

Epistemic Injustice and Powerlessness in the Context of Global Justice

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EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND POWERLESSNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL JUSTICE: AN ARGUMENT FOR “THICK” AND “SMALL” KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: In this paper, I present an analysis of the “windows into reality” that are used in theories of global justice with a focus on issues of epistemic injustice and the powerlessness of the global poor. I argue that we should aim for a better understanding of global poverty through acknowledging people living in poverty as epistemic subjects. To achieve this, we need to deepen and broaden the knowledge base of theories of global justice and approach the subject through methodologies of “thinking small” and “thick descriptions”, which are ways to give people living in poverty sufficient room to express themselves and have their voices heard, leading to “small” and “thick” knowledge claims.

Introduction

Global justice is first and foremost concerned with “material” injustices, such as poverty and a lack of basic goods, while the underlying system of knowledge production, namely the production and distribution of our knowledge about these injustices and about how they can be overcome, is largely neglected. This comes with a reliance of most concepts of global justice on a specific form of third-person knowledge, which can be characterized as distant, “big”¹, unpersonal, “thin”² and objectified. Such knowledge presents us with figures and numbers about hundreds of millions of people living in misery, but the “voices” and experiences of the victims of injustices are marginalized in this kind of knowledge and therefore under-represented in concepts of global justice. In

order to overcome this shortcoming, I argue for a greater concern with “thick” and “small” third-person knowledge, which necessitates work with first-person testimonials, narratives and life stories. It is not a question of either/or, but a balance between different kinds of knowledge bases. “Windows into reality” are needed, otherwise many injustices will simply go unnoticed, unheard and will ultimately not be criticized, constituting an epistemic injustice.

My paper is structured in four sections: Every concept of global justice needs a “window into reality” to know what injustices to criticize and how to overcome them. In the first section, I argue that concepts of global justice rely mainly on “big” and “thin” third-person knowledge about global injustices, and I explain why this increases the risk of neglecting certain forms of injustices. In the second section, I turn to epistemic injustices that are embedded within global injustices resulting in poverty and exclusion as well as in the production of knowledge about these injustices. Concepts of global justice that rely on “big” and “thin” third-person knowledge are often not concerned with the production of this kind of knowledge and the ways epistemic injustices are present in it. Besides being the victims of harsh injustices, the global poor are also trapped in a state of epistemic powerlessness. In the following third section, I propose the concepts of “thick” and “small” third-person knowledge to empower the victims of (epistemic) injustices by giving them the opportunity to tell their stories and their experiences. Thus, people acquiring this kind of knowledge should be able to gain deep insights into such injustices and into the ways they affect the victims and their lives. In the fourth and final section I argue for a balance between different types of “windows into reality” and connect this matter to issues of empowerment and recognition.

Theories of Global Justice and “Windows into Reality”

Theories of global justice often start with the observation that our contemporary world is radically unjust, and they try to come-up with answers that can help us to remove these injustices. Furthermore, most theories of global justice acknowledge that they rely on empirical findings they cannot

produce themselves, including data about the state of the world's poor, the conditions they live in, the institutional arrangements on the national and global level that produce, reproduce or reduce poverty as well as the political and legal systems that shape these arrangements. According to many theorists, global justice, if it wants to be considered as a venture that is as feasible as it is reasonable, has to take these non-ideal circumstances and the limits they pose into account, not only for the realization of global justice but also with regard to its conceptualization. This point is made strongly by the so-called non-ideal camp, whose proponents argue that we need to know a lot about the world to apply and to design theories of justice – opposed to the so-called ideal camp, whose proponents argue that we should refrain from as much empirical influence as possible when we design theories of justice (Valentini, 2012). One of the reasons for opting for a non-ideal approach is the intention of most theorists of global justice to propose so-called real-life answers instead of theoretical daydreams. I would like to call this the necessity to have a “window into reality” that connects the philosophical work with the real world it aims to analyze, enabling theorists to criticize and to make proposals on how it could become better and more just. These windows are certain types of knowledge. Only rarely have theorists of global justice systematically reflected on the grounds and the ways in which they use such “windows into reality” or on the kind of knowledge they put to work in their theories. Let us distinguish three types of knowledge, following a similar analysis conducted by Clemens Sedmak (2013): third-person, second-person and first-person knowledge.

