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WHY ADULTS LEARN: INTERPRETING ADULTS' REASONS TO PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATION IN TERMS OF ECCLES' SUBJECTIVE TASK VALUE

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Biodata

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Abstract

Psychological research shows that subjective task value, a basic component of expectancy-value theory as outlined by Eccles, predicts task choice (e.g., going to graduate school). However, Eccles' approach has not been used to investigate adult learning so far. Therefore, the present study investigated a specific form of subjective task value and task choice, namely adults' subjective task value of participation in education. Based on expectancy-value theory, qualitative content analyses of 16 interviews with adult learners (aged between 21 and 67) from varying age groups and educational backgrounds show a differentiation of positive value according to points of reference and a revised conceptualisation of cost as an independent component of subjective task value with four subcomponents. Apparently people estimate positive value and cost separately at first and only later weigh these components against each other to arrive at an overall evaluation of subjective task value, which, in turn, predicts participation in education. Moreover, results suggest a distinction between anticipated subjective task value prior to participation and subjective task value based on experience (i.e., in hindsight). Benefits of using expectancy-value theory for future research on adults' participation in education are discussed.

Keywords: adult education, motivation, expectancy-value theory, subjective task value

1. Introduction

Adults typically choose the educational activities they engage in (Zmeyov, 1998) and may decide not to participate in formal learning (e.g., Beder, 1990). Therefore, adults' participation (or non-participation) in education constitutes a major area of research in adult learning throughout the last century (cf., Boeren, Nicaise, & Baert, 2010; Courtney, 1992). However, although many studies gathered and classified adults' reasons for or against participation, the literature lacks coherence and a larger theoretical framework (cf., Courtney, 1992; Schmidt, 2009).

From an educational psychology perspective, the decision (not) to participate in education represents a specific form of motivated behavior commonly referred to as task choice. Task choice is one of educational psychology's key research objects (cf., Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). Empirical studies based on expectancy-value theory consistently show that one major factor predicts task choice: Subjective task value (cf., Eccles, 2005). Subjective task value reflects people's answers to the questions 'Do I want to do it [i.e., perform a task] and why?'. Adult learners' subjective task value of participation in further education should predict task choice, that is, actual participation. According to Eccles' (1983, 2005) conceptualization of subjective task value (STV), positive and negative value aspects converge in a cost-benefit analysis. The concept of STV may be useful to explain both adults' participation and non-participation in education. However, Eccles' expectancy-value theory has not found its way

into the adult education literature yet, neither does research on adults' motivation to engage in ongoing learning constitute an important area of research in educational psychology.

Therefore, this study aims at exploring adults' STV with respect to their decisions (not) to participate in education within Eccles' expectancy-value framework (2005). Using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; for a methodological review, see Butler, 2006) made it possible to capture the unique perspective of adult learners on their reasons for (non-) participation and to re-interpret these as task value, thereby adapting the existing theoretical concept of STV to the context of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2008). This approach connects people's individual reasons for participation to the theoretical framework of expectancy-value theory. Thus, results may advance research addressing the pinnacle question concerning adults' learning motivation, that is, why adults do (not) engage in further education. Moreover, a detailed conceptualization of subcomponents of STV may help to understand the diversity of adults' participation in education and, hopefully, stimulates further research on adult learners from educational psychology.

1.1. Adults' Motivation to Participate in Education

Two major lines of research characterize existing research on participation in further education: First, analyses of people's reasons (not) to participate in education, and second, theoretical models of (non-) participation (for a summary, see Author, 2011; Courtney, 1992). As will be outlined in this section, using an expectancy-value approach may integrate these lines of research.

Several studies present a bottom-up classification of people's reasons (not) to engage in further education and identify higher order factors (e.g., Beder, 1990; Boeren, Holford, Nicaise & Baert, 2012; Boshier & Collins, 1985; Fujita-Starck, 1996). These may be integrated into a model of positive and negative determinants of participation in further education (Henry & Basile, 1994). Overall, this approach gives a comprehensive picture of the variety of reasons people may have for (non-) participation in education. However, because this approach adheres to the content of people's reports it is limited to descriptive results. Prescient from the content emphasis on concrete reasons results from this line of research broadly reflect values of education.

