EDITORIAL
Theory as contestation

Matthew Bunn*, Matt Lumb, Penny Jane Burke, University of Newcastle, Australia
Marie-Pierre Moreau, Samson Maekele Tsegay, Anglia Ruskin University

*matthew.bunn@newcastle.edu.au

In this issue of *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education,* we introduce work that explores questions of access and equity through the *use of theory* and the *practice of theorising*. We consider how these are deployed as forms of contestation of hegemonic epistemologies, theories, pedagogies and subjectivities. The papers in the issue aim at questioning key aspects of equity policy, research and practice that go by unnoticed far too often. These papers extend the debates and perspectives this journal seeks to facilitate given that a guiding commitment for the publication is to draw on and develop critical praxis. Such development requires to bring theory and practice together in approaches that seek to challenge social inequalities within different contexts of higher education (Bunn et al. 2021).

The *use of theory* and the *practices of theorizing* invite reflection on an important question: 'What is theory and who is it for?' (Budgeon 2020). The term 'theory' is used in many ways across the literatures from which the authors and readers of this journal will be familiar. The different translations of 'theory', and the ways specific theoretical frameworks are put to use, has significant implications for analysis and interpretation. Abend (2008) identifies seven different ways in which 'theory' is commonly deployed in contemporary sociology and makes the case for explicit conceptualisation to avoid inevitable muddles and miscommunications. This is crucial not only for clarity, but for vigilance against the turning of theory toward the purposes of hegemony. As Askland et al. call attention to in this issue, theory is not only contested, but in the case of Indigenous knowledges can be used as another tool of colonialism and dispossession. Theory can be *appropriated* from its original creators and turned toward new objectives. Theory and the means to be able to theorise to explain and to produce knowledge is inevitably connected to symbolic power across a range of social sites and relations of inequality. These re/produce the unequal power dynamics in which recognition as a legitimate knowledge producer plays out, often in ways that marginalises knowledge that has been historically excluded from practices of legitimisation. The denial of recognition as a knowledge-maker means that a wide variety of classed, gendered, racialised and colonial theories and knowledges are naturalised, whilst being constructed as value-free, displacing other claims to knowledge. This is achieved through hegemonic discourses that reclaim the terms on which legitimate knowledge is recognised and produced. As Weedon explains in relation to contestations over claims to knowledge and 'truth':

'Who and what is privileged is an ongoing site of political struggle' (Weedon 1999, p. 108). Abend describes contemporary *critical theory*, *feminist theory* and *postcolonial theory* as explicitly non-normative projects, 'which usually reject the fact/value dichotomy, and hence the supposedly value-neutral sociological theory' (Abend 2008, p. 180). Moreover, in using the verb 'theorising' above, we follow Ahmed's (2000) effort to signal processes that do not lead in neat or linear forms to static outcomes. Instead, we see the role of theorising in praxis-based frameworks as something endlessly on the move; restless and responding. Ahmed, drawing on De Lauretis, makes the case that feminist work becomes most recognisable theoretically when it challenges existing theoretical contributions that apprehend and explain highly gendered norms when it troubles the categories of analysis and interpretation that these have made possible, including by other feminisms (Ahmed 2000). Asking 'What counts as feminist theory', Ahmed asserts the importance of feminist theory that works simultaneously at multiple registers of contestation:

> […] it will both contest other ways of understanding the world (those theories that are often not seen as theories as they are assumed to be "common sense"), and it will contest itself, as a way of interpreting the world (or of "making sense" in a way which contests what is "common"). (Ahmed 2000, p. 101)

The idea of theory contesting itself might seem counterintuitive. However, it strikes at the heart of critical projects embedded in practical contexts where a belief that arbitrary conditions that have become naturalised are not 'correct', even if there is trouble in every direction. A willingness to use theory to trouble, and to theorise as a practice of unsettling, requires a commitment to the idea of knowledge as ever partial and grounded, and it demands 'a self-reflexive stance to its own production as a site of knowledge/power' (Budgeon 2020). This is crucial to making sense of access and equity in relation to entrenched structures of oppression that play out not only in the wider world but also in the production of subjectivity and self. This then requires a deep commitment to self-reflexivity to examine 'that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us' (Lorde 1984, p. 123 in Weedon 1999, p. 185).

