' has not yet been established as an analytical term and review attempts therefore offer either hardly any results at all (when the term 'coordination of action' is used as such) or way too many and unprecise results when *all* of the possible dimensions and research strands are taken into account (e.g. also broad terms such as governance, networks, cooperation). Furthermore, empirical insights into coordination of action are often embedded in studies rather than being foregrounded (e.g. in the context of research on program planning) and potentially relevant studies might not appear in the search since they operate with different terminologies.

Following the synoptical approach here, it is possible to conceptually outline a research program in the context of which more directed empirical explorations of the state of research could follow. Therefore, the choice of studies used for the analysis at hand is based on their explanatory value to exemplify the different research approaches to coordination of action made evident in Chap. 2. Furthermore, the selection was supposed to be diverse in terms of the research questions, methodical designs and theoretical backgrounds in order to represent a variety of research approaches and thus enable a coherent exploration of this research area and develop anchor points for the outline of a research agenda (see Chap. 4).

Referring to adult education as a multi-level system, various actors and actor constellations on different levels as well as their coordination of action can potentially be taken into account in adult education research. Starting off with the micro-level and its intersection to the meso-level, coordination of action is predominantly researched with regard to the interaction between teaching and planning staff in adult education.

Schrader (2001) examines how adult education organizations work together with teaching staff against the background of loose coupling (Weick 1976). On the basis of 16 guideline-based interviews with adult education experts in one German federate state, he identifies commitment, contract and trust as "prototypical mechanisms"

(p. 151, own translation) of the coordination of action between organization-internal staff and external teachers. As such, the study reveals elements of both neo-classical and modern views on action coordination as the organization is analyzed as a cooperative system (Barnard) and environmental or rather institutional influences become obvious within the differentiation between the different modes of cooperation. This study might be a starting point for a larger quantitative survey in which the identified coordinative mechanisms are further examined and correlations with institutional or organizational features could be explored.

Howe (2005) also focuses on the coordination of action between trainers and educational managers but exclusively looks at the context of companies. Based on guideline-based interviews with educational managers, the author identifies four distinct strategies on how trainers are selected and governed depending on the type of the educational offer. Interestingly, Howe (2005) directly grounds her study in organizational theory and refers to institutional economic insights (contract theory and principal-agent theory) classified as modern organizational theories and to findings from cooperation research. Consequently, coordination of action is assessed as a mechanism of economic exchange processes which can take different forms depending on the resources, information base and situational requirements.

However, the perspectives of the teachers are included neither in Schrader's (2001) nor in Howe's (2005) study leaving an empirical gap as only one aspect of and only one perspective on the coordination of action is examined.

Schneider (2019) takes up a similar issue by exploring recruitment processes and cooperation settings between adult education organizations and teaching staff. However, the author starts from adult education-specific approaches to professionalism as well as theories of organizational fit and even includes the institutional setting in her analysis by contrasting interviews with teachers and trainers ($N=11$) in different reproduction contexts (Schrader 2010). Like this, the study makes a crucial contribution since the perspective of adult education teaching staff is firstly taken into account when analyzing coordination mechanisms. While Schneider (2019) identifies different types of task division and cooperation modes, thus pointing to formal-structural aspects of the coordination of action, the institutional perspective also comes into the foreground. Even though it remains unclear to what extent the different institutional settings influence the coordination of action (Schneider 2019, p. 237), it still becomes apparent that the different levels of action are intertwined leading to multiple coordination mechanisms.

Overall, it needs to be remarked that these three studies (Schrader 2001; Howe 2005; Schneider 2019) stem from the German context only and furthermore only provide qualitative data on a single perspective on the coordination of action between educational managers and adult education teaching staff. Mixed-methods studies considering the perspectives of both actor groups involved as well as contextual influences might provide further insights here in the future.

The multiplicity of coordination mechanisms also becomes evident when looking at the coordination of action in the context of program planning. Even though program planning is commonly regarded as a core task on the meso-level, various studies point to coordination of action transcending different contexts and levels. For instance, von Hippel and Röbel (2016) examine program planning processes

in companies emphasizing that there is an urgent need for coordination in order to produce educational services within a context of interdependence (von Hippel and Röbel 2016, p. 62). Based on problem-centered expert interviews ($n = 35$) with different stakeholders and an analysis of training programs ($n = 478$), the authors show that the coordination of action in the context of program planning is coined by interest divergences and also by negotiations of power (see also Cervero and Wilson 1994; Yang and Cervero 2001). In this context, it is of particular significance that the negotiations primarily evolve around functional attributions to continuing education which seem to be shaped by the institutional context. Further research might pick up these insights in order to explore such mechanisms in different institutional contexts and also in order to analyze how different organizational forms with varying power and culture dynamics shape coordinative processes.

