Social Justice Research, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1987

Distributive Justice: Theory and Research

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The concept of distributive justice and the theoretical and empirical work conducted on it during the past two decades are examined. Three questions provide the structure for this examination: (i) What are fundamental conceptual dimensions of distributive justice and the specific substantive issues to which they are related? (ii) What central questions has recent work on distributive justice addressed? and (iii) What are the most important emerging issues on which work in the near-term future should focus? Much of the theory and research examined in the paper is social psychological in nature, but reference is made to related work in related disciplines, particularly sociology and philosophy.

KEY WORDS: distributive justice; justice; resource allocation; equity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, scholars from various disciplines in the social sciences have focused substantial attention on issues of distributive justice. This recent work was no doubt stimulated by the particular historical events of the 1960s, in which thousands of people acted in response to (what they saw as) unjust policies and practices. Movements against racism, sexism, poverty and the maldistribution of wealth, and the remnants of colonial rule and domination explicitly condemned the "injustice" of the policies and governments they sought to change. Legislation passed, and much more legislation contemplated, during that period invoked "justice" as the most important standard for evaluating public policy.

Though the last two decades saw greatly increased attention from the academic community and large publics toward issues of distributive justice,

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0885-7466/87/0300-0019$05.00/0

the history of debate on those issues is a long and complex one. Two of the most influential texts in Western philosophy, Plato's *Republic* (Grube, 1974) and Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (Ross, 1925), devote substantial attention to distributive justice. These texts, and earlier Western oral traditions (see Havelock, 1978), represent attempts to confront the universal dilemmas of human social life the concept of distributive justice suggests.

No single paper or volume could present a useful exhaustive discussion of distributive justice, and I certainly do not attempt that here. Integrative discussions of the history and current status of work on distributive justice undertaken from the perspective of several social science disciplines can be found in one recent edited volume (R. L. Cohen, 1986a). That volume and others should be consulted for more comprehensive overviews of recent work on distributive justice. (Among the most useful of such volumes are the following. For psychology and sociology: Bierhoff *et al.*, 1986; Deutsch, 1985; Folger, 1984; Greenberg and Cohen, 1982; Lerner, 1980; Lerner and Lerner, 1981; Messick and Cook, 1983; Mikula, 1980; Moore, 1978; Sampson, 1983. For economics: Arthur and Shaw, 1978; Phelps, 1973; Schaffer and Lamb, 1981; Sen, 1973, 1982; Skurski, 1983; Thurow, 1980. For philosophy and political theory, much of which focuses on the major statements by Nozick, 1974 and Rawls, 1971, see Ackerman, 1980; Barry, 1973; Buchanan, 1982; M. Cohen *et al.*, 1980; Daniels, no date; Hayek, 1976; Kamenka and Tay, 1979; Miller, 1976; Paul, 1981; Sandel, 1982; Walzer, 1983; Woolf, 1977.)

Rather than attempt another such an overview, the present paper addresses three issues. First, what are the fundamental conceptual dimensions of distributive justice and to what specific substantive issues might they be related? Second, what are the most central questions that recent work on distributive justice has addressed? And, finally, what appear to be the most important emerging issues that work in the near-term future should address?

Fundamental Dimensions of Distributive Justice

The contemporary philosopher Frankena (1962) describes justice in the following way:

> Justice, whether social or not, seems to involve at its center the notion of an allotment of something to persons—duties, goods, offices, opportunities, penalties, punishments, privileges, roles, status, and so on. Moreover, at least in the case of distributive justice, it seems centrally to involve the notion of comparative allotment. (p. 9)

This and every other description of the concept of distributive justice entails four central dimensions. There are (i) things allotted—which I call receipts—to (ii) persons—or recipient units—whose relative shares can be described (iii)

by some functional rule and judged (iv) by some standard. Each of these dimensions requires some preliminary discussion, and even such preliminary discussion will assist in identifying important issues that have received, and will continue to require, attention.

Receipts

Receipts may be material or social goods, conditions, opportunities, roles, etc. They may be valued positively or negatively, and to various degrees of either. One well-known taxonomy employed in some empirical research is that developed by Foa and Foa (1974) to describe the "resources" transacted in human social exchange. (Though the process of human social exchange is related to the comparative allotment of receipts central to distributive justice, the two are not identical; see Eckhoff, 1974.) The Foas identify two dimensions, concreteness and particularism, and locate six "classes" of resources (services, love, goods, status, information, and money) at various levels of the intersection of these two dimensions. Of these six, the majority of work has focused on the concrete and universalistic classes of money and goods. This might simply reflect the ease with which such receipts can be employed in currently predominant types of research. However, it might also suggest that issues of distributive justice are more likely to emerge in comparing allotments of such classes of receipts and less likely to emerge for other classes.

