A dialogue in support of social justice

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Abstract

There are kinds of dialogue that support social justice and others that do the reverse. The kinds of dialogue that support social justice require that anger be bracketed and that hiding in safe spaces be eschewed. All illegitimate ad hominem/ad feminem attacks are ruled out from the get-go. No dialogical contribution can be down-graded on account of the communicator's gender, race, or religion. As well, this communicative approach unapologetically privileges reason in full view of theories and strategies that might seek to undermine reasoning as just another illegitimate form of power.

On the more positive side, it is argued in this paper that social justice dialogue will be enhanced by a kind of "communicative upgrading," which amplifies "person perception," foregrounds the impersonal forces within our common social spaces rather than the "baddies" within, and orients the dialogical trajectory toward the future rather than the past. Finally, it is argued in this paper that educators have a pressing responsibility to guide their students through social justice dialogue so that their speech contributes to the amelioration of injustice, rather than rendering the terrain more treacherous.

Keywords: communication impact; communication ethics; education and culture; social change; social justice

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Un diálogo a favor de la justicia social

Resumen

Hay diálogos que apoyan la justicia social y otros que hacen lo contrario. Los que apoyan la justicia social requieren que la ira "quede en el tintero" y evitar esconderse en el lugar seguro. Todos los ataques ilegítimos *ad hominem/ad feminem* se descartan desde el principio. Ninguna contribución en el diálogo se puede subestimar a razón del género, la raza o la religión del hablante. Así mismo, el enfoque comunicativo de la justicia social privilegia sin tapujos la razón frente a teorías y estrategias que podrían tratar de desvirtuar el razonamiento como una forma ilegítima de poder. Por otro lado, y de manera más positiva, en este artículo se argumenta que el diálogo de justicia social se verá reforzado por una especie de *mejora comunicativa*, que amplifica la *percepción de la persona*, destaca las fuerzas impersonales que están dentro de nuestros espacios sociales comunes, en vez de a los villanos, y orienta la trayectoria dialógica hacia el futuro más que hacia el pasado. Finalmente, se afirma que los educadores tienen la urgente responsabilidad de guiar a sus estudiantes a través del diálogo de justicia social para que sus contribuciones ayuden a disminuir la injusticia en lugar de hacer que el terreno sea más traicionero.

Palabras clave: impacto de la comunicación, ética de la comunicación, educación y cultura, cambio social, justicia social

Un dialogue en faveur de la justice sociale

Résumé

Certains dialogues soutiennent la justice sociale et d'autres font l'inverse. Ceux qui soutiennent la justice sociale nécessitent que la haine soit laissée de côté afin d'éviter de se cacher en lieu sûr. Toutes les attaques illégitimes *ad hominem/ad feminem* sont rejetées dès le début. Aucune contribution au dialogue ne peut être sous-estimée, en raison du genre, de la race ou la religion du locuteur. De même, l'approche communicative de la justice

sociale privilégie, sans ménagement, la raison par rapport à des théories et des stratégies visant à dénaturer le raisonnement en tant qu'une forme illégitime de pouvoir. Par ailleurs, et de façon plus positive, cet article développe l'idée que le dialogue de la justice sociale sera renforcé par une sorte d'*amélioration communicative* qui amplifie la *perception des personnes,* souligne les forces impersonnelles se trouvant à l'intérieur de nos espaces sociaux communs à la place d'exalter les méchants, et oriente la progression dialogique vers le futur plutôt que vers le passé. Enfin, il est indiqué que les enseignants ont un besoin urgent de guider leurs étudiants dans le dialogue de justice sociale afin de diminuer l'injustice grâce à leurs contributions, au lieu de rendre le terrain encore plus mouvant.