The level-transcending coordination of action in the context of program planning is also illustrated by Alke and Graß (2019). They evaluate how governance impulses of organizational-external actors and organizational-internal management processes influence the planning autonomy. Drawing on the perspective of educational governance, the authors re-analyze 39 episodic interviews with program planners and leading staff by means of a reconstructive research approach. With their findings, Alke and Graß (2019) demonstrate that planning processes are both directly and indirectly steered, or rather coordinated, through requirements, influencing measures or funding regulations by external actors (p. 138). Furthermore, formal-structural responsibilities and hierarchies, as indicated as a common way of action coordination in organization theories, seem to prevail as powerful coordination mechanisms, as well (Alke and Graß 2019, p. 138). However, the study also points to the role of the individual actors as independent agents who are capable of purposefully overstepping formally structured boundaries and creating their own scopes of action (Alke and Graß 2019, p. 138). The reasons and influencing factors that lead, or enable, individual actors to step out of structural regulations still need to be analyzed. Here, modern organization theories might provide fruitful perspectives through their focus on the integration of individual and organization and the related questions of coordination, management and leadership.

Apart from the context of program planning and the interaction between teaching and planning staff, the relation between the organizational units of administration and education has been another significant focus in adult education research, especially in the German-speaking field. In studies considering this relation, the focus on the individual actor and the role of their subjective perspectives and positioning, as hinted to by the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium in terms of the motivational component of action coordination, becomes quite evident. For instance, Franz and Scheffel (2017) explore the cooperation between administrative staff and educational managers by a re-analysis of qualitative data from group discussions with administrative staff. On the one hand, the findings again point to the significance of the organizational context for the modes of coordinated action and underline the significance of structural aspects and on the other hand, it is revealed that the subjective views of the actors involved are crucial, as well, especially with regard to the perception of hierarchy (Franz and Scheffel 2017, p. 22). Kil's findings (2003) further underline this by showing that, apart from leadership aspects and organiza-

tional structure, motivational issues and subjective perceptions of stress are decisive when it comes to coordinating actions in adult education organizations.

Another study by Dietsche (2015) examines how administration and the relation between administration and education are conceptualized in adult education organizations. By means of 20 guideline-based interviews with different actors (management, administration, program planners, teachers), the author shows from an interactionist perspective how the coordination of action between these functional units is regulated by both individual interpretations and institutionalized expectations with the institutionalized expectations referring to the prevailing idea of bureaucracy in administration thus implicitly relating to classical, Weberian views of the organization. It is striking here that a multi-perspective design including various crucial actor groups in the sample is employed in order to research the issue at hand. Furthermore, the interactionist theoretical perspective brings actor-centered issues into view that are sometimes at risk of being overshadowed in organizational theories.

The observation of coordination of action being regulated both by individual, actor-specific factors but also by institutional contexts can be found in Herbrechter's (2018) study of leadership in adult education, as well. Against the background of a neo-institutionalist approach, thus corresponding to modern organization theories, and by means of a contrastive case analysis, the study shows that the leadership style of leading staff in adult education organizations can be linked to the respective institutional context (Herbrechter 2018, p. 96) but also to the organizational structural context and finally also to the interpretation and action contributions by the individual actors (Herbrechter 2018, p. 99).

Again, the above-mentioned studies each make a significant contribution to the overall issue of coordination of action in adult education organizations in different contexts (program planning, administration, leadership) but it needs to be noticed that all of the studies employ a qualitative design and mostly built on interview data. More varied empirical material (e.g. surveys, observation studies, document analyses) and the orientation towards a multi-perspective approach might further complement the existing evidence on coordinative practices in adult education organizations.

In addition, apart from the structural or institutional aspects, there are also findings from adult education research implying that actions might also be indirectly mediated and coordinated through organizational culture (e.g. Dollhausen 2008; Franz 2017). For instance, Çakir and Alpaydin (2019) conduct a quantitative survey study with adult education teachers ($n = 354$) in order to examine the relationship between perceptions of organizational culture and job motivation. The findings imply that certain facets of organizational culture, particularly success and support culture (Çakir and Alpaydin 2019, p. 129), are predictive of the job motivation of adult education teaching staff thus regulating their actions. How coordinative practices between different actor groups within the organization might be influenced by organizational culture and to what extent there might be certain organization-specific types of coordinative practices still needs to be ascertained. Again, mixed-methods designs combining, for instance, qualitative interviews and group discussions with quantitative organizational surveys in a contrastive case study could enrich the empirical picture here.