Apart from this, receipts most relevant to distributive justice appear to have two other important features. First, such receipts must be, and must be seen to be, distinct and separable from recipient units. It must be possible to conceive of receipts currently attached to, owned, or controlled by recipients as detachable. Conversely, it must be possible to see currently unattached receipts as potentially owned or controlled by recipients.

Second, receipts most relevant to distributive justice must be, and must be believed to be, part of an aggregate pool of receipts. There must be some aggregate storehouse of receipts from which shares might be allotted in the future, or from which currently allotted shares can be understood to have come in the past.

Recipient Units and Their Characteristics

Recipient units are those entities, most often individual persons, to whom receipts are allocated. It is the moral judgment of the resulting distribution to which the concept of distributive justice refers. Several issues of importance emerge in considering this dimension more closely.

Note first that the very idea of distributive justice requires boundaries which include some, and exclude other, potential membership units. One may learn more about distributive justice in any situation by noting how such boundaries are drawn than by how receipts are allotted to those falling within the boundaries already drawn. Walzer (1983) makes a similar point and argues that:

> The primary good that we distribute to one another is membership in some human community. And what we do with regard to membership structures all our other distributive choices: it determines with whom we make those choices, from whom we require obedience and collect taxes, and to whom we allocate goods and services. (p. 31)

In addition to boundaries circumscribing spatial aggregates which may be defined as neighborhoods, work groups, clubs, or nation-states, there are temporal boundaries. Serious questions of distributive justice may be involved in decisions concerning clean air, clean water, and a radiation-free (or minimally radiated) atmosphere, not only for the current population but for future generations. A recent review which examines the nature of these boundaries suggests that from any perspective which employs "equal consideration" as a crucial aspect of distributive justice, focusing only on those inside the relevant spatial or temporal borders seems a kind of "unjustified ethnocentrism" (Fishkin, 1983, p. 359). At the same time, expanding either those spatial or temporal boundaries present serious difficulties for most current theories of distributive justice and for those attempting to apply them. (Questions concerning spatial boundaries, and the possibility of extending them, and those concerning temporal boundaries and the possibility of extending them, may be relatively controversial, at least theoretically. Issues concerning species boundaries may be highly controversial. Excluding from consideration under this rubric the question of whether or in what measure human fetuses before birth are fully human, there is a healthy degree of controversy, some of it touching those engaged in biomedical, psychological, and sociological research, about whether nonhuman animals, and if so, which ones, should be included within the boundaries of those to whom justice of some sort is due.)

Circumscribing boundaries establishes the size of the aggregate eligible for receipts (and, by implication, the size of the aggregate ineligible). The vast majority of the empirical social psychological research on distributive justice has focused on the dyad, though increasing attention is being paid to the justice of income distributions across large populations (see Cook, 1987) Much of the work in social theory and philosophy (for example, Nozick, 1974; Rawls, 1971) employs society-wide or nation-state boundaries. One important question that should be addressed in future research (on which more later) is the way in which work at these two very different levels of analysis can be brought together (Hardin, 1987).

Consider the work suggesting that judgments concerning distributive justice are made as a result of incorporating several pieces of information about each of the relevant recipients and then integrating that information into an overall judgment. It is difficult to imagine how the complex models of cognition hypothesized to describe such judgments (e.g., Anderson, 1974, 1976; Leventhal, 1976, 1980) would be relevant to very large recipient aggregates. Recent work employing larger aggregates (e.g., Elliott and Meeker, 1984, 1986; Harris, 1980) and descriptions of the heuristics and biases employed in making judgments under uncertainty (see Folger, 1986; Kahneman *et al.*, 1982; Nisbett and Ross, 1980) will be important in addressing this issue.

The entire recipient aggregate may include large or small numbers of distinct persons, but the nature of the recipient unit taken to be the basis for considerations of distributive justice may vary. There are two distinct ways to think about this issue. First, the units to which shares are or might be allotted may not be individual persons but aggregates or groups themselves: families, work groups, statistical aggregates (e.g., regional populations or age-graded aggregates), and self-conscious collectivities. Second, the "individual person" may be variously conceived. Different conceptions of individual and social identity, and the role that connection and separation play in social relations, affect the nature of the boundaries drawn, and therefore the discussion of distributive justice to which they are related (this issue is discussed in more detail below; in addition, see Cohen, 1986b; Furby, 1986; Sampson, 1986; Sandel, 1982).