In contrast, other researchers developed models of participation in education (e.g., Blair, McPake & Munn, 1995), which can be subsumed as *decision models* (Courtney, 1992). Although most decisions models do not use this terminology, they basically depict adults' decisions to engage in an educational activity as an interaction of expectancies and values. However, most existing theoretical models have not been tested empirically (cf. Courtney, 1992; Schmidt, 2009).

Theory-driven empirical studies of adults' participation in education predominantly draw on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Using this approach, attitudes and subjective social norms predict specific behavioral intentions which, in turn, predict behavior (i.e., participation in a particular course available to the participants; Yang, Blunt, & Butler, 1994). However, the theory of planned behavior can ultimately be considered a situation-specific application of expectancy-value theory because attitudes draw on subjective expectancies and values (Ajzen, 2002). Moreover, while attitude is conceptualized as a predictor of behavior, its origin is not within the focus of the theory.

Existing but somewhat outdated applications of variants of expectancy-value theory failed to stimulate further research (e.g., Milbach, 1993). Though being predestined for investigations of participation in education, Eccles et al.'s sophisticated expectancy-value

model (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) had surprisingly little impact on research in the field of adult education and continuing (however, see Yang, 1998, for a similar model). Thus, although existing research on adults' participation in education offers many links to expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983, 2005), there is virtually no connection between adult education literature and educational psychology literature.

1.2. Eccles' Expectancy-Value Theory

Eccles' expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) offers an integrative socio-cultural framework for empirical investigations of motivation. According to expectancy-value theory, achievement and achievement-related choices in education are based on one's expectancy of success ('Can I do a task?' mostly conceived as academic self-concept of ability) and STV ('Do I want to do the task and why?'). Eccles (2005) and Battle and Wigfield (2003) particularly elaborate on students' STV, which is composed of four different types of values. Three of these value components are positive leading to task engagement (Eccles, 2005): Intrinsic value (i.e., the task is joyful and interesting), utility value (i.e., the task is useful in attaining future goals), and attainment value (i.e., the task is personally significant and contributes to one's identity). The fourth value component, costs, may put people off the task (Battle & Wigfield, 2003). 'Task' may refer to a course, a subject, or a whole educational program (e.g., Battle & Wigfield, 2003). Thus, task could also mean participation in further education.

Expectancy-value theory has mostly been used to predict course choice within high school or university settings (Eccles, 2005). Because students could not refuse to choose at least one course from the range of alternatives, costs were excluded from most studies (cf., Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). However, costs come to the fore when people have to decide about taking a course or not staying in education at all (as was the case in Battle & Wigfield's study of women's decision to go to graduate school, 2003). Battle and Wigfield point out that 'cost refers to what the individual has to give up to do a task, as well as the anticipated effort one will need to put into task completion.' (2003, p. 58). Thus, costs are broadly conceptualized as alternative costs, that is, 'cost of investing time in one activity rather than another' (Eccles, 2005, p. 108) as well as direct costs arising from task engagement related to the task's worth (i.e., effort, fear of failure). In measuring costs, Battle and Wigfield (2003) mainly used judgmental wording such as 'would be worth...' or 'requires more effort than I'm willing to put into it' (p. 73). However, using this terminology implies that positive value has been weighted up against costs to calculate the task's worth. Therefore, costs in this sense are intertwined with value; they cannot be considered a separate element of the value component within expectancy-value theory.

To date, costs remain a rather fuzzy concept. Nevertheless, for adult learners, costs should be an important factor for their educational decisions. In fact, many adults hold further education in high regard, and yet do not participate (OECD, 2005). Thus, costs could counterbalance intrinsic, utility, and attainment value leading to non-participation. Therefore, costs of participation in education should receive extensive attention when investigating adults' educational decisions.

1.3. The present study

The present study was designed to explore STV underlying adults' educational decisions to pioneer future (quantitative) investigations. The term 'educational decision' denotes people's (potential) transition from non-participant to participant (and back). Educational decisions thereby comprise personal and external decisions to participate (e.g., mandatory participation in a course). Focusing on a detailed analysis of STV aimed at understanding the

diversity of adults' educational activities (i.e., beyond the distinction between intrinsic, attainment, and utility value and cost).

