

## **Critical perspectives on methodology in higher education research**

Kahn Peter, *University of Liverpool, UK*

### **Introduction**

The close connection between higher education and transformations of various kinds in some ways represents the sector's most compelling characteristic. Barnett (1990) argues that the overall project of higher education is one of emancipation, a project achieved for students through critical self-reflection. According to Bhaskar (1986, p. 170), emancipation is a transformation 'from an unwanted and unneeded to a wanted and needed source of determination'. If the higher education sector is to meet the needs and expectations of current and future generations of learners and academics, it is important that we continue to find ways to address emancipatory concerns. Given the diversity of those engaged in higher education, it can hardly be assumed that an exclusively economic focus, for instance, will be sufficient. This is true not only in relation to student learning, but also in relation to processes of research and knowledge production.

It might be argued that the processes by which research is conducted remain marginal to the emancipatory nature of higher education and that it is the resulting knowledge that is of primary interest. If we look at current orthodoxies, the extent to which a research design is appropriately conceptualised dominates considerations of what is counted as acceptable research. But issues of purpose and interest only become more fully transparent in a fuller consideration of sources of determination, and these are left downplayed if the focus remains simply on a conceptualising the research design. Da'Alba and Barnacle (2007), indeed, identify a narrow focus on epistemological issues in higher education at large, and call for further attention to ontology.

This conceptual study explores the relationship between approaches to research into higher education and the nature of practice in the field. In what ways do approaches employed by researchers into higher education help to shape higher education itself? In addressing this question, we take as an example one generative mechanism that impacts directly on the nature of such research. We thereby hope to lay the ground for further analyses that connect approaches to research in higher education and the emancipatory potential of the field, as well as to assist in developing approaches that are distinctive to the study of higher education. We structure our analysis around central concerns highlighted within critical realism. This paradigm offers a non-reductive explanatory critique that draws attention to the structures and generative mechanisms that exist at various strata of social reality (Bhaskar, 1993). The account is motivated in part by the author's underlying interests on the relationship between research and practice, stemming from responsibility for a professional doctorate in higher education.

### **A generative mechanism that influences approaches to research**

Bhaskar (1986) argues that agents themselves play a central role in determining what needs and aspirations are to be pursued, and thus in determining what constitutes their own emancipation. It is thus important to consider approaches to research that accommodate the perspectives of those who are involved or affected on a relatively full basis. We see here the value of incorporating hermeneutical

mechanisms (Gadamer, 1989) into higher education research. In looking at those studies carried out within a set of key higher education journals during 2010, Tight (2013) judged that surveys/multivariate analyses, documentary analyses and interviews together accounted for the methodological stance of 91% of the studies considered. What would such research look like if the approach adopted were to highlight opportunities for dialogue within and beyond a research team?

In considering how to establish such exchanges, it is important to emphasise that research processes occur within social reality more widely. Donati (2011) argues that social relations provide a key generative mechanism that frames reflexivity, thereby shaping both the agency of the parties involved and the interests that are promoted. This draws our attention to the influence of social relations on the ways that research is framed and conducted, whether with collaborators or research participants. Various approaches to research into higher education do incorporate close ties with implicated parties. There is an emerging tradition of student engagement in research into higher education, with attention also devoted to social relations in participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and ethnographies of higher education (Pabian, 2014). The focus on understanding in ethnography contrasts with the emphasis on change in action research, but both traditions constitute approaches that are socially embedded. This is a characteristic also of institutional research within higher education (Delaney, 2009).

A need to maintain social relations, though, places demands on researchers. MacIntyre (1981) argues that any social practice relies for its integrity on those involved displaying associated virtues. There is a need for what we can call 'researcher congruence', such that the social and personal dimensions to the research also cohere in promoting emancipation. Congruence between the activity of the researcher and the approach taken to research underlies much work on critical pedagogy, through associated educational activism. This involves far more than simply following a pre-set method in conducting one's research, with scope for research to give rise to social relations that further support other aspects of higher education.

## **Conclusions**

The way that social relations are incorporated into the research setting represents one generative mechanism that influences the nature of the research, thereby affecting whose needs and aspirations are served. It will be important to identify further generative mechanisms that affect this connection, whether stemming from social structures involve regulation, funding, management or others. For instance, it will be worth exploring how different approaches to research incorporate attention to uncertainty, recognising the extent to which the knowledge that is produced is provisional. Learning to appreciate ways in which knowledge is both certain and uncertain represents an essential feature of higher education, as various stage models of intellectual and moral development suggest (see e.g. (Perry, 1999)). There are ways in which the intellectual development of students is at stake in how higher education research deals with silences, gaps and uncertainty. Such connections between approaches to research and the emancipatory potential of higher education warrant further attention.

## References

- Barnett, R. (1990). *The Idea of Higher Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Bhaskar, R. (1986). *Scientific realism and human emancipation*. London: Verso.
- Bhaskar, R. (1993). *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. London: Verso.
- Dall'Alba, G., & Barnacle, R. (2007). An ontological turn for higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 679–691.
- Delaney, A. M. (2009). Institutional researchers' expanding roles: Policy, planning, program evaluation, assessment, and new research methodologies. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2009(143), 29–41.
- Donati, P. (2011). *Relational sociology: a new paradigm for the social sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Crossroad.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. London: Duckworth.
- Pabian, P. (2014). Ethnographies of higher education: introduction to the special issue. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 4(1), 6–17.
- Perry, W. G. (1999). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *The Sage handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Tight, M. (2013). Discipline and methodology in higher education research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(1), 136–151.