Finally, of course, in addition to the initial boundary-setting, there may be distinctions drawn among members of the included aggregate. Standing on any one of several dimensions on which recipient units do, or may, differ often plays an important part in the amount or type of receipt appropriate to each. Status at birth, sex, age, religion, etc., all have been employed as dimensions on the basis of which initial boundaries have been drawn; and these and other dimensions, such as work output or need, have been employed as dimensions for allotting receipts among recipient units.

Functional Rule

All discussions of distributive justice invoke some functional rule that describes the relationship between receipts, on the one hand, and recipient units and their characteristics, on the other. In some cases, this rule describes only the distribution of receipts and the composition of the recipient aggregate as a whole. "Equal income for persons" precludes any identification of recipients save that they are bona fide members of the recipient aggregate and provides a complete description of the distribution of receipts. Other rules

also refer only to the distribution of receipts, but do not provide a complete description of the distribution, such as those specifying certain maxima, minima, variances, or distributional shapes. Whether they provide complete or only partial descriptions, rules that refer only to the distribution of receipts and not to characteristics of recipient units might be called *nondifferentiating* or *nonindividuating,* as they do not distinguish units from one another.

Most familiar rules are, instead, *differentiating.* They specify a characteristic or set of characteristics that (may) differentiate recipient units. To each according to his or her need, merit, worth, contribution, sex, class, etc., are all differentiating rules. Such rules may also include a specification of the function, most often ordinal or ratio, that relates characteristics to receipts.

Standards

Distributive justice involves a moral judgment of an allotment of receipts among recipient units. Most who work in this area seem to agree that justice is not the only moral standard that might be employed; beneficence is another. (Hume (1739/1888) argued that, along with scarcity, it was limited human beneficence that made justice necessary as a moral standard.) The relationship between justice and other moral standards is a highly complex one. Some (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981; Rawls, 1971) suggest that justice is the fundamental moral standard, and that other moral standards should be understood in relation to it, whereas others (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Sandel, 1982) identify what they see as the limitations of justice and emphasize the fundamental importance of other standards of morality.

In addition to distinguishing between justice and other moral standards, it is important to distinguish between justice and other types of standards that might provide the basis on which a distribution of receipts could be judged. The standard most often mentioned in this connection is efficiency. Much public argument, and academic debate, concerns the extent to which different distributions can meet standards of both justice and efficiency (see, for example, Buchanan, 1985; Cooter, 1987; Buchanan and Mathieu, 1986; Hochschild, 1981; Okun, 1975; Soltan, 1986).

Summary

I have tried to show that every discussion of distributive justice necessarily involves a consideration of receipts, recipient units, rules, and standards, and the interrelationships among them. Consideration of each of these dimensions, and their interrelationships, provides a context for understanding the

work that has been undertaken to this point, and should provide some hints to the issues that should be addressed in the near-term future.

TRADITIONAL AREAS OF FOCUS

The extensive literature on distributive justice of the last two decades can be seen as linked to developments in two different fields. In psychology and sociology, earlier field work by Homans (1953, 1961) and experimental work by Adams (1963, 1965) in the area of industrial relations, and field work by Blau (1964) in a complex bureaucracy, led each to emphasize issues of distributive justice. In political philosophy, Rawls's early article on justice as fairness (1958) culminated in 1971 in his comprehensive theory of justice. Each of the early developments, and later work that followed in their wake, were influenced in complicated ways by the general social and intellectual climate. In addition, it seems likely that this work provided some of the context in which public discussion and social action in the 1960s and 1970s occurred.

Work along both general lines of development, and various offshoots, directed most attention to two themes: (i) material principles of distributive justice and their endorsement, and (ii) reactions to distributive injustice. A good deal of attention was also directed at understanding the factors that affected endorsements of different principles and different reactions to injustice. Each of these issues is examined in turn.

