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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus discussion on some philosophical issues that informs discussion of the stabilising dimension of higher education as a mediating institution. Backgrounded habits provide the deep context for developing moral practice and other regarding sentiment in higher education. Understanding higher educational institutions as mediating institutions, as forms of associational life which inculcate habit and the development of mores is an important corrective to the discourse of marketization and neo-liberal reform which otherwise crowds out consideration of the role higher educational institutions play in cultural stabilization and social cohesion. This argument we intend to make in this paper is that the stabilizing and associational function of higher educational institutions is critically important to developing habits and mores which are the key support for a society that can still retain a sense of concern and regard for others.

Keywords: Habits; Habitualization; Higher education; Mediating institutions

1. Introduction

Higher educational institutions introduce their participants to the possibilities and opportunities of creativity, social, cultural scientific change development and knowledge production within a global knowledge economy. This basic objective predominates in policy papers and public policy commentary in regards to higher education. However it is the important role that educational institutions play in cultivating moral order, social stability and cohesion that informs the basic problematic of this paper. The animating interest in this paper is the extent to which we can still discuss and engage universities as creators and realisers of associational and moral community. What is a university if it is not centrally concerned with moral formation and social reproduction of norms, manners and
habits that advance a societies cultural and moral development? What is a university if it is not also, and most centrally, a form of associational life? The history of disquiet in regards to the role universities play in maintaining the moral fibre of society is not new. In a lecture titled ‘Knowledge as a Vocation’ delivered in 1918 Max Weber asked if a ‘university was possible in a godless and prophetess time’ (Carroll, 2008, p.145) Weber’s question is still relevant today. For critics of contemporary higher education a deep malaise pervades our efforts to ground a university in a vital and central moral mission. Philosophically articulate critics such as Alasdair MacIntyre, (Alasdair MacIntyre, 1984, 2009; Alasdiar MacIntyre, 2006) Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1985; S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1977) writing from a religious perspective, and many others writing from a more secular perspective all question the moral character of our educational institutions (Annette, 2005; Egerton, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000).

For critics of our current condition universities arguably lack a sense of a stable or vital ethical centre as they are increasingly beholden to the demands and spectacle of neo-liberal modernity found in the manipulations of rankings and the ethos of competition, individualism and increasing pluralisation (J. Campbell, 2010; J. K. Campbell, 2010; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). The extent to which the current discourses of modernity briefly mentioned above crowd out a deeper and more complex understanding of the critical role that higher educational institutions play in cultural stabilization and social cohesion is more than of passing concern. Arguably the stabilizing function of higher educational institutions is of equal importance to the role they play in advancing creativity and advancing new knowledge and individual growth. This stabilizing function and the concerns attached to it can sometimes seem crowded out of consideration in a discursive environment increasingly dominated by neo-liberal discourse, marketization and choice. The stabilizing function of universities results from and is reinforced by the way in which universities function to their members as forms of associational life.

Educational institutions are finding that their sure foundation and legitimacy in inculcating students to vital moral values and principles of civility and conviviality under threat by a growing discourse of individualism, competitive ethos and consumerism which radically undercut shared meaning and moral order. The roots of our current malaise are deep not superficial. The university must produce graduates whose idea of themselves in relation to their community and the public within which they act is informed by an ‘other regarding’ sense of moral purpose. Such an ‘other regarding’ sense is derived from a commitment to civility and care for each other rather than calculation of our own personal betterment as the basis of being properly educated. If we argue a case for the universities importance in the articulation of a common good but still maintain an egotistical utility maximising view of individual morality and preference formation (the identity of the unencumbered self) then the deep and substantive basis of our commitments to the common good will always be undermined and threatened by self-seeking egotism. If our institutions are lacking any sense of thick commitment to substantive values not reducible to profit, competition or consumption and fail to provide students or staff with any position from which to engage the varied viewpoints of modern life the result is anxiety, confusion and a retreat into self-serving behaviour.