Adults should decide in favor of participation if the cost-benefit analysis of an educational offer holds a positive balance, that is, value is greater than cost. In most cases the range of alternative educational offers includes non-participation. However, existing studies mostly focused on either participants (i.e., reasons to participate in further education) or non-participants (i.e., reasons not to participate). Thus, most existing studies limit their view to one positive educational decision (i.e., participation in one particular course) and leave out that this educational decision simultaneously means that people have decided against participation in one or more alternative courses and against non-participation. Being inherently linked to participation, this paper argues that non-participation should be considered, too, when explaining participation because it reflects the other side of the coin. Accordingly, this study addressed both positive (i.e., participation) and negative (i.e., non-participation) educational decisions at the same time following. Negative educational decisions were distinguished from positive educational decisions in terms of participation and persistence in a course (i.e., non-participation in a course or in further education at all, or drop-out; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Thus, it was possible to reconstruct people's cost-benefit analyses, that is, their balancing of positive and negative aspects of STV which is assumed to precede the actual educational decision.

To easily pinpoint educational decisions the scope of the study was limited to people's participation in formally organized educational courses (referred to as educational programs). Thus, engagement in education and learning will not go unnoticed by the participants themselves (unlike informal learning; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Adults explained why they did or did not participate in further education in guided interviews. Interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) within the theoretical framework outlined by Eccles (2005, Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). This approach made it possible to capture and elaborate on people's subjective description of why they participated in further education based on a conceptual foundation of STV. Thus, findings may be related to existing psychological research on task choice.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

To produce many different reasons for / against PAE, the qualitative sampling plan implemented the principle of variance maximization demanding a wide range of ages, variance in number of educational decisions, variance in types of adult and further education that was participated in, and different life situations (Patton, 1990). Participants were contacted using gatekeepers (Creswell, 2007) and via (online) social-networks. The sample covered non-traditional undergraduate students, senior citizen students at university, learners at various adult and continuing education institutions (adult education centre, second-chance education institute, vocational school, and business college), and people from specific occupational groups with a high versus low demand for continuing education and training. Unfortunately, the sample did not cover individuals without participation in education after graduating from secondary school. Overall, interviews with 16 participants (aged between 21 and 67) who reported a total of 60 educational decisions (including eight decisions not to participate and four decisions to drop-out) have been analyzed. A short summary of participants' biographies is presented in Table 1 (names have been changed to preserve anonymity).

Table 1 *Sample Overview*

Short educational biographies

Amy (23) enrolled in second-chance education to gain GQHE after vocational training.

Anne (27) completed two vocational trainings and then enrolled in psychology at university.

Betty (67) completed further education building on her occupation, went to evening school to get her GQHE and studied science for one semester. Moreover, she enrolled in computer courses twice. She then enrolled for senior citizen studies.

Charlie (32) joined the local work council and participated in several related trainings. He then completed an extra-occupational course to become human resource specialist including a trainer certificate and enrolled at a distance learning university in business studies. However, he dropped out from that and enrolled in business psychology.

Charlotte (29) completed a three-year course to become state-certified business administrator.

Emma (67) went to stay in England, France and Switzerland. She earned several language certificates, took courses at university level, participated in various job-related further education courses, and finally enrolled in senior citizen studies.

Heather (61) did not participate in further education except for mandatory courses.

Jack (45) gained GQHE in second-chance education, studied engineering and later on completed a further education course to become sales engineer. He participates in internal trainings on a regular basis.

Kate (27) gained her GQHE in distance second-chance education and enrolled in psychology at university.

Laura (21) was in second-chance education to gain GQHE since she wanted to enroll at university.

Lily (30) enrolled at a business college to become state-certified business administrator and, thereby, earned a trainer certificate as well.

Lucy (52) participated in further education courses which were supported by the Federal Employment Office while she was unemployed. Later, she enrolled in senior citizen studies.

Mary (23) went to second-chance education to gain GQHE.

Peter (27) enrolled at a business college to earn GQHE while doing shift work, being overman. With this, he fulfilled the requirement to become state-certified business administrator which he then enrolled for.

