

Higher Education Close Up 8: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU8 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 18-20th July 2015. The theme of the conference is *Locating Social Justice in Close-Up Research in Higher Education* and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website: <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/hecu8/index.htm>

From Close-Up to Far, Far Away: the mediating role of social justice

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The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.

(Sagan 1994, 6)

Perspective is a social justice issue. A commitment to social justice requires an appreciation of alternative perspectives and the interplays between these vantage points. Social justice requires a recognition that we are bound by commonalities that are both large and minute and similarly distinguished by diverse and eccentric differences: an over-emphasis on one or the other leads to distortions and pathologies; and in their name grave social injustices.

Early critical theorist, Theodor Adorno (eg. 2006, 2005, 1973), revealed the injustices inherent in artificial dichotomies, such as between thought and object, the particular and the general and theory and practice. Such critical theory rests upon a commitment to revealing and resisting the forces that distort our abilities to lead lives of internal integrity and worth – to fulfil who we are as human beings. More recently Axel Honneth's interpretation of critical theory (eg. 2007, 2003, 1995) has expressed this in terms of mutual

acts of recognition: the intrinsically human capacity to give and receive recognition. To deny or misrepresent recognition to another is to do injustice.

As the quote at the start of this paper suggests, we can gain perspective and thus greater understanding through knowing the difference between close and far; the enormity of the cosmos evokes an intimacy within life on earth we might otherwise miss. However, we can also be mistaken – and through such mistakes distort what there is to know and act in unjust ways. This in the case with Sagan’s generals and emperors; they hold a distorted sense of distance that enables them to deny mutual recognition, and thus to justify their own acts of terror. This is a story still familiar today.

In my contribution to the conference, I want to suggest that in our research community we tend to impose artificial distance and harmful separations. I am going to suggest that social justice, understood from a critical theory perspective, illuminates the need to breach these separations and indeed, shines light on how that can be done. The distances and separations I refer to are represented by a number of common dichotomies to be found in the research literature. Key among these are: qualitative – quantitative; conceptual - empirical; and theory – practice. The problem with these enduring dichotomies is that they ghettoise, distort and put a veil over the richness of what can be known. Seen through the lens of social justice such dichotomies are revealed as fictions.

Close-up research is clearly key to revealing and understanding the minutiae of commonalities and differences that so eluded Sagan’s generals and emperors and which I fear continue to elude many of their current day counterparts – political leaders, captains of industry, the rich and the powerful. However, it cannot do this alone or in isolation. As close-up researchers we need to consider our relationships with large scale, survey work, for example. In Britain, for example, research such as that undertaken by Charles Booth and Seebhom Rowntree in the 19th and 20th centuries laid bare the extent of poverty and also demonstrated the fallacious nature of assertions at the time that poverty was somehow a lifestyle choice: it changed social opinion and public policy. Even so, such research can only provide one facet of the experience. Other forms of research and historical analysis – such as EP Thompson’s later, *The Makings of the English Working Class* (1963)– provide the complementary close-up insights. The raw pain of losing a child, the endless fatigue of working for scraps – all these are there in the work of Booth and Rowntree but are illuminated in different ways by Thompson.

However, the tendency to impose dichotomies onto these alternative facets of research remains. Indeed, sometimes qualitative and quantitative are used almost as synonyms for the close up and the large scale. Similarly, the conflation of quantitative and positivism and qualitative and interpretivism severely hampers the social justice project. The term mixed methods also often only serves to reinforce the dichotomy, affirming that there is some inherent difference here that must be revered and canonised. Qualitative researchers have done themselves no favours by perpetuating stereotypes of the quantitative 'other'. I still read far too many papers that begin their methodology along the lines, 'because I am not a positivist I am going to do small-scale, qualitative research': and therefore pity anyone who does quantitative research for they then bear the mark of the positivist!

We are wrong to decree that positivists monopolise numbers: social justice is located in quantitative research, and furthered through it, every bit as much as in qualitative. All we are talking about here are numbers and words. Neither binds us to particular world views; neither absolves us of responsibility for thinking through the nature and implications of our own research dispositions and actions. Dichotomisation is a form of *othering*, a form of not taking responsibility and is thus anathema to a social justice commitment. For example, I'm concerned about the plight of individual students from working class backgrounds, thus I position myself as a close-up, qualitative researcher. But this makes no sense. For the individual and the group cannot be sheared apart for analytical purposes. This serves to truncate identity, and hence works against social justice.

So I move to the next dichotomy, that between empirical and conceptual research. Underlying this dichotomy is, I suggest, a pervasive privileging of data in the research process. Data is not an end in itself. Research emerges from the processes of analysis – what we do with that data. And such analysis does not fit neatly into the categories of empirical or conceptual. To be clear, I am not anti data. And I am surprised how often that label is applied to myself (however much in jest) when I raise the issue of data being overly privileged in our approaches to research. Data is important. Data can literally help to save lives, as in research such as Booth and Rowntree into poverty. But it does not do this on its own.

Underlying the privileging of data and of the 'original' contribution of the empirical is the other dichotomy of theory and practice. Many countries now have systems to evaluate

research, such as the REF in Britain. Research alone is not enough, it must have impact, and impact is all about practice. But again, this dichotomy is revealed as both false and malignant when viewed through the lens of social justice. Indeed, Adorno illuminates that what binds these two concepts together is indeed social justice:

Theory that bears no relation to any conceivable practice either degenerates into an empty, complacent and irrelevant game, or, what is even worse, it becomes a mere component of culture, in other words, a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us as living minds and active, living human beings (Adorno 2000, 6)

Similarly, action that is not guided by thought carries oppression (Adorno 2005). Hence Adorno argues that ‘thinking itself is always a form of behaviour’ (Adorno 2000, 4; 2008, 53) and to think about reality is itself a practical act. Further, ‘thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis’ (Adorno 2005, 261). Moreover, because thought can more easily escape what already ‘is’, more easily step outside the prevailing mainstream, then for Adorno thinking can be a more powerful form of resistance than action alone (Tettlebaum 2008). To separate thinking from doing is surely to perpetrate the greatest of injustices. Such distance allows license to behave without thought; to pretend away the myriad of complex social factors that bind us together. It enables us to act like warmongering generals and emperors.

In looking to locate social justice within close-up higher education research care is needed to appreciate the many ways in social justice must actively inhabit multiple moments and diverse roles within the research task. There can be no greater injustice than to consider social justice as simply another topic of research: an interesting and perhaps vaguely honourable area of data to be mined and processed into academic papers and promotion applications. To locate social justice within close-up higher education research is to recognise its pervasiveness combined with its human tangibility. Social justice cannot be confined to only certain bits of the undertaking, nor dismissed as so nebulous as to be immune to efforts to locate, and thus to reflect upon and critique. A deep and rich appreciation of all that a commitment to social justice brings to our activities as researchers can help to mediate some aspects of research that otherwise seem dislocated or unreasonably dichotomised. Social justice can and should drive higher education research, not just wait patiently for polite attention or misplaced flattery.

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