

Academic Tribes and Territories: the theoretical trajectory

Abstract: This paper describes and reflects upon the *Academic Tribes and Territories* thesis as it has developed over 25 years and set out in two separate editions and a third book. The paper evaluates each of these books, setting out the developing thesis and in so doing describing a shift away from epistemological essentialism towards a more nuanced understanding of academic disciplines and their power. This is an understanding influenced by social practice theory and one which sees individual disciplines as constructed as well as enacted, with that construction influenced by contextual factors in academic departments, universities and more broadly.

Key Words: Academic Tribes and Territories, Culture of Disciplines, Metaphor and Sciences, Tony Becher

The First Edition

The research

The first edition of *Academic Tribes and Territories* (Becher, 1989)¹ was based on interviews conducted in the mid-1980s with academics and researchers in universities in the UK and the USA. In the UK these were: Birmingham; Brighton Polytechnic; Bristol; Cambridge; Chelsea College London; Essex; Exeter; Imperial College London; Kent; London School of Economics; Reading; Southampton; University College London. In the USA the universities were University of California (Berkeley, Los Angeles, San Francisco; Santa Barbara); Stanford.

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Altogether Becher conducted 221 interviews across 12 disciplines: Biology: botany and zoology (27)*; Chemistry (15); Economics (13); Geography (12); History (22)*; Law (24)*; Mathematics (13); Mechanical engineering (22)*; Modern languages: French, German, Spanish, Italian (12); Pharmacy (16); Physics (23)*; Sociology (22)*. The figures in brackets are the number of interviews, the asterisks indicate the subjects which provided the central body of data; those without asterisks were tackled in less depth, and could be classified as subsidiary.

In addition Becher reviewed much of the relevant literature extant at the time. His deft handling of it together with his elegant use of academic discourse is a great virtue of the book.

The argument

The first edition set out a thesis which argued, in summary, that the knowledge structures of disciplines (the academic territories) strongly condition or even determine the behaviour and values of academics. In this account academics live in disciplinary tribes with common sets of practices, at least as far as research practices are concerned (though the argument has been extended beyond it by many other authors).

These knowledge structures, the epistemological core of disciplines, have a cognitive dimension (elaborated by Kolb² in 1981 and Biglan³ in 1973) and a social dimension (developed by Becher himself). The cognitive dimension divides disciplines into *hard* and *soft*, *pure* and *applied* to give a four cell matrix. *Hard* disciplines have well-developed theory, universal laws, causal propositions, they are cumulative and have generalisable findings. *Soft* disciplines have unclear boundaries, relatively unspecified theoretical structure, are subject to fashions and have loosely defined problems. *Pure* disciplines are self-regulating and not directly applied to the professions or problems in the outside world. *Applied* disciplines are regulated by external influence to some extent (for example by professional bodies such as ones regulating lawyers or engineers) and are more applied within the professions and to problems of various sorts; economic, medical, physical or social.

The social dimension again offers a four cell matrix. This time the axes run between *convergent* and *divergent* on the one hand and *urban* and *rural* on the other. *Convergent* disciplines have uniform standards in research practice and a relatively stable elite. *Divergent* disciplines sustain more intellectual deviance and frequently experience attempts to shift research standards. *Urban* disciplines are characterised by intense interaction and a high people-to-problem ratio. *Rural* ones have bigger territories, less interaction and a lower people-to-problem ratio.

Combining these epistemic features Becher claimed that it is possible to say that physics for example is hard, pure, convergent and urban. Sociology is soft, pure, divergent and rural. Engineering is hard, applied, convergent and urban. Economics is hard, applied, convergent and rural. These 'territorial' differences create differences in practices between the academic tribes, for example in how and how much academics communicate with each other, in how they address research problems and what they consider important and trivial and in the standards of 'publishability'. In hard pure disciplines there is considerable consensus in terms of these research-related attitudes, values and practices whereas in soft applied ones there is diversity, even conflict about even fundamental issues such as the nature of the discipline itself. Career trajectories, research activities outside their own university contexts and publishing practices differ markedly between disciplines too, but tend to be quite consistent within them according to this account.

Critiquing the First Edition

The level of analysis and the integrity of the model

The problem with hard/soft, pure/applied, convergent/divergent, urban/rural categorisation is that while it seems to make sense when disciplines are viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, from a great distance, the distinctions begin to fall apart in the analytical hand when one looks at disciplines close up. The fractures within them become very apparent when the analyst steps out of the helicopter, as do the similarities between apparently very different subdisciplinary areas. The patterns of territorial difference are not so clear as the description in the 1989 book suggests. The landscape is an exceptionally complicated one, and is quickly changing to become even more complicated as time goes on.

