Understanding Learner Autonomy Better with Critical Realism

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Overview

Introduction – Context & Research Questions

Critical Realism as Meta-theory

A CR Perspective on Learner Autonomy

CR, Complex Dynamic Systems Perspectives, and Learning

Learner Autonomy, Agency, and an Ecological Model of Learning

Trajectories of Change and a Layered Reality

Proposed Model of Learner Autonomy

Introduction - Context

- Qualitative research

  Semi-structured interviews

  52 EFL teachers

  35 Japanese students

  12 different universities across Japan

- Extension of Doctoral research with UCL IOE

Introduction – Research Questions

- How do tertiary teachers at the university level successfully foster autonomy in their students?

- How does the act of fostering autonomy fit within the social context of learning?

- What are teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes towards negotiating a change in learner autonomy?

- How does the social context of past learning mediate student and teacher attitudes toward learner autonomy in the present?

- What effect does quantitative policy have upon the qualitative expression of autonomy at the pedagogic and personal levels?

Introduction – Research Problems

- Learner autonomy is usually considered to be a characteristic of the individual in the literature.

- Japanese students are often portrayed as lacking autonomy in the literature – myth of Japan's homogenous society.

- Range of analytical lenses available: cognitive capacity, motivation, critical reflection, social mediation, interaction, negotiation, student agency, teacher agency, social structure, field, *habitus*, capital, curriculum, assessment, policy.

- Quantitative instruments have proved unreliable in measuring learner autonomy (Horai, 2013)

- Adopt a Critical Realism perspective to help?
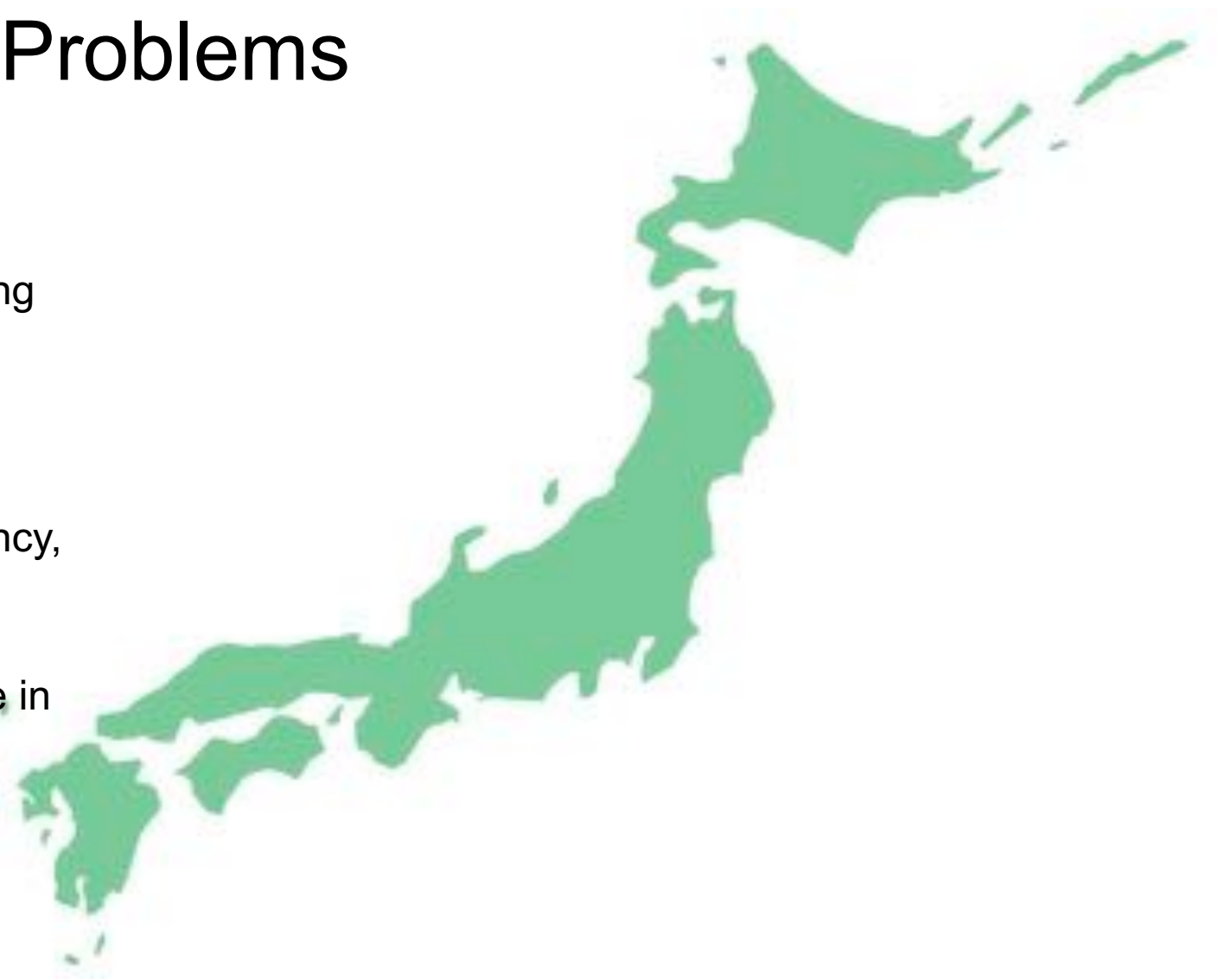
Critical Realism as Meta-theory

- Roy Bhaskar helped develop CR as a Meta-theory to improve understanding of the world.

- Ontological realism (Bhaskar, 2016)

- Under-labouring – asking what would have to be for what we know to be true.

- Complexity of freedom – open and closed systems are very different.

- Reflexive honesty about presuppositions.

Source: Curriculum4Cohesion/YouTube via https://www.independent.co.uk/news

Critical Realism as Meta-theory

- TMSA – Transformational Model of Social Activity (Bahsakar, 2016)
- All human activity occurs on the four dimensions of

1) Material transactions with nature
2) Social interactions between people
3) Social structure
4) Stratification of the embodied personality

- Social activity is concept-dependent, but not concept-exhausted.
- Learner autonomy must exist in at least one of these dimensions and be active in two others.
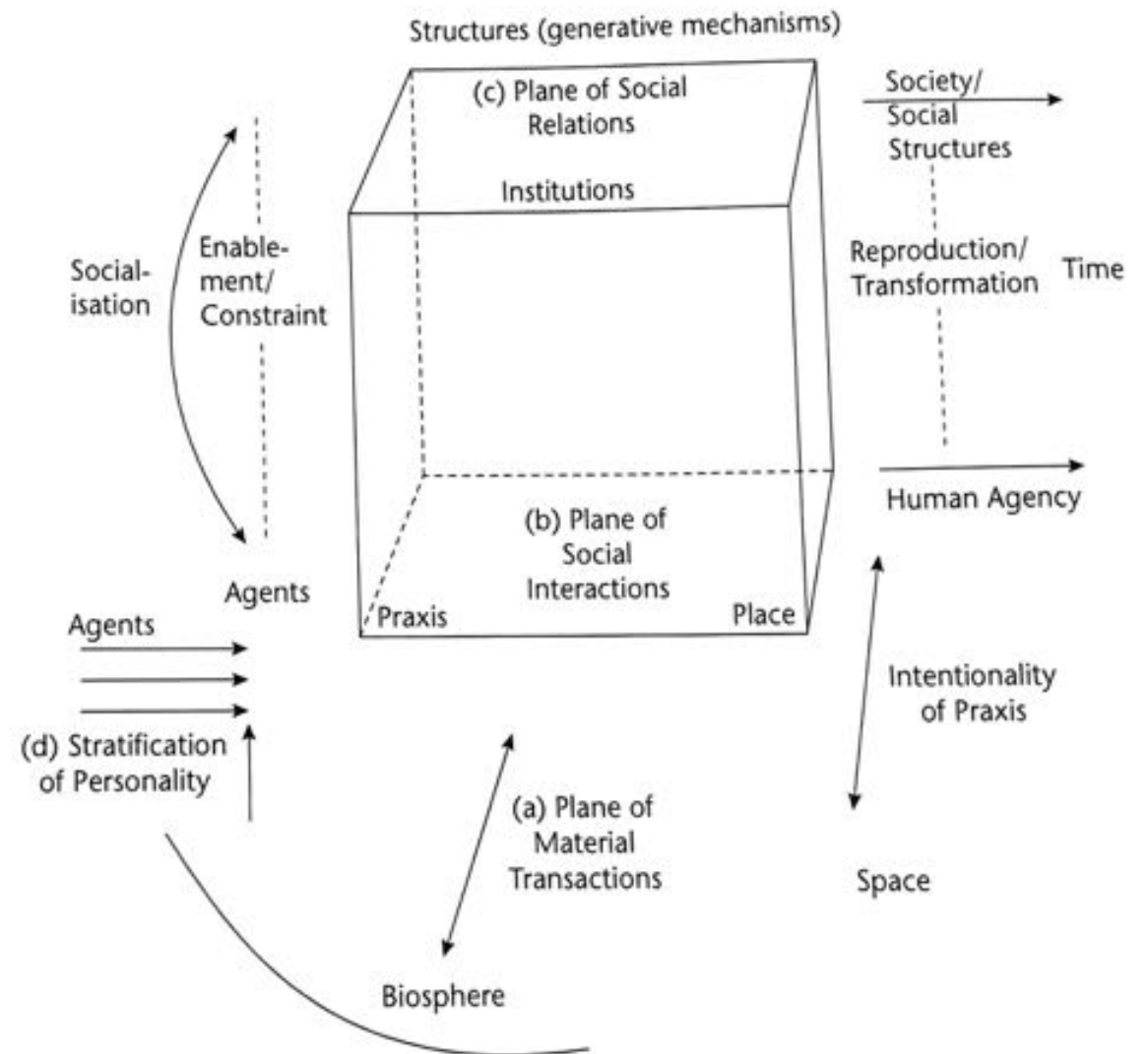
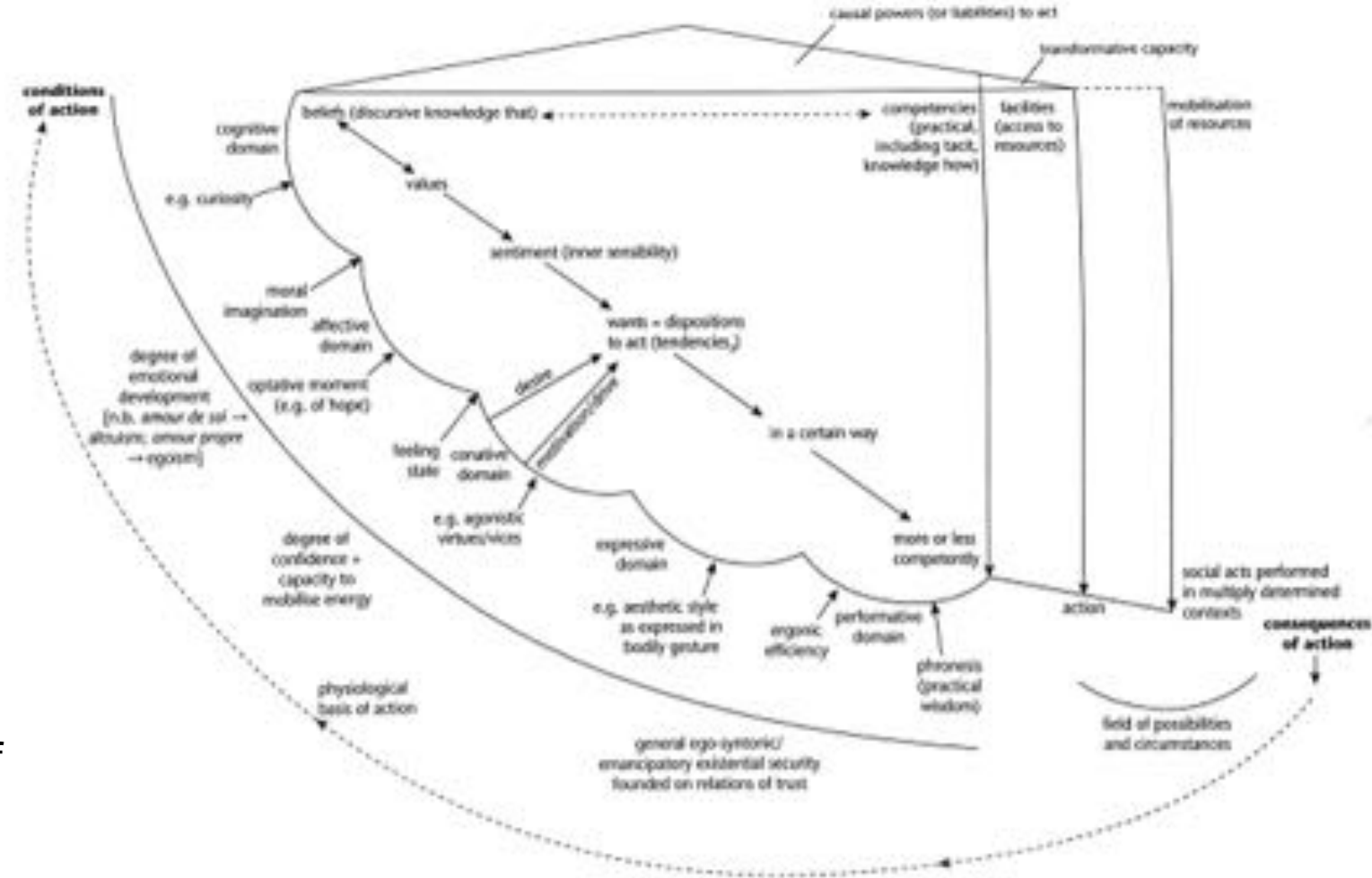# Critical Realism as Meta-theory

- Distinct levels of agency and structure (Bhaskar, 2016)

1. Sub-individual – psychological

2. Individual – biographical

3. Micro – ethnomethodological

4. Meso – relations between functional roles

5. Macro – functioning of whole sectors of society

6. Mega – trajectories of whole traditions of formations

7. Planetary – world systems, etc.

- So is learner autonomy stratified within the psychological level?
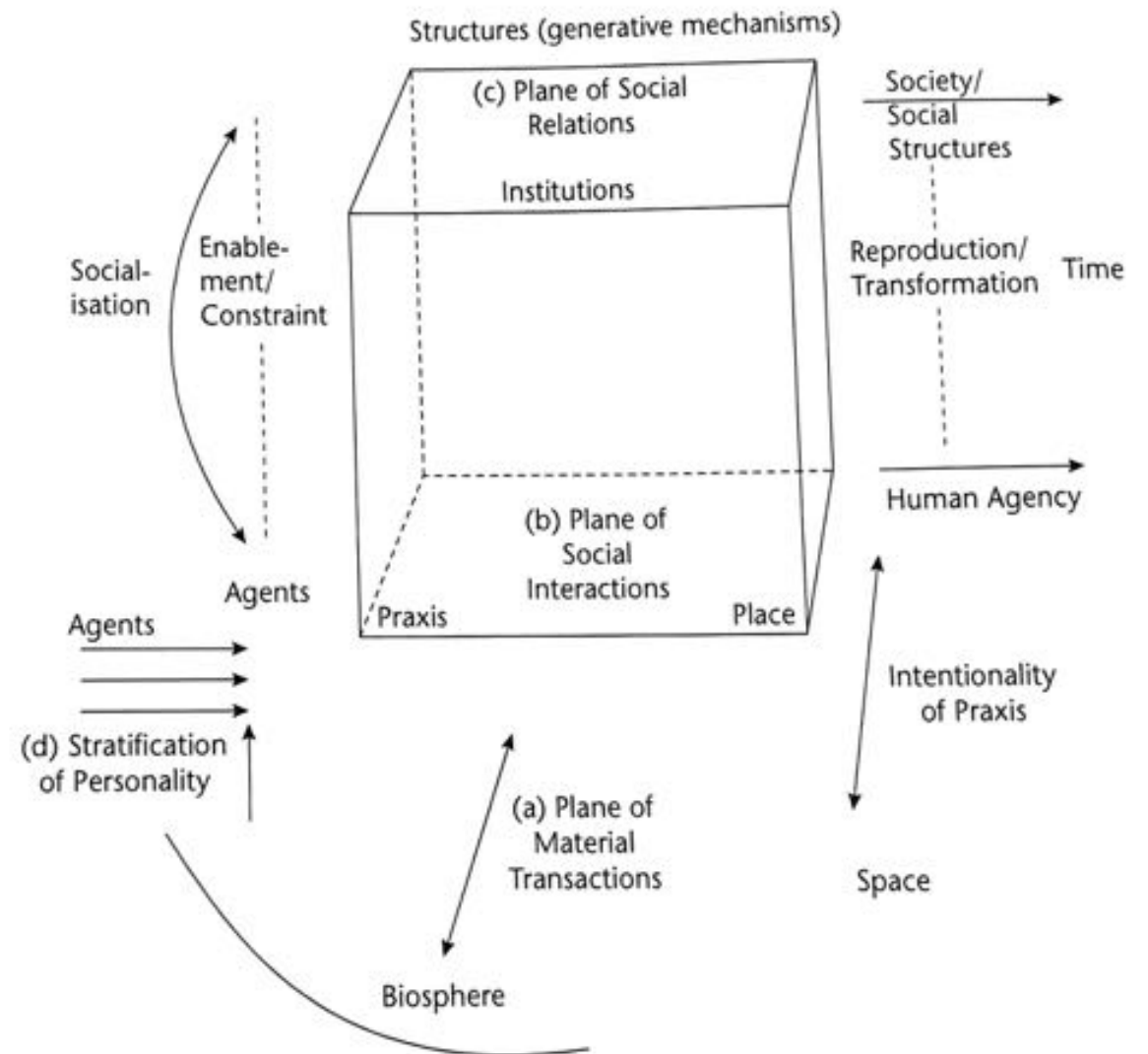
Critical Realism as Meta-theory

- Formation of action and agency (Bhaskar, 2016)

- TMSA – social structure conditions action, but mediated by actuality of reflexive deliberation.

