**Disabling Dualisms: essentialism, social constructionismand the explanatory power of higher education research.**

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Disabling dualisms (Sayer, 1997: 459) are oppositions in social science which close down alternative ways of thinking, create ontological tunnel-vision and so inhibit nuanced explanations. In this think piece I discuss the essentialism-social constructionism duality[[1]](#footnote-1). My emphasis is mainly on essentialism rather than social constructionism here because I want to argue that, while *strong* essentialism (as seen in, for example, biological essentialism or African essentialism) is always bad, a moderate form of essentialism is necessary in the study of higher education (and social science generally).

I am interested in airing this duality with delegates at HECU6 because of the thesis of the book I edited with colleagues recently, *Tribes and Territories in the 21st Century* (Trowler, Saunders and Bamber, 2012). Here we set out the proposition that the original Tribes and Territories thesis (Becher, 1989, subsequently modified in Becher and Trowler, 2001) had been essentialist, positing the driver of disciplinary cultures as being the structure of knowledge within each discipline. These knowledge drivers, the original thesis ran, resulted (or would result) in distinctive tribal characteristics within each discipline that would be found across the world. Other authors followed this line, or developed a similar essentialist one themselves. Arguments by Janet Donald (1995) and by Ruth Neumann et al (2002), for example, tried to articulate the distinctive characteristics of practices in different disciplines with regard to learning and teaching, generated by differences in their knowledge structures. But in our 2012 book and earlier (Trowler, 1998; 2008) I depicted these as ill-founded and essentialist: they largely see disciplines as a static, homogenous and dominant force, determining behaviours in highly structured ways and depicting regularities in university life which simply aren’t there now:

Psychology professors talked of developing students’ capabilities through a series of courses which focus on different methods…In education, case studies are seen as important instructional methods to aid students in making complex situations coherent. English literature professors paid attention to the analysis of text to determine the underlying assumptions…and they were concerned with the development of argument in their courses. (Donald, 1995: 16)

On the contrary, academics’ practices are being driven by multiple forces now, and academics are required to do many different sorts of thing. In addition, the nature of ‘the discipline’ in research practices is re-contextualised when academics turn to learning and teaching, and re-contextualised again in committee meetings, practices associated with winning funding, and so on. I draw on Bernstein’s work (2000) on the pedagogic device, and extend it, in making this relational argument. So, ‘disciplinary practices’ should be seen as unstable, contextually contingent and shaped by multiple strong forces. As a result, what we can say for example about sociologists worldwide as a category is rather limited.

So what, precisely, is ‘essentialism’? The concept requires two things: that a phenomenon has a definable and necessary character, an essential property or properties, and that these characteristics have generative power; that is, their presence significantly affects other phenomena around them[[2]](#footnote-2). Again, Janet Donald illustrates the first characteristic in taking an essentialist approach to defining ‘discipline’[[3]](#footnote-3). It is, she says:

a body of knowledge with a reasonably logical taxonomy, a specialized vocabulary, an accepted body of theory, a systematic research strategy, and techniques for replication and validity. (Donald, 2002: 8)

Compare this to a social constructionist definition:

Disciplines...are cartels that organize markets for the production and employment of students by excluding those job-seekers who are not products of the cartel. (Turner, 2000: 51).

The second characteristic of essentialism, its generative power, is evident in the original Tribes and Territories thesis: it not only assumes that each discipline has particular and essential knowledge properties, but that these properties are generative, in a direct and universal way, of specific cultural characteristics among disciplinary practitioners. This even extends to leisure-time: “physicists were inclined towards an interest in the theatre, art and music, whereas the engineers’ typical leisure activities included aviation, deep-sea diving and ‘messing about in boats’” (Becher, 1989: 106).

But in critiquing such arguments as essentialist it is important not to simply jump to the social constructionist pole of duality, adopting what Young (2000) rightly criticises as a relativist ‘voice’ argument about disciplines: that they are whatever their practitioners say they are. That jump would exemplify the ontological tunnel-vision described in my opening sentence.

Instead, social science, the study of higher education, and the account of practices in and across disciplines in universities actually *need* a moderate form of essentialism in order to offer anything that has "practical adequacy" (Sayer, 1997; 2010), that is usefully illuminating and can actually be applied.

So what is this ‘moderate essentialism’, and why is it necessary in social science?

