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Teaching for e/quality.

Steps towards a more habitus-sensible academia.

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Summary

This developmental paper discusses a way to foster more equality within academia. To this end, first different facets of inequality within higher education are discussed and how they are interrelated. Second, the concept habitus-sensibility is introduced. Habitus-sensibility is a social practice of agents, in order to bridge the own vocational habitus and the habitus of the other such as different students. Third, different phases for engaging in a reflexive process to achieve habitus-sensibility are sketched out and illustrated discussing the concept of passion. This developmental paper contributes to the discussion of inequality within academia by looking at teaching and showing a way on how to overcome implicit discrimination.

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Inequality through teaching STEM at university

Despite several initiatives, policies and measures women are still less likely to succeed within academia, especially within STEM. Women are less likely to become chair, take up leadership positions, or to be part of governing bodies within universities (Morley, 2014; Sherer and Zakaria, 2018; Treviño *et al.*, 2018). Due to the whiteness (Tate and Page, 2018) and institutional racism Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) academics face, furthermore, racist marginalisation, resulting in a vast underrepresentation of BME academics (Rollock, 2019). Positioned at the intersection of racist and sexist forms of domination, BME women academics are confronted with a multitude of marginalisation practices, often leaving it up to the individual to find coping strategies (Stockfelt, 2018). Moreover, social class alters the chances of people to enter a university programme and become an academic, as they experience microaggressions and other forms of exclusion (Gray *et al.*, 2017; Reay, 2017). Altogether, academia in general and universities in specific are hallmarked from inequality regimes (Acker, 2006).

There are several dynamics at play within universities inequality regimes. For one, the «ideal» academic is depicted as a disembodied, white, heterosexual men, who is just about the right age for his specific career step and very unlikely with poor- or working class background (Bourdieu, 1994; Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Fotaki, 2013; Ozturk and Rumens, 2014). In addition, the myth of meritocracy (Scully, 2002) and ambiguous call for excellence (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a) reifies this narrow and discriminatory notion of an «ideal» academic. This has implications for recruitment and hiring decisions as well as promotion (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2012; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012b).

The inequality regimes within universities not only affect staffing decisions and hereby individual trajectories; they impact the two main outputs of universities: research and teaching. A meta-analysis of medical papers showed that women authors are more likely to address gender and sex issues in their research (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). More diverse teams tend to pick up on more innovative topics and approaches, especially when minorities input is appreciated and welcomed (De Dreu and West, 2001; Díaz-García, Gonzalez-Moreno and Saez-Martinez, 2013). To put it differently: a lack of diversity bears the risk to limit research topics and approaches, and hence knowledge production in general. Which is why, Schiebinger *et al.* (2018) are calling for not only fixing the number of women and the organisation, but also fixing the knowledge.

Universities are not only tasked to generate new knowledge through research but also to share it with the wider society, through teaching and other activities. There are some indicators that attainment gaps of BME, working-class or female students are also influenced by universities and their faculty. Faculty's mindset, for instance, influences students motivation and achievement (Canning *et al.*, 2019): racial achievement gaps in courses taught by faculty who perceive students' ability as fixed is twice as high as for courses led by faculty who believe ability can grow. Teaching faculty, acts as a gatekeeper, relying on their somatised understanding on what is an «ideal» student, which in the case of STEM also is a heterosexual, non-working-class, disembodied men (Guenther 2016).

This developmental paper discusses a way on how to overcome such limited mindset and create a more inclusive, habitus-sensible teaching, considering that – as Scully (2002, p. 399) puts it – “university education is a precious good that universities distribute to members of society; it affects where people land in the stratified social order. Much is at stake in how universities govern their own distributive processes”. To this end, the concept of habitus-sensibility is introduced into the discussion, before different steps on how to achieve it are presented and exemplified along the concept of passion.

Inclusion, Habitus-Sensibility, and Reflexivity

There are several calls for creating a more inclusive academia, which not only allows for women and BME academics to realise themselves within the field but which also reduces racial and other social attainment gaps. Inclusive, in this context, often means that (formerly) marginalised people should now get access and become part of the group. In team science and work context, inclusion stands for a state where every member of a team can realise themselves without losing their uniqueness (Shore *et al.*, 2011; Mor Barak, 2015; Shore, Cleveland and Sanchez, 2018).

Despite its promises there are also limits to inclusion: First, there can be no inclusion without exclusion, as a group can only exist if there is someone else who is not part of it. Second, inclusion appears to be a rather fixed, one-time process: once, someone is included the person is part of the team. Inclusiveness, on the other hand, would rather suggest a more process-orientated approach. Yet, a process where an existing team or a more powerful and privileged team invites the Other to become part of the group. It is the one with power over a group, who decide on whether to include someone. Consequently, the issue of power is crucial when it comes to discussing inclusiveness. So far, however, it appears as if power dynamics are unmarked within the concept of inclusion.

Considering that power dynamics and forms of domination are crucial aspects of existing inequality regimes, I rather use the concept of habitus-sensibility when it comes to discuss inclusive practices. Habitus-sensibility is a concept discussed in the sociology of profession and labels the strive of professionals to bridge differences between their vocational habitus (Colley *et al.*, 2003) and the habitus of the other, be it a lawyer’s client, a nurse’s patient or the taught student (Rheinländer, 2014; Sander, 2014). Habitus-sensibility puts the agents’ social practices in the focus, in discussing how they can adapt their on habitus in communicating more smoothly while also realising what the other person needs. This way, an appreciative, inclusive climate is created which makes it easier to meet different needs and achieving the goal. Habitus-sensibility hereby puts the professional – who has expertise and hence power – in the focus and assesses their practices which are not limited to co-workers or employees, but includes other members or stakeholders of an organisation. Habitus-sensibility is therefore not limited to the construction of employee-ingroups or a one-time act, but a social practice.