This problem of educational institutions increasingly lacking a sense of moral or vital centre (Al-Attas-, 1992; S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1985; Shils, 1975) is not accidental. Critics lament a loss of moral compass in our institutions and even suggest that the very ‘soul’ of higher education is under threat (Alasdair MacIntyre, 2007, 2009; Alasdair MacIntyre, 2006). Commitment to a substantive moral mission for universities has been a key characteristic of the discourse of higher education over time yet the language of moral mission sounds increasingly hollow when put against the more obvious business discourse that now drives the agendas of many higher educational institutions (Johnston, 1910). Scholars have sought to understand the problems within our educational institutions in a number of ways. One way of framing the tension in education is through the concept of educational dualism or the split between knowledge and ethics (Hashim, 2004). Another way is in pointing out the tension between constancy of change and our capacities to reproduce social norms. Yet another dualism is the tension between habit and choice. Each of these dualisms points to the fundamental tension that informs the reform efforts in higher education. We face a breakdown in agreed to moral norms. Critics of modernity have articulated this tension in simple terms; the tension between the oversupply of information, knowledge and choice in the world and our need for predictability, stability and groundedness.
Understanding the historical social and cultural context that provides the background for the successful formation of human capital necessitates that educational critique needs to be informed by reflective discussion on the bounds of human culture, the importance of social solidarity and the way in which social and moral capital is formed and reinforced as important precursors to human capital (Campbell, 2011, p.10). In other words what habits of moral character are formed and consciously elaborated on in our institutions? Do we consciously view the problem of positive habit formation at the same level of importance as individual empowerment and competitive individualism? If we seek to endow students with the ‘habits of the heart’ necessary to lead moral lives as part of a moral community then to what extent must our institutions have some degree of autonomy from the discourses pressures and demands of the wider world? Does stabilization of our moral character require institutions to have some sense of associational purpose and human conduct not reducible merely to making students individualists successful in a free market but unable to act with any sense of mutual obligation or sense of duty?

2. Mediating institutions

While educational institutions play a creative role in the global knowledge economy they also play a stabilizing role at the national level and the stabilizing role that educational institutions play often manifests in claims that they must support national integration, (Segawa, 2007) social cohesion (A. Green, 2011; A. Green & Preston, 2001; A. Green, Preston, & Janmaat, 2006) and moral development (T. F. Green, 1985). There is a critical social capital dimension to education which can sometimes be downplayed in the rush for human capital (Dika & Singh, 2002). The development of forms of social and moral capital which can ground individuals in an increasingly chaotic and rootless world may need to be developed in institutions that are committed not to ‘immediate ‘relevance’ in today’s world, but rather committed to values and forms of practice which provide individuals with a longer term sense of limit, stability and grounding. Social stability, social cohesiveness and moral development all depend in large measure on the way in which social capital is developed and attended to in educational institutions. The kinds of social relations, the bonds of trust, regard for others and the moral ecology of higher educational institutions are critical to the core function of universities in knowledge creation and social reproduction. Universities in this sense are associational forms of life which provide the basis for moral and cognitive development and the inculcation of mores, habits and manners conducive to the broader society.

Social capital functions and is formulated within institutional contexts. In other words it is the processes of institutionalization, the cultivation and reinforcement of positive habits, norms, and manners that forms and provides the content and nature of the social capital that is so critical for personal, community and national development. Institutionalization of life is the key way in which meaning is rationalised and order is given to an otherwise chaotic reality (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011; Nelson, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Powell, 1985; Zucker, 1977). Institutionalization provides stability and ‘stickiness’ to social life. The study of institutionalisation of life is now a mainstay of much, economic, sociological, political and educational analysis. The idea of institutions mediating between the individual and society is a major idea in the contemporary sociology of education. Significant work by John W. Meyer, Brian Rowan, Walter Powell and Paul J. Di Maggio (S. Davies, Quirke, & Aurini, 2006; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Ramirez, 2006) to name just a few have drawn our attention to the important, cultural, organizational and normative role that institutions play both generally and in education in particular. Following the insight of John Dewey, understanding processes of institutionalisation of human action is to understand human action as ‘guided by problems of life and practice’(Selznick, 1996, p.270). Such an understanding differs from understandings based on abstractions and theoretical generalities such as found in rational choice models of human motivation and utility maximizing interpretations of the cause of human conduct.

