Knowledge Circulation in HE Research in Europe: What has Changed Since the Early 1970s?

Laberge, Suzanne *
School of Kinesiology and Physical Activity Sciences, Université De Montréal, Montréal, Canada

Albert Mathieu
Institute of Health Science Education, Mcgill University, Montréal, Canada

Bolander Laksov
Klara, Department of Education, Stockholm Univé, Stockholm, Sweden

Barman, Linda
Department of Education, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose of this Study: Like other topic-centred research areas, such as communication studies, criminology, and medical education, the field of higher education research is likely to be confronted with two challenges: self-referentiality and fragmentation. Self-referentiality occurs when members of a field reach a critical mass and engage in intellectual conversations without resorting to the insights of neighboring disciplines. Knowledge circulates internally within the field, resulting in fewer cross-disciplinary exchanges of ideas. Fragmentation arises when a topic-centred field gets divided into sub-specialties with limited dialogue between them. In this article, we centre our attention on self-referentiality, leaving fragmentation for future work. We investigate whether the institutionalization of the field of higher education in Europe since its emergence in the 1970s prompted a move towards self-referentiality. Did the research field become intellectually isolated as it settled in the academe?

Theoretical Background: To understand the social logic underpinning the citation patterns in higher education, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of doxa (2000) and field (2004). Doxa is "a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (2000, p. 16). Doxa operates as the cultural orthodoxy of a field and, as such, delineates the unspoken but acknowledged rules of the game therein. Members of a scientific field share a set of assumptions regarding essential aspects of academic practice: legitimate methodologies and approaches, research productivity, journal rankings, citation practices, etc. Players promoting heterodox (e.g., diverging, nonconforming) views run the risk of being marginalized as their positions may be considered discordant (Albert et al., 2017).

For Bourdieu (2004), a field is a space in which social actors struggle for scientific authority, which is understood as the capacity to define what legitimate science is, and to set the rules of the game. Scientists engage in struggles with their peers to have their own practices perceived as legitimate—and to become the new doxa. Scientists who gain scientific authority are those who succeed in having their views on science and research practices perceived as the legitimate way of thinking about and engaging in science. The features of their work (the methods they use, the journals in which they publish, the topics they investigate, etc.) become understood as the legitimate features of "good" practices and the standard against which others' work is judged.

Research Design, Methodology: We perform a bibliometric analysis of the publications cited by researchers in the field. We used a comparative design to compare cross-disciplinary knowledge circulation at two moments in the history of the higher education research field. The first period focuses on the 1970s, when the field started to develop in Europe, and the second period focuses on the early 2020s. The five-decade interval between the two periods ensures that these two moments represent distinct episodes in the field's institutionalization process.

We used the journals *Higher Education* and *Studies in Higher Education*, respectively launched in 1972 and 1976, to construct our citation list for the first period. In total, we examined 839 references cited by 47 articles published in eight different issues of these journals. For the second period, we used the same two journals, with the addition of the *European Journal of Higher Education,* launched in 2011. In total, we examined 1665 references cited by 30 articles published in three different issues of these three journals.

To analyze the references and identify which disciplines and research areas higher education researchers draw from, we inductively developed a typology of nine knowledge orientations, which we labelled knowledge clusters.

We also looked at the training and academic appointment of the authors of the selected articles for the two periods.