- Matrix of subjective sources of action:

    Cognitive, Conative, Affective, Expressive, Performative, Values, Competencies, Facilities, Opportunities

- Reflexive deliberation may take the form of internal conversation or be unconscious, but at least must be universalizable - transposable.
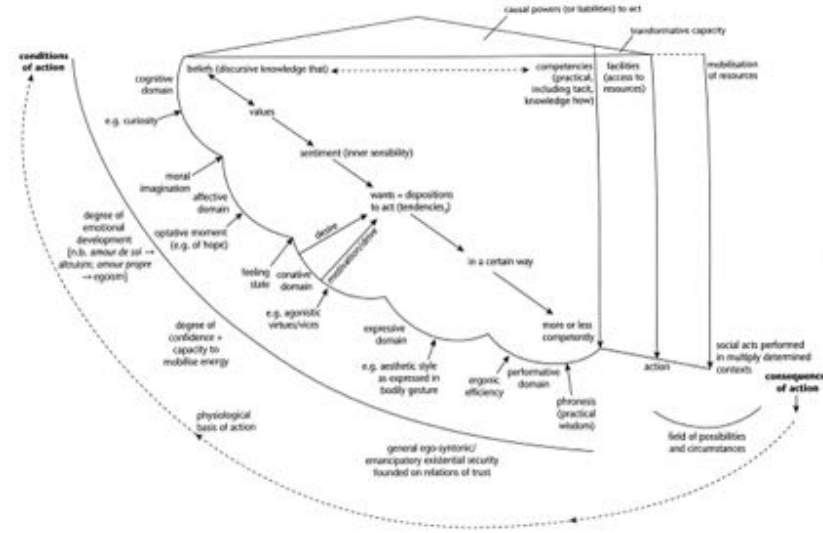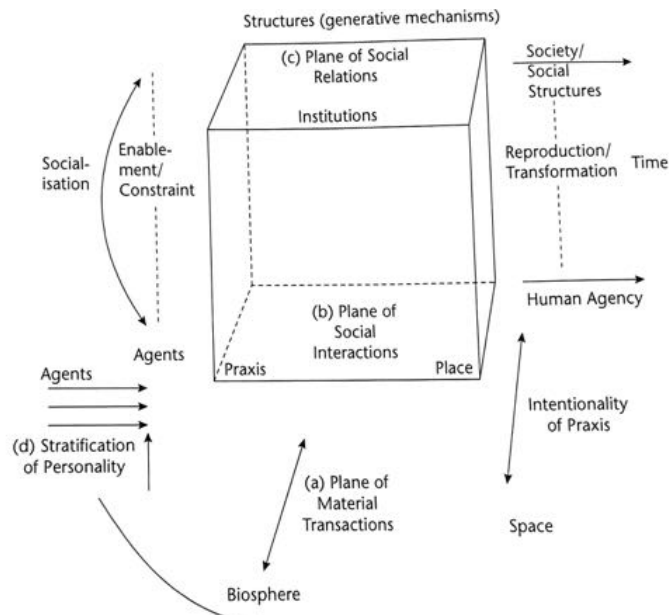
- Stratified reality across four dimensions.

- Critical Realism as Meta-theory across all levels.

- Critical Realism as Meta-theory at the Individual level.

- But how does this help my research?

- At what level does learner autonomy operate?

- How about the 'social' parts of my research questions?

A Critical Realist Perspective on Learner Autonomy

- Learner autonomy as the capacity to take charge of learning (Holec, 1981)

- Cognitive capacity for taking charge of learning (Little, 1991)

- Holec's ideas can be traced back to cognitive psychology of Schwartz (1973) avoiding problems of a social (or open) system.

- Deficit model of learner autonomy – the learner is cognitively deficient if they do not take charge of their learning!
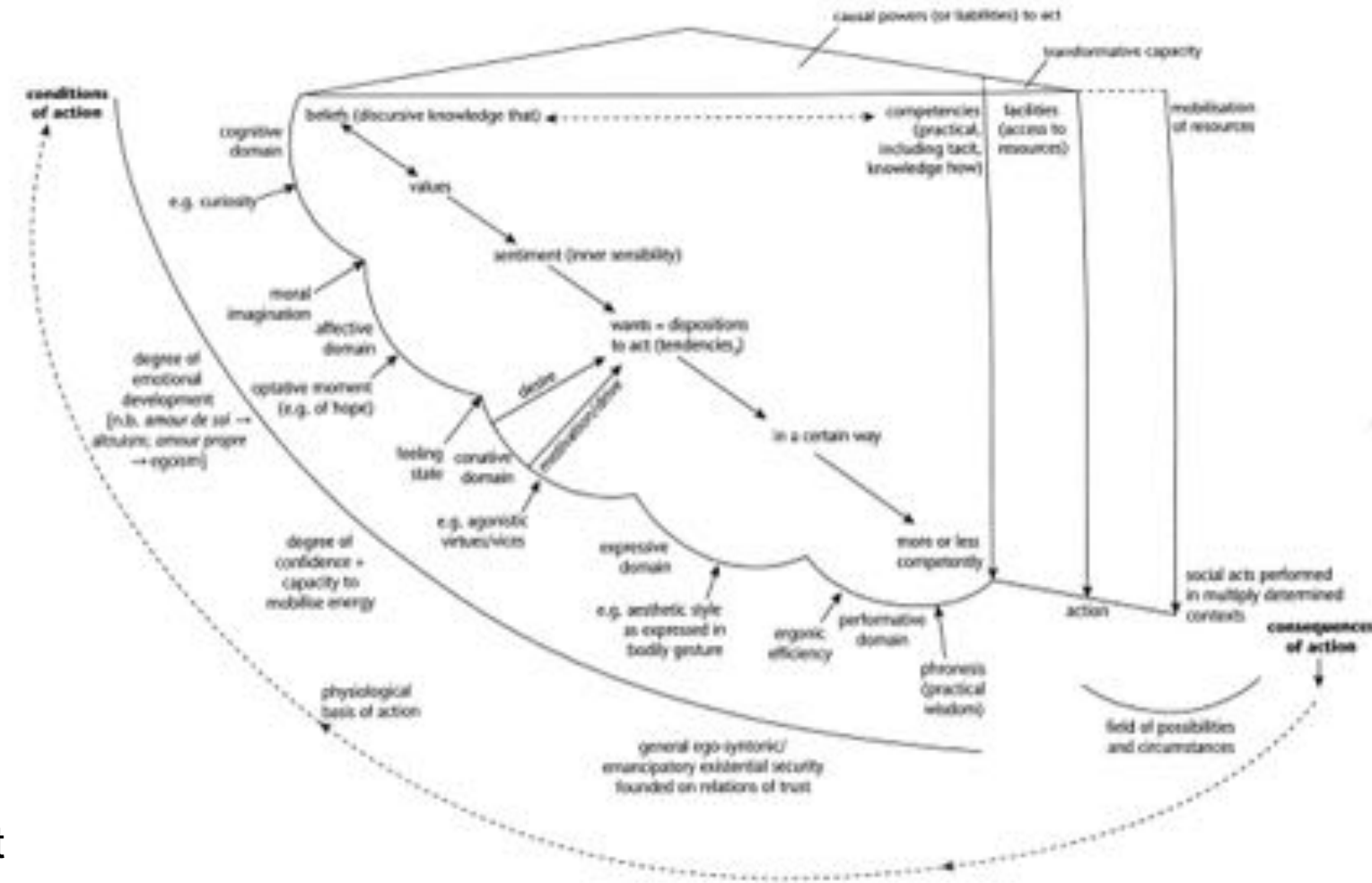
A Critical Realist Perspective on Learner Autonomy

- Tassinari (2012) provides a dynamic model of learner autonomy for use as a self-assessment tool by students.

- Based on a large body of learner autonomy literature.

- Focused on the Individual (Biographical) level but presumes agency at Micro- and Meso- levels.

- Tool for reflexive deliberation, rather than complete model of learner autonomy.