While the studies presented here cover a wide range of approaches and insights regarding the coordination of action in adult education organizations, the synopsis presented also reveals yet existing gaps of research. Most importantly, action coordination is usually researched with a bilateral focus meaning that the actor constellations explored mostly consist of two parties (e.g. administration staff and planning staff, teachers and program planners). Even though extensive research has been conducted with regard to the cooperation between different staff groups in adult education (see Goeze and Stodolka 2019 for the German-speaking discourse), more complex actor constellations or interdependencies between different coordination moments are rarely taken into account. Furthermore, the view of Barnard's extended organizational concept in which not only actors within the organization (i.e. the employees) are deemed relevant but also other stakeholders, all forming a coalition for the organization, can only rarely be identified in the existing studies. Even though several studies acknowledge the existence of external influences on the coordination of action within the organization, this is often framed by (neo-)institutionalist approaches focusing on differentiation lines between organizational actors and the organizational environment.

In addition, a perspective gap can be identified that might be filled by Mintzberg's theory of organizational forms. Though a considerable share of studies presented here points to the significance of the organizational context when analyzing coordination of action, there are barely any studies which explicitly link specific organizational structures and different organizational forms to certain mechanisms of coordination.

Finally, it becomes obvious that even though only few studies directly pick up the concept of coordination of action in adult education organizations, a number of studies still provides valuable insights into how actions are coordinated in adult education organizations and how these actions are aligned in order to fit the organizational objectives. The exemplary synopsis of studies in the research field of adult education demonstrates that coordination of action in adult education organizations is a phenomenon structured by its diverse forms of occurrence. First of all, coordination of action in adult education organizations needs to be conceptualized as *multiple* coordination of action referring to both multiple actors and multiple moments and modes of action coordination. Second, coordination of action transcends level boundaries and thus needs to be referred to as a multi-level phenomenon concerning not only the individual actors involved but also the organizational structural and cultural context as well as the institutional environment. Third and finally, coordination of action has proven to be a multi-perspective research phenomenon as it is viewed and researched through the lens of various theoretical, actor-related and context-specific perspectives. Consequently, the existing research on coordination of action in adult education also needs to overcome the qualitative bias and pursue research endeavors that not only combine multiple perspectives but also make use of mixed methods approaches.

4 Researching coordination of action in adult education organizations in the future

In the following, we will develop and discuss key parameters of a research program based on our analysis. This program can guide further research and help exploring relevant actors, actor constellations, modes of coordination of action as well as interaction effects within organizations of adult education. It may also shed more light on the question of how the organizational level and the performance level of the organization are intertwined.

Regarding actors, adult education research needs to consider actors within the organization and in its institutional environment or, put differently, all actors that make a relevant contribution to the organization. Accordingly, they might be individual or collective actors on all levels of adult education as a multi-level system.

In addition, the organizational form of adult education organizations needs to be considered when focusing on the actors since it pre-decides which actors are of relevance. For instance, actors of relevance in an evening institute differ significantly from those in a private adult education organization.

With reference to actor constellations, the structural and cultural context as well as the institutional environment in which they are embedded needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, there are multiple constellations of actors which have an impact on the performance level of the organization.

Consequently, it needs to be considered that there are multiple forms of coordination of action simultaneously going on within an organization which are likely to produce interaction effects or even dysfunctionalities. Thus, coordination of action has to be viewed as *multiple* coordination of action and also requires multi-methodical approaches. In addition, it has to be considered that hierarchy is a stable and more or less ubiquitous mode of coordination of action (e.g. Schneider 2019; Dietsche 2015; Herbrechter 2018) supplemented by other modes depending on the organizational form. In general, this program allows to observe and analyze adult education practice in a more differentiated way.

5 Conclusion

The present paper argued that classical concepts of organizational theory as well as structurally focused concepts of organization and management do not allow for a differentiated observation and analysis of adult education practice any more, especially since the governance of adult education has changed dramatically in recent times. The goal was to develop a research program that brings coordination of action between actors in the organization to the fore.

The notion of action coordination was explored through different theoretical lenses following three general development phases of organization theory. The organizational theories provided hints to the coordination of action being moderated by formal-structural aspects and hierarchy (Weber), by a balance of incentives and contributions in a broad organizational fabric (Barnard) and by different organizational forms (Mintzberg). Taking these insights as an analytical heuristic, the

paper then focused on coordination of action in adult education research revealing a prevalent focus on bilateral actor constellations and suggesting the significance of organizational and institutional contexts. Starting from the desiderata identified in the narrative synopsis of studies, an agenda for future research on coordination of action in adult education research was outlined emphasizing the perspective of multiple and multi-level action coordination.

Thus, the paper made a contribution to different research fields that are concerned with the question of how the actions of different actors are coordinated in adult education organizations for the overall objective of facilitating adult learning.

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