Scientific studies are the most prominent example of third-person knowledge. This kind of knowledge is distant, which means that there is not necessarily a connection between the producers of such knowledge and those who use it in their theories of global justice. It appears to be objective, because it is produced according to shared rules; accordingly, it is presumed to be trustworthy and reliable. We can distinguish two types of such scientific knowledge along the distinction between qualitative and quantitative empirical research. Most empirical findings at the heart of theories of global justice are quantitative: they are “big” in the sense that they cover millions

or billions of people, different countries, genders, age groups etc. Their scope also increases the distance in the sense of the old saying that one death is a tragedy, one millions deaths are a statistic. Qualitative findings are “smaller” and cannot be generalized – some say they are less reliable – because they cover less ground and because they are closer to the real life of those who are covered in the research. They are not as often found in theories of global justice, because the latter have a tendency to think big.

Second-person knowledge is the kind of knowledge we obtain when other people tell us something they have experienced.³ For example: If I work in a shelter or refugee home in an affluent society, I have the opportunity to hear a wide range of stories from people who were compelled to flee from their homes. In some sense, such knowledge is perceived as much less reliable for its use in theories of global justice when compared to third-person knowledge. On the one hand, second-person knowledge does not cover as much ground as the big knowledge of quantitative studies by the World Bank or other sources, even though the story I am told might be tragic and I might believe in its truth. On the other hand, I have no way of knowing if it is more than a single or local incident. The reliability is furthermore shattered because second-person knowledge is neither considered as scientific, nor does it not come with the label of objectivity. People can and also have the right to tell their own perspective, however, in the context of theories of global justice such stories usually need to be backed-up by scientific procedures of data gathering and analysis. Nonetheless, such stories are sometimes found in the literature on global justice, because they put flesh on the dry bones of quantitative data. However, their function is often limited to exemplifications.

The third type is first-person knowledge. It is the knowledge we obtain from our own lived experiences. They might be poor themselves, exploited or otherwise harmed by global injustices – even though most theorists of justice I know are well-off academics. Others used to be poor during their childhood, were later able to escape poverty but still have vivid experiences and memories that they can use to connect their theory of global justice to the real world. Global justice

theorists might also visit areas where poverty is prevalent: favelas, refugee camps or war zones.⁴ Such first-hand experience of poverty is reliable, but in a different sense than the scientific third-person knowledge. Academically trained philosophers are often aware that their own experiences cannot simply be generalized and that in cases of conflict, scientific third-person knowledge trumps examples that are only based on own experiences.

I believe it is safe to say that theories of global justice most often use a particular form of third-person knowledge, which I have described as “big” and “thin” as a basis for their approaches – just to name two examples from two different approaches: Thomas Pogge (2008) always refers, although sometimes critically, to data from the World Bank and other global institutions about the hundreds of millions of people living in severe poverty to jump-start his arguments for global justice as does Gillian Brock (2009) in her discussion about global poverty, global justice and taxation. Many, if not most theorists of global justice use the statistics on absolute poverty provided by the World Bank, or rely on other scientific sources that regard causes of poverty, like illicit financial flows, studies that analyze the effects of trade agreements or the policies of the World Bank, the Monetary Fund or other institutions. A lot of this kind of knowledge is hence provided by economists, which also illustrates the division of labor between the disciplines. Such a reliance on scientific empirical findings is problematic for at least two reasons: on the one hand, philosophers rarely have any control over the production and validation of findings. On the other hand, and despite its potentially high relevance, it is far from clear what kind of information gets lost by the focus on a particular type of knowledge. While we can expect philosophers to be critical towards such external sources of knowledge, it would overburden them to ask them to be experts on poverty research or other forms of empirical knowledge production about global injustices. Neither can we expect theories of justice to produce their own primary data and analyze it. However, we should – and this is what I am arguing for – reflect on the kind of information that is lost and consider whether or not it would be better to use different types of “windows into reality”, or to

have a look at different types of third-person knowledge and ask what value the different variants have to offer. The argument I want to make in this paper is not to criticize reference to third-person knowledge per se, but to broaden the perspective and to turn attention to the issues of justice that might be present in the usage of certain types of knowledge production.

Epistemic Injustices and our Knowledge about Global Injustices

The term epistemic injustice was coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), and she divides this concept into two types: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice, on the one hand, occurs when the testimony of a speaker is not trusted because of an unjustified prejudice of the hearer. One of Fricker's examples for such an injustice is the case of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Robinson is a black man accused of raping a white girl, and his testimony is met with racial prejudice during trial: in the context of the racist 1930s in Alabama, where the story takes place, a white girl's testimony is given much more credibility than a black man's testimony. Robinson is unjustly wronged in his ability to know, simply for the color of his skin.