Applying Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus, I consider teaching faculty’s habitus as crucial in reproducing stigmatisation and inequality. Habitus is a corporal, somatised manifestation of the social world (Bourdieu, 1977, 1998). An agent’s habitus expresses in the way they think, talk, perceive their surrounding or act, among other things (Bourdieu, 1984). Given that an agent’s habitus is based on their somatization of social structure as builds on their own incorporated experiences, agents habitual actions “tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production” (Bourdieu, 1977: 78). This means that unless someone explicitly tries to overcome and change pre-reflexive behaviour patterns,

they will tend to reproduce what they experienced as appropriate practices within the social space.

Some authors criticise Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a vicious circle and too deterministic (McCall, 1992; Butler, 1998; McNay, 1999; Mottier, 2002). However, Bourdieu (2000) emphasises an agent's potential for reflexivity, which allows them to change pre-reflexive, somatised practices. "Reflexivity is precisely the conscious, rational use of power to resist the various forms of determination linked to the social colonization of the unconscious" (Fowler, 2003, p. 485). Reflexivity therefore goes beyond contemplating one's own reflections or internal negotiations about the meaning of the world (Farrugia, 2013); instead it is a social practice and a way to make sense of one's actions while at the same time questioning and altering them.

Reflexivity can (Bourdieu, 2004) – but does not have to (Adkins, 2003; Simpson, 2011; Adamson, 2014) – be evoked by experienced dissonance between an agent's habitus and the existent «rules of the game», i.e. more or less subtle modes of interactions within a social field. Here, the position of the agent is of importance: if they speak from a position of privilege, such as e.g. white people, it is rather unlikely they will perceive potentially existing dissonance. Hence, in order to engage in reflexive processes it is necessary to inspect power relations (Simpson, 2011).

Three steps towards habitus-sensibility

The empirical basis for this developmental paper is a study conducted within a Germanophone university focussing on STEM. I conducted six group discussions and 19 interviews with teaching faculty members and students in the area of informatics, physics and mathematics between 2011 and 2015. The interviews are analysed according to the principles of the praxeological sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack, 2003, 2013; Bohnsack et al., 2013).

The study showed that both faculty as well as several students failed to address existing power dynamics and inequalities, though to different extents. Some were (1) neglecting differences and focus on the implicit, exclusive norm, others (2) recognised difference but reinforced them through activating stereotypes. Both approaches reproduce existing inequalities. What would be needed to go beyond established discriminatory norms would be to (3) engage in habitus-sensible approaches which recognises but does not reify differences (see Figure 1). I outline the meaning of these three steps, discussing the ostensibly neutral concept passion.



Figure 1: Steps towards habitus-sensibility

Steps towards habitus-sensibility: Example Passion

I use passion as example to elaborate on the different aspects of the underlying dynamics, because ostensibly it appears to be neutral and was mentioned by faculty as well as students as a crucial for success. The shared assumption is that students who are passionate about something will manage a high workloads and put a lot of effort into studying, which is why they will succeed.

This assumption is an extension of the meritocratic myth (Scully, 2002): those who perform well will succeed and they perform well when they are passionate. Yet, there is abundant evidence declaring meritocracy as myth. For instance, female post-doctoral researchers are less likely to hold an endowed chair than male peers, even when the research impact is comparable. Moreover, in order to gain an endowed chair, female faculty members would need to perform significantly better than male peers (Treviño *et al.*, 2018). Altogether, passion is one of these deeply embedded and un-noted processes that produce inequality. It has – as the full paper will show – classist, ableist, ageist, racist and gendered connotations, which are whitewashed in the pre-reflexive use of passion. This does, however, not mean that passion, interest, or dedication need to be disregarded. Rather, it makes passion a good example to show the potential for habitus-sensible teaching, which cultivates interest in different people and recognizes that passion, interest, or dedication could show in different facets and forms.

Applying the three steps to the concept of passion shows that at first, implicit discrimination is ignored. Everyone prefers to work with passionate students. But there is a difference in how this passion shows. For instance, if someone has to work to meet needs end or has care responsibilities, this person would perhaps put in less hours into studying. Yet, they might be very passionate about the subject even though they invest less time. Some realise there are different constraints towards passion: working students will have less time, hence it would be legit for them to find an easy way out, instead of putting in the hours. Or women would be interested in different topics than men, hence they should get different offers. Even though these approaches already indicate a questioning of passion's neutrality, they reproduce stereotypes and hence inequality. A habitus-sensible approach would be to first deconstruct passion and point out the components that are important for teaching or pursuing an academic career. These teaching faculty members realise that people have different interests and backgrounds and aim to offer different inputs so a variety of students is addressed.

To conclude, in order to overcome existing inequality within academia it is worthwhile to engage in a reflexive process towards habitus-sensible practices within academia. This needs to question the ostensible neutrality of concepts and realise their implicit discrimination. However, recognising differences is not enough. One has to go beyond stereotypes and deconstruct the basic concepts. In doing so a more inclusive climate can be achieved.

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