Paul Cashian
Coventry University, UK

Establishing an Employability Social Structure as the Basis for Future Employablity Research: A Critical Realist Perspective (0033)

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Bhaskar describes the critical realist view of society in the following terms:

> "People do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather, society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce and transform, but which would not exist unless they do so" (Bhaskar, 1998, p.36)

The 'structures, practices and conventions' of the social structure refers to both the tangible legal, political and organisational institutions that exist within a society, and also the less tangible ethical, moral and general societal attitude and structures that a society reflects. For critical realists, however, social structure is not deterministic in nature but more a construction of those tangible and intangible pre-existing 'social facts' (Pring, 2004) which impinge on the creation of an individual's social reality. What is equally important is to establish the relationships between the elements of the social structure. Although these social constructs have no independent agency how individual agents construct their social reality reflects both the implicit and explicit relationships between them. The purpose of this paper is to argue that previous research into factors impacting on student employability provides sufficient evidence to construct a critical realist employability social structure. Constructing a critical realist framework also allows for 'employability' be explored from a firmer conceptual basis.

One strand of research into employability has focused on trying to establish the key impact variables on a student's employability. Figure 1 below summarises the recurring 'social facts' evident in the previous large scale studies into student employability.

Figure 1 – Previously identified impact factors on Employability

| 1 | Class of degree | Smith, McKnight and Naylor, 2000; Mason, Williams, Cranmer and Guille, 2003; Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003;  HEFCE, 2001; Smetherham, 2006; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton, 2005 |
| 2 | Prior educational attainment | Smetherham, 2006; Smith, McKnight and Naylor, 2000; Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton, 2005 |
| 3 | Age | Smith, McKnight and Naylor, 2000; Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003, HEFCE, 2001 |
| 4 | Social class | Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, |

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| | | 2003; Mason, Williams, Cranmer and Guille, 2003; Smith, McKnight and Naylor, 2000 |
| 5 | Gender | Smetherham, 2006; Mason, Williams, Cranmer and Guille, 2003; Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton, 2005 |
| 6 | Ethnicity | Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003; HEFCE, 2001 |
| 7 | Parental background (income and HE contact) | Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003 |
| 8 | Institution attended | Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton, 2005 |
| 9 | Degree | Required by definition |

When the factors identified in figure 1 are combined with the institutions (schools, universities, employing companies) and embedded practices (such as those related to graduate recruitment or university entrance) then a critical realist social structure surrounding employability begins to emerge.

Figure 2 – The Employability Social Structure

Central to the framework is the student's university experience with pre-university experiences being defined as 'prior variables'. The framework incorporates two entrances through which a student must pass with entry being gained through a mix of required elements (direct variables) and less clearly defined elements (indirect variables). Previous research also suggests an indirect link between aspects of a student's social and biographical background and the graduate labour market entrance.

The adoption of a critical realist perspective provides a stronger conceptual basis to employability research. A student's individual employability becomes something which they actively manage and develop as they interact with the employability social structure (figure 2) rather than being equated with merely gaining a DLHE classified graduate job. The adoption of a critical realist view also requires the researcher to distinguish between context factors (pre-determined 'social facts') and mechanisms (variables which potentially impact on the outcome). The distinction between context factors and potential mechanisms will vary according to which aspect of the social structure is being investigated. Thus research into university employability enhancement programmes will treat factors relating to a student's social background as context and hence fixed.

Finally causality within a critical realist social structure arises from how individual agents create their social reality in relation to the pre-determined elements of the social structure. Any commonalities in actions may lead the researcher to consider there is evidence of causality however this will only be contingent causality based on the specific context of the research. The employability social structure shown in figure 2 is a generic framework based on high level categories which correspond with impact variables which have occurred across

a range of previous research contexts. The social structure still represents an open system which will need a degree of closure reflecting the research question being addressed before meaningful conclusions can be drawn.

Therefore the argument is that by developing a generic employability social structure and the adoption of a critical realist perspective allows for a more coherent, focused and theoretical basis to future employability research.

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