Tina (26) earned her GQHE in second-chance education and then enrolled in psychology. Before getting enrolled for psychology, she studied science for two years.

William (50) worked with a business audit company and passed two demanding professional exams, tax consultant and business auditor. He eventually completed a language course and several internal trainings.

Note. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity; GQHE = general qualification for higher education

2.2. Procedure

The semi-structured interviews followed a broad guideline covering people's participation in further education, learning behavior and motivation, epistemological beliefs, goals, and school experience (in this order). The guideline allowed for further remarks and side notes and followed a fixed order unless interviewees anticipated later questions.

The present analyses are solely based on the questions dealing with people's educational decisions, which were "Please describe your academic and professional development.", for each educational decision, "Please describe why you decided to engage in this educational activity, what would have been the alternatives, and why you decided against the alternatives.", and "Would you say that educational decisions were especially difficult or easy for you? In what way? Please describe."

The female interviewer, a post-graduate student in psychology, was instructed to phrase all questions openly and to avoid suggestive wording. The full interviews took between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviewees were informed about the goals of the study, the interview procedure, and the processing of their data (including anonymization and use of direct quotes) in advance and gave their consent.

2.3. Analyses

All interviews were transcribed in full and anonymized before the analytic procedure began. The analytic procedure aimed at establishing a set of categories to adequately reflect adults' STV of participation in education. Using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) allowed for detailed theoretical presuppositions in terms of deductively derived categories while complementing these with inductively derived categories.

A team of four researchers (the author, the interviewer and two undergraduate students) implemented a four-eye-principle for categorization and interpretation of results to ensure methodological rigor (cf., Fossey, Harvey, McFermott, & Davidson, 2002). The researchers revised the initial set of categories (see Table 2) based on inductively derived categories (i.e., if data in one category was rather heterogeneous, the researchers developed a new category to capture the differences). Overall, 232 text passages were categorized using all available text passages (between 5 and 27 text passages per interviewee). Assignment to multiple categories was allowed if the text passage corresponded with more than one category. Interrater reliability was very good ($\alpha=.98$; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

3. Results

The final set of - both inductively and deductively derived - categories is depicted in Table 2. Deductive categories for STV were intrinsic, utility and attainment value as well as cost. Positive value was further differentiated based on inductively derived points of reference (content/activity, status as participant, and degree/certificate). Similarly, costs were classified in terms of four inductively derived categories distinct from the costs outlined by Eccles (2005) and Battle and Wigfield (2003). Types of costs were effort, time, money, and psychological strain with each type being high or low, independent of the task's worth. The categories are presented in detail below.

Not all statements about educational decisions referred to reasons people had to engage in education at the beginning of an educational program. Therefore, assignments of categories distinguished between aspects considered prior to participation (i.e., from the beginning) and changes in or new aspects revealed later on and reported in hindsight, thereby reflecting potential changes in STV.

Table 2 *Set of categories*

Category	Subcategory	Definition (with respect to participation in an educational program)
Intrinsic Value	<i>Content / activity</i>	Participation in the educational program holds interesting and / or enjoyable contents and activities.
	<i>Status as participant</i>	The status of being a participant of the educational program is interesting and / or enjoyable.
Attainment Value	<i>Content / Activity</i>	Participation in the educational program holds personally significant contents and activities.
	<i>Status as participant</i>	The status of being a participant of the educational program is personally significant.
	<i>Degree / certificate</i>	Participation in the educational program will lead to a degree / certificate which is or will be personally significant.
Utility Value	<i>Content / Activity</i>	Participation in the educational program holds useful contents and activities.
	<i>Status</i>	The status of being a participant of the educational program is useful.
	<i>Degree / certificate</i>	Participation in the educational program will lead to a degree / certificate which is or will be useful.
Cost	<i>High Effort</i>	Large amount of effort is necessary to succeed in the task (i.e. task is difficult to accomplish)
	<i>Low Effort</i>	Small amount of effort is necessary to succeed in the task (i. e. task is easily accomplished)
	<i>Time-consuming</i>	It takes a lot of time to participate in the educational program.
	<i>Time-saving</i>	It does not take a lot of time to participate in the educational program.
	<i>Expensive</i>	Participation in the educational program costs a lot of money.
	<i>Inexpensive</i>	Participation in the educational program does not cost a lot of money.
	<i>High strain</i>	Participation in the educational program is associated with high levels of emotional and motivational strain (e.g., fear of failure, stress).
<i>Low strain</i>	Participation in the educational program is associated with low levels of emotional and motivational strain.	

