Conceptions of difference within theories of Social Justice: implications for higher education research

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Abstract

In this paper I explore ‘Making a Difference’ within the context of research into higher education and social justice. Part of an ongoing project looking to connect theories of social justice with approaches to social justice research, this paper focuses on both ‘Making a Difference’ and how we understand difference in social justice terms. Key to my argument is that the ways in which one conceptualises a theory of social justice, including the nature of difference, has implications for the ways in which one then approaches research into higher education and social justice. I explore this by contrasting key aspects within the theories of social justice literature – such as between a procedural approach and the capabilities approach, and between a focus on redistribution or on recognition. I then consider how the position one adopts in relation to these aspects of social justice can (should?) influence how one researches social justice. My analysis draws upon Saunder’s (2014) think piece, particularly the irony of official, hegemonic calls for higher education research to ‘make a difference’ that are actually grounded in highly standardised notions of what counts as difference. As such, I also take up Saunders’ notion of usefulness; in my case, in terms of a useful contribution to greater social justice.

Keywords

Social Justice, capabilities, redistribution, recognition, critical theory

Introduction

In this paper I explore ‘Making a Difference’ within the context of research into higher education and social justice. My particular focus is research which is not simply about social justice, but which also aims to make an active contribution towards greater social justice. This paper forms part of an ongoing project looking to connect theories of social justice with approaches to social justice research. Within this paper my focus is on both ‘Making a Difference’ and also how we understand difference in social justice terms. Key to my argument is that the ways in which one conceptualises a theory of social justice, including the nature of difference, has implications for the ways in which one then approaches research into higher education and social justice.

My analysis draws upon that of Saunders’ (2014) think piece, particularly the irony of official, hegemonic calls for higher education research to ‘make a difference’ that are actually grounded in highly standardised notions of what counts as difference. As such, I also take up Saunders’ notion of usefulness; in my case, in terms of a useful contribution to greater social justice.

There is a great danger in social justice research of assuming that we can simply know, by some sort of common sense, what is meant by social justice, and indeed assume that this meaning is understood and shared. However, research that purports to be about social justice can quite often leave the question of what this means unstated, implicit or assumed. As Brennan and Naidoo (2008) observe, despite the term becoming common in policy discourse it is often used with ‘a feel good flavour … that can cover up the absence of precise meaning’ (287). This is not to suggest that social justice can easily be defined. Indeed, its power lies in remaining a wicked concept (Trowler, 2010) which we must understand in a rigorously messy sort of way (McArthur, 2012). Social justice is a highly contested term and there are significant differences in the ways in which it is conceptualised, not least of all in the ways in which the notion of difference itself is handled. Hence the next part of this paper briefly outlines the work of a range of social justice theorists, with particular focus on the
notion of difference. The final section of the paper then considers the implications of such theories for higher education research, both in terms of the need to have a more explicit theorising of social justice and then to appreciate how this foregrounds different notions of difference in our research practices.

**Difference within Theories of Social Justice**

Two debates with the social justice literature highlight key issues relevant to our understandings of difference. First is the debate between procedural/contractarian approaches and outcomes-based approaches. Exploring this debate allows us to consider the point at which difference, and sameness, is considered in theories of justice – and the implications of this. Secondly, there is a debate between social justice as an issue of either redistribution or recognition – or both. This debates allows for an exploration of what sort of differences are key to understandings of social justice. In both aspects, the notion of an easily assumed and shared standardised notion of difference is, as discussed in Saunders’ think piece, shown to be both fallacious and dangerous.

In this section I provide a brief overview of key social justice theorists, and how their work illustrates the issues around these two aspects of difference: at what point should it be considered, and what forms of difference are considered in theories of social justice. These are brief sketches, for illustrative purposes only, and not intended as full analyses of each theorists’ works.

**John Rawls and procedural/contractarian approaches**

There is a long western history of social contract based approaches to justice, but the most notable contribution of the late twentieth century is that of John Rawls in his Theory of Justice (1971). Fundamental to this approach is the importance of establishing the foundations for justice, and if this is established well, then we can reasonably assume that a just society will flourish on this basis. Rawls’ approach positions where difference should be considered, and where sameness is assumed, in ways that influence the nature of the resulting theory of justice. Rawls works on the assumption (and in fairness he recognises this as an assumption) of a state in which people are ‘free, equal and independent’ as they lay the foundations of social justice. On this basis the differences between citizens, notably the pursuit of their own differing interests, are also brought into a situation of mutuality. For citizens are assumed to share a mutual disinterest about how their own position is directly affected by decisions on justice and to share a mutual interest in a rule of law that prevents any one person’s interests dominating another. Differences between nation-states conceptions of what counts as justice can be justified under a Rawlsian approach because each individual nation’s conception of justice is the result of free choices made within its own civic realm (Brown, 1998).

**Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach**

Nussbaum (2006) positions her capabilities approach as offering a solution to some of the more intractable problems within Rawls’ theory of social justice, and particularly those people excluded by the initial assumption of sameness in the concept of ‘free, equal and independent’. Nussbaum does not reject all aspects of Rawls, and indeed sees much virtue in his Kantian approach to the social contract, however, she argues that it is unable to deal with three key issues: disability, nationality and species membership. All these issues are ones of difference and become problematic, Nussbaum argues, because contractarian approaches conflate aspects of ‘by whom’ and ‘for whom’. As such, there is an assumption that the parties who design the principles of social justice do so on behalf of human beings possessing the same features as themselves. But what then of those who are different, featuring mental or physical impairments that mean they are unable to participate in the processes of establishing the principles of justice? No matter how we look at it, argues Nussbaum, the contractarian approach cannot accommodate the interests of such people under the umbrella of justice, and instead relies on notions of charity or compassion to protect their interests.

So the first aspect of Nussbaum’s critique is that a contractarian approach necessarily excludes the perspectives and interests of many who may be deemed differently able to participate in the original debates on justice. Her second objection is to the very notion of a procedural approach (based on putting in place the ‘right’ conditions for justice) rather than an outcomes-based approach. Only by the latter approach, can we fully see and deal with the multiple circumstances that can prevent or impair different people’s experiences of justice in a society. This is the basis for her capabilities approach to social justice. Nussbaum has developed her capabilities approach as ‘an account of core human entitlements that should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires’ (70). By shifting the notion of sameness from the procedures to the outcomes of social justice, Nussbaum hopes to reach parts of society inadequately dealt with by the procedural approaches. She also sees it as overcoming the shortcomings of utilitarian approaches to social justice that focus on aggregating notions of satisfaction. In so doing, Nussbaum argues, these approaches inherently marginalise those who do not gain prominence in the aggregate. Moreover,
aggregation ignores tendencies for ‘adaptive preferences’ (making do in the circumstances). Thus she argues: Contentment is not the only thing that matters in a human life; active striving matters, too (73).

**Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach and critique of identity**

Sen’s work on the capabilities approach to social justice shares much with that of Nussbaum, but also differs in important ways. Sen is less interested in identifying the key capabilities, as Nussbaum does, and instead focuses on comparative decisions on social justice in a world with limited choices. There are two aspects of Sen’s work I want to emphasise here. Firstly, his insistence that ‘justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live’ (Sen, 2010, p. 18). Like Nussbaum he rejects the procedural or ‘arrangement-focused view’ (Sen, 2010, p. 10) of social justice and instead asserts that we must consider the realities of everyday lives, and the necessity of sometimes making choices in the name of social justice. This leads to his approach both being comparative and ‘imperfect’. Thus Sen advocates the value of striving for less injustice, rather than being preoccupied with the impossibilities of perfect justice. Secondly, Sen (2007) has focused on issues of identity and social justice. He writes, ‘many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity’ (Sen, 2007, p. xv). Clearly Sen is not arguing against difference, but rather problematizing it by rejecting simple, single or reductionist notions of identity:

The main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization (Sen, 2007, pp. 16-17).

This then leads to Sen’s (2002) insistence that theory of social justice cannot be understood solely within the confines of a particular nation-state. Thus, Sen invokes the moral philosophy of Adam Smith to support the idea that any theory of justice requires a perspective from outwith its own community, not just within.

**Nancy Fraser’s three-dimensional theory of social justice**

Fraser initially conceptualised justice using the two dimensions of recognition and redistribution. She argued: ‘Without reducing either dimension to the other, it encompasses both of them within a broader overarching framework’ (Fraser, 2003, p. 35). The clearest outline of this two-dimensional approaches comes through her debate with Honneth, who I will look at next (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). However, there are two aspects of Fraser’s work which I want to highlight in this discussion of difference, both of which resonate in some ways with the work of Sen. Firstly, Fraser is also wary of an ‘identity-based’ approach to social justice that can actually work against protecting differences. Secondly, in more recent work Fraser (2007) has added a third dimension to her concept of social justice, directly responding to globalisation and a need to think of social justice beyond the borders of sameness inherent in the Rawlsian approach. This third element is representation, which she links to the political sphere. At the heart of issues of representation is who is included in theories of justice and how do we actually achieve their genuine participation. In this sense, Fraser refers to social justice in terms of ‘participatory parity’.