- Model NOT informed by CR but compatible with CR!
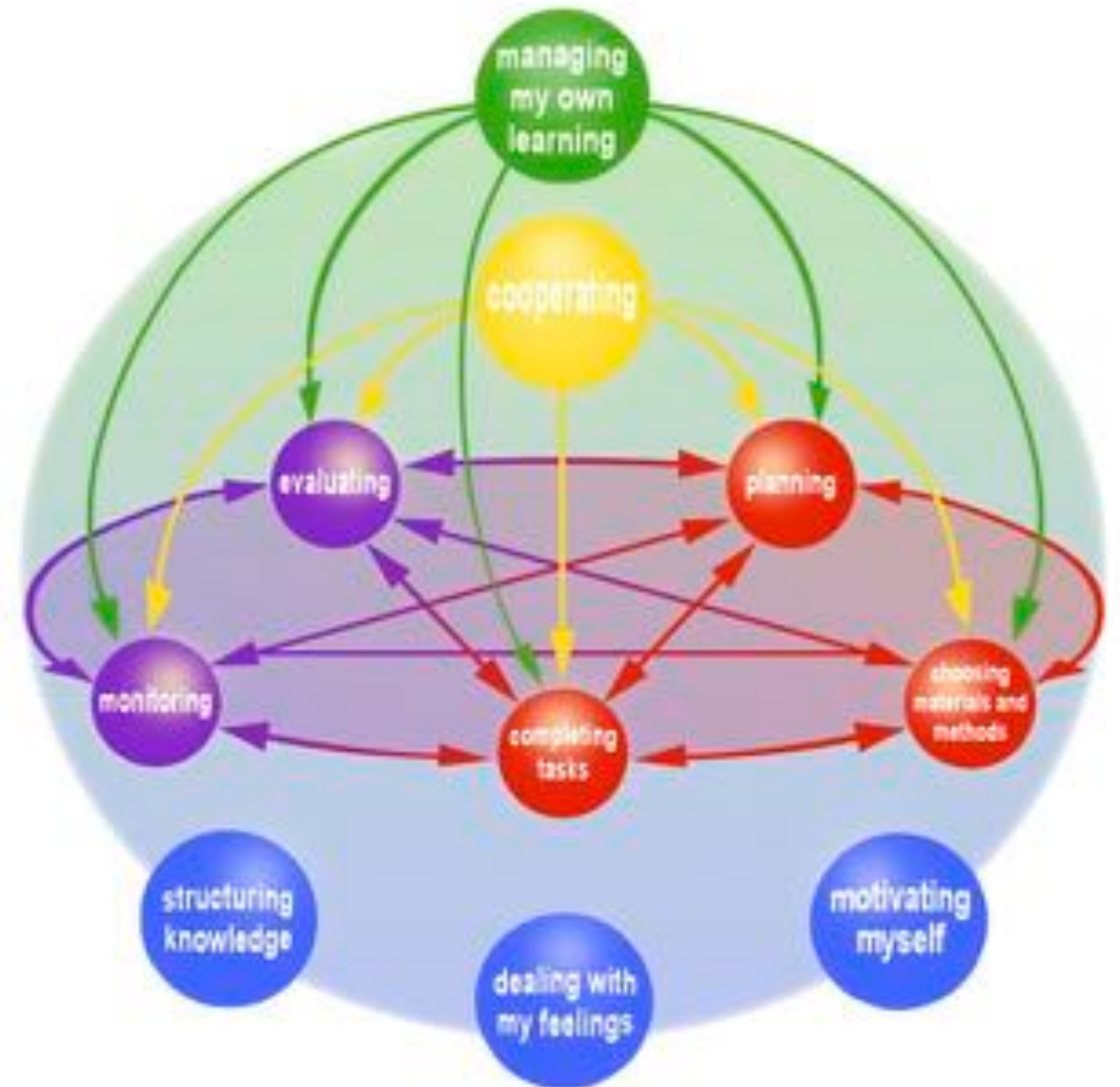
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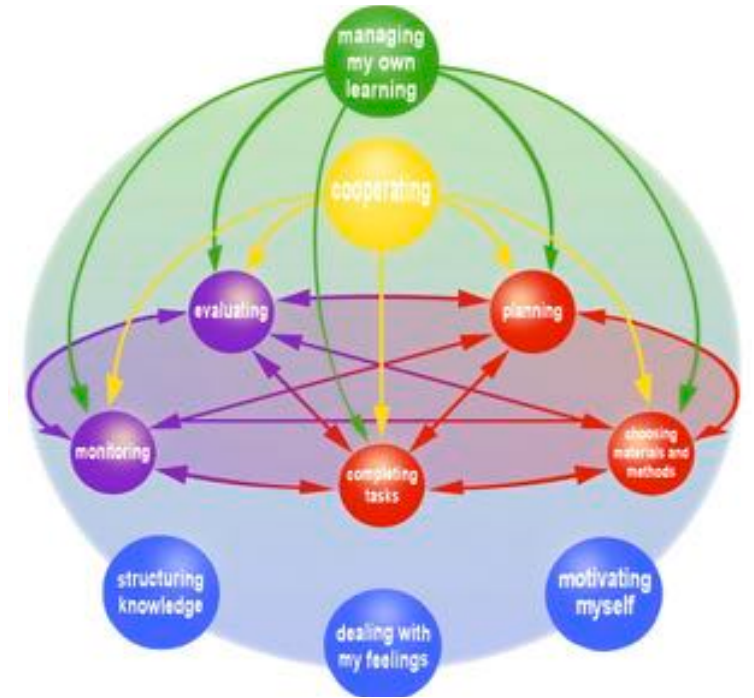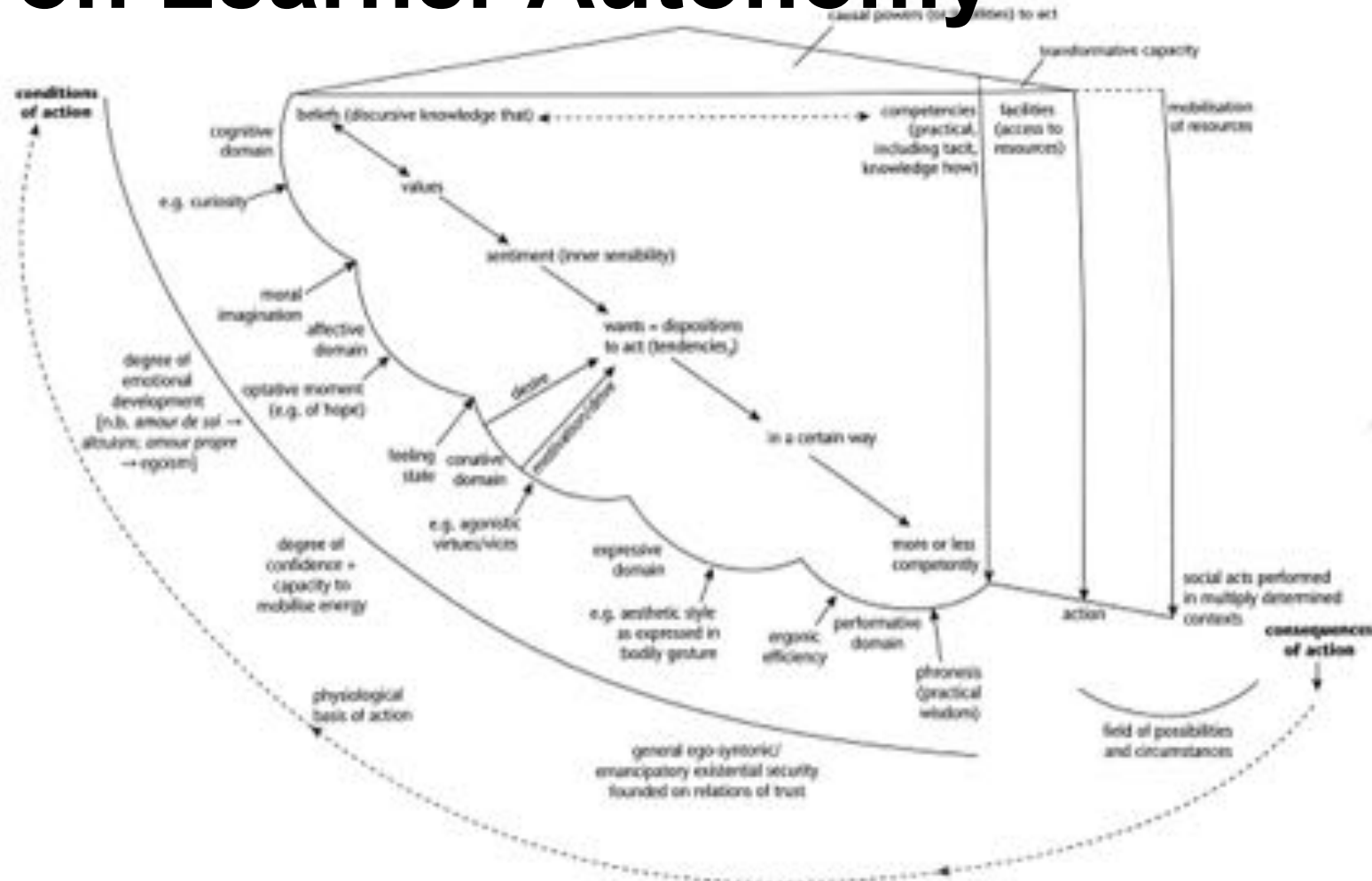
Tassinari's (2012) model has many elements that might be analogous to elements within Bashkar's (2016) components of action at the Individual level.
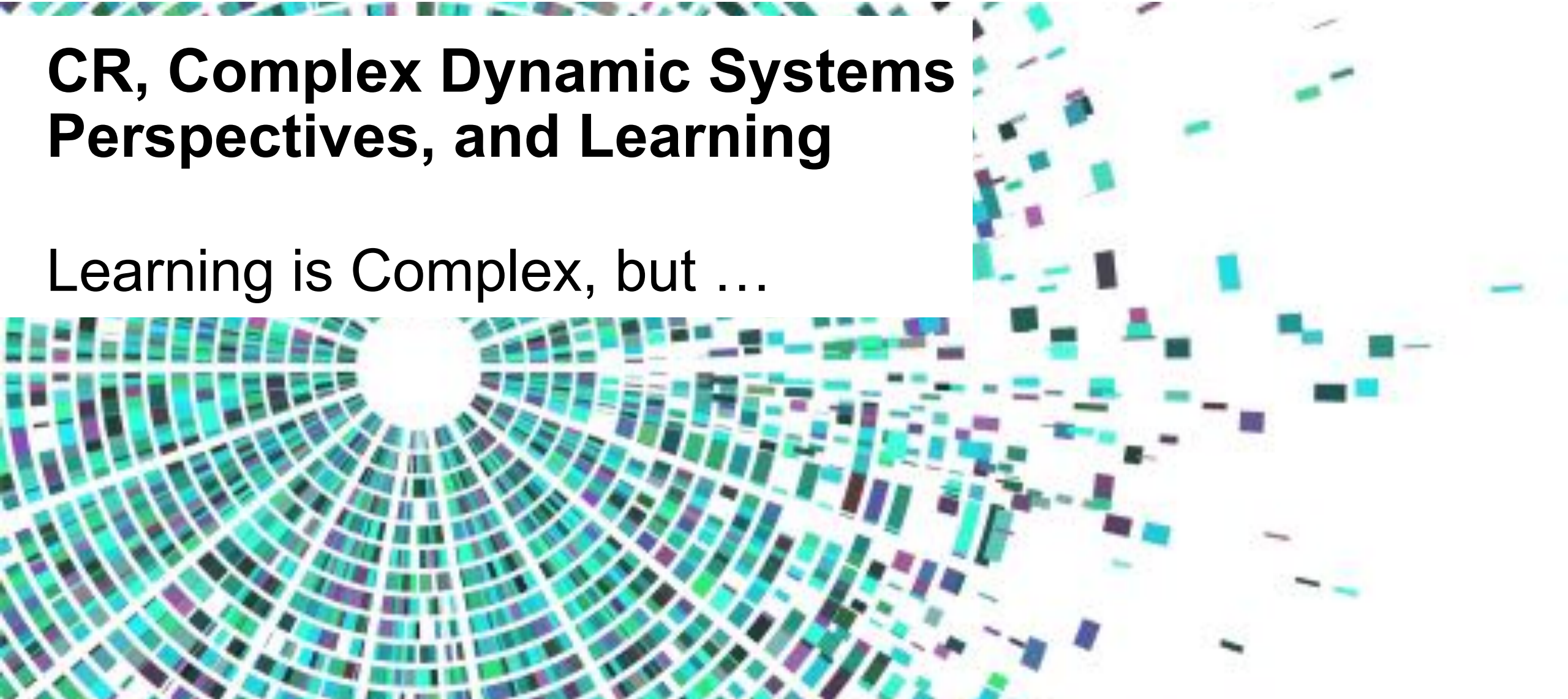
However, components of action link with agency, while learner autonomy and agency have traditionally been treated separately in the Applied Linguistics and SLA literature!
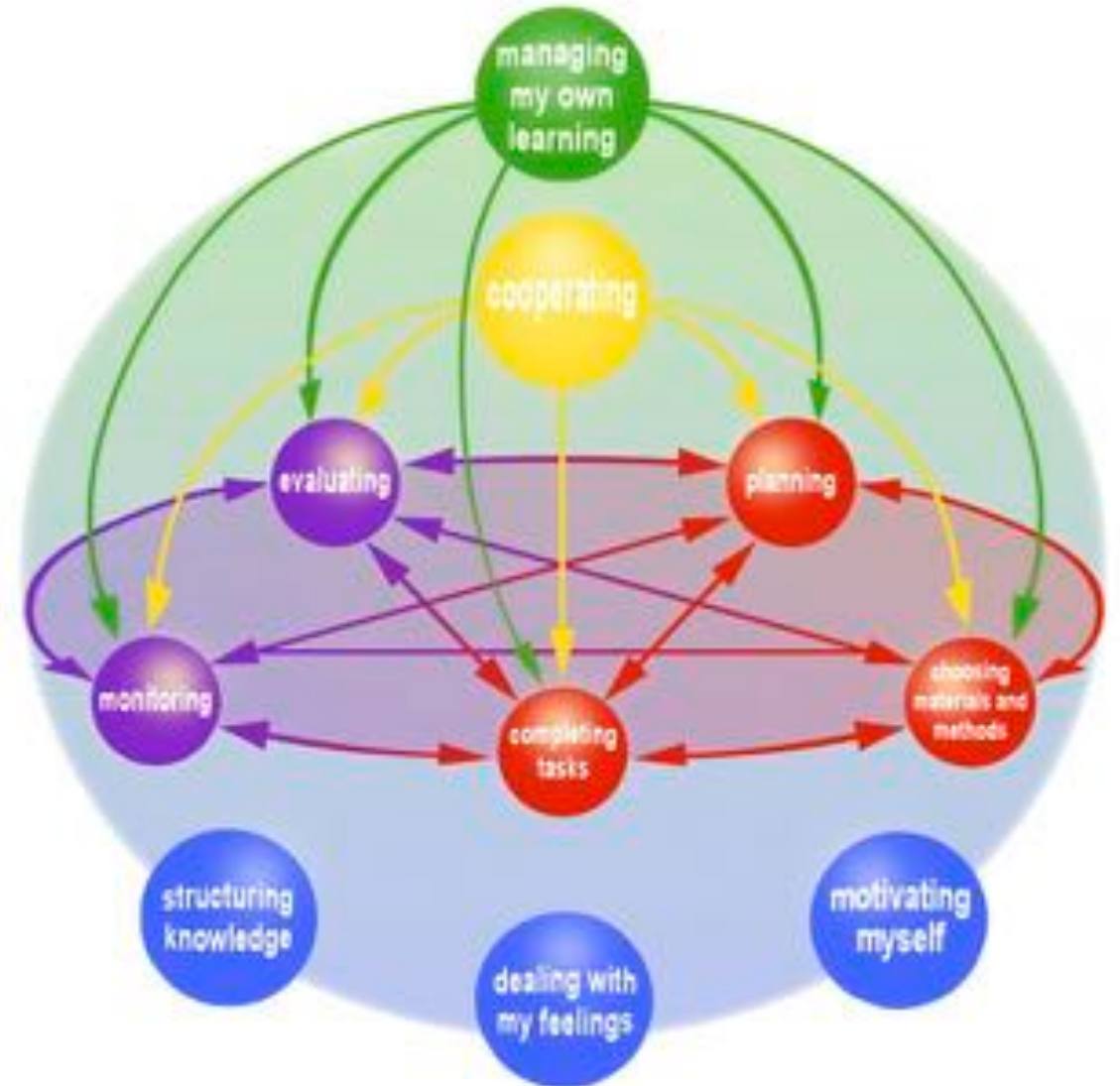
CR, Complex Dynamic Systems Perspectives, and Learning

Learning is Complex, but …

CR, Complex Dynamic Systems Perspectives, and Learning

- Tassinari's (2012) model draws on a Complex Dynamic Systems Perspective to provide some of its explanatory power.

- Complex Dynamic Systems Perspectives are not incompatible with CR, but there is a danger of falling into an epistemic fallacy.

- The 'Perspectives' part does a lot of heavy lifting from a purely empirical perspective: errors are unknown so difficult to apply mathematical simulations.

- Usage in SLA literature often invokes the social standing of Empiricism in the research community rather than provide useful benefits.

CR, Complex Dynamic Systems Perspectives, and Learning
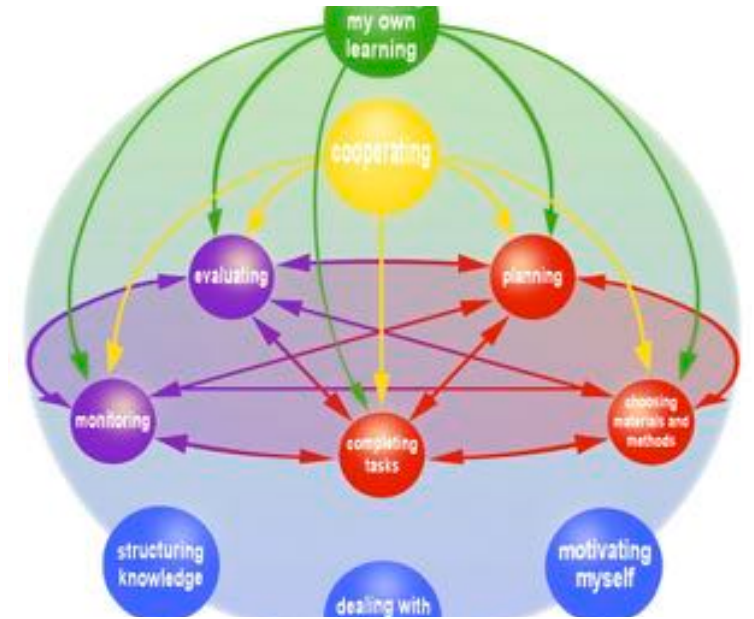
Scott (2021) lists 9 major models of learning that emphasize different theoretical and contextual aspects of a pedagogic site. Instances of learning happen throughout an individual's reality and are not confined to a school or university setting – learning happens all the time.

Learner Autonomy, Agency, and an Ecological Model of Learning

- What about the actual research?

- Nearly every teacher reported having a hybridised conceptualization of learner autonomy

- These hybridised versions of learner autonomy were influenced by:

- Teacher disposition towards learner autonomy

- Teacher disposition towards institutional goals

- Teacher disposition towards the means available

- Teacher access to different social fields
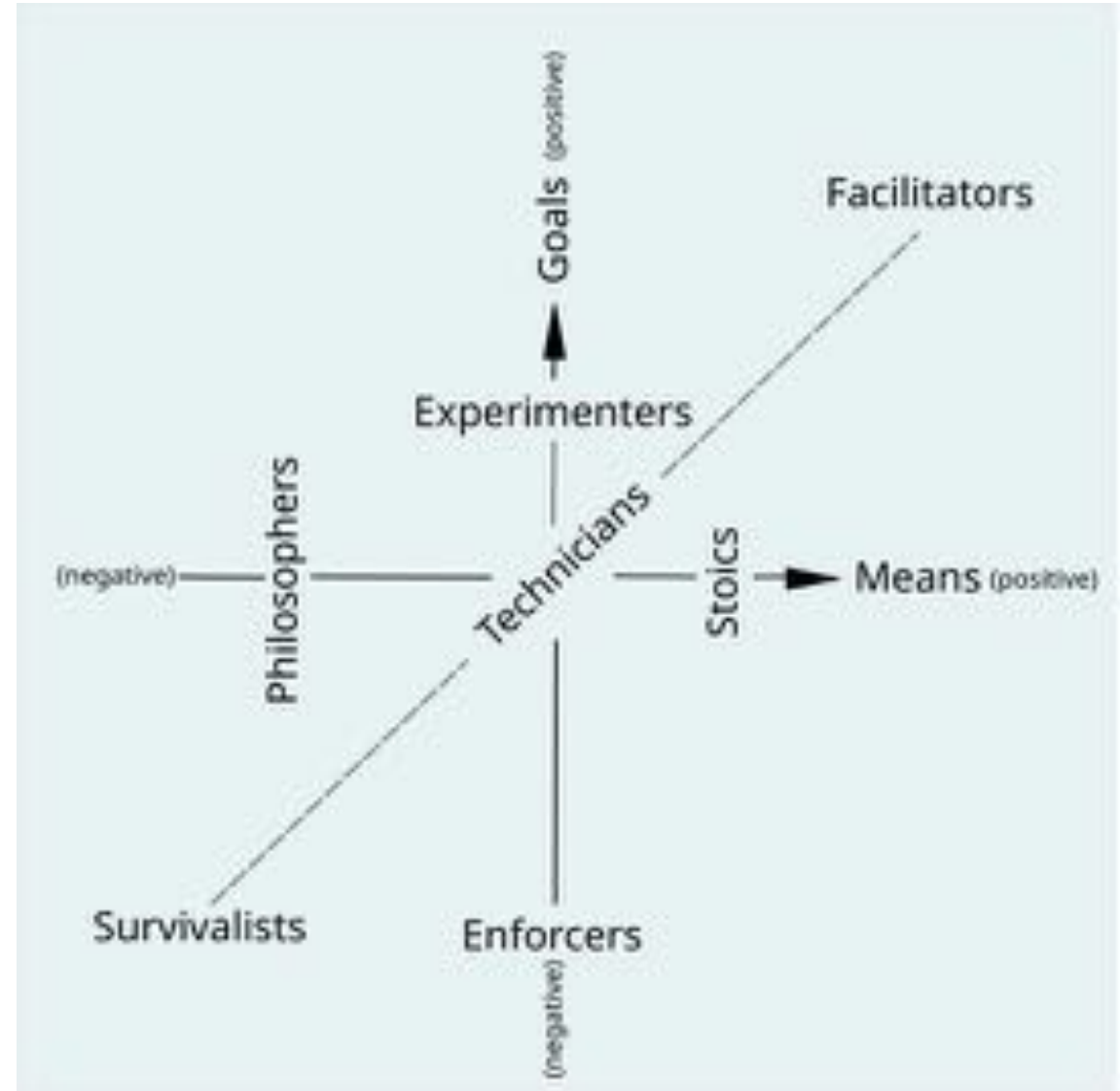
Learner Autonomy, Agency, and an Ecological Model of Learning

- But isn't this getting away from the simplicity of learner autonomy?

- Learner autonomy was never that simple.

- Leni Dam's flower model of learner autonomy shows how complex autonomy can be when viewed in the context of the classroom (Dickinson, 1987).

- Dam (1995) provided the simplest definition of learner autonomy as the learner making socially responsible decisions in pursuit of learning.

