

Academic Tribes and Territories

Intellectual enquiry and the
culture of disciplines

SECOND EDITION

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The Society for Research into Higher Education
& Open University Press

Published by SRHE and
Open University Press
Celtic Court
22 Ballmoor
Buckingham
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world wide web: www.openup.co.uk

and
325 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

First Published 1989
Reprinted 1993, 1996

First Published in this edition 2001

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 335 20627 1 (pb) 0 335 20628 X (hb)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Becher, Tony

Academic tribes and territories : intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines / Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler.—2nd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-335-20628-X — ISBN 0-335-20627-1 (pb)

1. Universities and colleges—Great Britain—Faculty. 2. Universities and colleges—United States—Faculty. 3. Universities and colleges—Great Britain—Curricula. 4. Universities and colleges—United States—Curricula. I. Trowler, Paul. II. Title.

LB2331.74.G7 B43 2001
378.1'2'0941—dc21

00-068750

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed by in Great Britain by St Edmundsbury Press, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

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way threatening (usually because they purport to undermine an established ideology or school of thought) is not confined to any one knowledge area, manifesting itself from time to time with comparable partiality in every kind of discipline.

The limitations of the exercise of peer judgement are easier to discern in the more or less publicly accessible arena of book reviewing or the refereeing of journal articles – where opinions are at least open to being challenged or appealed against – than in the closed world of making appointments and promotions, approving grant proposals, according honours or awarding prizes. Here the only recourse against the suspicion of unfairness is to try one's luck at another time or in another place, with the attendant risk that one or more of the same unfavourable referees will be employed. Where the achievement of a coveted goal is open to strong competition from people in a diversity of fields, the problem of making a just choice is all the worse. Faced with an array of well-supported, highly qualified candidates from disciplines whose standards are not easily comparable with one another, the temptation to lapse from the niceties of intellectual judgement to the coarser pursuit of political bargaining can become intense, as many of those who have been involved in such situations may be prepared in their unguarded moments to acknowledge.

Taking the long view, however, such complaints about the peer review process may be of no great import. They serve a useful purpose in signalling familiar pitfalls to be guarded against or in suggesting modest reforms in current practice,¹⁰ but they cannot be allowed to constitute a major indictment against the system as a whole. Most of those who advocate parliamentary democracy as a method of government are prepared to acknowledge its manifold weaknesses: their defence of it rests on the claim that there is no preferable substitute. So too, it can be argued, the exercise of peer group judgement must be tolerated, for all its admitted faults, because no one, and certainly not the QAA, has yet come up with an approach to academic evaluation that would not be discernibly worse.

Networks and social circles

The concept of a peer group has affinities with that of a network, as may be seen from the following comment by Crane (1972): 'Behind the seemingly impersonal structure of scientific knowledge, there is a vast interpersonal network that screens new ideas in terms of a central theme or paradigm, permitting some a wide audience and consigning many to oblivion.'

That a network also has a close relationship with the notion of a specialist area or segment may be seen by relating some of the observations in Chapter 4 to this statement by Mulkay (1977):

Research networks are amorphous social groupings which, partly due to migration . . . and partly due to overlapping membership . . . are in a

state of constant flux. At any one time the research community as a whole, as well as particular disciplines and specialties within it, is composed of numerous networks at various stages of formation, growth and decline.

An attempt to locate a tidy pattern in both sets of relationships might go something like this. A general distinction can be made (Becher and Kogan 1992) between what individuals or groups of individuals do – which may be termed their operational mode – and what their values, aspirations and loyalties are – which may be labelled their normative mode. The two modes are interdependent, in that significant changes in one will tend to be reflected in changes in the other. The peer group represents the academic community in its normative mode, where its predominant concern is with establishing standards, assessing merit and evaluating reputations. The network represents its operational mode, in which the focus is on the development and communication of knowledge as such. The interconnections may be seen in the way in which knowledge development is tested against professional norms (screened, in Crane's words, 'in terms of a central theme or paradigm') and the comparable way in which reputation may affect the collective identification and communication of 'new ideas'.

The distinction between norms and operations has a different frame of reference from that between the social and the cognitive aspects of academic life, though a shadowy connection may be discerned between them. It is in terms of this second dichotomy that networks and segments are related. It was suggested in Chapter 4 that the term segment might be seen in cognitive terms to signify divisions in knowledge at the microscopic level, whether or not such divisions fell within disciplinary domains or straddled the boundaries between them. The term network may be reserved to designate the corresponding social divisions: 'amorphous social groupings', as Mulkey describes them, of which 'the research community . . . is composed'.