Mots-clés : impact de la communication, éthique de la communication, éducation et culture, changement social, justice sociale

Um diálogo em favor da justiça social

Resumo

Há diálogos que apoiam a justiça social e outros que fazem o oposto. Aqueles que apoiam a justiça social requerem que a ira "fique no tinteiro" e evitar esconder-se no lugar seguro. Todos os ataques ilegítimos *ad hominem/ ad feminem* são descartados desde o princípio. Nenhuma contribuição para o diálogo pode ser subestimada com base no género, raça ou religião do falante. Da mesma forma, o enfoque comunicativo da justiça social privilegia abertamente a razão frente a teorias e estratégias que poderiam tentar desvirtuar o raciocínio como uma forma ilegítima do poder. Por outro lado, e de forma mais positiva, este artigo argumenta que o diálogo da justiça social será reforçado por uma espécie de *melhora comunicativa*, que amplifica a *percepção da pessoa*, destaca as forças impessoais que estão dentro de nossos espaços sociais comuns, em vez dos vilões, e orienta a trajetória dialógica rumo ao futuro e não ao passado. Finalmente, afirma-se que os educadores têm a urgente responsabilidade de guiar seus alunos através do diálogo de justiça social para que suas contribuições ajudem a diminuir a injustiça em lugar de fazer que o terreno seja mais traiçoeiro.

Palavras-chave: impacto da comunicação, ética da comunicação, educação e cultura, mudança social, justiça social

Introduction

Injustice is a blemish on humanity. Attempts by many to right these wrongs are legion. There are those who use violence as a way of "making things right." Groups such as the Black Panthers or the Taliban might fall into those categories. Alternatively, there are those who would utilize the power of dialogue and negotiation to bring about what they believe is a more stable global culture. Figures such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi, or Mandela might come to mind here.

For present purposes, we will assume that this latter course of action is preferable, but this still leaves open an important question: What type of dialogue has the best chance of ameliorating the forces of injustice in our world? This question is crucial because our collective failure to address it has led to the entrenchment of the belief that virtually all communicative interchanges—particularly if orchestrated by the victims of injustice—are conducive to creating a better world. This belief is faulty. In support of this claim, we will argue that there are certain kinds of dialogue that do just the reverse—that is, there are certain kinds of dialogue that actually stall or impede progress towards a more just world.

We will argue that if the intent is indeed to move towards a more just world rather than merely to vent or retaliate, then the dialogue must be of a certain kind. Specifically, we will argue that dialogue in support of social justice requires that anger be bracketed and that hiding in safe spaces be eschewed. Importantly, this means that ad hominem/ad feminem attacks are ruled out from the get-go. No dialogical contribution can be down-graded on account of the communicator's gender, race, or religion—and yes, that includes the ideas of white, straight males. As well, the proposed communicative approach unapologetically privileges reason in full view of theories and strategies that might seek to undermine reasoning as just another illegitimate form of power.

On the more positive side, we will argue that social justice dialogue will be enhanced by a kind of *communicative upgrading* that amplifies *person perception*, foregrounds the impersonal forces within our common social spaces rather than the *baddies* within, and orients the dialogical trajectory toward the future rather than the past.

In what is to follow, we will begin by investigating some of the common reactions individuals have to injustice. We will then explore the underlying dangers involved in adopting each of these reactions. Then, as noted above, we will outline some markers that will assist in orienting communicators during their discussions, in order to move forwards toward a genuinely more just world. Finally, we will speak to educators in particular, and argue that they have an urgent and pressing responsibility to guide their students through social justice dialogue so that their contributions support the possibility of mitigating forces of injustice, rather than rendering the terrain more treacherous.

Reactions to injustice

Understandable anger

In the past, some women have argued that men have absolutely no right to comment on issues such as abortion, sexual harassment, or child care. Proponents of this position argue that allowing male voices into dialogue on such issues is like inviting a wolf in sheep's clothing to enter the protective enclave of female solidarity. The belief seems to be that men will potentially disrupt the fabric of what little progress women have made on these issues thus far.

This anger is of the sort that Nussbaum (2016) calls *well-grounded*, i.e., it is based on the truth and fact that women have indeed been oppressed for eons. However, she goes on to say that while anger may have some instrumental value as a signal to oneself that something is wrong with a situation, and may serve as a motivation to address the wrongdoing or as a deterrent to others, it nevertheless impedes progress towards social justice.

Her major theme is *Deweyan,* in the sense that it is grounded in the belief that all of us have the responsibility to try to develop ways to live together in a manner that is potentially beneficial to all. As such, we all need to be part of a dialogical process of equal participants who come together in an honest and open attempt to articulate a common future. Treating others as likely criminals (as one does when slamming the door against the wolf) is just about the worst way to begin if you want someone to cooperate as an equal(Nussbaum, 2016, p. 243).