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, occurs when persons are wrongfully denied the ability to understand the social experience they make. Fricker's example for this kind of epistemic injustice is the inability of a gay man to properly understand his desire in the context of a society where homosexuality is condemned as a sin. Under such circumstances, it can become impossible for a gay man to develop a positive relation to himself and his sexual orientation. Both testimonial and hermeneutic injustices are not only individual instances of injustices, but they are closely tied to the social background in which they occur. While testimonial injustice denies victims the recognition as a full epistemic subject, hermeneutical injustice denies them the possibility to understand themselves. Both can have severely harmful consequences: they may undermine the status of the victim and they can be experienced as humiliating and excluding.

How is Fricker's distinction connected to the issue of global justice and to what I said before about the "windows into reality" used by theories of global justice? In most theories of global justice people living in poverty are underrepresented and their testimony is usually not given much space, because those theories rely heavily on the certain kind of third-person knowledge that I described as "thin" and "big". It has been argued by proponents of participatory research that in such "thin" and "big" knowledge people living in poverty are merely treated as objects and "units" of analysis and that their subjective experience and what they have to say about their own situation, how it came about and how it could be alleviated, is more or less ignored (Chambers, 2008). There are two dimensions to be distinguished here: On the one hand, statistics about global poverty, like the one by the World Bank, do not adequately represent individual experiences of poverty. They merely provide numbers about the amount of people living below a certain threshold without telling us anything about the individual experiences of living a life under such circumstances. Such missing information could be counterbalanced by revising the way poverty is measured. Better concepts of poverty can be drafted based on participatory research that reflects what people living in poverty actually view as essential for a better life for them or what they are actually missing.⁵ On the other hand, people living in poverty are only marginally reflected within poverty research when it comes to recognizing them as subjects and as people with a certain level of knowledge. There is a huge gap between experts on poverty, who are usually not poor themselves, and those actually affected by poverty. Using Fricker's terminology, poor people's credibility to know something about poverty is regularly met with skepticism, especially their ideas about its causes and the means to alleviate it. One report about participatory research makes clear how this should be understood:

Participatory research on poverty is not about adding the "subjective" feelings of people living in poverty to the researcher's "objective" knowledge. It is not about adding colorful quotes

to an existing report which already has its own agenda – although this can certainly enliven many texts and demonstrate the limits of “policy speak” on its own. Nor is it just about people living in poverty telling their life-stories. [...] What participatory practice in research and inquiry into poverty is about is putting into practice the belief that people in poverty have a right to participate in analyzing their own situation and how to tackle it. It also means that the perspectives and ideas of people experiencing poverty themselves are seen as key to achieving a more all-round and in-depth understanding of poverty. *People in poverty should be seen as having a right to take part in the debate and a particular expertise in doing so.* (Bennett & Roberts, 2004, pp. 5-6 emphasis in the original)

This also means that the victims of injustices such as global poverty are also victims of epistemic injustice, and that they have considerably less resources available to overcome both. I want to call this a state of double powerlessness, which can also be described as the intersection of different forms of discrimination and injustice. Most poor people are not only poor, but they face challenges due to their gender, race, age or health status, which reinforces their low position of being viewed as inferior epistemic subjects. The inability to be heard by the institutions that undertake poverty research and that are involved in designing and implementing poverty alleviation policies is furthermore accompanied by hermeneutical injustice in a specific sense. Alice O’Connor (2001) has argued that poverty knowledge is increasingly focused on counting and describing people living in poverty, while it leaves aside questions about the problem’s causation as well as its political, social and economic background. There is overwhelming evidence that many of the people living in poverty internalize the blame for being poor and feel themselves responsible for their fate, while it is clear that they are not (Jo, 2013). This applies to the unemployed social benefit user in Germany or the USA as well as to farmers in a country in sub-Saharan Africa

who cannot sell their crop or the sewers working in Bangladesh. It is a specific form of hermeneutical injustice, and I would even suggest that the victims of global injustice are left in the dark as to why they are suffering. Often, they are even made believe that it is their own fault, and that they are bad mothers or fathers when they are unable to provide for their children. Finally, we should expand Fricker's analysis into the direction of processes of invisibilization and silencing of people living in poverty. It is not only that poor people are less frequently represented in the knowledge production that guides the analyses conducted for the purpose of reducing global injustices, but they are also often not even asked and heard. This is a particular harsh form of testimonial injustice.