A useful analogy, in attempting to characterize networks in more detailed terms, is that of a 'social circle' (developed by Crane 1969a, 1972). The parallel is a neat one, in that social circles are 'amorphous', 'overlapping' and 'in a state of constant flux'. They are centred on, and drawn around, both individuals and groups. That is, they can be defined in both personal and interpersonal terms – one may speak for some purposes of 'X's social circle', and for others of 'the social circle to which X belongs'. They also allow for pluralism, in that an individual may be said to belong to more than one such group. The attributes of social circles may vary. They may be large or small, active or moribund, important, colourful and exciting or insignificant, drab and mundane. They may be cliquy or open, and the relationships between members may be close or relatively distant, somewhere on the spectrum from best friends to nodding acquaintances. And they may be seen to be 'at various stages of formation, growth and decline'.¹¹

The abundant research literature on the theme has three noticeable features. The first will by now seem familiar: it focuses largely (though not

exclusively, as we shall see later) on the hard pure domain of the natural sciences. The second is its tendency to concentrate on the high life, on those active, glamorous situations in which interesting things are always happening, at the expense of those that follow the everyday routines of what Kuhn (1962) calls 'normal science'. The third characteristic of network studies is that they more or less consistently adopt the group as against the individual perspective, which sometimes has the effect of reifying the concept into an independent, substantive entity, divorced from the consideration of membership and, as Chubin (1976) complains, careless of the question of intellectual content. In contrast, the data from the initial study, being drawn more widely from a scatter of disciplines, tend to emphasize everyday circumstances as against contexts of high intellectual excitement, and to reflect the individual's standpoint rather than that of the group as a whole. The two approaches turn out in the event to be complementary to, rather than contradictory of, one another. The ensuing discussion will deal briefly with both.

To start with the material from the initial interviews, one phenomenon is clearly evident in the testimony from members of virtually every discipline; namely, the existence of an inner and an outer circle of professional acquaintance. The outer circle is in many cases quite large in compass, numbering somewhere between 100 and 400 people, with a norm of about 200. Its members comprise those colleagues with whose names and work one is more or less familiar – the distant intellectual relatives and passing professional friends one might occasionally meet and greet at conferences, those who might appear on one's mailing lists for offprints or publisher's notices. The inner circle is usually surprisingly small, ranging from half a dozen to a score, with a dozen as a fairly common average. The bonds here are tighter and more resilient, singling out those colleagues with whom one has a direct affinity and a closely shared interest; those critical friends to whom one would send draft papers for comment and whose own drafts one would take some trouble to read; the kind of people one would go to for assistance over a knotty problem, advice on research tactics, or support at times of intellectual adversity, and whom one would expect to help in one's turn.¹²

The size of the outer circle shows some variation from one type of specialism to another, with practitioners in socially well-organized, cognitively hard knowledge fields (physics in particular) often claiming large numbers, and those in loosely organized soft areas (social geography, say, or minority languages) usually quoting smaller ones.¹³ The inner circle, however, seems to reflect no such cognitive contrasts. Variations in size here seem more a function of individual gregariousness than of subject field. Rather than reflecting a curiously uniform property of knowledge in all its different manifestations – the ability to be neatly parcelled up into small units capable of accommodating some 20 active researchers at most – the incidence of such small groupings seems more likely to arise from the difficulty academics have in sustaining more than a limited number of close affinities. Links of the intense kind in question are demanding as well as rewarding:

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they take time to develop and sustain. Moreover, there is usually a limit to the extent to which one is prepared to confide in others about one's own half-formed ideas, or to be receptive to theirs.

Previous researches into academic networks give some indirect support to this contrast between inner and outer circles, though they do not address it directly. Thus Crane (1972) quotes Roberts's contention that groups could be as small as half a dozen (Roberts 1970), but attributes this to low paradigm development in the humanities; and Mullins (1973a) ascribes the size of 'clusters' - a 'minimum core of 13 to 15 active students, teachers and researchers' - to a particular phase in the cycle of growth of coherent intellectual groups.

A more commonly noted contrast in network research is that between open and closed groups. Mullins (1968) and Knorr Cetina (1982) are among those who focus on the incidence of informal contacts across group boundaries. The first author, however, in a joint paper with Griffith (Griffith and Mullins 1972) also discerns certain highly coherent groups that develop their own enclosed and private worlds: 'these groups generate "tribal folklore" and customs, including distinctive lifestyles, mock ceremonies and awards, special ingroup roles, and even, on occasion, a group sport'. Close cohesion is generally seen to be more common in 'revolutionary' than in 'normal' contexts. Those who are united in an attempt to contest the prevailing orthodoxies, or to strike out in a novel direction, tend to show a higher level of interaction and a more intense pattern of communication than those who are engaged on central problems demanding accepted modes of practice in areas in which the appropriateness of the subject matter, methods and theories are not in dispute (we return to a more detailed consideration of this point in Chapter 6).

Case histories of particular networks, understandably enough, tend to focus on the interesting exceptions to everyday routine. They are not confined to groups in the hard sciences, though these remain the dominant focus. Thus, alongside Knorr Cetina's (1999) careful scrutiny of laboratory cultures in high energy physics and molecular biology, there is a comparable exploration by Evans (1993) into the English discipline and the networks that permeate it.