Despite this point, Nussbaum recognizes how the thoughts of *payback* can be intensely satisfying. She even quotes Aristotle's comment that thoughts of retribution are often pleasant (p. 17). Nonetheless, we all need to recognize that attempting to reverse injustices through *down-ranking* does nothing to create equality (p. 29). Yes, women have been kept out of the conversation for centuries, however, carving out dialogical spaces for women only—or for the colonially-oppressed only—is not painting a vision of a more inclusive future, instead, it is just a mirror image of what has been.

Ensuring that underprivileged voices are privileged

In 2017, a Jewish conservative named Ben Shapiro went on tour and visited a number of universities around America. Shapiro's talks centered on the importance of political diversity and free speech. Ironically, Shapiro was confronted by student protests when speaking at a number of these Universities, including California State, the University of Wisconsin, Penn State University, and UC Berkeley (The Daily Wire, 2017).

In the aftermath of the tour, Shapiro testified in front of the United States Congress about how these protestors likely justified their actions, and how the underlying logic of their beliefs posed a threat to the First Amendment in America, and free speech more universally (The Daily Wire, 2017).

The first controversial idea Shapiro identified to be fueling anti-free speech sentiments was *intersectionality*. Intersectionality Theory was first introduced by Kimberley Crenshaw in 1989 (Lorenz, 2013). Although the theory has had various iterations, it suggests that an individual's group identities — i.e., their race, gender, social class — can be used to determine how privileged they are within a given society. This theory is often used by social justice proponents to advocate two controversial ideas. The first of these is that the voices and viewpoints of those with *less* privilege should be valued over the voices and perspectives of those with *more* privilege. The second controversial idea is that the voices of the most privileged — which are often attributed to straight, white males — should be silenced outright in conversations surrounding certain topics, such

as social justice. In his book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, Peterson (2018) suggests that both of these ideas are iterations of Derrida's more fundamental idea that the powerless or oppressed should be privileged, and that powerful or oppressors ought to be silenced (p. 312). In short, advocates of this view push the idea that group identity should be used as a litmus test for determining whether you ought to speak and/or the value of the ideas that you do put forth.

Clearly it is the case that heretofore silenced voices must be protected from the roar of what may appear to be potentially oppressive messages. Nonetheless, echoing Nussbaum yet again, silencing such messaging does not seem like a fruitful strategy in the journey toward a future of equals. Carving out dialogical territory for the *oppressed only* is not productively contributing to a vision of a more inclusive world; instead, it is merely an attempt to reverse a power dynamic that is already considered problematic by those trying to flip it on its head. In his article "Freedom as Antipower," Pettit (1996) writes:

> how might we guard the powerless against subjugation by the powerful? One way would be to reverse roles, of course, and give them power over others rather than letting others have power over them. But that would only relocate the problem not resolve it (p. 588).

Ensuring safety

In a recent study of young people who grew up *connected to the internet,* i.e., those born after 1995, Twenge (2017) discovered that unlike previous generations, the idea of safety was at the core of iGen's values, which she speculated may be the result of helicopter parenting and over-protection. What is particularly interesting about this finding is that safety, for iGens, is not just protection from physical harm, but protection from *emotional harm* as well (p. 144). What this entails, in practice, is that speech which is perceived as hurtful is often shut down by simply citing the emotional harm it causes. As Twenge writes, "in recent years, safe spaces have become popular on college campuses as responses to visits by controversial speakers: if students are upset by a speaker's message, they can come together in a separate location to console one another" (p. 154).

This concern for safety should be taken seriously. Anyone who feels *unsafe* in a conversation will undoubtedly be inclined to either

fight or flee, neither of which are conducive to a reasonable or productive interchange. Nonetheless, we suggest that using safety to justify dialogical censorship should only be reserved for instances in which the emotional suffering is arbitrary or unnecessary, or for instances in which the speech poses a serious physical threat to those mentioned—e.g., speech inciting violence. In limiting their censorship responses and overcoming their reticence to listen to scary messaging, we suggest that such individuals may actually benefit from a higher, more anchored sense of safety through acquiring an enhanced and more balanced perspective of the issue at hand. In correspondence with this view, Anderson (2015), in his article "Creating Investors, Not Tourists: How to Care for the Linguistic Ecosystem," writes:

> Guarding [individuals'] emotional skin, may be directly harmful to them. In support of this position, Susan Gardner, in her paper "Questioning to Hesitation Rather than Hesitating to Question," argues that one ought to be warier of questioning that is soft and otherwise shallow, than forms of questioning that lead to an agent's uncertainty. What Gardner is suggesting is that a point of emotional upheaval in the agent, which results from pointed questioning, is in fact positive as it assists in overcoming pre-established beliefs in light of new reasons. Similarly, in his book *The Mess Inside*, Peter Goldie argues that radical adjustments to one's motivational set are more likely to take place when agents are exposed to situations that *force* them to see things in another light. (p. 145)

> In the same vein, developmental psychologist Jean Piaget argues that states of conflict between contradictory beliefs catalyze paradigmatic shifts, and that, without these internal struggles, one's moral development would remain stagnant (xii-xiii)

> What all three authors' arguments have in common is the view that oftentimes an internal state of conflict is not something to be avoided. On the contrary, this internal state of conflict often indicates a moment of reconstruction, in the sense that one's motivational set is undergoing adjustment. Likewise, internal conflict often indicates that the issue at hand is deeply important as opposed to a trivial venture. (p. 291)

Lukianoff & Haidt (2015), in their on-line article "The Coddling of the American Mind," also argue that victims benefit from facing, rather than distancing themselves from that which is perceived as unsafe. Citing the most basic tenets of psychology, they note that

the absolute least helpful strategy for helping someone who has developed an anxiety disorder after being trapped in an elevator is to try and restructure their world so that they can avoid elevators! With regard to creating safe spaces for college and university students, they argue that: Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, colleges should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control. One of the great truths taught by Buddhism (and Stoicism, Hinduism, and many other traditions) is that you can never achieve happiness by making the world conform to your desires.

Despite the benefits of listening to potentially scary opposing viewpoints, doing so may nonetheless be beyond the emotional strength of particular individuals—i.e., it may be just too difficult for a rape victim to engage in a discussion about how the injustice of sexual abuse should be handled. In such circumstances, rather than trying to silence potentially upsetting messages, we suggest that a better option would be to lean on the strength of those whom one trusts to give a fair and accurate account of what others have to say. One can do this with the confidence that it is only by allowing a position to be heard that it can be demonstrated as untenable. As Mill (1860) so famously argued:

> He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. [...] Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. [...] He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them. [...] He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form. (p. 163)

Discrediting reasoned communication altogether

Drawing on ideas from Foucault and Derrida, Said (as cited in Daniel, 2005) argues "that rationality and human nature are historical constructions, and that the task of post-colonial thought

is to undermine the hegemony of Western Rationality" (p. 400). Derrida, too, takes aim at the sort of reasoned communication that many typify as Western, when he suggests that communicators, or meaning makers, cannot be considered reliable because they carve up the world with a vested interest in mind. For Derrida (as cited in Daniel, 2005), "the repression at the origin of meaning is an irreducible violence" (p. 302). Thus, if meaning networks persist because of power and not because of their superior capacity to map reality—i.e., the *signified* in his language—this seems to carry the implication that we should abandon reasoned communication altogether.

However, we would argue that such a move or attitude is unhelpful. On the one hand, it seems irrefutably clear that reasoned truth-seeking—not illegitimate, interpersonal power moves—have brought us technological wonders such as modern medicine, air travel and the computer. And with regard to social justice, if we reject reasoned truth-seeking as a way to right wrongs, the only other obvious alternative would seem to be a violent struggle for power. The worry, in other words, is that if we reject reasoned communication because it can be, and has previously been, used to solidify illegitimate power, then won't we end up ensuring that sheer raw power will reign supreme? By contrast, we suggest that while *reasoned* communication can be, and has previously been, used to stabilize illegitimate power, it also can be, and has previously been, used by such brilliant orators as Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mandela, and Wilberforce, amongst many others, to destabilize illegitimate power. It is for this reason that Bloom (2013) in his book *Just Babies*: *The Origins of Good and Evil* writes, "[just] as we have used reason to make scientific discoveries, such as the existence of dinosaurs, electrons, and germs, we have also used it to make moral discoveries, such as the wrongness of slavery" (p. 207).

To those in the postmodern movement who worry that accepting the potential benefit of reasoned communication might discredit their bone fides, we would like to remind them that even Derrida (as cited in Daniel, 2005), in his article "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," writes "the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed by my writings," (p. 298) and that even within interpretative contexts, "it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of

consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigor, criticism, and pedagogy" (p. 298).