“Thinking Small” and “Thick Concepts”

In this section, I would like to argue for a more balanced usage of “windows into reality” in theories of global justice that take into account the insights I have presented so far. Some third-person scientific knowledge, namely that which is “thin,” distant and “big”, about global injustices and poverty is not unproblematic, (a) because it does not tell us much about the lived experience of the victims, (b) because it is produced without granting the perspective of the victims much room and within power structures that are susceptible to epistemic injustice, and (c) because it tends devalue the contributions people living in poverty can make to analyze, criticize and overcome the injustice from which they suffer. I want to refer to two distinct concepts to make my point: David Hulme's (2004) idea of “thinking small” and Clifford Geertz' (1973) notion of a “thick description”.

Hulme's paper on “thinking small” introduces and analyses the story of Maymana and Mofizul, a couple living in a small town in Bangladesh under severely impoverished circumstances. Hulme argues that such a “close reading” of a single life story is often overlooked in poverty research because of the latter's focus on “thinking big”, meaning that poverty research, just like poverty alleviation policies, are primarily interested in numbers and figures that provide insights into the “average” poor. By contrast, “thinking small” brings to life the experience of a single person or family and the struggles they

have to face, the reasons for their poverty as well as solutions for it. Such knowledge has certain limitations, however, it is still an inevitable crucial source of knowledge, first in order to understand the suffering of people living in poverty as well as its causes, and second in order to conceptualize policies and routes out of poverty.⁶ It is not a question of either or but “thinking big” and “thinking small” are needed and should complement each other as Hulme writes:

[S]uch grand approaches [thinking big] are not unproblematic. Ultimately it is individual people who experience the deprivations of poverty, not countries or regions. Understanding what happens “on average” can be an erroneous basis for working out what to do in any specific country, as can understanding what happens to the “average” poor person or poor household. [...] We desperately need to continue thinking big about poverty, but this must not mask the counterbalancing need to “think small”. (Hulme, 2004, p. 162)

I want to call the knowledge that is produced by “thinking small”, “small” knowledge in contrast to “big” knowledge. In comparison to Hulme’s advocacy for such “small” knowledge in poverty research and development studies, Geertz’ idea of a “thick description” is already a classical tool in disciplines like anthropology, ethnology or sociology (Alexander et al. 2011). It was introduced to provide a framework for the research and interpretation of empirical findings. A “thin” description of a social action is superficial information that contains no explanations and little or no context, while a “thick” description provides in depth information not only on what is present, but also on how and why it exists, by what it is accompanied and what kind of emotions and meanings are attached to it. A “thick description” embeds the content that is described into its context and meaning and reconnects it to those it describes or the description of their actions. If a person is sitting on the street to beg, this information does only then become a “thick description” of poverty, if it is connected to other types of

information: why is the person begging, what happened in the past that led to this situation, in which context is the person begging and what does he or she feel sitting there or what is his or her motivation. Joseph G. Ponterotto (2006) has summarized the basic pillars of the concept and provides a working definition, which shows that a “thick description” is relevant for the researcher as well as the reader.

Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (and behavior) within its particular context. The context can be within a smaller unit (such as a couple, a family, a work environment) or within a larger unit (such as one’s village, a community, or general culture). Thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns [sic] leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report’s intended readership. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context. (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543)

I suggest that such “thick descriptions” can be understood as forms of “thick” knowledge. Both, “small” knowledge (Hulme 2004) and “thick” knowledge (Geertz 1973), share a similar ideal, namely to enrich our knowledge about certain phenomena such as poverty by regarding it through the lens of a particular, individual story: a life that is struck by poverty and still cannot be reduced to it. These approaches highlight that the experience of living in poverty is shaped by individual traits

and behaviors, by the social context and by tangible and intangible infrastructures that may or may not be available to the person and his or her family. Another very important feature is to aim at understanding the dynamics that take place when injustices like poverty occur. People move in and out of poverty for various reasons that are only poorly reflected in most poverty statistics, and they are active agents within these dynamics, even if they are not in full control (Addison, Hulme, & Kanbur, 2009). “Small” and “thick” knowledge are both produced by scientific inquiry and with the aim to produce scientific knowledge in the sense of the third-person knowledge I introduced above. These concepts are not just replications of testimonies of people living in poverty or other victims of injustices, but they embed affected people’s stories into a context, they interpret and connect them to other kinds of scientific knowledge as well as to the position of the researchers themselves.