The trickle-down theory of change

The argument of the first edition is predicated on the idea that what Yale and Harvard do today, a community college in the mid-West of the USA will do tomorrow. Becher says:

I confined my attention to members of those departments which were viewed as reasonably prestigious within their disciplinary communities [...] The disciplinary values with which [most academics] are first inculcated are [...] the

values of the leading departments in their fields [...] So it seemed sensible to concentrate on the pacemakers rather than those that follow behind them.⁴

As long ago as 1974 Donald Light was questioning this approach and suggested that academic staff in different structural locations (in terms of the institution they work in, the nature of their employment and their own characteristics) develop different cultures.⁵ In most countries there is a process of academic differentiation occurring, with higher education institutions becoming more diverse, the one from another. As private corporations such as the Apollo group become inserted into national systems and as other providers become involved in research and in the provision of higher education this is likely to become more the case. The situation, and hence the appropriate metaphor, has become less 'trickle down' and more 'one hundred flowers blossoming' – less Ronald Reagan and more Mao Zedong.

Gender blindness

A second effect of a research design which focuses on elite institutions, disciplines and the higher status activity of research rather than the generally lower status activity of teaching is that there is a concomitant focus on men. We know that the glass ceiling which limits opportunities for women compared to men reaching the top positions continues to exist in different degrees in higher education institutions around the world, and the result of this research design is to largely omit women from the sample. Certainly the gender issue is invisible, as Becher himself admits. He says:

If I were to start again I would want to build in more systematic allowance for gender differences.⁶

In addition the language of the first edition is redolent with what today would be seen as unacceptable sexist language, with talk of 'Great Men' and the constant use of 'he' to refer to any unspecified individual academic for example.

Problems with the 'tribes' metaphor

The selection of the metaphor of 'tribes' has only recently been critiqued.⁷ However, post-colonial theory in other areas of research than higher education critiques the term's colonial roots and inaccurate and tendentious portrayal of native peoples, and discursively it is problematic. Southall describes how the term has been used in

European colonial discourses since the 18th century, serving to distinguish between “savagery” and “civilisation”.⁸ Manathunga and Brew say:

In order to establish control over colonial territories, it was necessary to engage in a process of categorisation and naming of indigenous peoples (Southall, 1996). So colonialists around the globe tried to classify people into tribes based on significant ‘mistranslation and misunderstandings of local social structure, geography and history’ (Southall, 1996: 1331). The term tribe then came to signify ‘primitive peoples’ who shared a ‘common language and culture, with uniform rules of social organisation, a common name, contiguous territory and tradition of common descent’ (Southall, 1996: 1334–1335). As a result, the vague and often inaccurate differentiations between colonised peoples came to be essentialised and solidified into false tribal labels.⁹

It might be said that the same is true of Becher’s first edition. Its final sentence is:

What has been offered here is after all a prolegomenon, not an epilogue, a naming ceremony for a new and untried set of ideas, rather than an obituary on an inquiry whose course is fully run.¹⁰

Like the colonial naming “tribes”, that ceremony may have been misconceived, with deleterious consequences.

Epistemological structures and academic cultures: strength and limits of connections

There is a certain vagueness in the first edition about the limits and strength of the determining effect of knowledge structures on academic cultural characteristics. Becher talks about the hierarchies found within the different disciplines, the gate-keeping practices, the nature of innovations within them, communication patterns, career trajectories and life patterns of academics in different disciplines. Knowledge differences are important too in conditioning (or perhaps determining) the modes in which arguments are ‘generated, developed, expressed and reported’¹¹. But it is unclear how tenacious the links are between the nature of the discipline and these characteristics: can they withstand new possibilities for communication, or new pressures for types of research from research evaluation exercises for example? Such issues are not addressed. He even talks about practices such as office decoration differences and the kind of sports and other leisure pastimes preferred by the different tribes:

Although it was not part of my purpose to enquire into the private, as against the professional, lives of those I met, it was [...] apparent from the incidental remarks they made that the 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'. The biologists, along with the historians, tended to the view that theirs was 'a discipline for loners'.¹²

It is not quite clear exactly what the nature of the linkage is. Becher says, for example:

[...] the close-knit epistemological structure of high energy physics research is mirrored by the fast-moving, competitive, densely populated – one might say urban – research community associated with that field.¹³

Exactly how this process of 'mirroring' occurs is unclear.