- Learner autonomy exists in an open system!
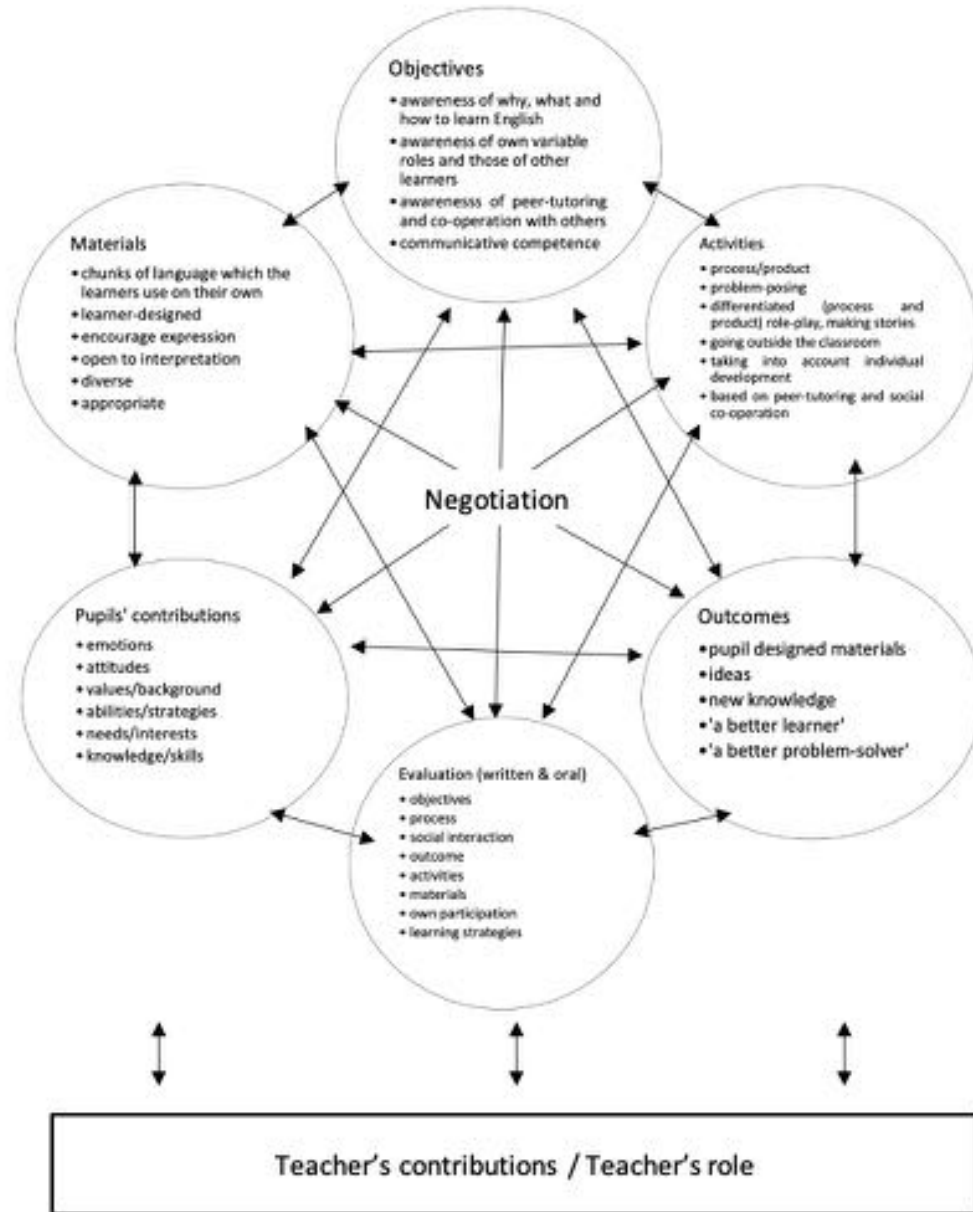
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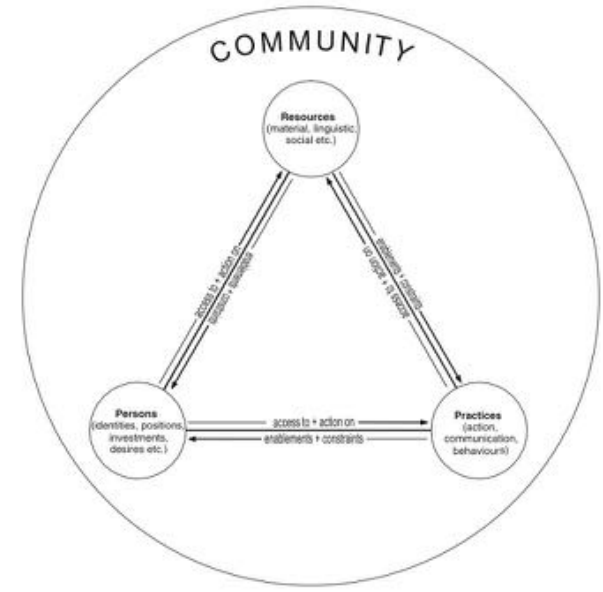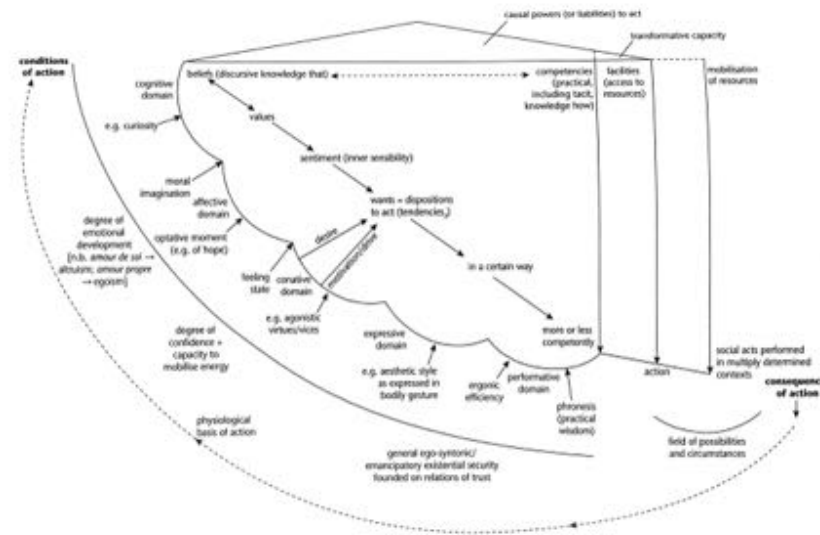
- Toohey (2007) suggested that autonomy and agency were interrelated within a community.

- In Toohey's model (right), Persons, Resources, and Practices are linked by a system of access/action/ and enablements/constraints.

- Recall CR's TMSA – Transformational Model of Social Activity (Bahsakar, 2016)

- Multidimensional negotiation for agency, resources, and position
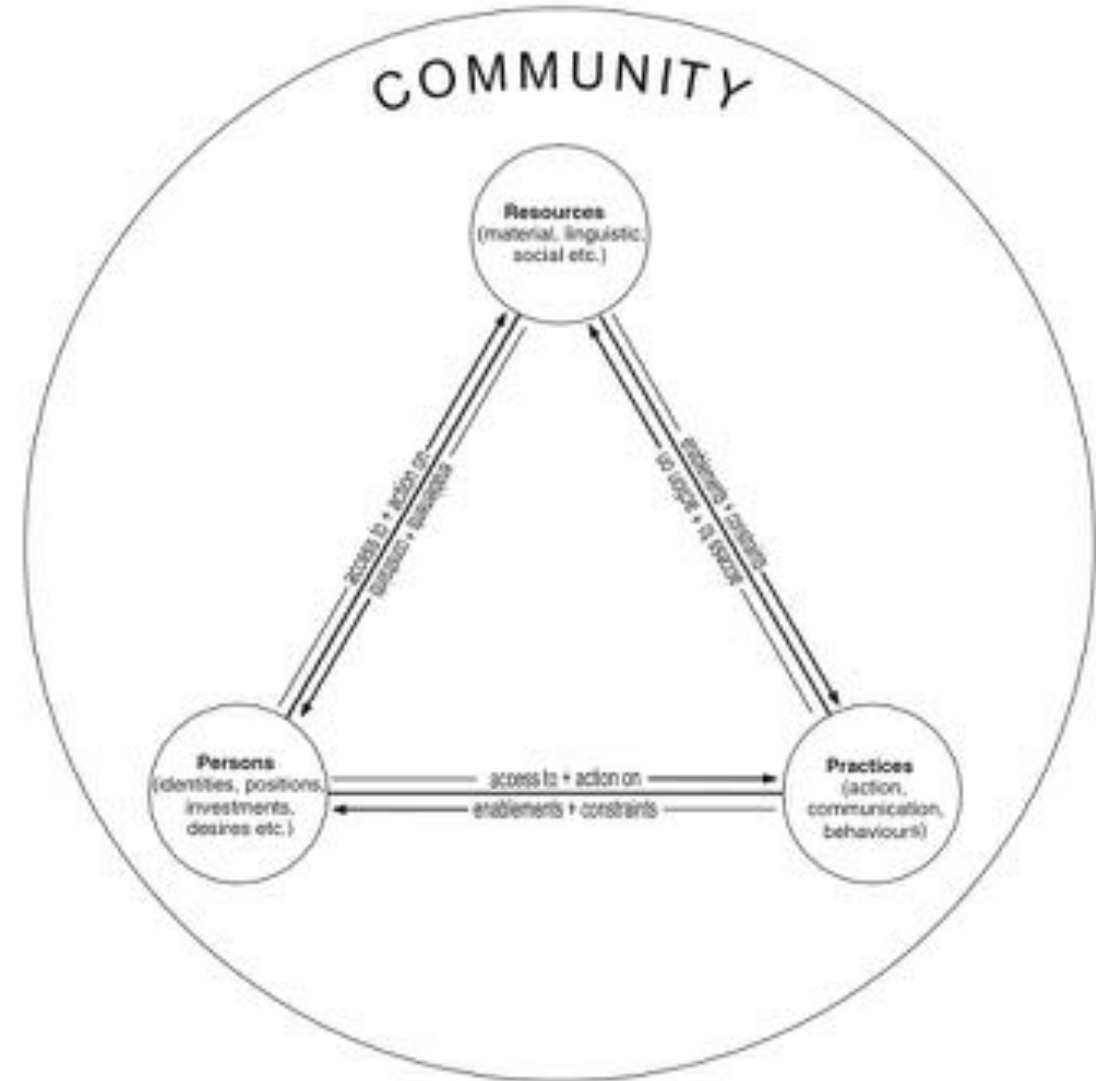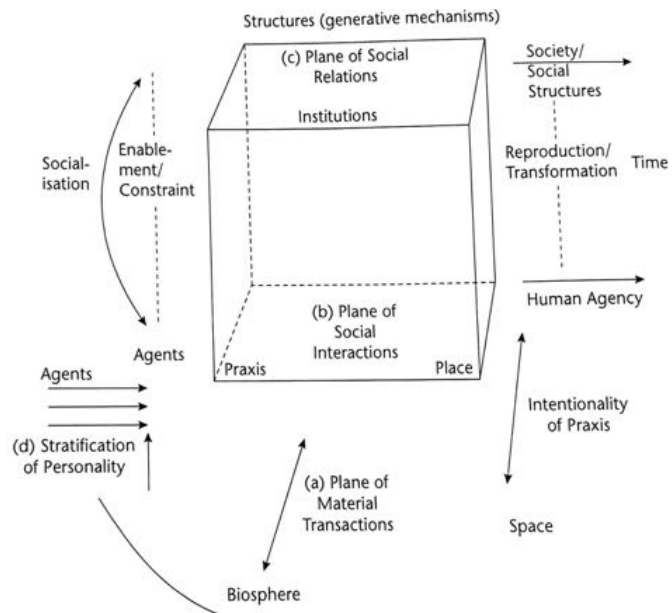
- Stratified reality across four dimensions.

- Agency affected by access to /action on practices and resources.

- System of enablements & constraints.

- Critical Realism as outlines 'action on' through system of enablements & constraints

- Link between autonomy at the intrapersonal level and agency at the individual level

- But how does this help my research?

- At what level does learner autonomy operate?

- How about the 'social' parts of my research questions?

Learner Autonomy, Agency, and an Ecological Model of Learning

- Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested an ecological model of learning within different layers.

- The Douglas Fir Group (2016) suggested this as a way to bring together cognitive and social perspectives on Second Language Acquisition.

- CR provides the under-labouring to bring together cognitive an social perspectives on SLA.

- How about the learner's experience of learner autonomy?
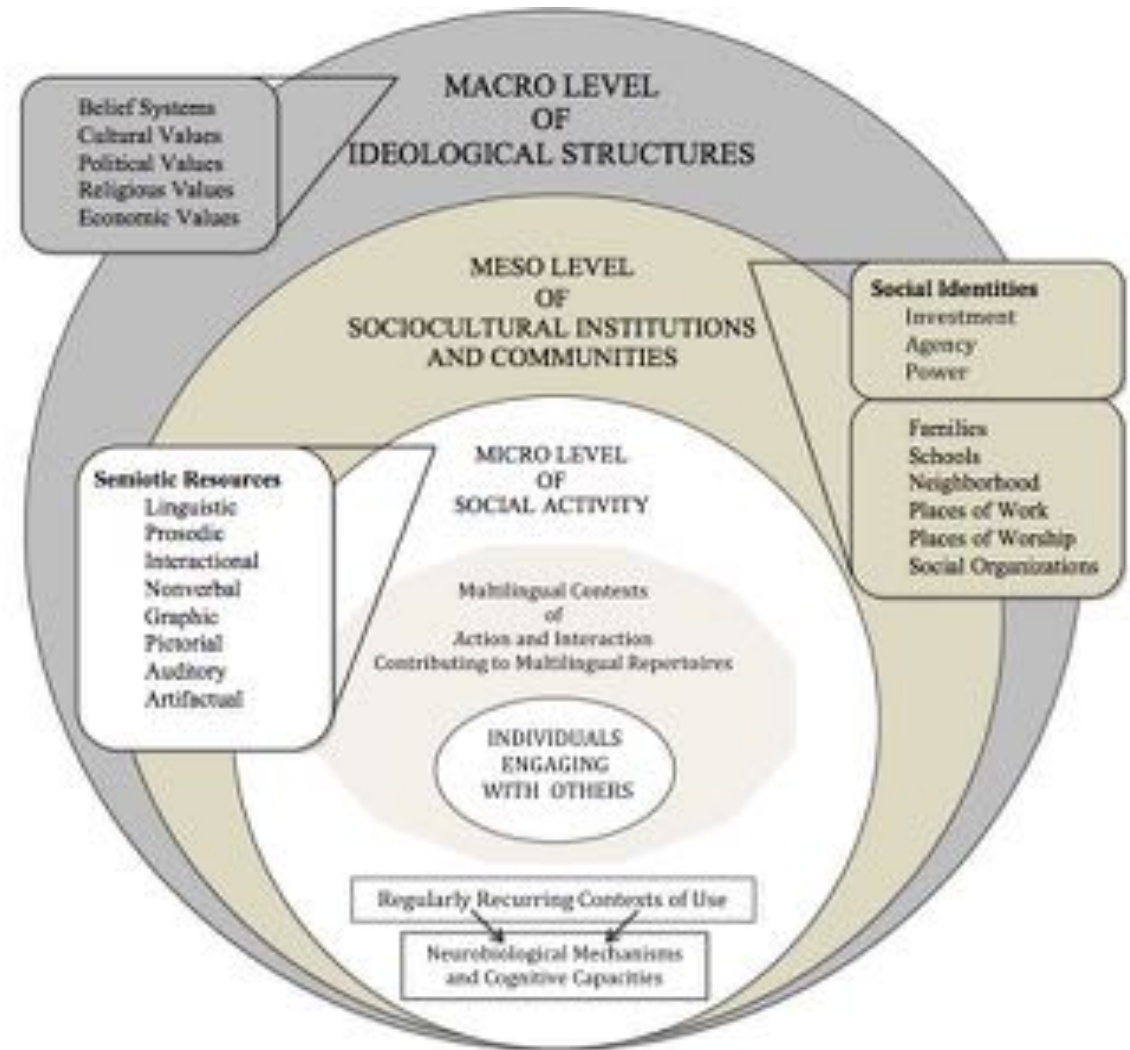
Trajectories of Change and CR's Layered Reality
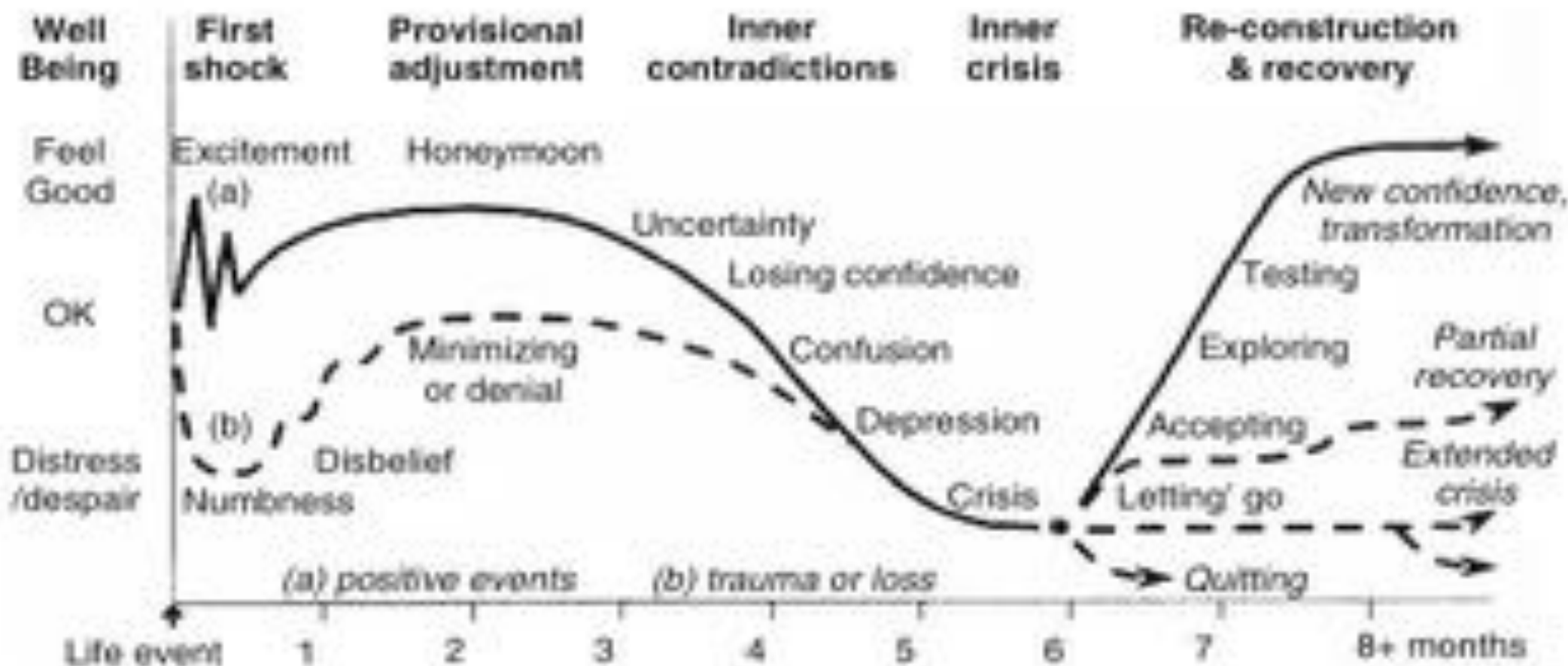
Trajectories of Change and CR's Layered Reality

- Williams' (1999) model of human reactions to change provides a possible model of learning about autonomy.