Studies along these lines commonly represent the evolution of their research grouping as falling into three or four phases. Mullins, one of the front runners in such research, labels them as 'normal', 'network', 'cluster' and 'specialty', giving them somewhat surprisingly precise definitions, sizes of membership (Mullins 1973a, 1973b) and collective lifespans ('10 to 15 years is typical'; Griffith and Mullins 1972). Leaving aside the first of these, which can be taken simply as the characteristic form of loose network underpinning most academic activity, the remaining stages are usually identified in terms of (1) a disorganized, spontaneous growth of interest in a new development, as a result of which a network begins to coalesce and its defining doctrines to crystallize; (2) a more systematic structure of communication, recruitment and training, during which small internal interest

groups appear and external boundaries become more firmly staked out; and (3) a stage at which the area becomes institutionalized, the excitement dies down and routine sets in. In the end, 'the penalty of success . . . is the death of the group as a distinct social and intellectual entity' (Griffith and Mullins 1972); 'growth turns imperceptibly into decline as recruitment falls away and as established members of the network move elsewhere into problem areas in the process of formation' (Mulkey 1977). The process can be aborted at any stage. Where a particular area of intellectual development proves to be less promising than it initially seemed, support ebbs away and the network dies a premature death – though here, as elsewhere, a rump of the highly committed converts may remain to pursue their unfashionable concerns in what will by that point have become an intellectual backwater.

However, this account of the life-cycle of research groupings needs to be modified in the light of research funding councils' adoption of more dirigiste policies during the 1990s, at least in the UK. Henkel (2000) notes that the ESRC promoted a shift in favour of team research in that decade. In common with other research councils, its funding policies were increasingly organized around collaborative programmes so that by 2000 less than 40 per cent of its allocations were made to individuals in what is called the responsive mode. Such policies will interfere with the natural cycle of birth and death in collaborative research groupings as well as with the shape and characteristics of the groups themselves.

Understandably, the internationalization and globalization of HE, discussed in Chapter 1, has important implications for the networks in which academics are involved. Scott (1998) identifies three important processes in academic staff networking at this level: the international flow of staff; the internationalization of collaboration between institutions; and the internationalization of the flow of ideas. None of them are new, but all have been invigorated by technological and economic change as well as by changes in HE itself.

The first, staff flows, spans the range from permanent relocation to brief visits, the latter now becoming predominant, but with the research universities of the USA provides the prime destination for the former. Scott discerns a class system of sorts at work in terms of international travel, with elite scholars and the 'management class' more able than run-of-the-mill academics to take advantage of new opportunities for travel.

The second, collaboration, typically involves bi-partisan arrangements and, increasingly often, multiple-partner regional or global agreements. These may be directed towards a political goal (for example the development of the HE systems of Latin American countries, as in the EU's Alfa programme). Alternatively they may offer a response to a perceived threat (as in the case of the British government's call in 2000 for consortial bids from universities and private sector companies to develop collaborative 'e-universities' – designed to counter perceived incursions into domestic markets by virtual universities abroad).

Scott's third category, the flow of ideas in relation to the humanities natural and social sciences has always been international. He notes that

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while the 'hardware' of big science may need to be increasingly concentrated, the balance is shifting in favour of the 'software' in that it can readily be produced in a variety of locations. There is moreover a pattern in the dispersion of software production, an unequal division of academic labour, 'with the truly creative paradigm-busting science being done in North America (and, to a lesser extent, Europe) and routine science subcontracted to outworkers in the Indian subcontinent, Latin America and so on.' (Scott 1998: 120). The patterns of internationalization and globalization of academic networking are thus increasingly conditioned by social structural factors and economic considerations.

The influence of fashion

Every one of the 12 disciplines covered by the initial study appeared to be subject to fashion (or, as one sociologist preferred to call it, 'paradigm choice or shift'). Some informants considered this a healthy feature of their academic community, allowing scope for individuals to move in new directions and ensuring that ideas did not stagnate. Others took a less positive view, deploring the tendency of some colleagues to 'behave like a flock of lemmings' in pursuit of novelty, noting the adverse effects on the systematic development of the field, and commenting on the consequent overpopulation in some areas at the expense of underpopulation in others. One of the chemists interviewed summed up a common worry: that susceptibility to fashion served to create 'a cyclical pattern of glut and scarcity'. Another remarked on the 'tendency to flock into new areas while other fields become comparatively neglected'.

The term itself, as some respondents noted, is value-laden, in that the same research activity might be represented as 'a mere fad' by those who disapproved of it, where those in favour would describe it as 'a hot area', and hence as rightly attracting new recruits.¹⁴ Crane (1969b) attempts a neutral account in her observation that: 'The key factor in fashion is that similar perceptions of an area come to be shared by large numbers of scientists due to a process of social validation occurring in a rapidly expanding communication network.'

Recruitment to meet the need for expansion 'depends upon the number of scientists in related areas who are capable in terms of training of moving into [a new field]'. It tends to stem from three main groups of academics. The first consists of those who are highly mobile by temperament and profession: people who eschew fixed loyalties to a single line of research and are eager to seek out novel ideas as they begin to appear over the horizon. The second is the group of individuals who, at any given time, have become disenchanted with their current line of research – usually because it is, or they themselves are, apparently going stale – and who are therefore looking out for promising fresh departures. The third group comprises the novitiates to the discipline, the research students who arrive with