Substantive changes within disciplines and in higher education globally

Much has changed in higher education around the world since the mid-1980s when the research for *Academic Tribes and Territories* was conducted. Some writers see disciplines themselves as in decline as organising structures.¹⁴ Certainly disciplinary characteristics have undergone great changes:¹⁵ disciplines are becoming highly complex and even more dynamic, they are shifting, boundaries are changing and there are more subdisciplines than ever.

At the same time in higher education more generally much has changed, with new managerialism in ascendency almost everywhere, reductions in state funding and a commensurate need for entrepreneurial activity to generate income, the rise of "mass" higher education developing around the globe, increasing state-control, the predominance of vocational aims for higher education and, for academics, simultaneous processes of work intensification and work degradation. These pressures lead to changes in academic cultures which may be unconnected to, or only partially mediated by, disciplinary characteristics.

The Second Edition

The 2nd edition of this text, co-authored by Becher and Trowler and published in 2001, sought to address some of the dramatic contextual and epistemological changes to higher education during the late 1980s and 1990s and to update the material more generally.¹⁶ It explored the impact of Mode 2 knowledge (applied, transdisci-

plinary, problem-orientated knowledge) and “triple helix” linkages between universities, the state and industry on academic tribes and territories. It gave attention to discipline-related issues about teaching as well as research and reported literature concerning practices in institutions lower in league-table rankings than those reported in the first edition. However there was no new primary data collected specifically for its preparation; the new material was derived from studies by other authors. The only exception was the use of new data collected for my own study *Academics Responding to Change*¹⁷, though that was collected for other purposes.

The second edition largely retained the theoretical framework of the 1989 text but addressed many of the deficiencies outlined above. The trickle-down theory was rejected in favour of a greater emphasis on contextual contingency. The gender-blindness was addressed, both in terms of the male-centric language used and substantively, giving attention to the different experiences of men and women. By discussing teaching practices within the disciplines the book attempted to widen the analytical focus.

Critiquing the Second Edition

Many of the fundamental problems of the first book remained in the second edition because the opportunity to review the whole thesis had not been taken: the basic model remained in place. This was still an essentialist account, though a little less determinist now, arguing as it did a somewhat weaker relationship between epistemological characteristics and cultural features. The problems with the metaphor of ‘tribes’ remained because that metaphor was still being deployed. By 2008 (Trowler, 2008a and b) I had rejected the simple epistemological essentialist view¹⁸ and was developing an alternative approach, which was more fully articulated in the third book in the series (Trowler, Saunders, and Bamber eds., 2013)

The Third Book

The third book to address the topic had a different publisher, one which had newly acquired the imprint of the UK’s *Society for Research into Higher Education*. It was presented as an edited volume and involved three editors: myself and Professors Murray Saunders and Veronica Bamber.¹⁹

This time the opportunity was taken to fundamentally review the tribes and territories thesis, and to elaborate on a new approach illustrated via a series of cases contributed by a range of authors from around the world. This extended the per-

spective of the book beyond the North Atlantic-centric view taken in the two earlier books.

For these reasons, as well as the fact that, very sadly, Professor Becher had now passed away, I regard this as a separate book rather than the third edition of the same book.

A social practice approach informed the view taken of disciplines in this third book. This was a completely new perspective. The text defined disciplines in this way:

Reservoirs of knowledge resources shaping regularised behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses and motivations. These provide structured dispositions for disciplinary practitioners who reshape them in different practice clusters into localised repertoires. While alternative recurrent practices may be in competition within a single discipline, there is common background knowledge about key figures, conflicts and achievements. Disciplines take organisational form, have internal hierarchies and bestow power differentially, conferring advantage and disadvantage.²⁰

This volume had the subtitle *Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*, which signalled a view which gave less power to disciplines in conditioning practices. It recognised other powerful structures such as technologies and managerialist ideology and practices as well as the significance of agency in disciplinary articulation. In applying social practice theory this revised view sees academic disciplines as malleable, as open, natural systems which are influenced in contextually-contingent ways by social and material characteristics. Individual academic identities and power relations are significant in structuring how disciplinary practices are instantiated in specific locales. This is wholly new ontologically and epistemologically as well as theoretically when compared with the approach of the first two books.

Critiquing the Third Book

In retrospect I would amend the definition of disciplines above to the following:

Disciplines are reservoirs of ways of knowing which, in dynamic combination with other structural phenomena, can condition behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses and motivations. Together this constellation of factors results in structured dispositions for disciplinary practitioners who, in conjunction with external forces,

reshape them in different practice clusters into localised repertoires. While alternative recurrent practices may be in competition within a single discipline, there is common background knowledge about key figures, conflicts and achievements. Disciplines take organisational form, have internal hierarchies and bestow power differentially, conferring advantage and disadvantage.