Principles of Distributive Justice and Their Endorsement[2]

Research in sociology and psychology coalesced rather quickly around what came to be known as "equity theory." Both early (Adams, 1963, 1965) and later statements (Walster *et al.*, 1973) of this position claimed that there was one fundamental material principle, proportionate equality linked to productive contributions. Apparent endorsements of other principles, such as those linked to need or requiring substantive equality, were argued to be either instances of the "equity principle" where the relevant recipient characteristic needed proper specification (e.g., equal "status" or member, state of need) or an indication that not justice but some other concern (for example, charity) was the issue at hand.

[2]The concept of "endorsement" suggests genuine support. Much of the work in this area failed adequately to distinguish public from private support (cf. R. L. Cohen, 1986c; Rivera and Tedeschi, 1976) and, a related matter, acquiescence and passive acceptance from enthusiastic advocacy. I return to this issue later in a discussion of the relationship between justice and power.

This position was criticized for ignoring the mounting evidence of preference for equal or need-based distributions, for the inadequately "social" nature of its psychology, and for its implicit ideological claim that appeared to justify the large inequalities characterized by complex Western capitalist democracies (e.g., Deusch, 1975, 1985; Furby, 1986; Sampson, 1969, 1975, 1983; Schwinger, 1980; Tajfel, 1981, 1985; Wexler, 1982). [Similar criticisms of related mainstream theoretical frameworks have been directed at the functional theory of stratification in sociology (Davis and Moore, 1945; for criticisms and some discussion, see Offe, 1976; Rytina, 1986), and the marginal productivity theory of income inequality in economics (e.g., Mansfield, 1976; for criticisms and some discussion, see Nell, 1973; Thurow, 1971, 1980; Worland, 1986).]

There now seems substantial agreement that there is widespread-support for at least three material principles: equality, need, and contribution. This agreement is based on experimental research in social psychological laboratories (for summaries, see, e.g., Bierhoff *et al.*, 1986; Deutsch, 1985; Folger, 1984; Messick and Cook, 1983; Mikula, 1980), field research employing highly structured questionnaires (e.g., Hochschild, 1981), and large-scale survey research on income inequality (see Cook, 1987, and Kluegel and Smith, 1986, for a summary of much of this work and the following for some recent examples: Shepelak and Alwin, 1986; Jasso, 1980; Jasso and Rossi, 1977). This work seems to demonstrate both widespread recognition and differential endorsement of (at least) these three principles as a result of the particular receipt being considered, the situation or societal sphere in which a distribution is located, or the psychological characteristics and social location of the respondents. (For examples of recent work on national and cultural differences, see Leung and Bond, 1984, and Törnblom and Foa, 1983).

A final criticism of this early work concerns the importance of material principles of distributive justice, and was expressed in two different ways. First, much of this work was appropriately criticized for failing to distinguish endorsements of the justice of certain distributive principles from their putative efficiency, recognizability, or ease of implementation. Failure to distinguish the standards on the basis of which distributive rules differ led much of that early work to imply that distributive justice was a greater concern for most people than it may actually be. Second, work on endorsement of distributive justice principles appeared to ignore completely the important matter of procedural justice. Attempts to redress this problem began with work by Leventhal (1976) and, more especially, Thibaut and Walker (1975). This work is discussed more fully in Tyler's (1987) contribution to this volume.

Somewhat similar controversies and subsequent developments have occurred in the areas of political theory and philosophy stimulated by Rawls's

(1971) statement. Rawls's theory presents a complex argument for two material principles: equality in the distribution of political and civil liberties, and inequalities in the distribution of social and economic goods only to the extent that such inequalities work to the benefit of the least advantaged (the difference principle).

Criticisms of Rawls's work has been voluminous (see, for example, Barry, 1973; Buchanan and Mathieu, 1986; Daniels, no date; Sandel, 1982; Woolf, 1977). Some has focused on what is argued to be the ideological function of the theory (to provide justification for the substantial distributional inequalities characteristic of capitalist democracies) and the absence of attention to issues of power and its distribution (e.g., Nielsen, 1985; Woolf, 1977). Additional critical attention has focused on the inadequately "social" nature of the person thought to populate the Rawlsian universe (e.g., Sandel, 1982). These criticisms parallel those directed at the earliest empirical research and theoretical statements in sociology and psychology. [Nozick's (1974) alternative takes neither of these critical stances (and, in fact, has been even more seriously criticized on both scores; e.g., Barry, 1975; Held, 1976; some of the articles in Paul, 1981) and instead offers what purports to be an alternative normative theory of distribution. It emphasizes three principles: justice in acquisition, justice in transfer, and just rectification.]