Institutions mediate and provide boundaries to human action and conduct (Peter L. Berger & Kellner, 1965; Peter L. Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Béteille, 2005; Bidner & Francois, 2011; Biggar, 2009). While educational institutions have a significant role to play in advancing innovation and creativity in a global knowledge economy (Bank, 2007; Bullena, Fahey, & Kenway, 2006; Dale, 2005; Hodgson, 2005; Jane Kenway, Bullen, Fahey, & Robb, 2006; Marginson, 2007) they also have a legitimizing and stabilizing role to play (Norcia, 2002). The core stabilizing role that interests us in this paper is the role that educational institutions play in the moral grounding of students (T. F. Green, 1985). This apparent binary and possible site of contradiction between the idea that...
educational institutions play a role in fostering creativity unleashing individuality and fuelling creative destruction and conversely their role in providing and inculcating habits which support social stability and cohesion appears to be largely under theorised in public policy documents (OECD, 2004; Peters, 2001; UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, 2003). While there is rhetorical commitment to moral and social cohesion and character building there seems less engagement with the extent to which acceleration of creative destruction, marketization and constant competition can dissipate and break down the necessary mores, habits and social practices that underpin cohesion, moral relations and a sense of stability. To understand the way in which educational institutions play a role in upholding social cohesion and stabilizing our lives we must first understand our educational institutions as mediating institutions that have a role that is relatively autonomous from the everyday fads and fashions that may inform state policy or the constant clutter and clamour that characterises the market.

This idea that educational institutions mediate between individuals and the market or the state draws our attention to the importance of processes of character formation that are not simply reducible to the needs of the market or the whims of the state at any given time. The idea that institutions are mediating structures and play a role in interceding between individuals and the broader society is not a new one. Edmund Burke observed the power and importance of the ‘little Platoons’ that stood between the individual and society or between the private and public spheres. These ‘little Platoons’, in Burke’s terms play a critical role in the formation of moral norms, and reinforce social stability and cohesion (Burke, 1909, p.164). Emmanuel Durkheim in his classic sociological tract, titled ‘Suicide’ draws our attention to the ‘tempest’ (Durkheim, 1951, p.323) that modernization and change brings forth in society and the destruction of the ‘little aggregations’ (Durkheim, 1951, p.322) which have given people meaning and grounding throughout time (Peter L. Berger, 1976, p.401). These little aggregations, found in the institutions of family, locality, church and so forth provide stability in an otherwise ‘brutish’ (Hobbes, 1968) and ‘heartless’ (Lasch, 1976) world. Similar concerns about the importance of mediating institutions, ‘aggregations, ‘platoons’ have been expressed by a range of thinkers from Tocqueville whose influence on this discourse is immense, through to Charles Cooley (Cooley, 1932) and Thorstein Veblen (Peter L. Berger, 1976; Veblen, 2007).

The core idea at stake with all these thinkers is that the cultivation of moral balance, stable identities and positive social and individual norms occurs within institutions that are in some sense, resistant to mere power whether found in the market or the state. The classic book which brought the concept of mediating institutions to the fore and built upon the insights theory and sentiment discussed above was the work of Berger and Neuhaus. The classic text titled, ‘To Empower People: From State to Civil Society’ by Berger and Neuhaus made the argument that with the advent of modernity and the breakdown of values and moral chaos, the value creating and value generating role that institutions could play needed to be supported and understood (Peter L. Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). According to Peter L. Berger:

‘What are mediating structures? The concept has quite vast implications, but it can be defined simply: mediating structures are those institutions which stand between the individual in his private sphere and the large institutions of the public sphere. The concept is by no means new; indeed, a good case can be made that it is a central theme of the sociological tradition. What might be new, however, is the translation of the concept into a paradigm for public policy….’ (Peter L. Berger, 1976, p.401)