A moderate form of essentialism achieves the leap beyond disabling dualities to a more nuanced ontology because:

* It does not assert that all members of a class or ‘set’ are identical, only that they have some defining features in common. So academic historians, for example, may display very different characteristics in different universities, though there are still common features (or they wouldn’t belong to the category ‘academic historians’).
* Those defining features may be different at different levels of analysis, different ‘ontological strata’ (Sayer, 1997). So disciplines viewed from a distance do have certain common characteristics, but viewed close up those characteristics crumble in the analytical hand – yet other characteristics come to the fore. This is a particularly salient point for a conference about ‘close up’ research.
* The defining features can be different in respect of different sets of relations. So disciplines as articulated in a research context are different than when articulated in learning and teaching contexts. This distinction is key in Bernstein’s notion of the pedagogic device and his distinction between *discipline as research* and *discipline as curriculum*.
* A moderate form of essentialism does not assert that the distinguishing features of a phenomenon such as disciplines are permanent, at whatever ontological stratum one views them. A discipline can change very markedly over time, but it is still ‘the same’ discipline.
* It does not assert that the essential characteristics of a phenomenon such as disciplines are even necessarily significant or themselves generative. There is no necessary correspondence between the essential properties and the generative properties of a class of objects. They may be trivial, and insignificant compared to ‘accidental’ properties in terms of effecting changes in other phenomena.

So, an ontological standpoint based on this set of propositions is that objects such as disciplines can have multiple essences, depending on their sets of relations and the level of analysis at which they are viewed. They also have varying generative properties of different power which are not necessarily linked to their essential properties and some of which are not unique to them.

Discussing these issues at an abstract level, Sayer (1997) points out that hard categorical boundaries:

... conceal fuzzy, complex, shifting transitions, with the distinctions often being the subject of social struggle. In particular, familiar bi-polar distinctions.... suppress difference and hybridity. (Sayer, 1997: 460)

This is exactly my argument about disciplines. It is an error to attempt to ‘fix’ them and to map their borders for all time and all circumstances. They are the site of struggle of competing viewpoints, and often there are more similarities than differences between, say, critical legal studies and sociology, with greater divisions inside academic law (at least as articulated in some places) than there are between those two disciplines. Essentialist accounts flatten out internal differences and occlude complexity. Nonetheless, we should not confuse essential properties and accidental properties: there can be huge differences in the accidental properties of, say, academic law, but it still *remains* academic law as long as the essential properties (considered at a particular ontological stratum and in particular relational context) remain in place.

This, though, does leave us with a problem in defining the essence of things. How much change can a discipline undergo, and how much internal diversity must there be before we conclude that it is no longer what it was? I will leave that question open here but expand on a response in my keynote. I will draw on Bowker and Star’s work (2000) to deconstruct the commonly heard phrase “I couldn’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” The notion of ‘recognisability’ is key in tackling that question.

That issue is not just an academic one - it has real consequences. For example there have been heated debates about whether schoolchildren doing arithmetic with a calculator are *really* doing mathematics, or whether the polevaulter who has a new high-performance technologically-enhanced pole is *really* doing polevaulting (Wertsch et al, 1995). Or, in a South African context, whether Oscar Pistorius, the ‘blade runner’, was *really* *running* the 400 metres when he won the world record.

So, why is moderate essentialism necessary? First, because it is always necessary to categorise and distinguish, to ‘sort things out’ (Bowker and Star, 2000). Second, because it is one of the tasks of social science to explain aspects of the world through establishing causality. This need not, of course, be singular or even regular, it need not be permanent. But without a causal account there is no explanatory purchase. Indeed, moderate essentialism is a pre-requisite for a *critical* social science, because accounts that lack an attempt to identify structured regularities and links between the properties of phenomena and emergent outcomes simply have no purchase on structured inequalities. Critical realists such as Sayer point out that a strong anti-essentialist position is devoid of emancipatory possibilities because, as Fuchs does, it sees the social world as “a turbulent system, where ‘order’ and ‘consensus’ emerge locally and for the time being, if at all” (Fuchs, 2001: 4). The clear vision required to see the mechanisms of inequity is lost.

So while we should reject strong essentialism, and the reductionism and determinism that usually accompany it, we also need to avoid a thoughtless rush to relativist constructionism which dismisses regularities in social life and the possibility of going beyond only-contextual accounts. A nuanced depiction of academic tribes and their territories recognises that disciplinary territories do not directly and singularly have behavioural effects, and the behaviours we see amongst academic staff are a result of the emergent properties of a combination of factors. They are *not* chaotic, but have regularities and are constrained in particular ways. Disciplinary characteristics are a significant ingredient in the mix. A nuanced ontology goes beyond dualities and offers accounts of social life which recognise impermanence, conditionality and the significance of different ontological strata.

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1. Though this duality is often posited in the literature, in reality it is a false one: a phenomenon can be socially constructed yet have essentialist characteristics: distinctive properties and the power to cause change in other phenomena. Language is one example. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is notable that ‘essentialism’ therefore itself is essentialist in nature: it has distinguishing properties and it is generative of other things – *causal* *explanations*, which themselves have consequences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. She is far from alone in this: see for example Berger (1970) or Krishnan’s account (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)