In conclusion then, we suggest without hesitation that we all ought to acknowledge the fact that, like all human systems, the reasoning enterprise is susceptible to being corrupted and tainted by those who use it. Nonetheless, this should not be used as a charge against the reasoning enterprise itself. To abandon this tool simply because of past corruption would be to abandon what may be the only viable tool available to us to overcome injustice.

Summary of reactions to injustice

If we are ever going to make headway toward greater social justice in this world, we need more people to work together to make that happen. If we are to create a formidable force in the service of good, we need to communicate with one another honestly, openly and empathetically. To do that, we need to turn away from anger, turn away from the over-privileging of hitherto underprivileged voices, turn away from ensuring the emotional safety from reasoned opposing viewpoints, and turn away from the undermining of reasoned dialogue altogether as a result of barbs flung from obscure, elitist philosophical theorists. We suggest that all of us, both those who are part of what might be considered an oppressive class—or religion, or sexual orientation, or race, or gender—and those who have been victims of that oppression, turn to the possibility of *communicative upgrading* in order to facilitate a genuine forward movement toward a world where there is at least potentially justice for all.

What *communicative upgrading* might look like

Amplifying *person perception*

One might assume that, given such tactics as ad hominem attacks and shutting out opposing viewpoints (both by those who are viewed as oppressors and by those viewed as oppressed), the first step toward enhancing social justice through communicative up-grading would be to up-grade everyone's reasoning skills. Though superlative reasoning skills may indeed be necessary for transparent

and efficient dialogical interchange, an even more important factor is rising beyond what Benjamin (2018) refers to as the "doer and done to" position by strengthening what Gardner & Wolf (2018), in their paper "In the Shadow of Our Time," call *person perception*, or what Hicks (2011) refers to as the *perceived dignity* or *inherent worth* of *both* self and other.

Hicks (2011) argues that "dignity violations" in interpersonal interchange are the norm rather than the exception, and that dignity assaults are registered by the brain as symbolically equivalent to physical assaults (pp. 7, 14, 51, 54-56). Since dignity violations ensure that all parties feel under attack, it is no wonder that very little listening and understanding results from such interchanges.

And while dignity violations seem easy to spot when authored by a perceived *oppressor*, Hicks notes that dignity violations are likewise often inherent in the communication of those who identify as victims. Thus, Hicks (2011) argues that:

> The temptation to see the other person as the perpetrator and oneself as the innocent victim is one the greatest obstacles to resolving conflict in relationships. Our need to be both right and done wrong by is an outdated survival strategy that creates big problems for us today. (p. 143)

And she writes elsewhere:

> Treating people badly because they have done something wrong only perpetuates the cycle of indignity. What is worse, we violate our own dignity in the process. Others' bad behavior doesn't give us license to treat them badly in return. (p. 5)

Hicks goes on to say that whatever the perceived issue is, whether it be a past or present injustice, all of us need to be open to how we might be contributing to the problem (p. 143). This is the case because how we contribute to the problem may be precisely the lens through which the other sees us—we view the other as a victimizer which is precisely how they see us—and, thus, such acknowledgement begins to open up a way for each of us to perceive one another in shades of grey (p. 148), rather than in a black-and-white manner, as oppressor and oppressed — i.e., to see one another as equal members of the

"perfectly imperfect" human species (Gardner & Wolf, 2018) —. She likewise suggests that all parties have a responsibility to articulate how they might contribute to a collective resolution.

Interestingly, Hicks (2011) lists *safety* and *understanding* among the ten essential elements necessary to preserve dignity, which, in light of the current reticence to hear and understand what are perceived to be *unsafe* messages, may seem to land us in a contradiction, i.e., it may not be possible to understand the other and feel safe at the same time. Hicks avoids this contradiction by arguing, instead, that those who have hitherto felt unsafe and/or humiliated must learn to rise above their histories, and ensure that they do not perpetuate a cycle of indignity. She argues that, if those of us who have felt unsafe do not learn to heal from these early imprints of indignity, then we will become controlled by them and hence continue to hurt others, "jeopardizing their and our own dignity and threatening all our relationships" (Hicks, 2011, p. 53).