According to Berger and Neuhaus the price we pay in terms of social breakdown and moral confusion can be high if we do not seek to defend the deep educational, habit forming and obligation oriented mission that our mediating institutions can play. Mediating institutions are important in society for they are the place where general moral values are given their authority, practiced and embedded. Historically of course universities played this mediating role. From the middle ages universities had a degree of autonomy and this autonomy has allowed them to exercise their character building functions (Ramirez, 2006; Rashdall, 2010). Currently critics contend that our higher educational institutions are increasingly beholden to influences and agendas that place strain on the character building functions that mediating institutions can have in life. Part of the problem lies with the issue of size. Families, mosque, church or synagogue are often closer to more grounded values than larger institutions. For example in higher education due to their subservience to rationalized norms and their current tendency to isomorphic mimicry institutional goals and the necessary behaviours that attend such goals are driven by interests far removed from the grounded lives and cultures of people and their moral ecology. In higher education the values
that are inculcated in the new discourse of performance, competition, efficiency and knowledge productivity are articulated in an apparently secular and instrumental language usually stripped of any substantive ethical referent and used without reference to cultural and traditional moral beliefs. These neo-liberal ‘values’ which are pushed by mainstream global institutions and their ideologues in their advice to developing nations are the subject of considerable debate and public reflection (Razak, 2009a, 2009b, 2011).

Neo-liberal hegemony expresses itself in part through institutional isomorphism on a global scale where convergence on a single model of higher education (and what is considered important as indicators of its success) is inculcated through the discourse of competition and compounded by mimetic influences (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000). The problem with this is that our higher educational institutions are increasingly influenced by values which are alien to local and lived culture. Due to this there is an increased necessity to have a rethink about our higher educational institutions and ask to what extent we ought to view them as mediating institutions which consciously focus on engendering psychological and ethical identification with a clear set of values which are resistant to the pull of selfish oriented attitudes and provide students with solid forms of beliefs and habits. This approach; the core aim which is to translate statecraft institutions into arenas of soul craft runs up against numerous problems, not least of which is the absolute breakdown of shared norms and understandings in the first place.

As pure individuals human life is in Hobbes’ terms ‘nasty brutish and short’ (Hobbes, 1968). In other words pure competitive individualism and the selfish orientation that flows from it create a social world which in Hobbesian terms is characterized as a ‘war of all against all’. To avoid this Hobbesian dilemma the theory of mediating institutions has been developed and adapted to the discussion of a wide range of issues (Carlson, 1999). The concept has been applied to discussions on health provision (Hurd & Kapteyn, 2003; Jacobs, 1992; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000), the role of political parties (Calabresi, 1994; Garrett & Lange, 1995), businesses and neighbourhood associations (Browning & Cagney, 2003; Fort, 1996) to name a few. In regards to education the recognition of the important role that educational institutions play as mediating institutional spaces between the individual and the society is now a central tent of educational sociology (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Clark, 1968; Colbeck, 2002; Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011; Lane, 1983).

The importance of understanding and engaging the mediating role that higher educational institutions can play is captured in the work of Rodney A. Clifton. Rodney A. Clifton argues, ‘the human capital of students can be most effectively developed if professors and universities organize their programs in terms of social capital and mediating structures’ (Clifton, 1999, p.114). According to Clifton reform is necessary in higher education to ensure that the positive role and function that higher educational institutions play in inculcating and supporting moral and character development can occur. Such reforms include, dividing faculties into smaller units, moving towards smaller classes and so forth. Such a reform is informed by the idea that forming meaning, strong bonds of identity and identification with moral norms comes from being engaged in close community. Closer contact and association, properly managed, leads to mutual understanding and the development of care. Another reform advocated by Clifton is that intellectual programs in universities must have clearly outlined and ‘articulated goals about the intellectual and behavioral changes that are required from students.’ (Clifton, 1999, p.116) This means that teachers must clearly and consistently make clear the ethical and moral standards which both inform education, the institution and which the students are expected to internalise and act upon (Clifton, 1999, p.117). These kinds of reforms and the commitment to pedagogies of care and character development require active and committed engagement (Nixon, 2008) and need to be drilled down into the disciplines.