Much more attention, however, has focused on the material principles themselves, their apparent implications for current distributions of receipts, or their implications for possible redistributions. Nozick's (1974) alternative permits very little, if any, redistribution and, in fact, questions any theory that allows what he sees as the illegitimate appropriation of individually held receipts justly acquired. Any material principle which employs an end-state description and which imposes some restriction on the absolute or relative amounts of receipts anyone may hold constitutes illegitimate intervention by the state. Viable material principles must be "historical," in the sense that they respect the history out of which the distribution of current holdings arises.

Walzer's (1983) radical particularist alternative is more interesting for present purposes. He takes his examination of the historical and anthropological record to suggest that material principles have always differed across time and space and will continue to do so. In addition, he argues that within a particular culture at any one time, different material principles will, and should, arise to "govern" distributions in different structural spheres. "Importing" a principle justly applied to one sphere, or one culture, to another is in itself unjust.

Finally, though he addressed specific attention to the issue, and though critics such as Nozick (1974) argue that the material principles he espouses are too end-state oriented and not sufficiently sensitive to historical factors,

Rawls's theory has been criticized for focusing on distributive to the exclusion of procedural justice (Young, 1981).

Reactions to Distributive Injustice

One crucial element of the initial social psychological approaches to distributive justice involved reactions to injustice. Equity theory (Walster *et al.,* 1973), for example, specified several types of reactions potentially available to individuals, distinguished between cognitive accommodation and overt behavioral responses, and identified several factors predicted to affect choice of response. Relative deprivation theory (e.g., Crosby, 1976; Gurr, 1970; Mark and Folger, 1984; Runciman, 1966) offered similar suggestions about the responses of individuals in more clearly social contexts and the responses of collectivities. Subsequent theory and research in these traditions also drew important distinctions among the reactions likely to come from the victims of injustice, (what were called) the perpetrators of injustice, and third-party observers of injustice (Austin and Hatfield, 1980).

Among other things, this research demonstrated that the costliness of a response is one important determinant of whether or not it will be employed in any particular situation, that the threshold for rectificatory responses is much higher for those who receive more than their just share than for those who receive less, and that the anticipated reactions of others (victims, perpetrators, or bystanders) affect the response. One ambiguity that plagued this work, or at least the clarity of the interpretation given to it, concerned the distinction between perceiving and experiencing an injustice, on the one hand, and reacting to it, on the other. Embedded in the earlier theoretical works was the assumption that perceived injustice produced intolerable psychological tension that required relief. This made lack of response to apparent injustices a problem. Such might indicate a prior rectificatory response or a failure to experience the situation as unjust. Little attention was paid to the possibility that the injustice was experienced, but that whatever tension associated with that experience remained because of the absence of any satisfactory response.

Several lines of work in recent years have addressed this problem and developed new ways of considering experiences and reactions to injustice. Mikula (1986b; Mikula and Schlamberger, 1985) invited individuals to describe unjust events in everyday life and their responses to them. With the appropriate cautions for interpreting such information, it seems clear that "resignation" and "passive resistance" are important types of reaction which deserve additional examination. Montada and his students (Montada *et al.* 1986; Nepple, 1986) have focused attention on the thinking that advantaged individuals do when forced to consider the experience of unjustly victimized

individuals or groups, and, in particular, the role that existential guilt plays in their reactions. Wortman and her colleagues (Hermann *et al.* 1986; Wortman *et al.* 1986) have examined the reactions of people facing extremely stressful life crises (death of a child or spouse, terminal illness), and Smetana *et al.* (1984) have examined the moral judgments made by abused and neglected children. Finally, work by both Folger (1986) and Martin (1986) has demonstrated the importance of the ability to imagine alternative situations and the likelihood that such situations could occur in reactions to injustice. If alternatives to currently unjust situations are unimaginable, or if their likelihood of occurrence appears to be very low, current injustices may not provoke much in the way of reaction. Thus, current and continuing research is likely to emphasize the complexity of experiences of injustice, the complexity of the reactions to injustice, and their relationship to each other.

FUTURE WORK ON DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Finally, I offer some combination of forecast and suggestion about what the near-term future of work on distributive justice holds. Work on many of the issues already discussed will continue and will no doubt contribute to our developing understanding of distributive justice. The general themes and more specific issues identified in this section represent my own sense of what is likely to be more important as this understanding develops.