“Small” and “thick” knowledge in the sense I described them above are types of third-person knowledge, they fall under the standards of scientific rigor and they provide third-persons, like theorists of global justice, with knowledge about poverty. What makes “thick” and “small” knowledge different from the “thin” and “big” one is that the primary starting point for reflections on global justice is that they have a certain relation to second-person and first-person knowledge, because they try to do justice, epistemic justice so to speak, to the first-person knowledge of people living in poverty by entering into a specific relation to them, that is acquiring second-person knowledge. Third-person knowledge is always transformed first-person knowledge (of the people living in poverty) and second-person knowledge (of the researcher) but “thick” and “small” third-person knowledge does so in specific way, and with a specific result that aims to give much more substance, nuances and depth, and provide the ones who acquire this “thick” and “small” third-person knowledge with a different kind of “window into reality”.

Empowering the Victims of Global (Epistemic) Injustices

In this last section, I would like to approach the question how we can improve our understanding of global injustices in order

to make better theories of global justice. Based on what we know about the flaws that are inherent in some types of third-person knowledge – namely that it is “big” and “thin” – and about how it is produced, I would like to argue for a balanced approach that does not only aim at counterbalancing such knowledge with “small” and “thick” knowledge, but one that also acknowledges that the process of acquiring such knowledge is in itself valuable, because it empowers people living in poverty and recognizes them as full epistemic subjects. On the one hand, “small” and “thick” knowledge provides theorists of global justice with third-person knowledge that is different to the one that is normally used, because it is connected to second-person and first-person knowledge, which is provided by people living in poverty themselves (which in some cases might be the author him/herself). It gives valuable insights into the harm of being poor and how people arrange their lives under such harsh conditions. It is possible that some aspects of theories of global justice will profit less than others from integrating such new “windows into reality”, or, to put it differently, it will also depend on the level of generality a theory argues. I want to consider one example to make that point. Monique Deveaux has recently argued that most theories of global justice, like the one of Thomas Pogge, are interested only in what happens on the institutional level, mainly on global institutions and how they should change to alleviate global poverty (Deveaux, 2015). That is certainly an important aspect and how could that profit from “thick” and “small” knowledge? I would want to make three points: Firstly, as Deveaux argues, a focus on the institutional setting on the global level is in danger of overlooking or downplaying the potentials of pro-poor movements and initiatives “on the ground”. In this respect, “thick” and “small” knowledge about the self-organization of people living in poverty and how they can be empowered in local initiatives complements insights or claims about what has to happen on the global institutional level. Secondly, change on the global institutional level has also to be translated into practice in distinct settings and for concrete people. This is only possible with “thick” and “small” knowledge. If a NGO comes to a village and builds a well so that the women in this village no longer have to go two hours

per day to get water, this sounds like a very good idea and the claim to build this well can be grounded in many different theories of global justice. But if it turns out that the women do not use this well, even sabotage it, because the two hours per day that they have to go to get water are an important time for them because they can be away from their husbands and be with other women without supervision, then this information is highly important to put into practice what global justice demands. Yes, it can even turn out that the primary focus of global justice in such settings should be on establishing gender justice first, because without it the justice-based claims to easy access to water cannot be realized. Thirdly, I argue that any focus on the global institutional level also has to take a look at the set-up of those institutions. Are the experiences of people living in poverty heard on that level? Are they giving some weight, when it comes to deciding which programs are implemented and how? Or do we need to accept that every focus on this level necessarily implies acting paternalistically towards people living in poverty? It is possible that the claims of many theories of justice such as Pogge's would not change on a general level, but they would be complemented and deepened, if they would reflect more on these questions and come up with different types of injustices that people living in poverty face today.

