Actor-Network Theory (ANT): An Assemblage of Perceptions, Understandings, and Critiques of this ‘Sensibility’ and how its Relatively Under-Utilized Conceptual Framework in Education Studies can Aid Researchers in the Exploration of Networks and Power Relations

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical paper, the author provides a critical review of the Actor-Network Theory concept, while considering the relative under-utilization of Actor-Network Theory in education studies, tracing possible ways in which this theory can contribute as an analytical framework through its strands of ‘actor-network’, ‘symmetry’, ‘translation’, and their constituents—thus facilitating its international growth. Two concepts this paper gives prominence to are networks and power relations. The author challenges the widespread conception of the ‘network’ metaphor propagated by globalization discourses, contrasting it in turn with the network conception in Actor-Network Theory, where the main premise is multiplicity. The author explores Actor-Network Theory as a theory of the mechanics of power, concerning itself with the establishment of hegemony. This paper is especially aimed at those researchers of education reform who are as yet unfamiliar with Actor-Network Theory and somewhat sceptical of socio-material approaches, in order for them to realize its unrivalled potential contribution to their work.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Assemblage, Education Research, Network Metaphor, Ontology, Power Relations, Symmetry, Translation

INTRODUCTION

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is considered to be one of the more controversial approaches in the social sciences, mainly because of its analytical realism, which in the words of Law (1992) “treads on a set of ethical, epistemological and ontological toes” (p. 3), through its conception of general symmetry which gives equal and undivided attention to human and non-human ‘actors’. Law (2007a) describes ANT as “a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis” (p. 2). I explore the various definitions

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of ANT as developed by different thinkers while considering the possible reasons behind the relative unpopularity and under-utilization of ANT in education studies. While admitting that writing about ANT is extremely difficult due to its messy, fluid, disorderly, dynamic, chaotic and ambivalent nature, it is the very ‘messiness’, ‘fluidity’, and ‘chaos’ of this ‘sensibility’ that offers invaluable insights to researchers in the education arena. I trace possible ways in which ANT can contribute to ‘methodological cleansing’ in the exploration of networks. Besides providing a critical literature review of the ANT concept, I consider the potential of enacting ANT in education research, particularly in the exploration of networks and power relations, through some of its strands, namely ‘actor-network’, ‘symmetry’, ‘translation’, and their constituents.

Two concepts this paper gives prominence to are networks and power relations. In light of the way in which the ‘network’ metaphor has invaded social order, becoming a common conceptual horizon for contemplating about the ontological ‘structure’ of the construction of reality, I challenge this conception of networks propagated by globalization discourses, contrasting it in turn with the network conception in ANT, where the main premise is multiplicity, the enactment of multiple, simultaneous ontologies, as outlined by Law (2004), Mol (2002), and Moser (2008). ANT may be regarded as a theory of the mechanics of power, concerning itself with the stabilization and reproduction of some interactions over others; the construction and maintenance of network centres and peripheries; and the establishment of hegemony. I explore how Law’s (1991) suggestion that “power, whatever form it may take, is recursively woven into the intricate dance that unites the social and the technical” (p. 18) has been received by both ANT critics and proponents.

DEFINITIONS OF ANT

Law (2007a) describes ANT as “a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis ... [it explores] the webs and the practices that carry them ... [and] the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors” (p. 2). In his exploration of the definition, Law (2007a) outlines four qualifications for this concept/approach. ANT is both theoretical and empirical, as theory is embedded and extended in empirical practice. Law (2007a) refuses to regard the actor-network approach as a theory, for him it is a ‘toolkit’ rather, a ‘sensibility’ for the exploration of relations and how these assemble. He even refuses to define it as a theory, preferring the term ‘material semiotics’ rather than ‘actor-network theory’, as it better captures the open, uncertain, revisable, and diverse nature of this approach, all this hinting at Law’s desire to keep it implicit and volatile, he refuses to have it pinned down to something concrete. Callon (1999) denies the claim of ANT being a theory, at the same time stressing that this “gives it both its strength and its adaptability ... we never claimed to create a theory. In ANT the T is too much (’de trop’)” (ibid, p. 194). Law (2007a) further acknowledges the relationality of texts, thereby indirectly admitting to the subjective nature of ANT, with no researcher able to make objective claims. He describes it as neither ‘a creed’, nor ‘a dogma’, with humility as a leitmotif. Latour (1999a) outlines the agenda of ANT as comprising: the attribution of both human and nonhuman characteristics; the distribution of properties among them; the connections generated; the circulation of these elements; as well as their transformation. Thus, ANT incorporates both relational materiality and performativity (Law, 1999). It takes a semiotic world-view, embracing a negation of conventional social dualisms, where divisions are understood as ‘effects’ or ‘outcomes’ rather than being inherent in entities – “essentialist divisions are thrown on the bonfire of the dualisms” (ibid, p. 3). As a consequence of this ‘semiotics of materiality’, entities are performed in, by, and through those relations.

Cordella and Shaikh (2006) consider ANT as an interpretative lens for the analysis and subsequent interpretation of the complexity of dynamics present in networks. Their
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