

## Chapter 13

# Supercomplexity and Education Research: Six Scholarships

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### ABSTRACT

*Supercomplexity is that state of affairs that is characterized by multiple, conflicting, and proliferating accounts of a situation, in which there are no secure categories through which to anchor oneself in the world. Stated thus, understanding supercomplexity is at a fork: it can lead either to relativism or can be coupled to a realism. I opt here for the latter gambit, specifically marrying supercomplexity to (Roy Bhaskar's) critical realism and I do so by placing my reflections in the context of investigations of the university. Grasped as a site of supercomplexity, the university is open not just to multiple interpretations and ideas (ideas of the university now flourishing and conflicting) but to infinite possibilities. This is where the researcher-as-scholar comes into her or his own in discerning and imagining possibilities for the university in the 21st century.*

### INTRODUCTION

We live in turbulent times. It is not just that we live amidst change but that the fundamental concepts and frameworks through which we make sense of the world are in dispute. Each person, each group and even each institution – especially in the public services – is having to juggle multiple, proliferating and contending frameworks of understanding. In turn, professional identity is unstable and full of immanent conflict. A doctor can no longer be sure of his or her identity as a doctor, a situation that arises in part as a result of a surrounding swirl of rival frameworks. Similarly, a university can no longer be sure what it is to be a university.

In the wider philosophical and social theoretical literature, terms attempt to do some justice to this irredeemable uncertainty. The metaphors of an unstructured “rhizome” and its associated theme of “multiplicities” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2007), a “liquid world” (Bauman, 2005), “assemblage” theory

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(Irwin & Michael, 2003; De Landa, 2013) and the Moebius strip (Zizek, 2009: 4) which turns upon itself and confutes itself, are just some of the contemporary offerings providing insights into this inchoate situation. However, the implications of these movements have yet to work their way fully into education research. If the world is so unstable that our very frameworks for comprehending it are problematic, if words can hardly do justice to the world's fluidity, how might education research itself be construed and conducted? The main ploy adopted here is that of drawing on the central theme of this volume, that of scholarship. The education researcher has to become an imaginative scholar, glimpsing possibilities for action and for change. The discussion is placed in the context of the university.

## **TWO KINDS OF COMPLEXITY**

Approaching twenty years ago (Barnett, 1990), the idea of supercomplexity was posited as a way of understanding some of the challenges befalling the world. The idea of supercomplexity was sharply distinguished from complexity. So far as – for instance – an educational institution was concerned, complexity worked at the systems level. It was concerned with inputs, systemic processes and outputs, all of which had their place in an environment that was complex, and which ranged from the local through the national and even – say for a university – to the global levels. These are open systems (Bhaskar, 2008a), in relation to which nothing can be predicted with any assurance, but which offer possibilities for “emergence” (Bhaskar, 2005/1979). “Complexity” here points to the instability and, thereby, the unpredictability of the interactions of the pertinent components but also the openness of their interactions.

“Supercomplexity”, in contrast, was still a form of complexity but arose from the presence of multiple conceptual frameworks through which individuals and groups interpreted their world. The very categories through which the world was understood were not only in dispute but were proliferating. For example, just what is it to be a university? Is it an institution for human development or for economic gain or for worldly power or for public understanding or for the provision of social goods or for cultural reproduction or cultural renewal? To say it is all of these things is to evade the matter at hand, for the categories of possible understanding cut across each other. Some could even be felt to be incommensurable with each other. And this presence of competing – and conflicting – frameworks is the nature of today's world.

The difference between complexity and supercomplexity can be encapsulated in this way. A doctor is faced with increasing numbers of new drugs, new procedures, a surfeit of patients, an overload of data, growing audits of various kinds, and an insufficiency of resources to cope with the situation. Such a situation is not just replete with multiple entities but is characteristically complex. All the features just mentioned are sub-systems that are entangled with each other, producing unexpected happenings and events, which in turn demand a response. This complexity is (ontologically) real and reflects powerful underlying forces, both national and global: it exists in the world and it imposes considerable burdens; so much so that doctors experience much stress and even commit suicide.

Supercomplexity, in contrast, is – as stated – a situation of multiple, proliferating and rivalrous sets of categories. Here, in our example, the question arises: “what is a doctor?” Different, growing and conflicting responses are readily available in contemporary society. A doctor is a systems manager, or works to fulfil state ends in public services, or is an agent in the operation of quality systems, or is a professional caring for the health needs of clients as they present themselves, or is a member of a medical profession with its own interests, or is a crystal-ball gazer with a concern for improving public health, or is a magic healer endowed with supernatural powers. Again, to say that being a doctor is all of these things is right

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