With regard to understanding the viewpoints of others — i.e., even those who we might consider unsafe — Hicks argues that we should always start from the position that *what others think matters*, we should give them the chance to explain and express their points of view, and we should actively listen in an effort to understand— even if, ultimately, we do not agree. (p. 81)

Focus on the forces of the system

In a *Time* commentary on Rosling's (2018) book *Factfulness*, Bill Gates argues that this book should be a *must read* for everyone, as it clearly points out not only how the world is making amazing progress on many fronts, including social justice, but also why our "biases tend to coax us into seeing the reverse" (Begley, 2018). Knowing that "we have come a long way" nudges us toward duplicating successful strategies, and hence accelerates our collective movement forward. By contrast, believing that we are stuck in tragic circumstances tends to hijack our efforts and energy, and encourages us to seek out scapegoats. Gates' legitimate worry about scapegoating is complemented by his worry about our propensity for hero-worship. He says:

With a few exceptions, things don't get better because of heroes. There were heroes 1,000 years ago, and the world was awful. Modernity is a miracle of systems. Jonas Salk was an amazing scientist, but he isn't the only reason we're on the doorstep of eradicating polio —it's also thanks to the coordinated vaccination effort by health workers, NGOs, and governments. We miss the progress that's happening right in front of us when we look for heroes instead of systems. If you want to improve something, look for ways to build better systems.

In his paper "Freedom as Anti-power," Pettit (1996) also urges individuals to keep focused on systems rather than particular people occupying positions within a given system. He writes:

How might we guard the powerless against subjugation by the powerful? One way would be to reverse roles, of course, and give them power over others rather than letting others have power over them. But that would only relocate the problem not resolve it. The question is how we might guard people in general against subjugation, not how we might guard some particular subgroup. (p. 588)

Pettit argues that the *power relocation strategy* is often advocated because we hold a zero-sum view of power. However, Pettit argues that if we abandon this tug of war perspective—where one group has to lose ground in order for another to gain it—and instead entertain the idea that you can simply empower the disenfranchised in order to equalize a power disparity, then maybe we can take positive steps toward subjugation-free environments, i.e., change the system. Pettit calls this novel strategy *antipower*. Antipower, in practice, involves "giving the powerless new, empowering resources of their own" *relative to the context* where that power differential exists. (pp. 589-590)

Pettit advocates for some traditional forms of antipower, such as regulatory policies and legislation. However, he recognizes, to one degree or another, that this is merely a Band-Aid solution to a much deeper problem. So instead, Pettit advocates for interventions that are

designed to empower certain people—to give them *equality in basic capabilities*—and thereby to guard them against various forms of subjugation, and the various forms of vulnerability

these subjugations entail. [...] Such measures are necessary in a society like ours to render people more resistant to various forms of interference by others and thereby to domination by them: the better educated and the better informed are less easily harassed or duped for example. (p. 591)

Enhancing the education of those who might be vulnerable to oppression is a viewpoint with which we strongly concur, and a point to which we will return below.

Imagining the future

Damasio (2010) has provided significant empirical evidence to support the claim that ultimately it is *somatic marking* that drives human action and thought. What he means by this is that most of our perceptions are *colored by emotion*. This, indeed, is what he argued was Descartes' fundamental error, i.e., since ultimately the body is our source of emotion, a brain suspended in a vat would be incapable of thought (Damasio, 1995).

What is particularly interesting about somatic marking within the present context is that while one's past may be emotionally-laden — and hence forever knocking on their conscious brain — it is not at all clear how one's imagined future can be seen or heard over all of this disruptive noise.

The challenge, then, is how to emotionally color an envisioned future. Gardner (2009), in her textbook *Thinking Your Way to the Freedom,* has argued that, in order for a future vision to gain magnetism, *precision* is crucially required. That is, we need to have a precise idea of how to take the next steps forward (pp. 61-62). Gardner's contention is supported by research on goal achievement, which has found that fantasizing and daydreaming about future goals actually impedes progress towards goal achievement when it is not accompanied by a precise plan (Oettingen, Mayer & Portnow, 2016: Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). Just thinking that we should have a more equal society is certainly laudatory, but far too imprecise to guide or direct our behavior. Therefore, educators ought to devote a significant amount to time to improving education so that students are encouraged to not only focus on specifics of their present behavior, but to imagine creative and precise alternatives that may have sufficient magnetic power to direct future behavior —

i.e., instead of just bemoaning the loss of animal habitat, how about volunteering for a NGO, and/or sending money to environmental charities, and/or voting for the candidate who has a precise environmental platform? —

