

## **Remaking the Social Order": the significance of concerns and commitments in the trajectories of academic developers in South Africa**

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This article reports on a research project which emanated from a larger National Research Foundation Funding project, entitled "Structure, Culture and Agency". The subproject is based on the lives of three academic developers (the authors) in South Africa. We position ourselves as having in the past worked as agents for change within the previous apartheid system and thus in the words of social realist Margaret Archer (2007), we participated in literally "remaking the social order". We believe that academic development in higher education is strongly influenced by the values base and sense of identity of the academic developers; and that these values and sense of identity are strongly influenced by history and the developers' own histories. If this is the case, what role do values play? And how may understanding our pasts, help to provide advice to upcoming educational developers? These are some of the questions that we asked ourselves, when narrating our pasts to each other. At the level of social theory, we were interested to explore how our own stories reflect theory concerning identity and values, most specifically from a social realist perspective. The use of narratives as a research approach is particularly appropriate when exploring issues of biography and identity, as they locate individuals in relation to the past and in relation to aspirations for the future. As Huber, Caine, Huber and Steeves (2013) remark, "our very identities as human beings are inextricably linked to the stories we tell of ourselves, both to ourselves and one another". It is also appropriate when one is attempting to see the linkages between social issues, and how these play themselves out at the macro and individual level. It becomes important in reflective functioning and understanding why we act in the ways that we do within certain social contexts. The shared identity found within a group working together allows for opportunities to "produce validated knowledge, shared beliefs about ways of perceiving, thinking, and doing that we assume to be appropriate in terms of the demands of objective reality" (Turner, 1991). Sense of self can be seen as individuals having commitments, as defined by Archer, and these commitments, for example towards achieving social justice, fuelled us when we are young, and continue to fuel our energy today. There is a circularity to our emerging sense of self: we behave in a certain way, for example to join the struggle because of our belief in social justice, and this provides opportunities, for example it becomes easier to get a job in an NGO associated with education, in which we again reaffirm and re-enact our values. It makes it easier for us to practice in the field of academic development, which we interpret as being about equity and justice. But we did wonder, what doors did our actions close for us, what opportunities did we not enjoy, that might have led us on other paths? In conclusion we believe our use of narrative as a means of excavating our pasts, comparing and contrasting our trajectories and our values, has had value for us as a group to allow us to reflect on matters of social change and our own roles in our environment. It has been affirming as well, providing us with an opportunity to consider our own lives against the backdrop of social forces and social change, and to see how we fitted in to the bigger picture. Finally, on the matter of values, the struggle and whether academic development is informed by a pro-social justice approach, our stories do not pronounce on this matter. All that the stories do, is to explicate how having been in the struggle may make the values base and set of assumptions we are working with in academic development, clearer. The implication of this is that it may be beneficial for academic developers to undertake introspective and retrospective journeys, especially if they are in a position to reflect on these in the company of

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