

The limits of criticality: the need for explanatory theories in higher education

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Abstract

This paper addresses a key question raised by the conference theme, namely the role of higher education (HE) research in critiquing and challenging the practices and values of the academy. My argument is about the limits of criticality when not linked to causal explanations and theories of change. Much of the HE literature contains calls for change, whether for reasons of efficiency or justice and equity. However, Hlengwa's think piece highlights the difficulty of bringing about real structural transformation in HE, despite the good intentions of (some) social actors. And Lee and Green, referring to doctoral education, speak about the "curious persistence" in practices, despite a widespread scholarly recognition of alternatives (2009:616).

Understanding the processes by which higher education practices could change, requires an understanding of the causal mechanisms involved in their production, reproduction and transformation. Margaret Archer's social realist framework (1979, 1995) generates such explanatory theories by, amongst other things, reframing the micro/macro divide in social research. From a social realist perspective, this distinction has less to do with the size of the social unit being investigated, than with the distinction between system level features on the hand, and the social interaction of contemporary agents on the other (Archer, 1995). The systemic and the agential aspects of social reality have distinctive kind of powers, many of them not observable, that act as causal mechanisms interacting to produce social phenomena. By rejecting empiricist assumptions, the distinction between "close up" and "large scale" studies can be reframed: underlying systemic mechanisms can and should be identified in both micro and macro level studies.

Archer's morphogenetic framework (1995) theorises the interaction between the systemic and the agential. A key assumption is that all social phenomena, including systemic features, are (or have been) created through the interaction of people. But once systemic features exist, they are relatively enduring and condition the current context. Current agents can work to change these systemic features, but their interest and ability to do so are also conditioned by them. Social structures have histories, and their features—often not directly observable—can be best explored through investigating the historical interactions from which they emerged. Through linking structure and agency diachronically, this approach highlights the underlying causal mechanisms that maintain practices, as well as those that could potentially transform them.

Keywords

Educational change, Explanatory social theories, Causality, Social realism, Criticality, Morphogenetic framework, Higher education, Macro-micro dualism