Note. Inductively derived categories are printed in italics.

3.1. Reference points of positive value

Categorization of positive value produced different reference points of values specifying existing definitions. Each subtype of value– intrinsic, attainment, and utility value – may refer to the content/activity of the task, the status of being a participant, or the degree/certificate that can be obtained (see Table 2). Content/activity refers to what can be

learned or to the activity people engage in when participating in the course. For example, as a senior citizen student, Emma expresses intrinsic-content value, ‘I’m taking it [a particular subject at university] because I’m very interested in it and I find it very fascinating’ (all statements translated by author). In contrast, Charlie refers to utility-content value when he says, ‘I benefitted from the insight I gained...’ (HR specialist course) and William refers to attainment-content value talking about English language courses, ‘Well, because I realized that in our job without decent English skills you... well... make a fool out of yourself in the best case but in the worst you’re not capable of doing anything (laughs).’

Status of being a participant refers to being enrolled or being member of the class and/or educational institution. Betty’s statement illustrates intrinsic-status value. Betty is talking about evening school: ‘I enjoyed going there’. In contrast, Lucy needed to have the status of being a participant in various mandatory courses—‘...it was enforced by the Federal Employment Office. [...] And if you didn’t do it without having a special reason you wouldn’t get any money.’ (utility-status)—while for Emma, who never had the chance to become a regular student at university, participation held great personal value, ‘In the end I actually attended French lectures at [a well-known university in Paris, France] for one semester.’

Degree value refers to the degree, certificate, or the like that can be obtained from completing the course (i.e., becoming a state-certified business administrator). For example, William said about his business auditor course, ‘... and then it was clear to me that if I wanted to achieve anything there I would have to pass that exam’ (utility-degree), and Peter referred to attainment-degree, saying ‘... I started going back to school for my ego, because I thought [...] I really would like to have [degree].’ Only one combination could not be found in the data: Intrinsic value of degree/certificate. Therefore, this category was omitted from the final set of categories.

3.2. Four types of cost

With respect to cost-benefit analyses, positive values are on one side, and cost is on the other. While cost is broadly conceptualized as alternative costs (i.e., lack of time / money for other desirable activities; Battle & Wigfield, 2003) the results presented here suggest that cost should be conceptualized independently of positive task value. Hence, cost may be high or low, but this does not yet mean that the task is not worth the cost. Thus, cost is proposed to be weighted in relation to positive task values only after people have judged each aspect individually. Therefore, four distinct subcategories roughly relating to Battle and Wigfield’s (2003) considerations were construed to categorize costs based on inductive categorization: effort, time, money, and psychological strain. Each subcategory had two levels, high and low.

Effort denoted the intellectual demand and/or amount of work required for (successful) course completion (i.e., a very difficult course content may require much effort). Reflecting high effort, Jack said about his general qualification for higher education, ‘It was a hard nut to crack. Well at least for me it was a hard nut.’, while Emma expressed low effort referring to her hotel management course, ‘That was really easy for me’.

Time cost referred to the amount of time required for course attendance and (successful) course completion (i.e., duration of course, time in class, time for course preparation and wrap-up) in addition to potential exoneration of other responsibilities (e.g., work may be interrupted for participation). Courses may be time-consuming, as was reported by William with respect to his extra-occupational business auditor course, ‘And if you consider all the preparation that’s necessary [...]. And all that in addition to our work, which is already quite time-consuming itself’. In contrast, earlier on William took a short-term intensive course

instead of a long-term extra-occupational course to qualify as a tax advisor, which was time-saving, 'I decided to take a 3-months course instead. So that lasted 3 months, 5 days per week'.