A key feature, particularly of her later work, is the way in which Fraser frames her theory of justice in the context of globalisation. She states: ‘Globalization is changing the way we argue about justice’ (Fraser, 2007, p. 17). Fraser credits globalisation with putting the issue of framing social justice ‘squarely on the political agenda’ (p. 23). In particular, she argues, it has enabled a challenge to the dominant Keynesian-Westphalian frame which ‘is now considered by many to be a major vehicle of injustice, as it partitions political space in ways that block many who are poor and despised from challenging the forces that oppress them.’ (p. 23) For some critics, this is a core problem with Fraser’s work, as she seemingly takes too optimistic a view of globalisation as a force to counter nation-state hegemonies and injustices. To be sure, Fraser does distinguish two forms of the ‘politics of reframing’ that have emerged with globalisation. One, the affirmative, remains based within the ‘Westphalian grammar of frame setting’ (p. 24) contesting only the particular borders which it seeks to reframe, rather than the underlying notion of such borders. The second approach she labels, transformative, and it is this one that she sees as offering promise. A transformative approach to reframing challenges the very notion of the ‘state-territorial principle’ as ‘an adequate basis for determining the ‘who’ of justice in every case’ (p. 25). Hence, Fraser’s principle of ‘all-affected’ as a basis for social justice decision-making:

all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it….what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is not geographical proximity, but their co-imbrication in a common structural or institutional framework, which sets the ground rules that govern their social interaction, thereby shaping their respective life possibilities, in patterns of advantage and disadvantage (p. 25)
Axel Honneth and the primacy of recognition

Honneth’s approach to reframing critical theory resonates with the fundamental shift of the early School of Social Research, particularly the notion of sub-conscious, unnoticed and pathological elements. He argues that Fraser’s analysis is based solely on the identity groups which can be seen, often by being the most vocal. These are the groups already recognised, in some form at least, by the prevailing system. He warns of the danger of an unintended reduction of social suffering and moral discontent to just that part of it that has already been made visible in the political public sphere by publicity-savvy organizations (Honneth, 2003, p. 115).

At the heart of Honneth’s approach to social justice is recognition, understood in terms of injustice as the withdrawal of social recognition, and the attendant ‘degradation and disrespect’ (132). Given his critical theory position, it is natural that Honneth, like Sen and others, rejects transcendental notions of social justice and instead argues for the concept to be grounded in people’s lived reality. However, he is also critical of fellow critical theorist, Habermas, for not taking this notion of lived reality far enough in terms of social justice:

> Even he [Habermas] is ‘Marxist’ enough to know that we cannot derive ideas of justice transcendentally, but instead have to grasp them as historically emergent principles of legitimacy on the basis of how they take effect in reality. But Habermas restricts his purview to law, which in my eyes makes up only a small part of what is actually institutionalized as socially effective promises of freedom in Western societies. By contrast, I also include the ‘market’ and ‘personal relationships’ in my analysis of justice, because I am convinced that in these spheres, as well, particular forms of freedom were originally institutionalized and thus promised in the development of these institutions. (Honneth in Willig, 2012, p. 147).

Theories of Justice and approaches to social justice research

As Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy (2010, p. 14) argue, ‘traditional methods are not enough to understand the silenced and oppressed’. And yet, as the previous section discusses, our understandings of what constitutes the ‘silenced and oppressed’ can vary, as too can our understandings of causes and solutions. This needs to be reflected in approaches to research. In this section I take two examples to illustrate how many of the common practices within higher education may take on a different character when viewed through alternative theories of social justice. The first considers assessment through the different lenses of a procedural approach and an outcomes-based approach to social justice. The second example considers the policy dimension of HE and the particular example of widening participation, considered here mainly through the lens of Honneth’s ‘recognition-theoretical turn’ (see Honneth, 2003). I suggest both these areas of higher education are under-researched in social justice terms and would benefit from analysis based on understanding notions of difference within alternative theories of social justice.

Assessment for Social Justice

I have termed the phrase ‘assessment for social justice’ as a play on words from the growing body of literature on assessment for learning (eg. Boud, 2007; Carless, 2009). This literature, and the empirical work underpinning much of it, argues for assessment processes that positively shape the student learning experience, based on evidence that assessment is one of the most powerful drivers of how a student learns. Hence, if one is committed to social justice through education, which is my position, then surely assessment is a key feature in shaping the social justice experience embedded in the learning?