- Changes in control of autonomy/agency will induce a reaction – a learning process instance (or pedagogic site).
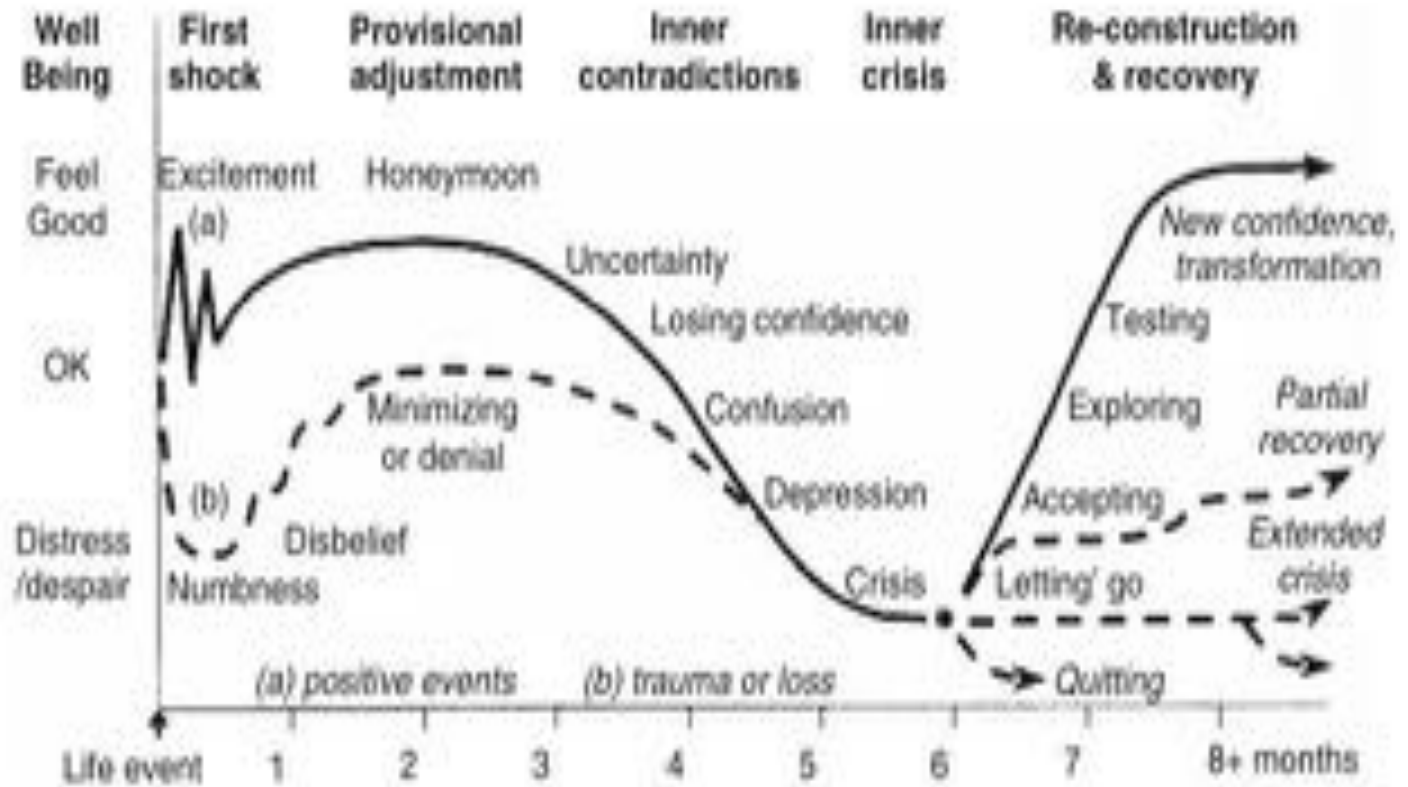
Trajectories of Change and a Layered Reality
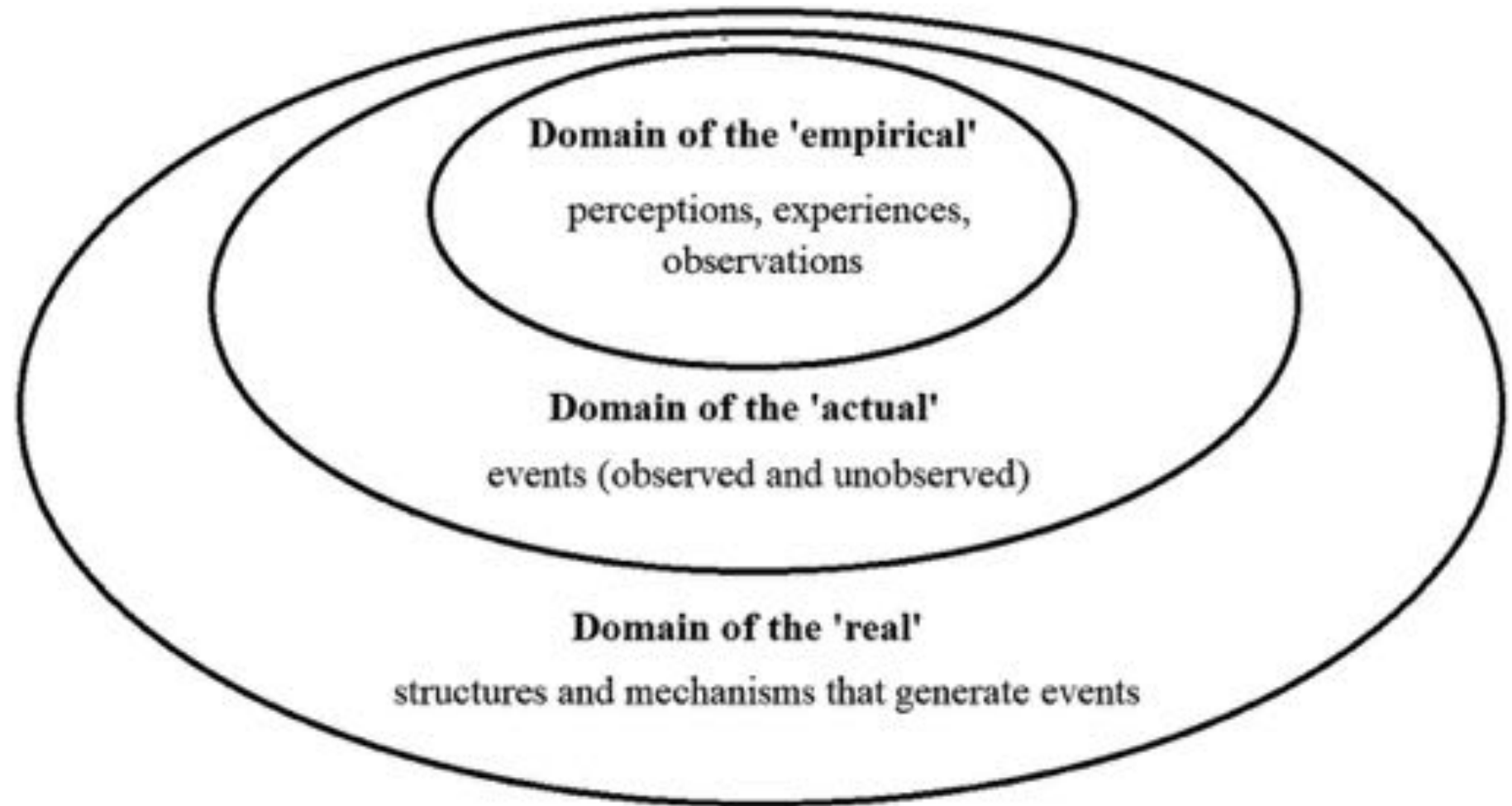
- Hoddy (2019) based on Bhaskar (2008).

Domain of the 'empirical'

perceptions, experiences, observations

Domain of the 'actual'

events (observed and unobserved)

Domain of the 'real'

structures and mechanisms that generate events

Trajectories of Change and a Layered Reality
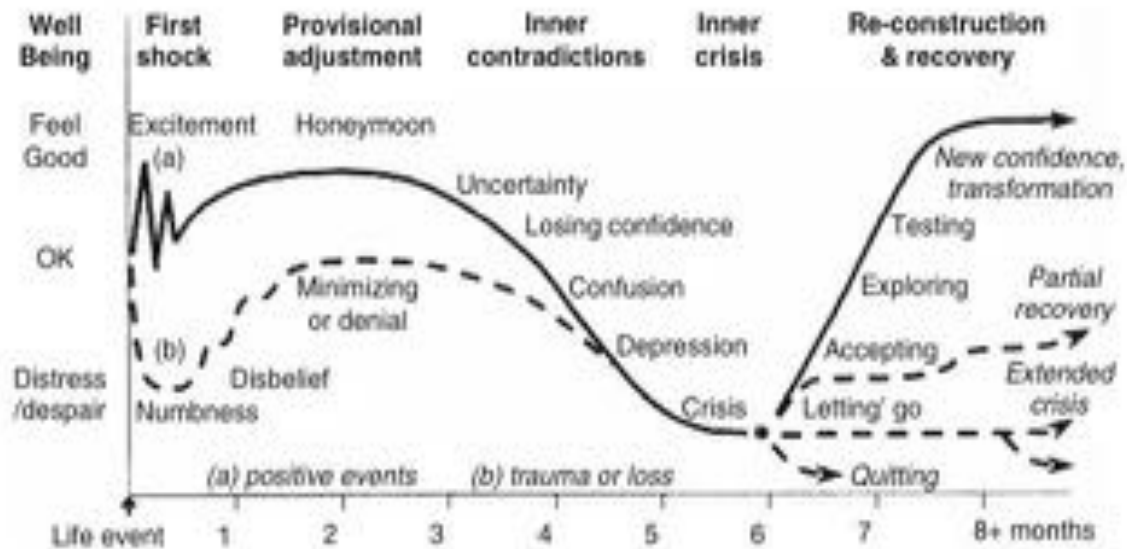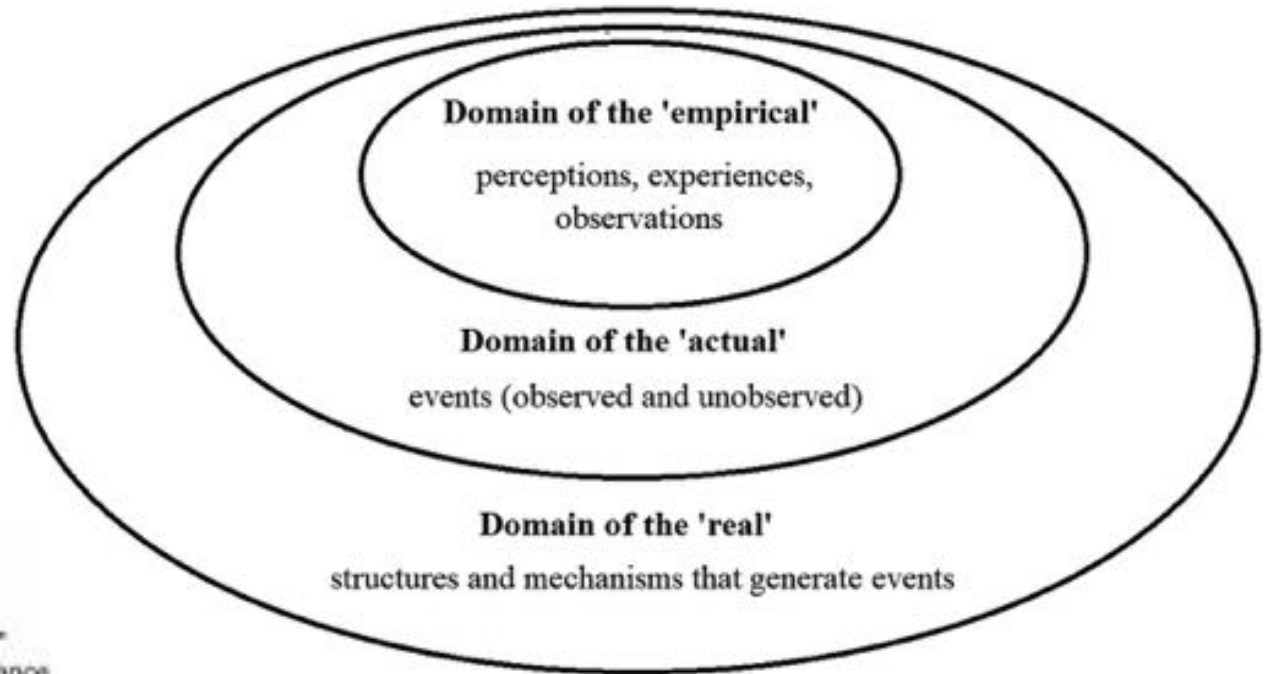
Underlying Generative Mechanisms & Structures cause Seen and Unseen changes in autonomy/agency trajectory as students progress through life.

Empirical
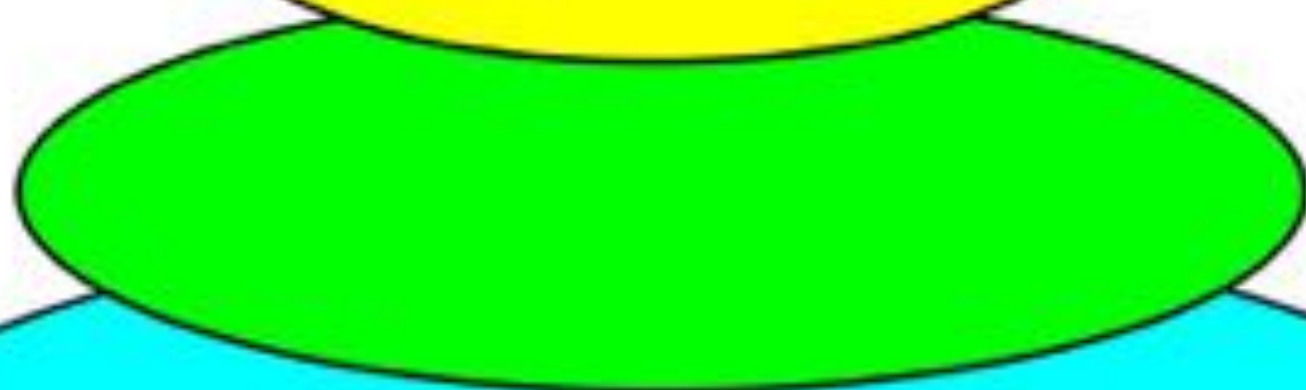
Actual

Real

Trajectories of Change and a Layered Reality – What about Japan?