Perhaps this is mere wordplay, but the use of 'knowledge' (implying a concrete thing) in the book's definition strikes me now as wrong. There is also a de-emphasising of the power of disciplines in this revised definition, immediately above which is expressed in the phrase the 'dynamic combination with other structural phenomena' and 'constellation of factors'. To my mind the power of disciplines over the practices of academics is over-emphasised in the book's definition, although that was my own attempt to define what they are.

I have now come to see disciplines as being articulated in different ways in different contexts, while retaining recognisable core characteristics. In my 2014 paper I elaborate on this idea, drawing on Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances as an organizing device.²¹ This approach moves away from the conceptually disabling strong essentialism of the earlier work to a weak form of essentialism which gives intra-disciplinary difference room to breathe and moderates in multiple ways any conception of the generative power of disciplines in relation to academic practices and anything else.

As an edited work, I am not sure the third volume quite works. Many of the cases are only tangentially related to the theory set out in the earlier chapters, and much work is left to the reader to draw the connections between that theory and the details of each case, although section introductions by the editors try to do that for them.

Conclusion

Despite these faults, a recent review of the whole oeuvre (if I may dignify it with that term) says this:

"The tribes and territories thesis [...] has made a significant contribution to education studies in mapping ontological, epistemological and methodological shifts within education studies over 23 years"²² (Hughes, 2013, p. 261)

I would like to think that this is the case, but remain acutely conscious of the flaws that exist in all three books.

Notes

- 1 Tony Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*, Buckingham 1989.
- 2 David A. Kolb, Learning styles and disciplinary differences, in: Arthur W. Chickering, ed., *The Modern American College*. San Francisco 1981, 232–255.
- 3 Anthony Biglan, The Characteristics of Subject Matter in Different Academic Areas, in: *Journal of Applied Psychology* 57, No. 3 (1973), 195–203.
- 4 Becher, *Academic Tribes*, 3.
- 5 Donald Light, Jr., Introduction. the Structure of the Academic Professions, in: *Sociology of Education* 47, No. 1 (1974), 2–28.
- 6 Becher, *Academic Tribes*, 179.
- 7 Catherine Manathunga/Angela Brew, *Beyond Tribes and Territories. New Metaphors for New Times*, in: Paul Trowler/Murray Saunders/Veronica Bamber, Eds., *Tribes and territories in the 21st-century. Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*, London 2012, 44–56.
- 8 Aidan Southall, Tribes, in: David Levinson/Melvin Ember, Eds., *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 4., New York 1996, 1329–1336.
- 9 Manathunga/Brew, *Beyond*, 48.
- 10 Becher, *Academic tribes*, 180.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 13 Tony Becher, The Significance of Disciplinary Differences, in: *Studies in Higher Education* 19, No. 2 (1994), 151–161, 153.
- 14 Michael Gibbons/Camille Limoges/Helga Nowotny/Simon Schwartzman/Peter Scott/Martin Trow, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London 1994; Helga Nowotny/Peter Scott/Michael Gibbons, *Re-thinking Science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*, Cambridge 2001; Angela Brew, Book review of Nowotny, H., Scott, P. and Gibbons, M. (2001). *Re-thinking Science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge, Polity Press, in: *Studies in Higher Education* 27, No. 3 (2002), 353–354.
- 15 Burton R. Clark, Case Studies of Innovative Universities: a progress report, in: *Tertiary Education and Management* 2, No. 1 (1996), 53–62.
- 16 Tony Becher/Paul Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories. Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*, 2nd Ed., Buckingham 2001.
- 17 Paul Trowler, *Academics Responding to Change: New Higher Education Frameworks and Academic Cultures*, Buckingham 1998.
- 18 Paul Trowler, *Beyond Epistemological Essentialism: Academic Tribes in the 21st Century*, in: Carolin Kreber, ed., *The University and its Disciplines. Teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries*, London 2008, 181–195. Paul Trowler, *Cultures and Change in Higher Education. Theories and Practices*, London 2008.
- 19 Paul Trowler/Murray Saunders/Veronica Bamber, Eds., *Tribes and territories in the 21st-century. Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education*, London 2012.
- 20 Trowler/Saunders/Bamber, 9.
- 21 Paul Trowler, *Depicting and Researching Disciplines: Strong and moderate essentialist approaches*, in: *Studies in Higher Education* 39, No. 10 (2014), 1720–1731.
- 22 Mark Hughes, Book review essay: the territorial nature of organization studies, in: *Culture and Organization* 19, No. 3 (2013), 261–274, 261.