Focusing on past ills is tempting because it is easy. Focusing on how to create a better world is not so easy. But if we keep in mind that the future is the only place where we will find a better world, then we will know how to act when we find ourselves in unproductive interchanges that seem stuck in the habit of dredging up all the ills of the past. We might, for instance, find that a fruitful tactic may be simply to ask: "what do you suppose the first step toward a better world or a better life might look like?" which brings us to the special responsibility of educators with regard to enhancing dialogue toward the amelioration of social justice.

The responsibility of educators

How to make this world a more just place for all, including our non-human cousins, is a pressing question for many young people. For that reason, it is the responsibility of all educators to be prepared to accompany their students in their quest to think through what is required of them to make peace with themselves and others as they face this challenge. As they dive into issues of social justice, it is critical that educators keep a firm grip on the helm so that their well-intentioned efforts are not shipwrecked.

We suggest that educators find their bearings by keeping their eyes on the horizon, i.e., assist students in somatically marking the future. If by contrast, students are more focused on past storms that have left a disquieting wake (e.g., if, for instance, in their rage, they focus on how to forcefully right historical injustices by punishing the descendants of oppressors) then they need to be invited to reflect on the possibility that this may only invert the problems of the past, and that such strategies ultimately will lead to power battles likely to devolve into tribalism and potentially even bloodshed—e.g., the Cambodian genocide. Students also need to be invited to reflect on whether they see themselves primarily as an amalgamation of their group identities—i.e., their skin color, their gender, their socioeconomic class—or whether it is their thoughts, ideas and values that ultimately anchor who they are.

In their pursuit of social justice, educators themselves must recognize their particular responsibility to ensure that all youngsters have equal access to the kind of education that allows them to think through how best to lead their lives, given the circumstances that they find themselves in. This is precisely why initiatives like *Philosophy for Children* are so crucial: by reaching children at an early age, we can help level the playing field by giving youngsters some of the structure they might otherwise lack in their lives, and equip them to participate in the dialogical arena with peers who might not face the same generational roadblocks.

To those educators of a post-modern bent, we suggest that undermining the reasoning enterprise as a way of destabilizing what is perceived as illegitimate power structures catches the wrong target in the crosshairs. All of us can agree that starving marginalized groups of reason has historically been used as a method of oppression—e.g., women shut out of educational opportunities. Thus, to try and overcome oppression by depriving everyone of reason is no more eloquent a solution than the horrid suggestions of Vonnegut's (1961) classic *Harrison Bergeron,* where the entire populace is handicapped in order to end inequality. Our efforts ought to be focused on creating opportunities for historically oppressed populations, not universally eliminating the tools that have historically helped other groups flourish.

Conclusion

To suggest that those of us who are concerned with social justice should focus on changing the system rather than engaging in down-ranking tactics may seem decidedly *unsexy*, particularly for those who would strive to follow in the path of their past revolutionary heroes. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that down-ranking tactics are inherently a *whack-a-mole* game—although one gets an adrenaline rush during every whack, these tactics ultimately do not result in any concrete universal progress—instead, they merely reorganize and redistribute power.

We must accept the fact that there will always be some who fare better than others—that inequality, in one form or another, will always exist. Despite this fact, some systems are inherently better than others, and manage to ensure that all are given an equal

opportunity. If we adopt this perspective, we will be more inclined to focus on the tedious work of continuing to change the rotten planks of our seaworthy vessel that we so desperately need to sail through the ocean of never-ending challenges that make up the plight of humankind. There is no end to history; we can just have epochs that are better or worse.

Even Derrida (as cited in Daniel, 2005) argues that discussion and argument are "always contextual and never legitimated by absolute, extradiscursive, or nonpolitical criteria" (p. 267), nonetheless, he believes that we can and

> should think of moral improvement or advances in social justice in terms of that which is better than (and always relative to) the status quo. In that way, we could always imagine better laws, better ways of doing things, without having to identify an absolute best. (p. 267)

Our time is now. Let us all engage in reasoned dialogue together so that we move toward a more just world.

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