- Myth of Japanese homogeneity (Sugimoto, 2014)
- Myth of Japan's egalitarian school system (Bjork, 2016; Cave, 2016)
- Japan's hidden curriculum (Ito, Kubota & Ohtake, 2015)
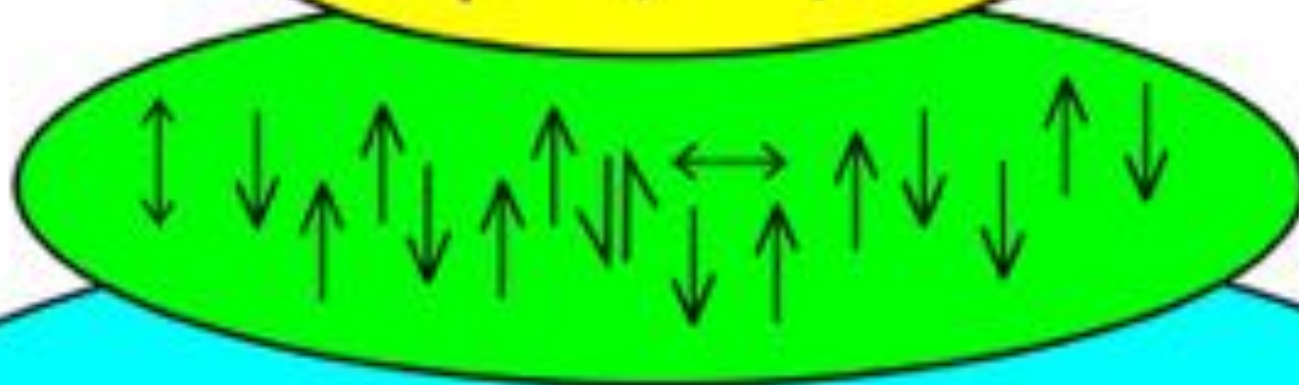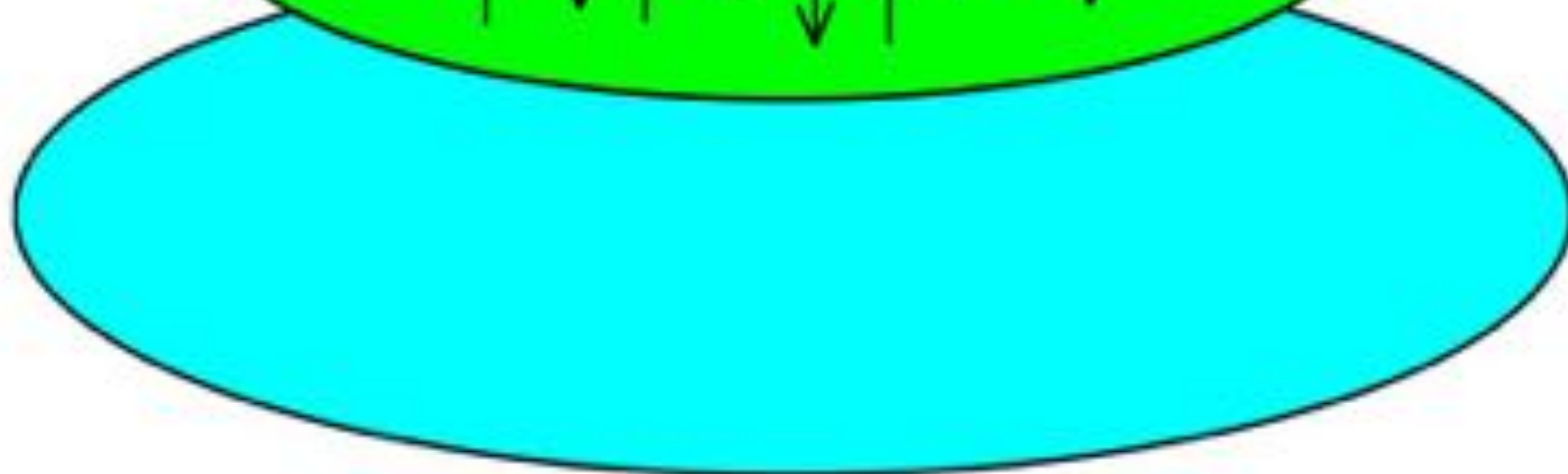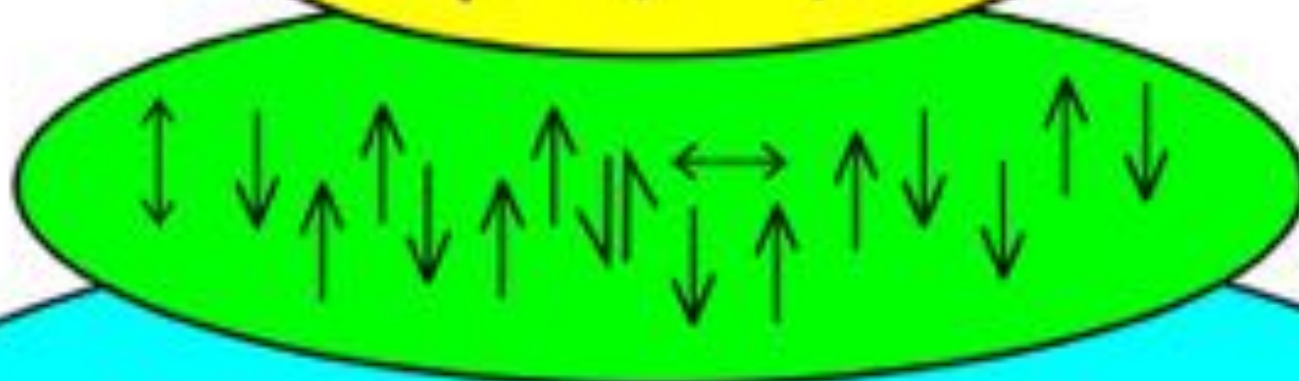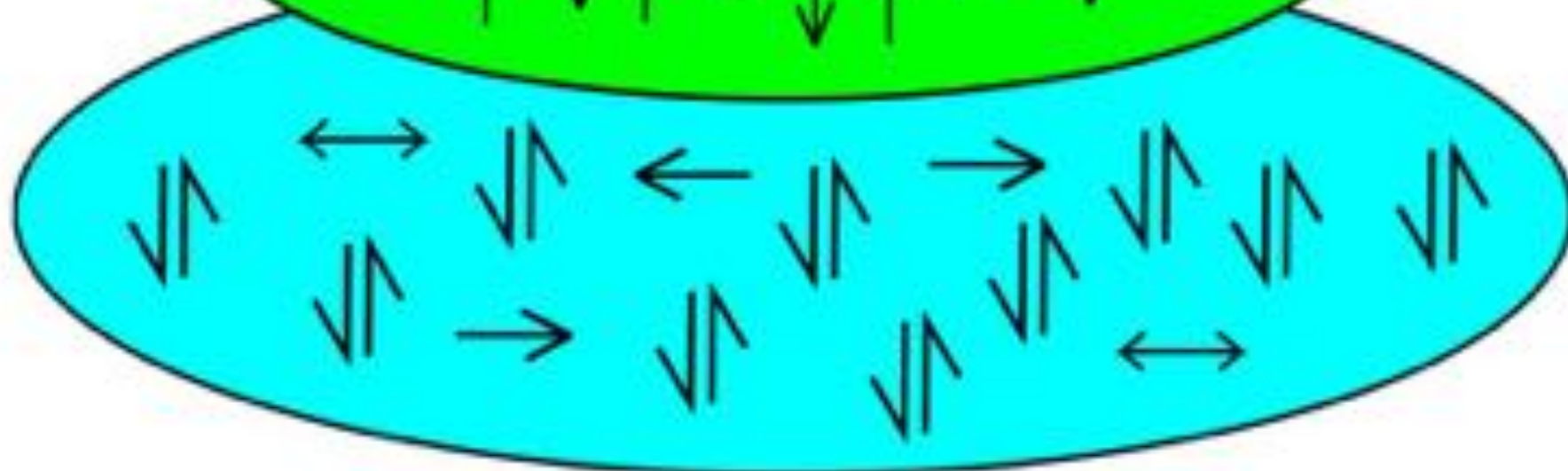
Teacher Negotiation of Learner Autonomy

- Nearly every teacher reported having a hybridised conceptualization of learner autonomy

- These hybridised versions of learner autonomy were influenced by:

- Teacher disposition towards learner autonomy

- Teacher disposition towards institutional goals

- Teacher disposition towards the means available

- Teacher access to different social fields

- Teacher data could be arranged in a dynamic typology (right) arranged around teacher dispositions towards goals and means.
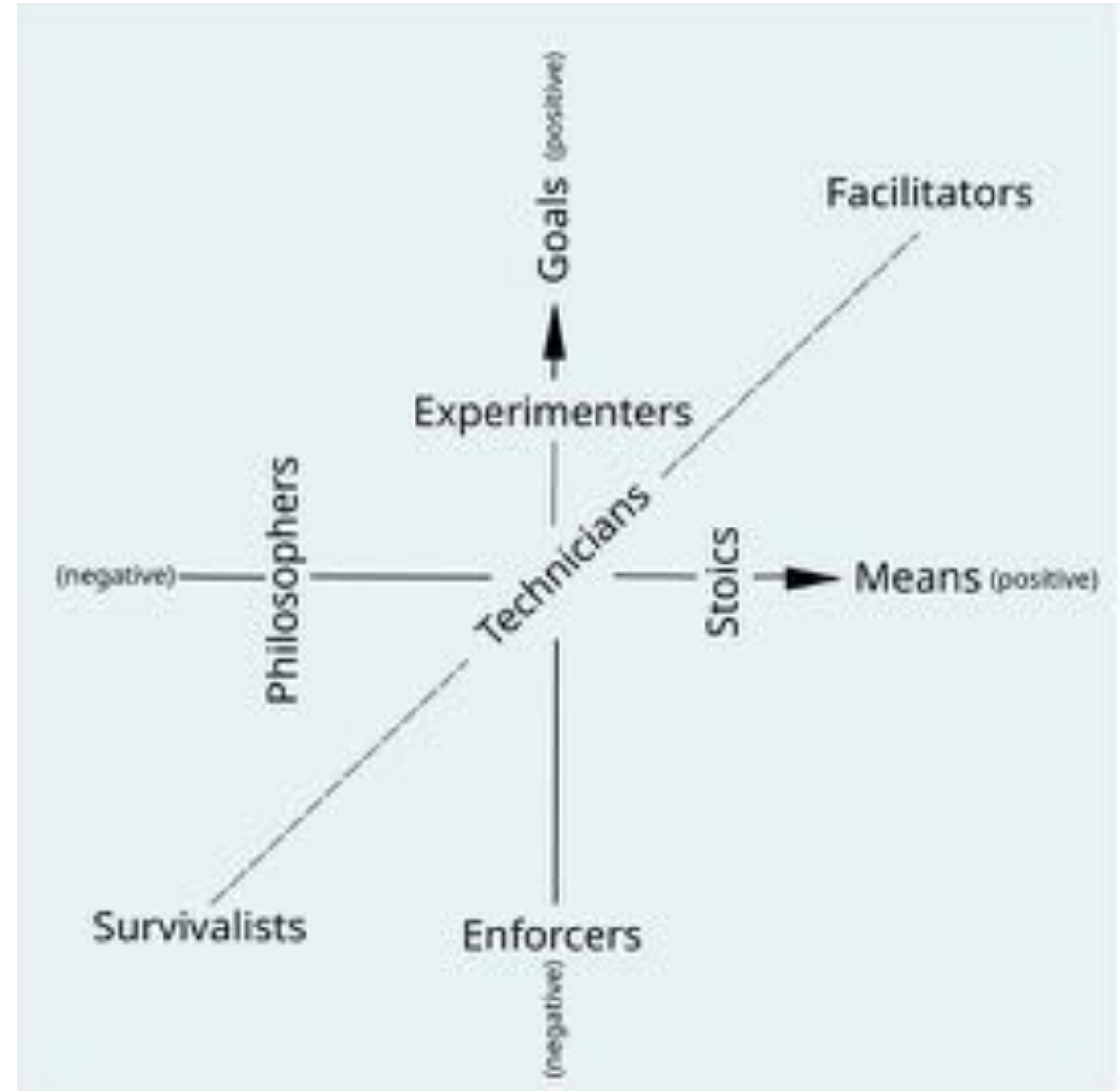
Teacher Negotiation of Learner Autonomy

- Site of re-interpretation & change

- Multiple different Student experiences of autonomy/agency even within same institution

- At Intrapersonal level, enforcement & lack of student engagement – self-sustaining negative cycle of experiences for students and teachers.

- At Interpersonal level, teachers report evidence of student agency, *habitus*, mediation, interaction, and negotiation – impact of pedagogy at Classroom level.

- At Classroom level, teachers report expression of their own agency.
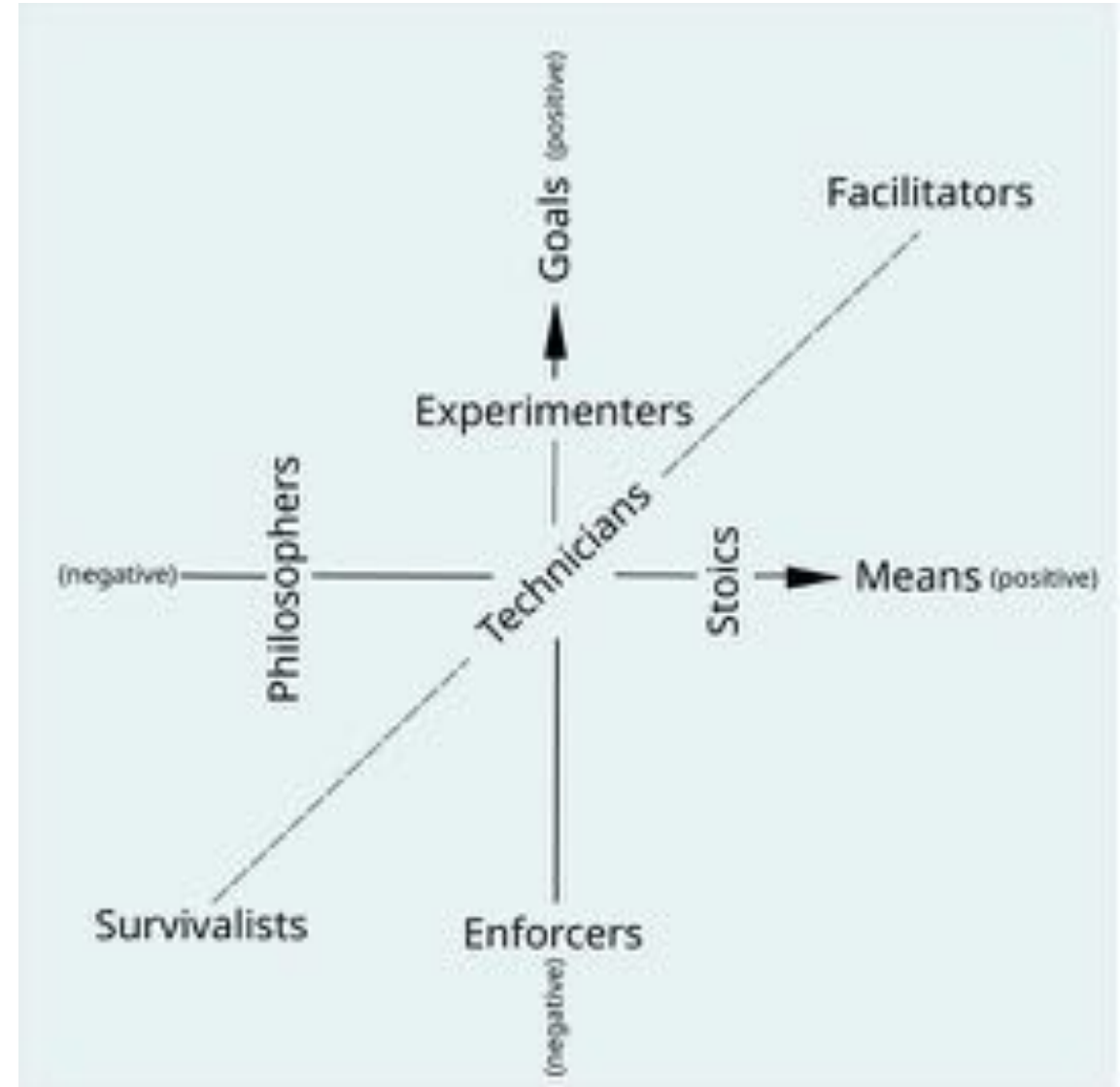
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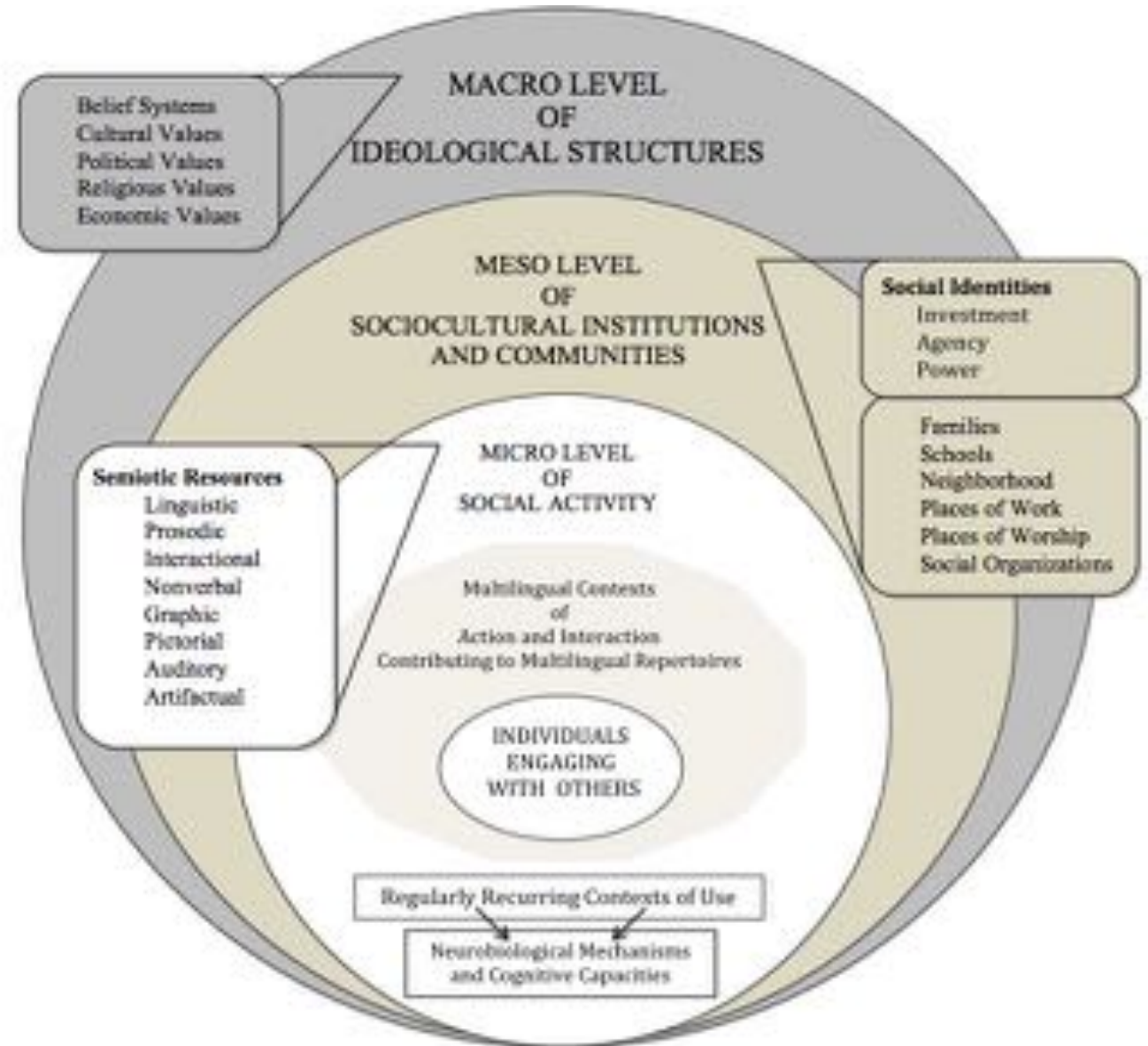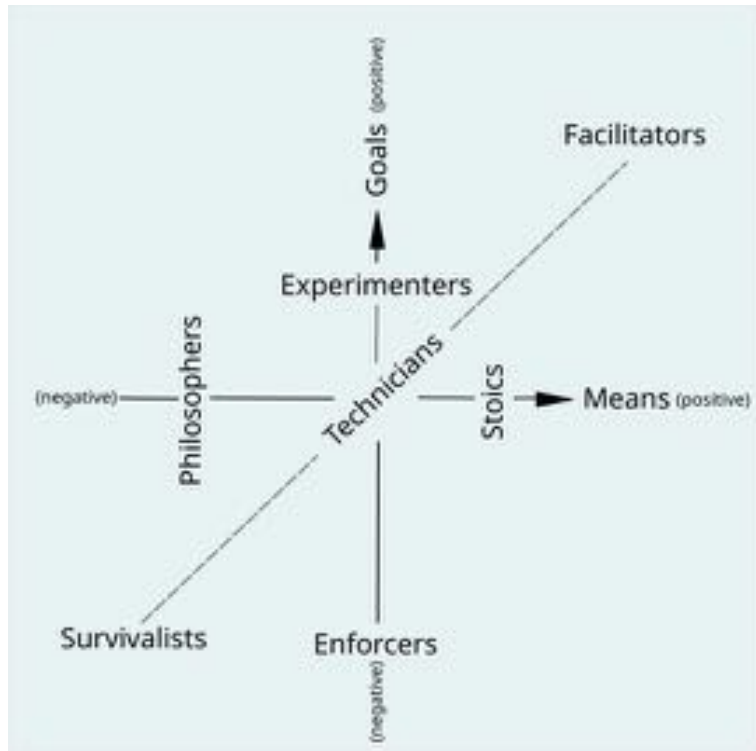
Teacher Negotiation of Learner Autonomy

- Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model fits with Bhaskar's (2016) laminated system – the Seven-scalar social being.

➤ 7. Planetary or global whole

➤ 6. Mega-level

➤ 5. Macro-level

➤ 4. Meso-level

➤ 3. Micro-level

➤ 2. Individual level

➤ 1. Sub-individual level

- Any model of autonomy/agency must be laminated system
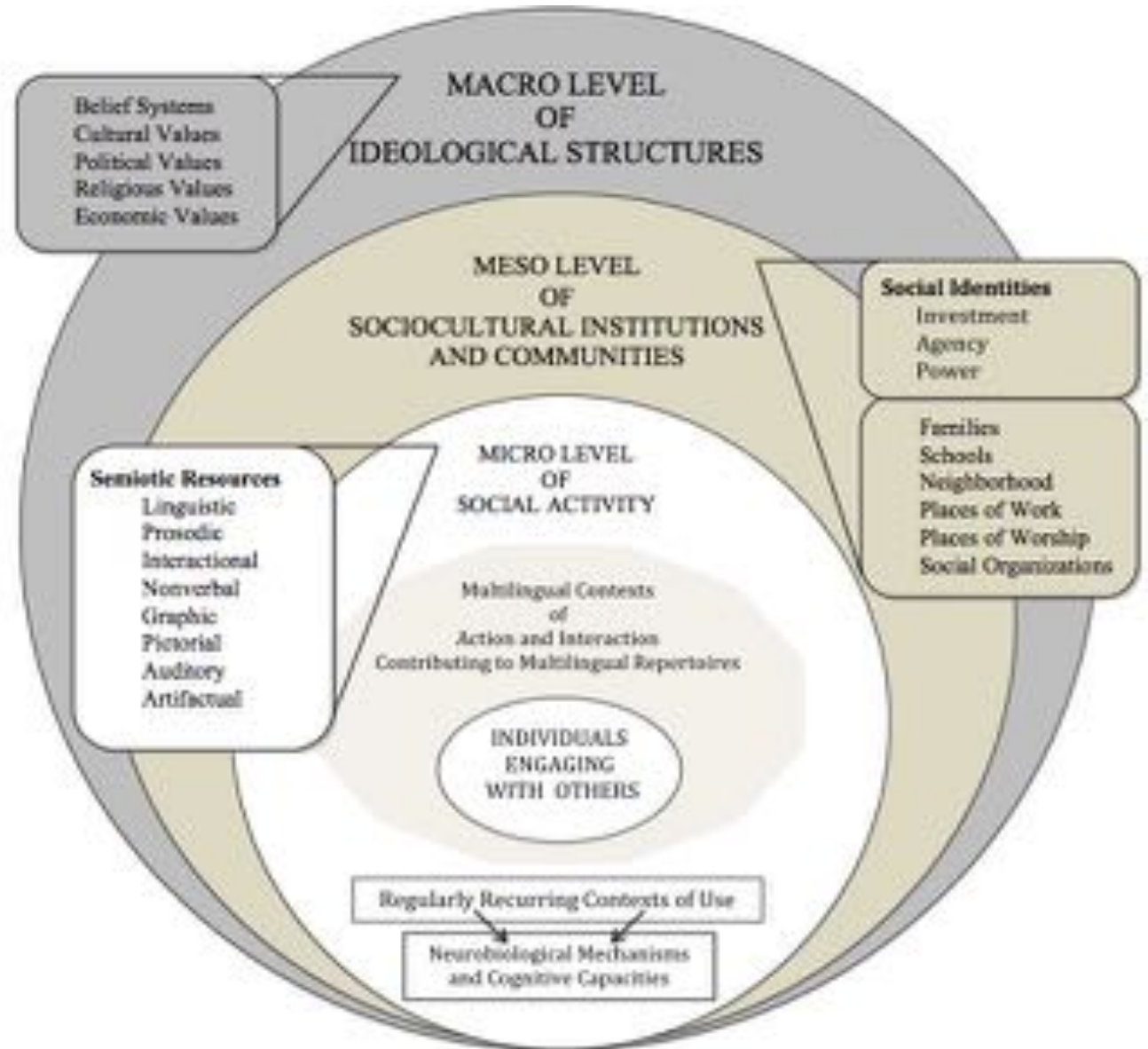
Teacher Negotiation of Learner Autonomy

- Could we arrange the analytical lenses available on this model in order to better understand learner autonomy?

- Cognitive capacity, motivation, critical reflection, social mediation, interaction, negotiation, student agency, teacher agency, social structure, field, *habitus*, capital, curriculum, assessment, policy.

Proposed Model of Learner Autonomy

National Level
Politics, Government policy
Field and Structures
Institutional agency

Institutional Level
Field and Structures
Pedagogy and Teacher agency
Curriculum and assessment

Classroom Level
Field and Structures
Teacher agency, Habitus, Pedagogy
Student agency, Habitus
Social mediation, Interaction, Negotiation

Inter-personal Level
Student agency
Social mediation, Interaction, Negotiation
Critical Reflection

Intra-personal Level
Cognitive Capacity
Motivation
Metacognition, Critical reflection
Habitus
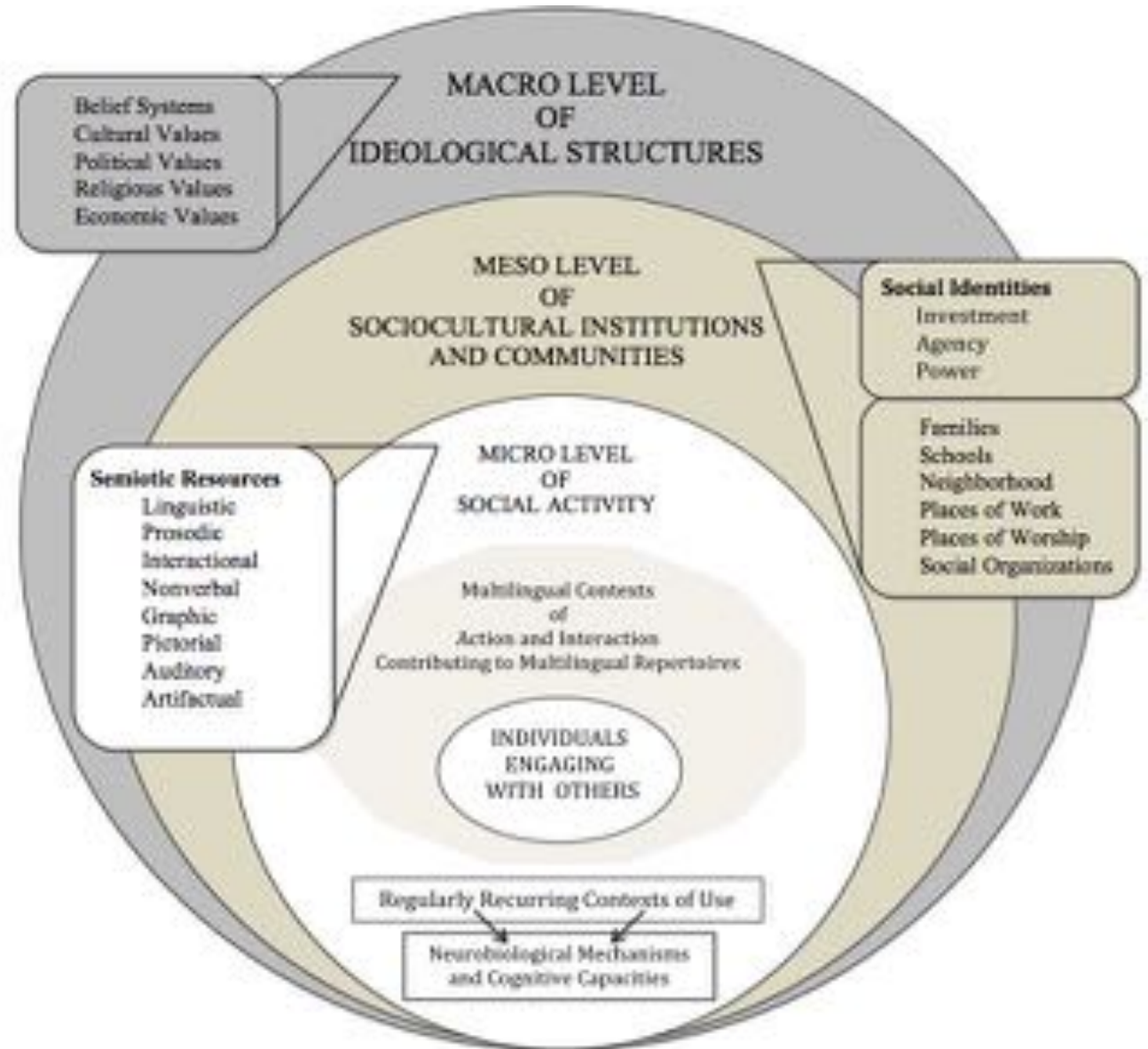
- Evidence reported by teachers at specific level in data and arranged according to the corresponding level from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bhaskar (2016).
- Arranged in a tangent section representing the incomplete nature of the empirical data.
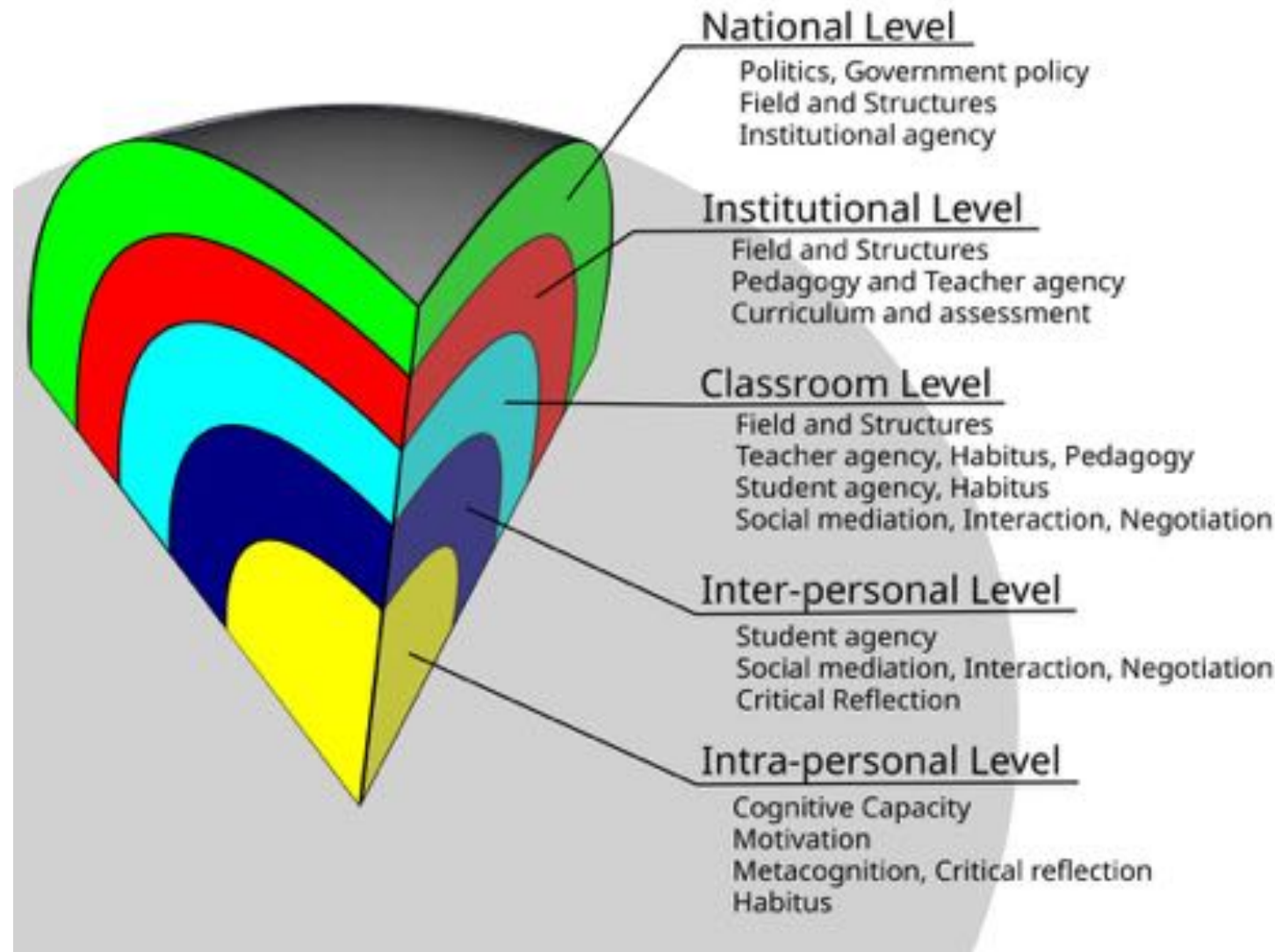
Research Questions – Answers?

- How do tertiary teachers at the university level successfully foster autonomy in their students?

- How does the act of fostering autonomy fit within the social context of learning?

- What are teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes towards negotiating a change in learner autonomy?

- How does the social context of past learning mediate student and teacher attitudes toward learner autonomy in the present?