Higher educational institutions as mediating institutions can act to protect and inculcate an ‘other-regarding’ culture which is based on principles of care and solid character development. A cooperative and caring culture (Alhabshi, 1994) must be inculcated which is consciously aimed at instilling in students these values for later life. Institutions can do this if they are structured in such a way that recognises the importance of moral character formation to learning and the structural issues involved. The literature on this is immense (Annette, 2005; Arthur, 2005; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Bulach, 2002; I. Davies, Gorard, & McGuinn, 2005; Martinson, 2003; Michael Davis, 2003; Milson & Mejlig, 2002; Pritchard, 1988; V. D. Turner & W. Berkowitz, 2005). Yet in our emphasis and focus on the role of institutionalization, the grounding of behaviour and the focus on developing student rootedness the tensions between this kind of philosophy and those approaches to higher education which
focus more on giving students ‘wings’ over ‘roots’ (Nixon, 2008, p.4) must also be noted. Other scholars such as David S. Seely argue that educational institutions must get back to basics and focus on the human dimension and social relationships which inform positive outcomes in education (Seeley, 1985). Bruce C. Hafen argues that institutions which deal with ‘intellectual and moral’ issues have a particularly important role as mediating institutions in society. Educational institutions are classically devoted to these issues and the critical role that educational institutions play in developing these attributes, habits of the heart in Tocqueville’s words, is of critical importance to theorists concerned with the maintenance of social order, moral development and social stability (Bellah, 1985; Hafen, 1993). Educational institutions understood as intellectual and moral associations and not simply as profit making corporations are a ‘value-oriented "moral" sphere’ (Hafen, 1993, p.606).

Though mediated institutional life individuals realise their capacities, in conditions of obligation, forms of encumbrance to cultural norms, habits and social relations which provide meaning and stability and cohesion to life. Institutions stabilise life and they stabilise life within cultural frameworks and norms. Hannah Arendt reminds us that the stabilizing effect of institutions is a critical issue given our need for some sense of grounding which can temper an otherwise chaotic and meaningless existence in a world of flux change and endless ‘newness’ (Arendt, 1965, 1968). It is precisely this conserving nature of education that provides the possibility of change and innovation and creativity bounded by strongly embedded moral norms. The question that arises if one accepts Berger and Neuhaus’ argument, elaborated on by scholars such as Hafen, Seeley, and Clifton is how can norms be embedded? What is the process that can ameliorate and temper the spirit of individualism and selfishness that educational institutions are apparently failing to address?

3. Habit

One of the more interesting areas of public policy discussion and sociological theory as it relates to the uptake and nature of social norms lies in the discussion of habit and behaviour. Mainstream economic arguments about human conduct argue that as we exercise our free choice and through the faculty of reasoned decisions we maximise our benefits and minimize our costs in making choices. Is this however the whole story in why we do things the way we do? Does this explain the deeper more embedded and less tangible ways in which choices are truly made? Does the approach of rational choice provide the basis for moral grounding and stabilization in higher educational institutions? The argument outlined below is that rational choice as a framework for understanding moral actions and the persistence of moral practice is insufficient and in Geertz’s terms to thin a construct to grasp the way in which moral grounding functions and can be reinforced in higher educational institutions (Iii, 1988). As we have seen in public policy this stabilizing and mediating function of educational institutions expresses itself in rhetoric’s of moral formation, and commitments to the ethical dimension of education. The key to understanding the stabilizing processes of institutions and their role in ingraining moral behaviour lies in the understanding of habit. Elinor Olstrom reminds us that: ‘Over time, behaviour in conformance with a new rule may itself become habitual.’ (Olstrom, 2005, p.19)

Habits are formed through reiteration and internalised in individuals through social repetition and routine. The critical thinkers for the argument made in this paper in regards to habit include: John Dewey, Geoffrey M. Hodgson and the work of Berger and Luckmann. John Dewey argues that habits must be understood in a holistic and deep sense as critical to educational development and moral advancement. For Dewey ethical habits are formed on the basis of habitual and socialised behaviour which is reinforced and forms the basis of a properly educated individual (Mitchell, 2000; Shannon, 2000; Stroud, 2007). Habits are revealed in ‘predilections and aversions’ and they provide continuity and stability without which moral development and character cannot be formed (Dewey, 1922, p.29). The centrality of Dewey both to educational philosophy and his clear recognition of the positive and generative role that habits play in moral development provides a solid bedrock for an understanding of habit not as somehow something to be overcome or simply as a negative phenomenon. Rather Dewey reminds us that all ethical action and dispositions are formed through habit and reinforced in practice. This critical understanding is foundational in a discussion of the role of habit in moral formation and links back to the theory of mediating institutions and the power of associational life in the development of character. The second thinker that influences the argument made in this paper is G.M. Hodgson. Hodgson builds on the arguments of Dewey and brings forth to
our attention the central role that habits play in institutions (Hodgson, 1998, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Hodgson writes:

‘We are all creatures of habit’ but this is more than a mere idiosyncrasy, sluggishness or conservatism on our part. Instead, the reason why we have evolved the capacity to form habits is to deal with the uncertainty, complexity and variability of circumstances that we have endured over hundreds of thousands of years. Furthermore, habituation is a social mechanism, which typically involves the imitation of others, or results from behaviour that is repeatedly constrained by others. Habits, in short, are tied up with social institutions.’ (Hodgson, 2004, pp.651-652)

The critical importance of Hodgson’s argument to this paper lies in his recognition that in Hodgson’s words: ‘Institutions are durable systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions.’ (Hodgson, 2004, p.655) This is critical since all forms of human interaction occur in institutions which are to some extent dedicated to reproducing and inculcating positive habits that reinforce and represent in society the norms and attitudes that are expected from such institutions. As Hodgson points out the, ‘durability of some institutions stems from the fact that they can usefully create stable expectations of the behaviour of others.’ (Hodgson, 2004, p.656) Critically Hodgson’s insight provides not only a critique of the overly individualised concept of human motivation and human action that characterises neo-liberalism but also provides a bridge between educational commitments to social and cultural reproduction and commitments to economic development. This is critical to engaging the key tension that informs this deeper mostly unstated concern in this paper the tension between economic needs and moral needs. Finally Berger and Luckmann provide us with the critical process which describes the practice that occurs within institutions that helps to bring stability to individuals and grounds a culture in an ability to reproduce itself. The core concept of Berger and Luckmann is relevant to this paper is called habitualization. According to Berger and Luckmann:

‘All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualization further implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort. This is true of non-social as well as of social activity. Even the solitary individual on the proverbial desert island habitualizes his activity. When he wakes up in the morning and resumes his attempts to construct a canoe out of matchsticks, he may mumble to himself, ‘There I go again’, as he starts on step one of an operating procedure consisting of, say, ten steps. In other words, even solitary man has at least the company of his operating procedures. Habitualized actions, of course, retain their meaningful character for the individual although the meanings involved become embedded as routines in his general stock of knowledge, taken for granted by him and at hand for his projects into the future. Habitualization carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed.’ (Peter L. Berger & Luckmann, 1991, pp.70-71)

Cultivating reinforcing encouraging the cultivation of manners, social mores and ‘habits of the heart’ which nurture empathy social and national solidarity and other regarding sentiment in students is a critical role for all educational institutions. Educational institutions as mediating institutions play a role in introducing individuals into social and moral norms, habits of behaviour and ways of conducting oneself. Habitualization, traditional norms, manners and mores are all in a fashion limits to simply doing whatever we want to do. They provide social costs to simply enthroning the self and having no care or obligation to others. The nature and quality of habitualization can either reinforce the patterns and practices of what Syed Hussein Alatas refers to as a captive mind (Alatas, 1974) or unleash and support creativity that is still in keeping with cultural and moral norms of the host society. The roots of empathy for individuals which is the basis of social solidarity and social cohesion lie not necessarily in the freely chosen, ‘authentic’ foregrounded values and choices of ‘unencumbered’ individuals (B. S. Turner, 2001). Rather, the roots of empathy, the habits of the heart so necessary for social cohesion and stability lie in their grounding, and ‘embedding’ in backgrounded habits and dispositions that are formed often unconsciously in our institutions. (Peter L. Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