While secondary school is free, money is an important issue in further education. Monetary costs include tuition fees, additional expense (i.e., costs for transportation, learning materials), potential loss of income, and potential financial support or funding. For Emma, participation in a professional school for hotel business was expensive, 'And I was more or less out of money [...] ...and then I had saved money to pay for the professional school for hotel business in [location]. [...] And then I had, well, allowed myself this course.' In contrast, Jack's sales engineer training was inexpensive because he did not have to pay tuition fees and the Federal Employment Office granted a subsidy to cover his living expenses (at least in part), 'It was paid for by the Federal Employment Office, you got paid some support.'

Finally, fear of failure, pressure caused by the course demands and/or by side effects (i.e., distraction from other tasks), worries, financial burden, and social costs of participation (e.g., rejection due to violation of social norms) as well as self-control needed to regulate motivation and emotion fall into the category of psychological strain. For example, Charlotte pointed out, participation in the extra-occupational course to qualify as a state-certified business administrator was 'really hard' and she asked herself, 'What are you getting into? Why are you doing this to yourself?' As announced by the teachers, slightly more than half of the class actually finished the three-year course. In contrast, with respect to attending evening classes, Betty reports low strain, 'I enjoyed going there, there was always someone to talk to [...] and you could have conversations on different topics and you could ask someone about things.'

Considering costs as a distinct component of STV, especially as being independent from a task's positive value, costs could even promote participation if, for example, cost is low compared to a similar educational program. An independent cost component can and should be evaluated in relation to the positive value of that same task as well as the positive values and costs of alternative tasks. Moreover, a high level of effort associated with an educational program may be an indicator of the program's quality and reputation. Successful completion of such an educational program is likely to make participants proud and lead to positive outcomes, such as improved job opportunities. Thus, even an educational program associated with high levels of costs may be the best choice from a range of alternatives.

3.3. Connecting positive and negative value

Based on a cost-benefit analysis, a positive balance of value and costs should promote participation. On the other hand, if costs exceed positive value, people should be put off the task. Conceptualizing reasons for non-participation in terms of a negative cost-benefit balance differs from the concept of 'barriers to learning' commonly used in adult education literature (Cross, 1981). Barriers, in this sense, imply that people are prevented from learning by something they cannot change (at least not in that particular situation). However, the results presented here suggest that (real) barriers are distinct from costs. For example, Peter could not enroll in a particular degree program due to his level of education ('You have to do this extra-year of study if you do not have a qualification for higher education'). Lack of formal qualification for an educational program makes participation impossible; at least participation in that particular program and in that particular situation (i.e., one may decide to gain the qualification needed and try again later). Thus, barriers referring to actual constraints that limit people's latitude can be distinguished from costs.

In contrast, William decided not to enroll in a certified public accountant course because it would take too much time away from his family life while not being necessary for his career. As he put it, ‘It was not necessary; really, it would just have been nice to have it [the title] on the business card’. In this case, the time-requirements associated with the course are not insurmountable. Rather they represent costs that are, from William’s perspective, not justified by positive values: the cost-benefit analysis did not proffer enough positive value to outweigh the associated costs. Nevertheless, people can (and actually do) bear high costs if positive value is strong enough to justify them.

3.4. STV during Participation

While most statements about educational decisions referred to reasons people had to engage in education beforehand, some referred to people’s actual experience during participation. To keep these two perspectives apart, value considered prior to participation (i.e., anticipated STV) was distinguished from new aspects of or changes in value revealed later on and reported based on experience (i.e., in hindsight).

Why is this distinction important? When people describe their educational decisions in hindsight, they are able to compare initial anticipations of STV with actual facts. That is, people’s anticipation of STV may turn out to be inadequate or wrong. Moreover, additional aspects may arise; people may realize that contents are not as useful as expected, unexpected costs arise, or educational programs expected to be dull turn out to be fun. For example, Charly talks about his business studies at a distant university only in hindsight, saying ‘business studies is too dull for me, I have tried this once, shortly after having finished my vocational training’. In contrast, statements about his current studies in business psychology refer to anticipated STV, ‘because I am also interested in mediation and coaching, and a friend suggested that I should gather some information on this topic [business psychology]’. Thus, he anticipated high intrinsic value associated to an enrolment in business psychology. In hindsight, his anticipation turned out to be right, ‘and now, after having finished one semester, I can say that it is very interesting and exciting, especially all the psychological stuff’.