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Distributive Justice

One characteristic understanding in past work on justice has been the separation of work in philosophy from that in other disciplines in the social sciences. The most recent work expresses a growing awareness that this is neither fruitful nor really possible. Two recent comprehensive attempts at theories of justice by philosophers proceed from different bases but clearly draw on the perspectives and the literatures of disciplines other than philosophy. Whatever their differences, both Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974) drew heavily on economics and psychology. To be sure, the use they make of these disciplines, and their interpretations of the disciplinary prespectives they employ, are different; to an important extent such differences can be understood as one important source of the different theories of justice they develop. Their reference to and reliance on work in both economics and psychology, however, is a basic similarity. Walzer's (1983) work on justice, though rejecting the possibility of developing a comprehensive theory, draws on history and anthropology, rather than economics and psychology, for its base.

Recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary integration is also characteristic of some recent work by psychologists and sociologists. Provocative work by Sampson (1983, 1986) exploring the implications for distributive justice of anthropological work on different understandings of personhood, Moore's (1978) examination of the role of justice in 19th and 20th century German workers' political movements, and Deutsch's (1985) attempt to incorporate work by economists and political scientists on the role of justice in worker-controlled enterprises demonstrate not only the desirability but the necessity of interdisciplinary perspectives. (The extensive work by Tajfel, 1981, 1985, and his colleagues to emphasize the necessity for a more "social" social psychology of distributive justice should be mentioned here as well.)

Increasing recognition of the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of distributive justice is likely to stimulate additional work on another central theme: the relationship between normative and analytic questions. Buchanan and Mathieu (1986) point out that recent philosophical theorizing about justice has tended to blur the previously sharp distinction between meta-ethical and normative inquiry. Rawls and Nozick, for example, each offer "systematically related material principles—principles which in turn are embedded with a broad theoretical structure which includes an account of human good and/or an ideal of the person." Currently predominant perspectives in (at least Anglo-American) sociology and psychology emphasize "objective" description and analysis. As suggested above, much of such work focuses on the beliefs ordinary people have about justice and injustice, the preferences they have for different principles of justice, and the structure of their thinking about justice. Most of this work not only does not "aspire to derive any normative conclusions" (Soltan, 1986) but is often informed by a belief that "value neutrality" precludes such aspirations. A similar perspective dominates much current work in economics (Worland, 1986) and political studies (Di Quattro, 1986).

Two different kinds of questions arise here. First, what is to be made of current everyday beliefs and thinking about justice? Second, what issues are raised by the approach that takes the accurate description of these beliefs and thinking to be (all of) what a psychology or sociology or economics of justice should attempt?

Extensive and finely textured descriptions of the thinking ordinary people do about justice provides an important source of information about the complexity of justice itself and of the seriousness and depth of ordinary people's thinking. It also provides important information about the variety of practices, principles, and conduct that can be considered just. Whether it also might provide evidence for the suggestion that some social conduct and practices are always and everywhere considered unjust is not yet clear (see,

for example, Furby, 1986; Moore, 1978; Phillips, 1986). The variety of such thought and practice is an important discovery. But does this suggest that justice is simply what people can agree it is, and to follow this up with a theory of justice that steers clear of the attempt to discuss universals (e.g., Walzer, 1983)? Or must these folk understandings be probed, for example, with a counterfactual methodology (see, for example, Di Quattro, 1986; Gaventa, 1980; Lukes, 1975), to imagine in a disciplined way what these understandings, beliefs, and preferences might be without the distortions created by current myths and distributions of power?

And what of the intellectual approach to justice that takes empirical research addressed to accurate description as its primary (and sometimes sole) task? A recent discussion of the relation of social science as currently practiced to the realm of ethics (Haan *et al.*, 1983) points out that the concept of value neutrality itself is far from clear and, thus, that such a belief is no longer an adequate guide to thinking this issue through. Furby (1986) suggests that some psychologists working in this area believe that the work they do "can shape what people think about justice and how they interpret the injustices around them", and Furby herself advocates a focus on how the study of justice in psychology "interprets and de-mystifies injustice for laypeople." Rytina (1986) suggests that, because of strong pressures toward moral relativism and against philosophical speculation, justice is "more often an implicit theme than an explicit object of study in sociology." The consequences are that the sociological study of justice is often embedded in attempts to understand enduring inequalities in access to values, and that this in turn "embed[s] moral elements by asserting the inevitability or desirability of particular patterns."