On the other hand, "thick" and "small" knowledge is not only a tool and "window into reality", but it provides information about the agency of people living in poverty, make them visible as active agents and subjects, and even as epistemic subjects in their own right. This can be connected to two ideas: empowerment and recognition. Empowerment can be defined as the process to restore or build-up the agency of a person whose agency is diminished by the social conditions he or she lives in. Hence empowerment is neither identical with the means that help to achieve agency, like education or health, nor is it identical with the outcome of that process, but it is in itself a dynamic phase of change and development (Drydyk, 2013). "Small" and "thick" knowledge provides insights into actual processes of empowerment that are not visible in thin data or research methods that are empowering in themselves – namely, participatory research that acknowledges people living

in poverty as subjects of knowledge production. These concepts help to overcome the epistemic powerlessness of people living in poverty as described earlier.

Closely tied to empowerment is the idea of recognition as something people living in poverty are entitled to, which reflects their agency and what they claim for themselves (Schweiger, 2014). Epistemic injustices – and especially testimonial injustices in their harshest form of silencing and invisibilization – are forms of denied recognition, whether as disrespect, humiliation, denigration or exclusion. Through the recognition of people living in poverty and other victims of global injustices, the problems of silencing and invisibilization may be overcome: Recognition gives poor people the opportunity to speak-up and to be heard. Furthermore, it considers their opinions as valuable and furthermore recognizes them as agents of their own lives. This is not only important for the process of research on people living in poverty and for the ways how we may try to integrate their views into theories of global justice, but certainly also for the design and implementation of policies and other measures of poverty alleviation (Lister, 2004). Finally, such a reshaping of our understanding of poverty and other global injustices is also important if we want to take an original and different look at one central question of global justice, namely the question about its agents. I have referred to Monique Deveaux (2015) and her argument that most theories of global justice focus too heavily on institutions or the rich as agents of justice for people living in poverty, while they ignore the options available to people living in poverty to improve their situation. This should not be interpreted as another way of blaming and shaming people living in poverty for their poverty. Rather, it is meant to acknowledge that people living in poverty are not only epistemically neglected their status as full subjects, but discriminated against also in other dimensions. They are viewed as helpless, passive and powerless, and while that may be true in comparison to other possible agents of justice, such a description remains inadequate: People living in poverty are never only helpless, passive and powerless, but they are also resistant, active and potentially powerful.

How could we achieve such justice for poor people? How can they be empowered and recognized? I can only give a very brief and general answer to those pressing questions, which deserve more attention in future research.

It would be good to start by attributing responsibilities to different agents of justice. I can think of at least three agents that are relevant here: The first one is the group of people working on global justice like myself. There is plenty of participatory research available now and we should just start making reference to that when thinking about global justice. Most probably, theorizing justice would change if philosophers would start reading accounts of people living in poverty and taking seriously what they have to say about suffering and injustices. The second agent of justice is the heterogeneous group of poverty researchers, some of which are actually doing a lot of work with people living in poverty. I do not call for everyone becoming a participatory researcher, and I also do not want to say too much about the inner lives of disciplines and institutions that I only know from the outside. Yet, I defend the claim that it is a task of the community of people engaged in poverty research whether within a university, an NGO, at the World Bank or in the UN to reflect the breadth and depth of the experiences of people living in poverty and to have their voices recorded, preserved and distributed.⁷

I chose to say something about two agents of justice that have not much power in changing the situation of people living in poverty. However, I know that empowerment and recognition demand such a change and must not be limited to respecting and valuing their voices in our theories. For these bigger questions, we need to have a lively political? debate on global reforms, about what is feasible, if we should go for revolution or start pressuring our own home countries to spend more on development aid.

I want to finish by contemplating one further aspect that relates to the meaning of empowering and recognizing people living in poverty. My suggestion does not say much about giving people living in poverty an active role as being theorists – and activists – of global justice themselves. I made a point that we – which refers at first to such people as myself, who are doing theoretical work on global justice in academic

institutions in well-off countries – should give the voices, the experiences and the resistance of people living in poverty more space in theories of global justice and that we should recognize them as invaluable for making better such theories. Another, even more radical but nonetheless worthy expansion of my claim could also be to argue that people living in poverty should be given the opportunities and support to become theorists themselves. Certainly this would demand much greater efforts than to expand and deepen our knowledge base and to open different “windows into reality”. One possible more realistic approach could be to give theorists, who are “closer” to global poverty, for example because they have grown-up in poverty or because they live(d) or work(ed) in countries where poverty is much more widespread and visible, more space within the academic discussion. It seems as if there is now some movement in that direction (Graness, 2015). It is to hope that the theoretical work on global justice that is produced from peoples’ histories and experiences and that are working under different circumstances than those in the rich countries, will not be marginalized as embellishments without real influence on the mainstream debates that dominate today.⁸