- What effect does quantitative policy have upon the qualitative expression of autonomy at the pedagogic and personal levels?
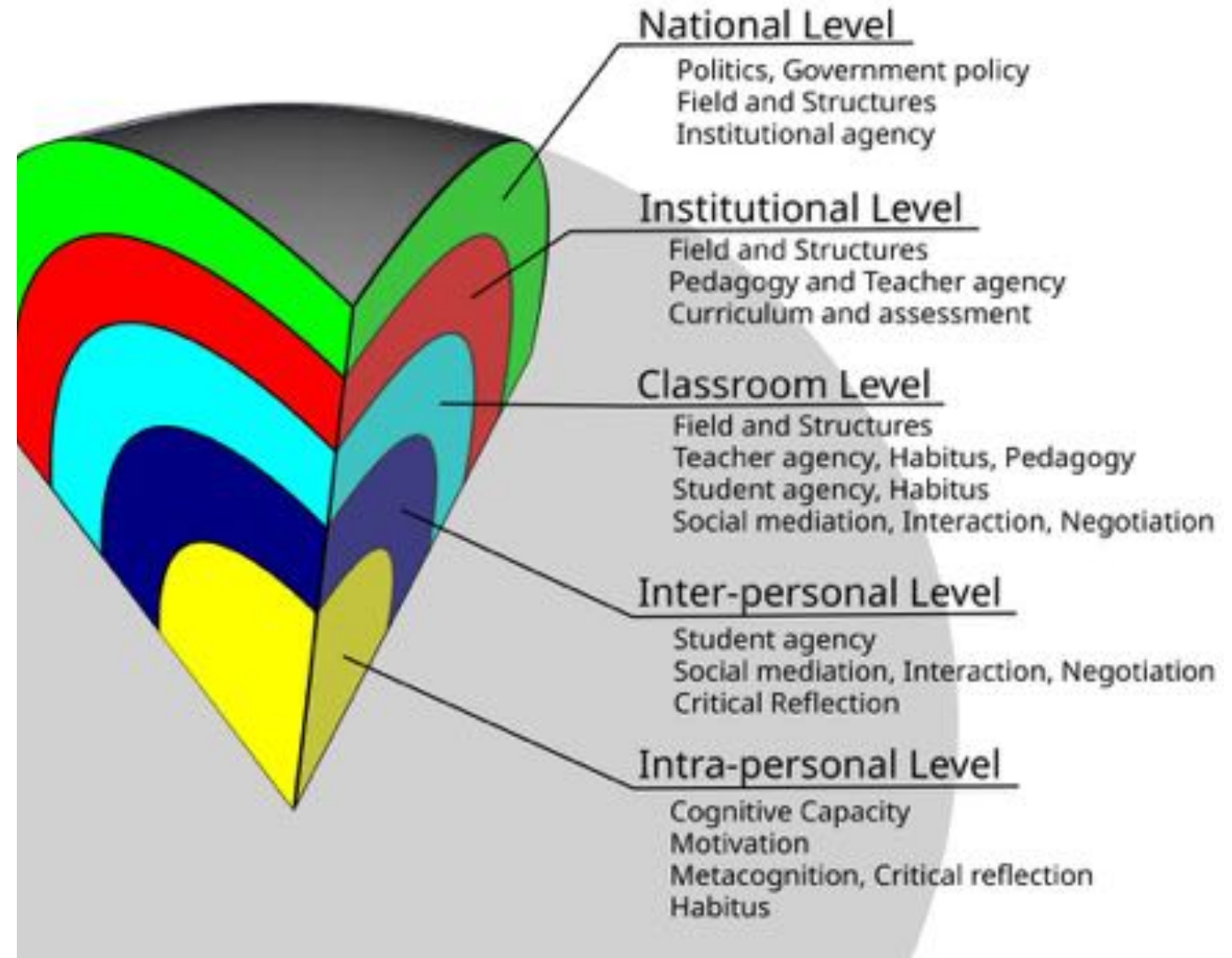
Proposed Model of Learner Autonomy

- At the intra-personal level, evidence for all processes of Bhaskar's (2016) model of the components of action.

- At the Inter-personal level and above, evidence for Bhaskar's (2016) Transformational Model of Social Activity.

- Possible to combine different research lenses within the same epistemology by accepting limits of epistemology/ontology within CR

- Possible to extend to the Global level via PISA and other global educational movements.

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Proposed Model of Learner Autonomy

- How does this help our understanding of learner autonomy?

- No real boundary between Autonomy and Agency – Autonomy is a subset of Agency.

- Autonomy is historical – student experiences will affect observed autonomy/agency.

- Students with little or no experience of autonomy are less likely to value it within specific social fields.

- Students display autonomy depending on the specific field.

- Fauxtonomy (Mullen et al., 2016) is a student social strategy.

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Intra-personal Level
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Proposed Model of Learner Autonomy

- How does CR help our understanding of Learner Autonomy?
- CR places autonomy within the context of an open system that is rational, universal
- CR provides a morphogenic system with emergent qualities not limited by ontological or epistemological fallacies
- CR provides a framework for autonomy as social activity that is concept-dependent, but not concept-exhausted
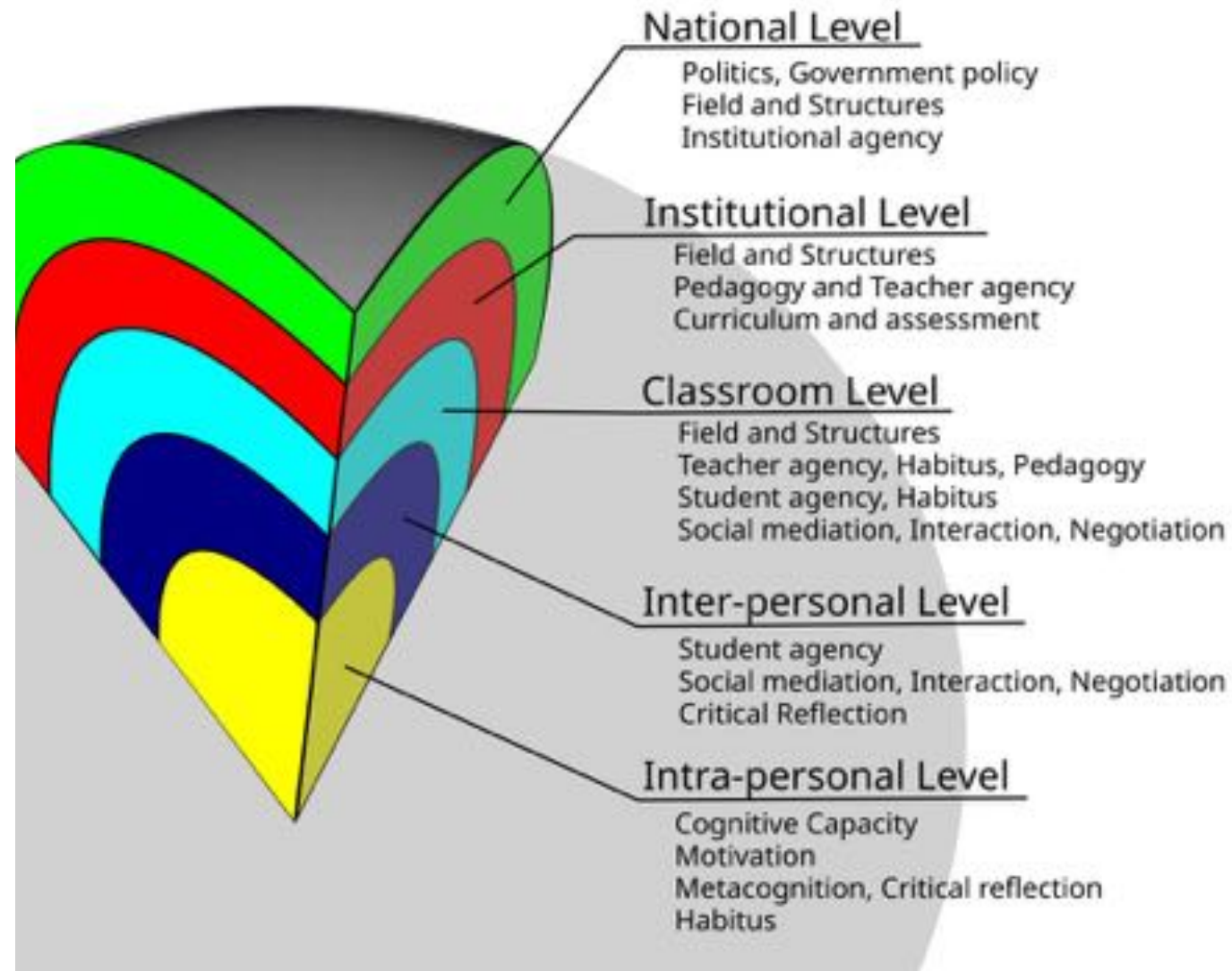- CR as meta-theory provides the under-labouring to combine cognitive and social perspectives on SLA
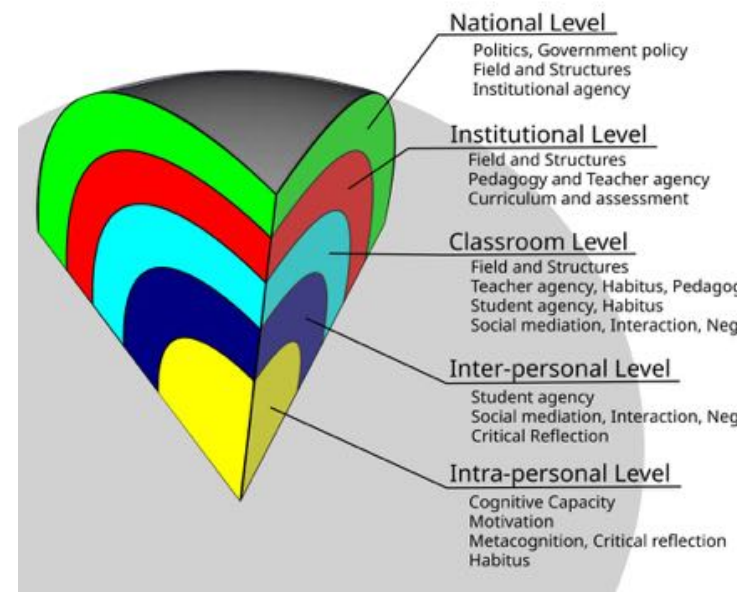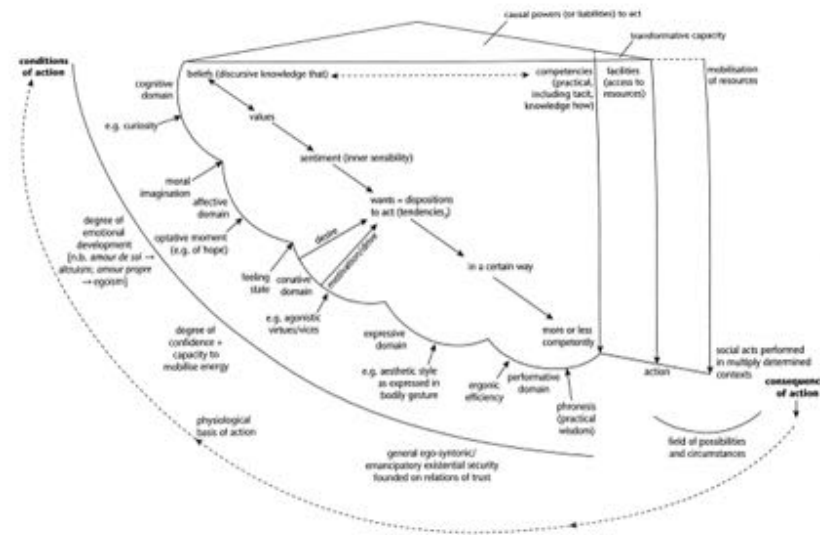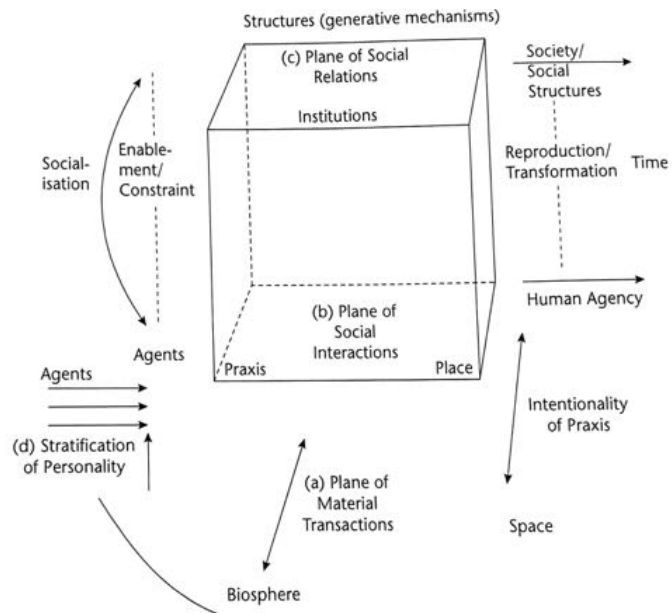
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- Stratified reality across four dimensions.

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- Critical Realism as outlines 'action on' through system of enablements & constraints

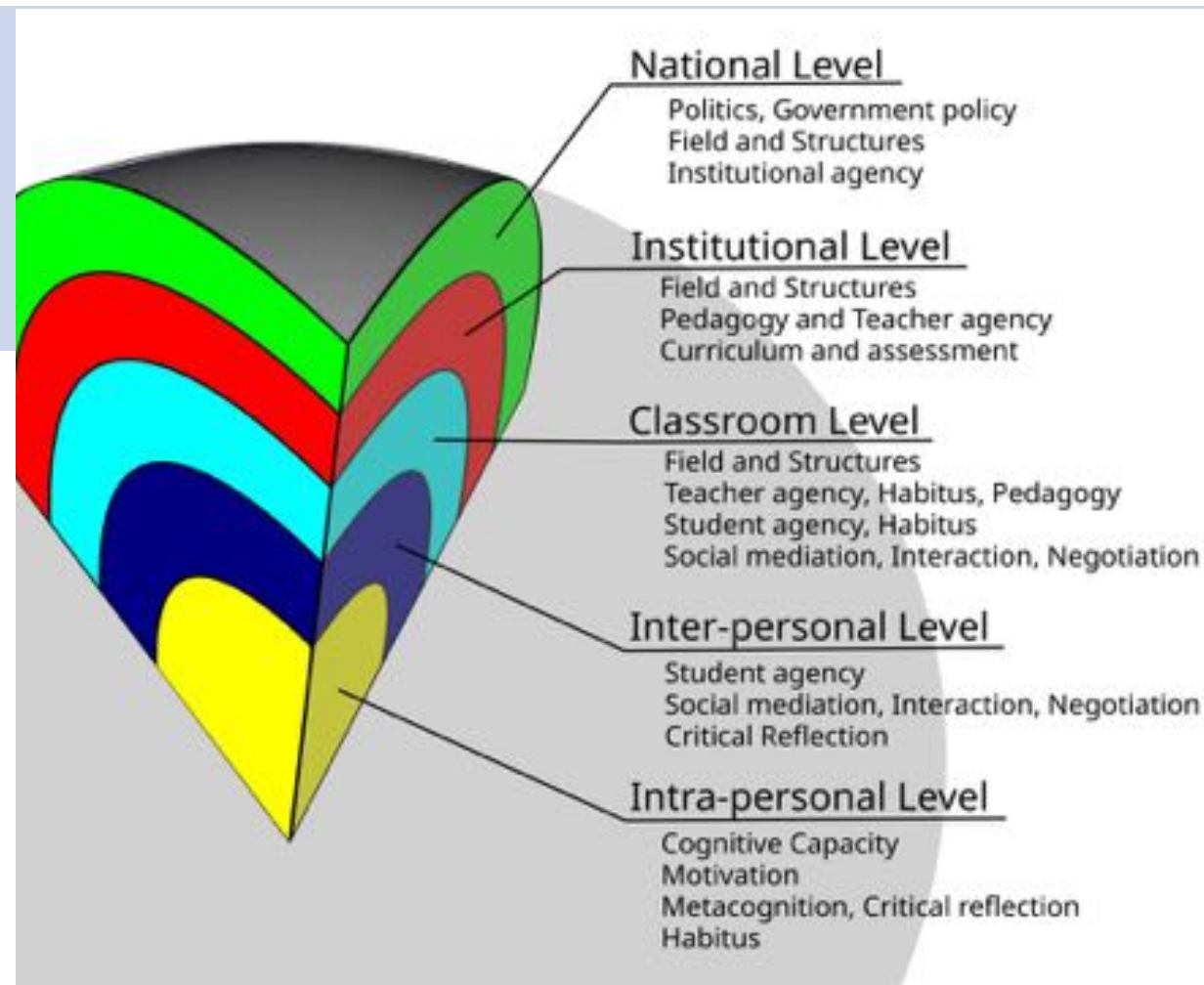- Link between autonomy at the intrapersonal level and agency at the individual level

- Critical Realism provides under-laboring to combine different research lenses.

- Research lenses at different levels provide more explanatory power.

Summary

Introduction – Context & Research Questions

Critical Realism as Meta-theory

A CR Perspective on Learner Autonomy

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Thank you

Any questions?

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