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Synonyms: Agent theory, Disciplinary cultures, institutional culture, new institutionalism, systems of higher education, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, resource dependence theory

General description: This entry discusses the strengths and weaknesses of cultural and institutional approaches to higher education and higher education research

Disciplinary versus institutional approaches

Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) can be approached from two main perspectives. The first one defines HEIs as organisations with their formal structures and processes. The second one approaches HEIs from the perspective of academic communities and disciplinary cultures. These two perspectives not only reveal different aspects of HEIs as organisations and as cultural entities based on networks of academics and international epistemic traditions. These two perspectives also can be defined as organising principles of HEIs where organisational aspect focus attention to HEIs as actors with their decision-making and resource allocation structures and processes, whereas teaching, research and third mission activities of HEIs are rooted in international disciplinary-based academic cultures. These two organising principles of HEIs also can be seen as dominant perspectives in higher education research.

Burton R. Clark (1983) discussed in his classical book higher education as a system consisting of three different levels and defined HEIs as matrix organisations. According to Clark vertical dimension describes HEIs as hierarchical organizations with different institutional levels whereas the horizontal dimensions describes the orientation of academics towards international academic communities and disciplines. Becher and Kogan (1992) continued with this tradition by defining four levels in the national system of higher education. For Kogan and Becher the levels were as follows: individual, basic unit, institution and central authority (national level). Both Clark (1983) and Becher and Kogan (1992) define each of the levels as having their own norms, values and objectives, or external and internal normative and operational modes (according to Becher and Kogan 1992). Without going deeper into these traditional system models of higher education, it can be said that this tradition recognized HEIs as a part of a system of higher education with their own values, processes and operational goals. This tradition also recognized that HEIs are not monolithic entities but consist of a variety of actors (both individual academics, operational basic units and academic groups) which may have and do have different ideas of what a HEI should be doing.

The system approach was further developed by Kogan et al. (2000, 20) when they suggested that each level of the system of higher education should be defined as a field of social action “where a field is an institutionalized area of activity in which actors struggle about something that is of importance to them.” This perspective challenged the traditional top-down or bottom-up reform strategies – and traditional reform analyses – which assumed that the implementation of a reform is a rational process where HEIs just implement national policies or international policy initiatives.

The system approach to higher education did not, however, pay much attention to the nature of differences, especially disciplinary differences, inside HEIs. It also paid little attention to historical developments of national higher education systems or HEIs.

This traditional system approach has been challenged both by disciplinary cultures approach, which aims to understand different academic communities, and institutional approaches which aim to explain institutional behaviour. These will be discussed below.

Disciplinary cultures in higher education research

According to disciplinary cultures perspective academic communities can be understood by focusing analysis on epistemic traditions and disciplinary cultures with their different theoretical foundations, methods of enquiry and interests of knowledge. These differences are related, in turn, to different phenomena under investigation like human body (e.g. medicine) or to different phenomena in physical world (sciences), or to norms, values and beliefs of human beings and their communities (e.g. in anthropology, history, sociology). It is easy to see that different phenomena investigated should be analysed by using different theoretical and methodological approaches in order to understand or explain them. These differences between epistemic traditions and academic disciplines have developed over the history of scientific research. According to Wilhelm Dilthey the main dividing line goes between sciences aiming to *explain* phenomena in nature with the help of general laws and abstractions, whereas epistemic traditions interested in human behaviour seek to *understand* social phenomena.

This traditional distinction was further strengthened by C.P. Snow who claimed that there can be found two worlds in universities, those of humanities (or literary intellectuals) and sciences, which did not communicate with each other (Snow 1959). Snow’s simplified and provocative argumentation gave, in turn, one of the starting points for Tony Becher’s book “Academic Tribes and Territories – Academic enquiry and the cultures of disciplines” (1989) which has become one of the milestones in the study of disciplinary cultures in higher education research. Becher’s book has been a seminal study because it introduced the categories of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ interests of knowledge which are, in turn, related to the methods of enquiry. ‘Soft’ refers to disciplines (such as sociology) which use interpretative methods of enquiry (like analyses of interviews or interpretations of texts) in order to understand human behaviour whereas ‘hard’ disciplines (such as physics) explain natural phenomena with the help of theories – the laws of nature - and normally use quantitative methods in their empirical analyses. The second cultural dimension is the nature of research which Becher describes as the difference between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research. ‘Pure’ refers to disciplines which derive their research topics from theories whereas ‘applied’ refers to disciplines which take their research topics mainly from real life problems and issues.