While non-participation is mostly based on anticipation of what it would be like to engage in an educational program, drop-out is probably based on actual experiences (see Charly’s statement on his business studies, which he did not complete). Thus, it is important to compare people’s initial reasons for participation and expectations they had with their actual evaluation of the educational program to understand why people are (not) satisfied with a course, or why they have different plans for future educational decisions.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to translate adults’ reasons for participation in education into a – possibly revised – conceptualization of subjective task value (referred to as STV) of education based on Eccles’ expectancy-value theory (2005). Findings include inductively derived reference points of positive value specifying intrinsic, utility, and attainment value: content/activity, status as participant, and degree/certificate. Moreover, the conceptualization of costs and barriers outlined in the literature turned out to not adequately reflect the cost-related findings from this interview study. The revised conceptualization of costs includes four categories, effort, time, money and psychological strain, and is distinguished from barriers. STV is found to be not only highly subjective, but also highly dynamic. People’s initial evaluation of STV may change due to their own aspirations or to their actual experience during participation. Therefore, a distinction between anticipated STV and experienced-based STV has been introduced.

4.1. Subjective task value in the field of adult and continuing education

Considering different reference points of value might explain why people probably use different criteria to evaluate expectancy of success and other value aspects underlying their final choice of educational program. For example, if one only needs the status as a participant (utility-status), expectancy of success should be less relevant (e.g., Lucy's mandatory participation in further education from the Federal Employment Office; Charlie's participation in short-term trainings to network). Similarly, if one seeks community (intrinsic-status), the content of an educational program could be less relevant (e.g., Betty's participation in evening classes). On the other hand, if only the obtainable degree is important, one may not be interested in the content (e.g., William's participation in tax advisor training). However, since people rarely mention only one aspect of value, it is difficult to point out differential effects of single aspects of value or reference points based on the data.

Distinguishing insurmountable barriers from costs may be useful for future investigations of non-participation. For example, policy or institutions could help to reduce costs (e.g., by providing financial support or childcare). Positive value may be increased by choosing contents according to people's needs or improve appreciation of obtainable degrees and certificates. However, people only consider costs and barriers when they seek—or at least consider—participation in further education but ultimately do not participate, or reject participation in one educational program in favor of another. Moreover, sometimes educational offers may hold a positive cost-benefit balance but do not meet people's demand. Thus, people cannot be made to consider participation in education by policies and institutions if they are not inclined to do so in the first place.

Decisions to participate in education appear to be based on anticipations of task value and people's momentary demand. However, what participants in further education want and what they get may vary over time based on endogenous (perceptions, goals) and exogenous factors (contextual factors, course announcement versus course reality). Thus, estimations of STV constantly develop in interaction with people's experience of life; STV is a snap-shot at any one time. Moreover, evaluation of STV may be subject to bias, which is especially salient when people compare anticipated expectancies and values to actual experiences during participation.

Overall, the present study yields insight into the structure of adults' STV of education. Results relate educational psychology research based on Eccles' expectancy-value theory to adult education research. Drawing on the large body of literature on expectancy-value theory in future studies on adults' participation in education will hopefully make this exploratory study fruitful for research into adult learning.

4.2. From a research perspective in adult education and learning

Results from this study relate psychological approaches to (previous) conceptions of participation in adult learning (e.g., Rubenson, 1978, quoting Courtney, 1992) in an effort to arrive at an empirically based understanding of adults' engagement in ongoing education., Adapting existing measures from expectancy-value research to adult learning would enable theory-driven research on adults' motivation to participate in further education. Items for quantitative research could be developed to reflect reference points of value and aspects of costs. For example, utility-content ('Learning about business administration will be useful for achieving my professional goals.') could be delineated from utility-degree ('It will be useful for achieving my professional goals to hold the title state-certified business administrator.').