I suggest that universities generally follow a procedurist approach to ensuring the fairness of assessment, but this characteristic is generally unacknowledged, and its implications unexplored. Systems of quality based upon pre-determined learning outcomes, assessment criteria, moderation procedures and so forth are clearly procedural, with the implication being that if the correct procedures are followed, the correct outcome will ensue. An exception to this is at the doctoral level, where there is a much greater emphasis on the ‘lived reality’ of the final piece of work – that is, how it contributes to ongoing scholarship. Indeed, I’ve previously discussed the ways in which assessment practices at doctoral level have much to offer all other levels of HE (McArthur, 2014). Hence, I suggest that the limitations of the procedurist approach to social justice provide a lens with which to rethink assessment practices in social justice terms. In terms of researching social justice in HE, the questions and issues change considerably depending on the social justice lens applied. An outcomes-based approach such as Sen or Nussbaum would support, for example, far greater attention directed towards ipsative assessment than is currently the case (one notable exception here is Hughes, 2011). Student under-achievement
also comes to the fore, and this is an area of research utterly outside the standardised measures of performance inherent in institutional approaches to assessment. The lived reality of how and what students go on to do with the knowledge engaged with in higher education must also be considered.

Identity and research methodology

It is in the nature of most higher education research on social justice to consider different groups or identities within a society or context. However, as even the brief overview of theories of social justice suggests, the way in which one conceptualises identity can differ greatly – and this then has implications for how we approach such research. Consider Fraser’s (2007) integrated theory of justice and the notion of parity of participation. As higher education researchers we can see how this could be applied to researching widening access, internationalisation, ethnicity, gender and so forth. I am particularly interested in what it means for the method of such research? Fraser discusses the barriers to parity of participation in the public sphere, but these could equally be applied to our research. Who do we research? How do we, or should we, ensure parity of participation in the research process itself?

We must also consider the nuanced and nebulous nature of identity, and how this fits into methodological strategies. Fraser, Sen and Adorno all write extensively about the problems of overly essentialist notions of identity, and the implications for social justice. Adorno (1973) does so in terms of his notion of ‘non-identity’ which emphasises the ultimate impossibility of fully understanding an individual manifestation of any quality or identity in terms of a general concept alone. As such, any research which sought to adopt an Adornean perspective on justice could not make use of the traditional notions of classification and groupings (eg. class, gender, ethnicity), or must do so with extreme care. The notion of the non-traditional student, so helpful in some ways to highlight assumptions of privilege and the perpetuation of elites within higher education, equally domesticates identity by bringing those who are recognised as different – according to some invisible list – under the reductionist term of ‘non-traditional’. Similarly, the term ‘student engagement’ risks domestication as it moves from the radical possibilities of rethinking power relations in higher education to an institutionalised set of procedures that can do no more than aspire to measure the easily measured – thus neglecting the richest aspects of true student engagement.

Honneth’s analysis of recognition and social justice also provides an alternative insight into policies such as widening access and student engagement. He states:

A critical social theory that supports only normative goals that are already publicly articulated by social movements risks precipitously affirming the prevailing level of political-moral conflict in a given society; only experiences of suffering that have already crossed the threshold of mass media attention are confirmed as morally relevant, and we are unable to advocatorially thematize and make claims about socially unjust states of affairs that have so far been deprived of public attention (Honneth, 2003, pp. 115-116).

The second aspect of difference highlighted by these theories of social justice – what sort of differences should we consider when examining higher education – raises a different set of research issues and challenges. I believe it is a useful way to highlight the problem of the domestication of ideas and values by policy - which is another relatively underexplored aspect of higher education. Domestication is, in a sense, another form of the standardisation referred to by Saunders (2014). I refer specifically to the absorption of an idea into the mainstream, such that its radical potential is made inert.

Conclusion

I end with this quote from Lorenzetti about social justice research:

a social justice researcher is an activist who has discovered a new set of lenses, evolving tools, and pathways. It is not a separate self now called ‘an academic’ but an extension of one’s role as someone invested in human rights, social change, and collective well-being. It is a journey with no particular end point, but many opportunities to reflect, grow, and share one’s learnings with others. Developing this new role requires humility and an open mind as well as a confidence in the value of everything that exists outside of this role (Lorenzetti, 2013, p. 456).

Framing the purpose of one’s research in terms of making a difference, rather than simply exploring difference, provides both risks and opportunities. The risk is that this becomes an uncritical vehicle for one’s own normative position, rather than a rigorous scholarly pursuit. A further risk, I suggest, is to proceed based on assumptions about the nature of social justice. Such assumptions are like blinkers or smudges on the lenses
through which we consider our research. However, as Murphy (2013) observes much of the original theoretical work one might apply to education can seem challenging, and unsurprisingly so ‘given the manner in which these theories have developed from sometimes arcane debates in continental philosophy, far removed from the modern world of teaching practice that is embedded in concerns over performance, attainment and accountability’ (3). And yet, this is also the fundamental usefulness of such lenses – and here I include different theories of social justice. We need them to enhance our research, to get closer to making a difference, because of their ability to reveal features of an otherwise taken-for-granted world: this is the world that sustains the status-quo and stands between the present and a more just future.

References