What, then, is the relation between normative questions of justice and the (supposedly) nonnormative analytic questions or descriptive emphasis in much recent work in the social sciences? If, as some have argued, "value commitment in some form or other is inevitable in doing social science" (Bellah *et al.*, 1983, p. 8), then social scientific work on justice which is not explicitly normative must be examined critically for the value commitments it contains. In addition to continuing to perform this kind of critique for specific theoretical positions (e.g., equity theory, justice motive theory, and relative deprivation theory in social psychology; marginal productivity theory in economics, functional stratification theory in sociology, liberal theory in political studies) this might also mean a critical examination of trends in research on justice.

For example, while work on distributive justice continued throughout the 1970s, a new area of theory and research began to develop, that emphasizing procedural justice. Work in this area (discussed most recently by Tyler, 1987) has demonstrated both the importance and complexity of procedural

justice, and the close, but as yet poorly understood, relationship between procedural and distributive justice. However, it is interesting to note that work on procedural justice was increasing during a period of increasing social and political conservatism.[3] This, plus the (at least initial) transportation of particular models of legal process, with corollary assumptions about equal access and power (and particularly in areas such as industrial relations where such assumptions are highly questionable), suggests the importance of critically examining the value commitments implicit in such a shift of research energies. (A somewhat similar criticism could easily be made of much research on distributive justice. See the next section.)

Work that is explicitly normative, even in part, has received and should continue to receive this kind of critical examination. It is extremely important that work that claims to be merely descriptive and analytic also receive such examination. There is at least some evidence that sociologists and psychologists (for example, Phillips, 1986, and Sampson, 1983, 1986) are joining social theorists and philosophers in trying to integrate explanatory and normative theorizing about distributive justice. Work of this kind, along with attempts to examine the normative content of explanatory work and the explanatory power of normative work, should become more important in the future.

Distributive Justice and Power

Mikula (1986a) has remarked that every significant national or international social scientific conference on justice in the recent past has bemoaned the lack of work on the relationship between justice and power and has called for such work to begin. This seems undeniably the case. Such repeated calls reflect the real importance of this relationship, and perhaps the difficulty of doing work on it. However, work has begun, and there are some reasons for optimism.

For example, Cook and Hegtvedt (1986) have discussed the continuing experimental work in the exchange theory tradition on (i) the effects of the distribution of power on allocations of (mostly material) receipts and (ii) the effects of the distribution of power on reactions to injustice. Ng (1980, 1985)

[3]This most certainly does not mean that there is anything "inherently" conservative in the notion of procedural justice or the work that has been done on it. Young's 1981 radical critique of Rawls's tendency to focus on distributional issues rather than issues of procedure she sees as underlying them makes this clear. Similarly, the fact that Rawls's theory emerged following a period of social and political liberalism does not mean there is anything "inherently" liberal about the notion of distributive justice or the work done on it, as for example, Hayek's 1976, willingness to embrace Rawls's principles should make clear. This is in spite of the apparent contradiction in doing so, as Hayek also questions the possibility of any viable theory of justice.

continues to probe interrelationships among the equity formulation, the power held by the allocator of receipts, and the important work on individual and social identity associated with the Tajfel group.

Work of this kind represents an important response to earlier criticisms of predominant sociological/psychological and philosophical trends: Power had been (almost) totally absent in explicit discussions of distributive justice. Defined as the ability to allocate or reallocate receipts, or the centrality of a social location with respect to communication of valuable information, power has now come to the forefront of investigations of distributive justice. However, conceived in other senses, power, and the distribution of power, have not yet received the systematic attention they should.

One particularly important dimension of power and its relationship to distributive justice remains relatively unexplored. It concerns the way in which agendas for public debate are set and the symbols and myths that facilitate some, and inhibit other, understanding of actors' identities and interests. [I rely here on Lukes's (1975) discussion of power, and to some extent, the application of it by Gaventa (1980).]

Consider the points at which distributive justice appears as a pressing issue, and the points at which it recedes into the background (see the discussion immediately above of the shift in research emphasis from distributive to procedural justice). Consider also the types of receipts or resources whose allocation is considered a matter of distributive justice. In the past several years, both public and academic concern have begun to focus on justice in the distribution of medical care (see, e.g., Lichtman and Wolfe, forthcoming). Assuming that the actual distribution of health care has not changed substantially, but even (perhaps) if it has, why did such concern appear when it did, and not before? Though there is increasing public attention addressed to homeless populations in the United States, the national distribution of adequate housing is not currently on the national political agenda as a matter of justice. Why not?