Beyond that, a stronger connection between adult education research and educational psychology may be beneficial in two ways: First, underlying principles of learning motivation, although they may have to be customized to adult learners, could be useful to investigate adults' engagement in further education (Brookfield, 1995). Drawing on established theories of motivation in education (cf. Schunk et al., 2008), psychological research could help explain stable patterns in adult education surveys and inform adult education practice (e.g., how to increase course participants' motivation to learn). Second, learning in school probably lays the groundwork for learning in adulthood in terms of expectancies of success and values (Gorges & Kandler, 2012). In school, people engage in learning and develop beliefs about their own abilities and interests which are not erased once they enter further education (Norman, 1999). In fact, schools and higher education institutions may cover fundamental phases for the promotion of continuing motivation to learn and, consequently, lifelong education (Cropley, 1977). After all, taking previous learning motivation and experience into account when deciding to engage in education again could explain the consistent finding that level of education and previous participation predicts future participation in education (OECD, 2005). This is not to say that previous findings from school contexts are just as valid for adult education. However, research aiming at bridging the gap between schooling and adult learning (Gorges & Kandler, 2012; Wai, Lubinski, Benbow, & Steger, 2010) provides hints concerning the role of school experience for participation in education throughout people's lives.

4.3. From a motivational psychology perspective

Although STV has been extensively studied in educational psychology (cf., Wigfield & Cambria, 2010), little attention has been paid to the dynamics of STV development over the life course and during participation in education. Therefore, future research should address factors contributing to people's subjective evaluations of task value in more detail. Moreover, it may be easier to handle expectancy-value theory if costs are explicitly distinguished from positive task value. In fact, it may be adequate to split the value component into benefit (i.e., intrinsic, utility, and attainment value) on the one hand and cost on the other to emphasize that people engage in cost-benefit analyses.

It is essential to note that values can only be effective when individual learners are aware of and attach importance to them. Therefore, predicting participation in further education remains difficult. People's assessment of STV (and expectancy of success) with respect to an educational program is subject to people's individual weighting of positive and negative aspects of particular educational offers, and of participation in educational in general. That is to say, depending on people's life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), ongoing education may have different functions. Therefore, it may be fruitful to focus more on the individuals' resources and goals, which may systematically influence the salience of particular aspects of STV (and expectancy of success). From this perspective, people participate in education when individual demands and educational offer fit.

4.4. Limitations and Outlook

Owing to the nature of qualitative research, results do not claim to represent final support for theoretical postulates. Results are based solely on people's subjective views and interpretation of their educational decisions. Nevertheless, results may inspire further research but there is no attempt at generalization.

Although the principle of variance maximization was applied to selecting participants, the sample did not cover every possible branch in the field of further education (e.g., political adult education, denominational adult education, etc.). An investigation of adult learners from

different settings would be desirable to refine the results and to validate them across educational programs. Moreover, results may be biased in favor of positive educational decision because every interviewee reported participation in education. Future research should pay special attention to people who do not participate in further education (see Reich-Claassen, 2011, who deliberately addressed people who acted contrary to expectations based on socio-demographic characteristics). However, it may be difficult—if at all possible—to analyze educational decisions of people who never have thought of participating in further education. In addition, the results from the present study need to be further validated using a larger sample and probably quantitative research methodology.

The decision to use one particular strategy for data analysis implies that other possible strategies, which may have led to different results, have not been used. Thus, the results presented here represent but one interpretation of the data. In addition, STV is only one component of a larger theoretical framework (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). While this study is dealing with its structure, antecedents of STV, such as the individual learner's characteristics (e.g., personal goals, resources, dispositions, motivational orientations) and the role of the environment (e.g., awareness and existence of educational offers, and beyond), as well as the concept of expectancy of success, have been neglected. They should be included in future research.

4.5 Conclusion

The results from the present interview study demonstrate that Eccles' (2005) conceptualization of STV—a key determinant of educational task choice—may be useful for further theory-driven research on adults' motivation to learn and to participate in education. A wide range of reasons for participation in education reported by 16 adults could be mapped to the four components of subjective task value (i.e., intrinsic, utility, attainment value, and cost). Nevertheless, results also indicate that Eccles' STV components are rather broad and many not adequately represent the many different reasons for adult learning. Hence, some more detailed specifications may improve the additional benefit of using expectancy-value theory in adult education research. More specifically, the introduction of reference points of value regarding positive value aspects, a clear separation of negative value aspects (i.e., cost) versus positive value aspects, and the subsequent combination of positive and negative value aspects in terms of a final balanced value, which may be individually calculated by the learner, may further our understanding of why adults learn and why—sometimes—they do not.

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