Becher also paid attention to social dimensions of academic communities by making a distinction between urban and rural modes of research containing different patterns of communication and publishing research outcomes. 'Urban' researchers (typically physicists) work in international research teams and have big networks of colleagues, whereas rural academics (like historians) work often alone and aim to publish books. Becher also paid attention to social cohesion of academic communities maintaining that there can be found both convergent and divergent disciplinary communities.

Combining these categories we can see the inside academia we will have four main categories: 'hard pure'; 'hard applied'; 'soft pure' and 'soft applied'. These categories have proved to be useful heuristics for higher education research because they help to pay attention to disciplinary-related differences in academic work (individualistic vs. team work), communication and publishing (articles vs. books) and funding of research (STEM fields vs. social sciences) thus helping to see the dimensions of differences inside HEIs. However, these categories are less useful as criteria for categorizing disciplines empirically because they are more like ideal types (in the Weberian sense) than empirical descriptions.

In addition to disciplinary cultures, higher education institutions have been analysed as organizational cultures (Tierney 1988, Tierney & Lanford 2018). When analysing universities as cultural entities researchers should pay attention to six main issues. According to Tierney these are as follows: 1) the mission of a HEI, because mission statements describe the core activities of HEIs; 2) environments of HEIs both in terms of geography, architecture and digital communication; 3) socialization of students and staff into the values of the HEI; 4) information: what is information, who has it and how is it disseminated?; 5) strategy of HEI by paying attention to official and actual strategies; 6) leadership by analysing both formal and informal leaders in a HEI under investigation. The strength of this perspective is to pay attention to higher education institutions as complex cultural entities. This perspective also makes it easier to understand that HEIs have remarkable differences in their goals, structures and processes even though all HEIs have many similarities as for their basic tasks of teaching, research and third mission activities.

The study of institutional cultures comes close to the perspective of disciplinary cultures because both of these approaches emphasize the nature of HEIs as cultural entities consisting of different academic communities and institutional actors with their different definitions on the purposes and objectives of higher education. In this regard these perspectives do not assume HEIs as actors *per se* but see HEIs as consisting of many actors, communities and interest groups.

Institutional perspectives to study HEIs

A popular perspective to study HEIs as institutions and organisations in higher education research is opened by new institutional (or neo-institutional) research. This approach is based on the assumption that every field of organisations can be defined as an institutional field because one can find similar processes of homogenization among organization in the given field. In their classical study DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 147) asked: what can lead organisations, after becoming an institutional field, to adopt a common set of patterns, characteristics and specific behaviour, leading them to be increasingly homogenous? They explained organisations' tendency to imitate other organisations by identifying three main processes of isomorphism, or mimetic processes which forces units to resemble each other. These processes of imitation have been defined as follows:

coercive, mimetic and normative (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 150). According to Powell (2007, 2): “Coercive factors involved political pressures and the force of the state, providing regulatory oversight and control; normative factors stemmed from the potent influence of the professions and the role of education; and mimetic forces drew on habitual, taken-for-granted responses to circumstances of uncertainty” (Powell 2007: 2). In more details, the existence of a common legal environment affects many aspects of an organization’s behaviour and structure (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In addition, organisations do not compete only for resources and/or clients but they also compete for political power and legitimacy in their field. This can be called as competitive isomorphism. All of these mechanisms are usually used as factors which explain adoption because according to Greenwood et al. (2008, 7): “Coercive isomorphism occurs because organizations are motivated to avoid sanctions available to organizations on which they are dependent. Normative isomorphism occurs because organizations are motivated to respect social obligations. And mimetic isomorphism occurs because organizations are motivated by their interpretation of others’ successful behavior”.

New institutionalism is, however, not a monolithic research approach. In order to see the differences under the umbrella concept of new institutionalism Hall and Taylor (1996) have divided it into three main schools of thought: the rational choice institutionalism (associated with the economic institutionalism), the historical (or comparative) institutionalism, and the sociological (or organisational) institutionalism. These will be described briefly below.