Conclusions

I would not want my argument to be understood as claiming that we should shift from issues of distribution and inequalities in resources to issues of epistemic inequalities.⁹ It is certainly necessary to criticize the injustice of global poverty because it hurts people, because it kills people and because this does not need to be the case. Approaches to global justice whether they are based in human rights, Rawlsian justice, the capabilities approach or the utilitarian tradition cannot ignore these facts about global poverty and it seems plausible to give them serious and lengthy attention. The issues I raised in this paper are nonetheless not just minor ones that can be neglected as long as the big issues of a fair distribution of resources or goods and protecting human rights of all are unresolved. Both demand attention, also because both are intertwined as I have tried to show. There are good reasons to assume that it is not sufficient for global justice to give people living in poverty just more resources without paying attention to reaching a level of equal

respect and social equality, both which are constituted in the process of overcoming epistemic injustices.¹⁰

Notes

¹ I borrow the term “big” from David Hulme, who has written about thinking big about poverty (Hulme, 2004a). “Big” knowledge means knowledge about the condition of a large group of people, such as on the national or even global level. “Small” knowledge refers to knowledge about an individual or a small group of people like a family or a smaller community. I will come back to that later.

² I use the term “thin” here in opposition to what Clifford Geertz has called a “thick” description (Geertz, 1973). A description or knowledge is “thin” if it is superficial, stripped of its context and its depth, for example, if you say about a person that s/he has an income below the poverty line, this does not tell you much about how that person actually lives.

³ It is certainly true that third-person knowledge is produced using second-person knowledge. Every statistic and every empirical poverty research somehow needs to get in touch with people that are poor: They are interviewed, have to fill out a questionnaire or tell their life stories. The distinction I am interested here is about the knowledge within theories of global justice and second-person knowledge is such knowledge that theorists acquire if they engage with people living in poverty themselves.

⁴ Such knowledge is a borderline case between second-person and first-person because visiting poor people, even living with them for a certain period of time, is not the same as being actually poor, because there is no exist option easily available. I will not further go into details here because it is not necessary for the claim of my paper.

⁵ It would be necessary to say much more about the pros and cons of participatory research methods and concepts of poverty that are based on them (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2006). I personally think that a balanced or mixed approach that includes participatory research but does not rely on it as the only source for conceptualizing and measuring poverty is the best available thus far. One example for such a mixed approach

based in the capability approach has been argued for and applied extensively by Sabina Alkire (2008).

⁶ It is worth noting that there is now extensive knowledge available that is produced using participatory research methods, even the World Bank itself conducting such research on a large scale (Narayan-Parker, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to examine the fallacies attached to participatory research and how it can also be turned into a vehicle of promoting new forms of oppression by reducing participation to a technical issue. For such issues that are also concerned with the World Bank, see the work of Alejandro Leal (2007).

⁷ Moreover, it will be necessary in this context to look at the wider fallout of the epistemic injustices I examined in this paper, for example the often one-sided and biased representations of people living in poverty in the media and also in schools.

⁸ An even more radical approach has been formulated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2012). He uses the term of cognitive injustice to describe the exclusion of knowledge from the global South. He sets out two premises of an epistemology of the South: “First, the understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world. This means that the progressive change of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by Western thinking, including critical Western thinking (Marxism not excluded). Second, the diversity of the world is infinite. [...] This immensity of alternatives of life, conviviality and interaction with the world is largely wasted because the theories and concepts developed in the global North and employed in the entire academic world do not identify such alternatives. When they do, they do not valorize them as being valid contributions towards constructing a better society.” (de Sousa Santos, 2012, p. 51)

⁹ This mirrors somehow the discussion between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003) whether we should focus on recognition or distribution. One central insight that emerged from this debate is, for me at least, that we need to look at both and that economic injustices and experiences of misrecognition

are often interwoven and go hand in hand. See for that point also Fraser (2008).

¹⁰ There is now a strand of philosophers arguing for what they call relational or social equality. They presuppose that to have an equal standing and not feel of less worth is really important for realizing justice (Fourie, Schuppert, & Wallimann-Helmer, 2015). Demanding epistemic justice for people living in poverty implies this. Conversely, giving people in poverty just enough resources so that they are no longer poor, might even further cement their status as inferior.

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