In the incessant desire to compete, perform and innovate within neo-liberal modernity the pressures and fragmentation of social cohesion and traditional values are immense. However, as Neil Postman points out teaching
and education it is a conserving activity (Postman). This conserving nature of education is relevant at every level from early childhood through to higher education. When we consider our educational institutions we find that they are critically and deeply formative institutions and they provide us with a sense of belonging to cultural narratives and obligations without which we would flounder. Recognizing cultural stabilization and social cohesion as central and not tangential to education is critical to the effort to ensure that the discourse of educational reform is centred balanced and in sync with contemporary social needs. Green and John Preston point out that, ‘concern over social cohesion is also part of a more fundamental questioning of what society means in a world transformed by globalization’ (A. Green et al., 2006, p.1). The problem of social cohesion which depends in part on principles of mutual respect, recognition and intercultural sensitivity is central to the stability of our societies. Social cohesion rests on moral norms and practices firmly embedded in habit. Habit frames human conduct.

To understand the significance of institutions (such as universities) in our lives we need to ground our ideas of development and the education of our ‘encumbered’ selves in institutional arrangements that provide deep meaning and stabilise our otherwise anarchic world. The result of viewing individuals as unencumbered, competitive, individualistic utility maximizing selves is that these crowd out our understanding of our vulnerability and need for institutionalization and habitualization of norms, mores and manners which form the backgrounded basis of our capacity for mutuality and empathy for each other. Forming strong institutions dedicated to the development of thick educational and moral outcomes requires us to grasp fully that our vulnerable characteristics as human beings require close and serious attention from our educational institutions. The nature of our human condition necessitates strong robust and committed educational institutions dedicated to education as moral development and character building and not just as producers of ‘human capital’. Such institutions must mediate between the individual and the market and the individual and the state. Our educational institutions ought to provide a firm footing in character building and moral development.

The competencies, practices, and identities that are necessary for students to compete and succeed in contemporary society cannot be simply reduced to technical arguments over improvements in human capital (Wong, 2009b). As Steven Wong argues, that creativity and innovation ‘starts and ends with a living, breathing person. That person has a family, a circle of friends and a community.’ (Wong, 2009a) In regards to universities, the moral aims of institutions must be an intrinsic and substantive part of their practical functioning and not merely an afterthought or addition to what is otherwise conceived of as prudent. Doing this requires a focus on processes of habitualization and strong backgrounding of norms for our students. It also requires understanding the importance of universities as mediating institutions committed to forms of association dedicated to values and character development that has justification in itself and not merely in reference to the fickle needs of the state or the fads of the market.

4. Conclusion

The key problem is that liberal society and its educational principles provides us with no moral anchor, no commitment to a vital ethical centre. It reduces our moral sensibilities to the interests of the unencumbered self and the needs of the market. These discourses may crowd out a deeper and more complex understanding of the critical role that higher educational institutions play in cultural stabilization and social cohesion. Educational institutions are finding that their sure foundation and legitimacy in inculcating students to vital moral values and principles of civility and conviviality under threat by a growing discourse of individualism, competitive ethos consumerism and creativity with no moral bounds which radically undercut shared meaning and moral order. Temperance of the individualistic and destructive forces that are unleashed by pedagogy based on individualism and self-aggrandizement is critically important. The achievement of social solidarity and other regarding ethical behaviour is critical to education properly conceived. Social solidarity as a basis for common objectives is ultimately reliant on substantive moral and character education which provides the basis for shared aims and moral agreement. Such habits of propriety, embedding of manners, mores and habitualization occurs in forms of associational life found in mediating institutions.

Strong backgrounding of habits and mores which become second nature to students and teachers alike provides the stabilizing function that is desperately needed in a Hobbesian world which is increasingly competitive and uncertain. Institutionalizing habits of moral concern, propriety and grounding of shared norms and behaviours is a difficult project in a world dominated by individualism and marketization. Cognizance of the positive role that
tradition and moral norms play in education through an understanding of the key importance of associational life, the function of educational organizations as mediating institutions and the proper understanding of habit to human conduct can help build a deeper and more critically engaged discussion of the costs and benefits of our current individually oriented rational choice discourse in higher education. Fortunately for us the past and tradition of universities provides an important guide in this struggle.

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