Rational choice institutionalism is rooted in rational choice theory. This academic perspective applies economic models to the study of institutions. Rational choice theory assumes that actors are rational and therefore make decisions in terms of their utility. However, sociological research has shown that this is not necessarily the case. According to Diogo (2014, 155) “rational choice institutionalism assumes that institutions are created by utility-maximizing individuals with clear intentions.” One of the theoretical approaches utilised in rational choice institutionalism is *Agent theory* which aims to describe ubiquitous agency relationship, where one entity (the principal) delegates work to another entity (the agent), who performs that work. However, Kivistö (2007) has shown that this approach does not fit well with higher education research because it does not capture well the wide range of other than economic aspects influencing government-university relationships. During the last decades neoliberal ideology together with New Public Management have supported rational choice school of thought by advocating that organisations must make rational choices in order to aim for efficiency and high performance. In HEIs, this view has supported managerialism and the need to compete in an increasingly global scale.

Researchers in historical institutionalism are interested in explaining HEIs with the help of their history. Most historical institutionalists also see that HEIs are *path dependent* meaning that contemporary and future actions of HEIs depend on past experiences and decisions made. In other words, contemporary decisions are limited by choices and decisions made in the past. Path dependence perspective also is helpful in explaining why policy continuity is more probable than policy change. Furthermore, according to Gornizka (1999) *resources dependency theory* aims to analyse the rationale on how organisations make active and rational choices to manage their dependency on those parts of the environment that control vital resources (Gornitzka 1999, 7). According to Thelen (1999), historical institutionalists agree with rational choice scholars that actors operate in a strategic manner. However, historical analysis helps to understand why certain goals,

policies, ideas, and so forth are emphasised over others and why there are different national responses to similar challenges. According to this school of thought culture, society and organisational identity are important for the institutions, and therefore on the behaviour of their actors. Therefore, HEIs are not only affected by the strategic calculations of individuals, but also their basic preferences and identity (see Hall and Taylor 1996).

According to Hall and Taylor (1996) sociological institutionalism defines institutions broadly, including not only rules, procedures and norms but also the symbols, cognitive schema and moral patterns that guide human action, establishing a systemic relationship between individuals and institutions. Sociological and historical institutionalisms pay particular attention to the contexts which help to shape policy change, mediate between actors and alter conditions in which decisions are reached. Sociological institutionalism also emphasizes the importance of a structure over agency. In historical and sociological institutionalism, however, human action is more context-driven and goal-driven than in rational choice institutionalism, where context matters less. In addition, from a sociological perspective, "(...) culture is extremely important because it contains the bedrock cognitive similarities that cause people to share perceptions of the world around them. (...). Therefore, culture is one of the most important driving forces behind the institutionalisation of human behaviour" (Aspinwall and Schneider 2000: 8).

A more recent approach based on actor-centred institutionalist approach has been utilised in the higher education field when analysing policy networks and multi-level and multi-actor governance reforms like the Bologna Process (e.g. Witte 2006). This perspective combines rational choice theory with new institutionalism and aims to explain policies and policy outcomes from intentional actions of interdependent actors. This approach acknowledges that intentional actors are shaped by their institutional settings. The concept of 'network' is used here in order to describe how informal institutional settings help to overcome collective action problems and transaction costs of negotiations (Kersbergen and van Waarden 2004, Witte 2006, Diogo 2014).

Palmer, Biggart and Dick (2008) have noted, however, that new institutionalism as a theoretical framework has problems in explaining the connections between organisational contexts and organisation's internal social dynamics. This makes new institutionalism theoretically weak for analysing internal dynamics of organisational change because it does not help to understand and explain, for example, why some HEIs implement radical changes whereas others do nothing despite the fact that they have experienced same institutional pressures. This is where the approaches of disciplinary cultures and institutional cultures can be useful as intellectual perspectives because they reveal different rationalities and communities functioning inside HEIs.

All the academic traditions discussed above aim to explain either how HEIs function or how they are related with their societal contexts. However, they approach two main organising principles of HEIs (disciplines and academic communities vs. hierarchies and formal organisation) from different intellectual perspectives. As for higher education researchers, one of the main challenges is to find a balanced combination utilising different theoretical approaches. The main rationale for this kind of eclectic argument is the fact that HEIs consist both of academic communities and formal organisations which all have different relationships with their surrounding societies and international academic communities.

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