Mellor in this issue takes a strong reflexive approach in her search for the theoretical tools that would help to 'avoid oppositional polarities', which she was concerned could 'reproduce polarised thinking by always looking for examples of oppression and not resistance or agency'. By privileging the theoretical resources that emerged from feminist, Indigenous and Black theorisation of higher education practices, she was able to examine the 'racialisations and epistemic injustice in knowing practices', and identify 'spaces of reordering and remaking'. This reflexive methodological framework foregrounded the importance of 'resistance to reproductions of (un)settler-colonial dehumanisation of Indigenous (and other marginalised) peoples' and worked towards building understandings of anti-racist, anti-patriarchal struggle in relation to broadly conceived questions of access in and through higher education curricular and pedagogical practices. Her commitment to continually exercising reflexivity in relation to scholarly work across related fields as well as the accounts of students and staff, helped her find a 'way to negotiate the politics of location' and to recognise 'subjects formed "in-between"' (Bhabha 1994, p. 2). Drawing from post-structuralism enabled a concept of subjectivity as 'always in a state of change, as discursively produced and relational' and this shaped her 'analyses of self and participants and the multiplicity of my/their positioning'.

Mellor's approach demonstrates that theory can be *disguised*. The construction of equity policy itself rests on a theory of the social that removes many aspects of the political construction of

concepts and representations. These frame what is possible and legitimate and, therefore, exclude alternative or lateral conceptualisations. Dent in this issue draws attention to this problem through the notion of 'non-traditional' students. This term refers to an attempt to broadly categorise students who have been systematically and historically marginalised from higher education participation. This innocuous term dismisses the entire *history* of the production of social closure in and through higher education. In its place is the projection of higher education access as a result of 'tradition'. Through this dehistoricisation and depoliticisation, marginalisation is created as a callous recognition of those students who, historically, would not have been admitted, as *non-normative*. The *in situ* experience of being labelled 'non-traditional' is often felt as a painful marker of difference.

The words used to articulate dominant conceptions of equity carry a theory of the social that maintains the effects of inequality while annihilating their historical cause and creation. Indeed, terms displace *other terms* that are connected to other imaginings of inequality, marginalisation and social justice. As Ahmed notes, 'the arrival of the term "diversity" involves the departure of other (perhaps more critical) terms' (Ahmed 2012, p. 1). It allows for a hegemonic framing of the very means we have to understand, interpret and theorise what is broadly referred to here as equity frameworks. This is embedded even in the enshrining policy frameworks that have brought equity, diversity and inclusion into being. Lumb et al. seek to problematise the clumsy beginnings of the notion of 'rural' as it began to frame policymaking imaginaries in Australian higher education. Rural, regional and remote (RRR) higher education is produced as a problem largely for creating economic growth but soon after entangles rurality in equity policy. The concern for social justice comes *after* the concern for growth in particular economic subjectivities, those more carefully aligned with the constantly emerging conditions of a global neoliberalism. The authors show that this categorisation of rural/regional/remote does little to acknowledge the wide varieties of lives, identities and experiences circulating in non-urban Australia, and that contemporary RRR policy and practice commonly ignores 'the *specific and historical construction* of marginality within RRR regions and places'. Marginality is of course not an issue that is experienced simply as rural vs. urban in this context, and the authors here contend that we must recognise how rural places involve a wide range of inequalities *within* them that prevent meaningful higher education pathways from emerging.

