Prospects for Distributive Justice Theory

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Theoretical progress is essential to the viability of any scientific subdiscipline. Ever since a growth spurt in the 1980s, however, and despite a very active research enterprise, distributive justice theory has developed very little. Our approach is first to discuss the role that theory plays in disciplinary growth. After noting the indicators of stagnation in distributive justice areas, we identify key problems with the way distributive justice theories are constructed and evaluated. Specifically, little attention is paid to the clear definition and consistent use of theoretical terms, or to the construction of explicit logical arguments from which empirical hypotheses may be derived. Weaknesses in these areas all but prohibit the evolution of improved theories over time. We conclude with a set of evaluative criteria that, if applied collectively by members of the field, would optimize the chances for theoretical progress. Ultimately this also would lead to more efficient empirical tests and better-informed practical applications of distributive justice theories.

KEY WORDS: distributive justice theory; theoretical progress; scientific subdiscipline.

INTRODUCTION

Fewer than 20 years ago, one could review practically the entire distributive justice literature in the span of a short dissertation chapter. Today the situation is very different. Few if any scholars who work in this subdiscipline can claim full knowledge of its literature because it has grown so, branching into myriad issues and applications that never could have been anticipated prior to the field’s accelerated growth in the 1980s.
The present work poses questions about the nature and the quality of that growth: What kinds of relationships exist between earlier and later states of the field of distributive justice? Are some forms of expansion better than others? What characteristics are necessary for justice theories to progress? What factors will stimulate progress in the subdiscipline as a whole? As we address these questions, we will discuss the causes and consequences of the major growth spurt in the early- to mid-1980s, and the subsequent stagnation of theoretical growth in the past decade. We suggest that, in order for distributive justice theories to advance beyond their current states, a rational selection process for theories must be enacted through the concerted and critical efforts of a community of social scientists. To arrive at this point, however, first requires a more general discussion of the nature and role of theory in scientific disciplines.

THEORY AND DISCIPLINARY GROWTH

There are several dimensions along which intellectual fields change and grow. At a very fundamental level, there are the dimensions of empirical evidence and theory. In the first case, a variety of kinds of empirical observations may be amassed in support of a claim: experimental or nonexperimental, quantitative or qualitative, purposive or fortuitous, systematic or anecdotal, and so on. Theoretical issues aside, evidentiary growth is evaluated based upon the validity and reliability of the measures that were employed, and based upon the quantity, variety, and precision of tests (Popper, 1968).

For the second case, a field may grow along theoretical dimensions. Wagner (1984) identified a number of kinds of relationships that may exist between earlier and later forms of a theory. Later versions may be elaborations of earlier versions, marked by increases in precision, rigor or comprehensiveness. A theory may spawn variants, each version differing from others in small but significant ways, or they may generate proliferants—multiple formulations employing different explanatory mechanisms and applied to different classes of phenomena. Later versions of theories may be integrations of earlier versions, combining their strengths while enhancing parsimony. Two theories may exist as competitors, offering distinct explanatory mechanisms for the same phenomena. Most important for the health of a discipline is cumulative growth (Cohen, 1989; Freese, 1980), whereby later theories literally evolve from earlier ones, improving with age in terms of their depth, breadth, precision, and parsimony.

Cumulative growth cannot occur in the absence of supporting evidence, and the relationship between theory and evidence is dynamic and bidirectional. Three

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4 An anonymous reviewer asserted that most of what is said in this paper with regard to theory development applies equally well to procedural justice theory.

5 Markovsky (1997a) also noted that a microtheory may be united with a macrotheory to form a multilevel theory.