Although these examples are taken from agendas at the national level, they need not be. The ability to set agendas, in informal settings and groups, and in families, cities, and international settings, is one manifestation of power and its distribution which may make the issue of who prevails in a direct conflict of interest unimportant. The question here is not one of what the just distribution of (for example) adequate housing *is,* but how such a matter comes to be a recognizable focus of public debate. In addition to observational and historical studies of agenda-setting and its relation to justice (e.g., Crenson, 1971; Gaventa, 1980), future research might examine the difficulties small groups have in "breaking out" of a seemingly fixed agenda to discover shared senses of justice and the collective action necessary to achieve it (Gamson *et al.,* 1982).

Justice and the Concept of the Person

Conceptions of justice and human personhood are mutually interdependent: "different views of what human traits must be taken into account—including a conception of which are fundamental and which are secondary—will lead to different conceptions of justice" (Buchanan and Mathieu, 1986, p. 21). Most current work on distributive justice invokes (but often only implicitly) a concept of the supposedly distinct individual whose self-understanding requires separation from others and whose motivation is narrowly self-interested. In part, this may be a consequence of the dominant Western conception of the person as:

> a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against a social and natural background. (Geertz, 1979, p. 229)

In part it may also reflect the liberalism of most current psychological and social theory. The liberal theory of justice, that theory most prevalent in contemporary work

> begins and ends with individuals and their interests, makes no sense without their consideration, owes its political strategies to its egalitarian conception of individuals, and radically distinguishes itself from competing (utilitarian, communitarian) theories because of that conception. (Di Quattro, 1986, p. 92)

Two of the most prominent contemporary liberal of justice, those offered by Rawls (1971) and Kohlberg (1981), have been subject to similar criticisms. One of the most important of these criticisms concerns their conception of the person. This conception is argued (by Gilligan, 1982, for example, with respect to Kohlberg, and by Sandel, 1982, for example, with respect to Rawls) to be unimaginably social, one which conceives individuals only in terms of a set of relations that strip them of the inevitably social aspects of their identity. This criticism leads Gilligan to suggest that Kohlberg limited his conception of the person to one whose morality denies the importance of empathy and care, and it leads Sandel to a similar conclusion about the extent to which the individual of Rawlsian liberalism lacks human sociality. Whether feminist or communitarian, such critiques combine with increasing international collaboration among United States, British, and Western and Eastern European researchers (exemplified by the 1984 Marburg Conference, see Bierhoff *et al.*, 1986; the Kozubnik Conference, Wosinsky and Wosinsky, 1985; and the 1986 Leiden Conference, Vermunt and Steensma, 1986) to draw continued attention to basic similarities and differences in conceptions of distributive justice. This, in turn, should contribute to a growing understanding of the specific ways in which differential conceptions of the person affect the drawing of moral boundaries that include

some and exclude others, the social construction of membership and nonmembership (other, alien, stranger) groups, and beliefs in the ability to implement different material principles of distributive justice. (Particularly relevant here may be not only the continuing work on social categorization and its inevitable relation to prejudice, summarized recently by Wilder, 1986, but also Billing's 1985, 1986, intentionally antithetical theoretical position which distinguishes prejudice and tolerance on the basis of the content, rather than the form, of thinking.)

SUMMARY

There have been other centers of attention in past work on distributive justice than those I have identified in the present paper. There will also be centers of attention other than those I have identified here in work on distributive justice over the next several years. Among the most important of these may be the role of distributive justice in collective action, the relationship between procedural and distributive justice, the role of social symbols, myths, and rituals in public debate over distributive justice,[4] the relationship betwen distributive justice and (especially democratic) forms of social organization, and the role of distributive justice in access to and control over information. Whether these or other issues will constitute the major focus of scholarly attention is less clear than that, barring the elimination (or a substantially new understanding) of scarcity and the emergence of universal generosity, judgments of the justice of resource distributions will remain central to social life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Jerald Greenberg, Melvin Lerner, and Tom Tyler for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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[4]"A more important requirement of research on social justice [than "to specify the conditions in which individuals can be expected to seek their 'private' resolutions of inequity] would consist of establishing in detail the links between social myths and the general *acceptance* of injustice, and research which would attempt to specify the sociopsychological conditions which could be expected to contribute to the dissolution of these patterns of acceptance" (Tajfel, 1985, p. 714).

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