These cases show how the absence of rigorous theories of equity that illuminate its social conditions lead towards a form of vacuous representation alien to most social actors. However, it only ever reaffirms the category as a social reality because it has not interrogated the basis of the category. In this way, uncritical research can become locked into re-creating particular categorisations of students (e.g. rural or non-traditional) by looking in the most convenient places. It presents *methodologies* that search for imagined 'equity groups' as if they are real. Wacquant summarises this well, albeit via an overtly masculine analogy, as he accounts for Bourdieu's critique of 'methodologism':

> Methodology then carries over into an implicit theory of the social which makes researchers act in the manner of the late-night drunk evoked in Kaplan (1964) who, having lost the keys to his house, persists in searching for them under the nearest lamp post because this is where he has the most light. (Wacquant 1992, p. 28)

This plays into the hands of institutional objectives, where research 'is premised on findings that institutions *want found*' (Ahmed 2012, p. 10, italics in original). Lacking a theoretically rigorous engagement the dominant account appears as the neutral account. Yet this continually displaces

any means of apprehending the complex and messy differences for groups who have been marginalised from institutionally legitimised knowledge-production, and even marginalised from the means for constructing knowledge about themselves. Instead, these groups are neatly bound into equity groups and representations by those who have the privileged social position to generate these representations. Indeed, this lends itself to 'inequality regimes' dressed up as social justice: 'a set of processes that maintain what is supposedly being redressed' (Ahmed 2012, p. 8).

The contestation of theory interrogates hegemonic forms of knowledge and knowing must also consider this in relation to the construction of the hegemonic body. Bateman's paper in this issue draws on Crip and queer theory to trouble the normative and ableist subject positions of higher education. She claims that drawing on language such as 'Crip' (from the word cripple), which might create a sense of profound discomfort, enables 'a part of the contestatory impact of what it is to be crip'. Engaging Butler's concept of 'mattering' she suggests that queer theory exposes 'how crip bodies do not come to matter within a higher education institution', 'bringing to light the imperative to critique dimensions of subjective formation that are naturalised and taken for granted in hegemonic discourses of equity in higher education' (Bateman 2022). Interrogating normative subjectivity in relation to forms of symbolic violence, she explains that violence is the result of ableist normativities, which 'continually gets reiterated in the experience of pain'.

Contesting theory requires contesting both the theories themselves, and the conditions from which theory emerges. Despite views to the contrary, theory is not able to transcend the circumstances of its production. To express this, Askland and colleagues use the very apt quote 'higher education is not a neutral enterprise' (Kirkness & Bernhard 1991, quoted in Askland, Irwin & Kilmister 2022). Theory is built on top of a politics of competition and attrition for academic positions, of the successful funding of research, on the selection of approaches, languages and theoretical lineages, and the interpersonal and macro politics of the production of knowledge. Even the theories that become more famed or more pertinent are still subject to the competition and struggle to be the strongest voice. As Askland et al. highlight, theory and theorising is entrenched and entangled in the neoliberal university. The modes by which it can highlight resistance and emancipation go hand in hand with whether or not it can be profitable for an institution. The very structures of higher education must thus be interrogated and contested as part of a recognition of what enables certain kinds of theory to emerge and to be put to work in particular ways. Like Mellor, Askland et al. point toward the very basis of knowledge production that takes for granted its White Western and colonial platform. Thus the challenge to decolonise theory requires a decolonisation of the means of theoretical production. Equity and social justice theory, then, is enabled, if not overshadowed by agendas counter to its intended outcomes. Yet, this also presents opportunities for contestation and transformation through understanding the context of the generation of theory as a vehicle of social justice.

Finally, the contestation of theory also requires *time*, or 'patient praxis' (Bunn & Lumb 2019). As Little and colleagues show, moving out of the expectations of higher educational roles is no easy feat. Academic time is largely invested in the narrow demands of a discipline, through teaching and research. Despite being framed as a place of careful knowledge production, an accelerating higher education system rarely allows for staff to dedicate their time examining and contesting the basis through which theory and knowledge are produced. Little et al. show how valuable this time is. Their account of being provided funding for research was as much about having the time to undertake research on equity outside of their disciplinary contexts as it was about the importance of being able to take the time to think, explore and forge new collegial engagements through praxis.

This collection of papers makes a contribution to thinking with, through and against theory, to consider its relation to systems, structures and practices of oppression and injustice and to draw on the insights that enable a deeply critical and analytical approach to questions of access, equity and social justice.

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