4 John Dewey's notion of social intelligence

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on a Deweyan understanding of intelligence as fundamentally social. This differs from conceptions of intelligence as a feature of an isolated individual or as the possession of an elite, which derive from longstanding philosophical traditions and are prevalent even today. Concrete illustrations of the effects of these traditional conceptions of intelligence can be seen in fields of study related to this project. For example, the study of the practices of citizenship and the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen citizenship often raise problems that could be understood from the perspective of the contextuality of intelligence. Solutions concerning deliberative participation or citizens' engagement developed in one societal and political context are often presented as universal guidelines for intelligent action, suitable for other settings, without in-depth understanding of their context (see Banks et al. 2015, 708–711; Pettit 2016, 89).

As Gaventa (2004, 34) notes, this may result in a situation where a solution that in one context was considered intelligent and liberating, becomes an instrument for "reinforcing domination and control" in another. For example, in terms of learning citizenship skills, many educational interventions in the development sphere are based on modern theories of education and learning, which have been accused of one-sidedly stressing developing the skills, knowledge, capacities and attitudes of the individual (see Triandis 1995; Peters & Marshall 1996). The idea of social intelligence, on the other hand, resonates with the priority of a "social individual", an individual essentially embedded in the community, the model commonly seen as prevalent in sub-Saharan contexts (Kaphagawani 1998). Therefore, we contend that Dewey's theory of social intelligence provides a useful conceptualization that can facilitate our understanding of the social learning of citizenship.

Dewey bases his theory of intelligence[1] on an evolutionary understanding of human nature and development, constructing it in light of the social nature of action. His goal of re-theorizing intelligence is closely related to one of the main efforts of pragmatism; at the turn of the nineteenth century, an era of

rapid and thorough changes in industrializing societies, pragmatism aimed at revising earlier philosophy in the light of what were novel findings in both the natural and the social sciences. By focusing on evolutionary theory on the one hand and practice on the other, his theory sought to mediate between opposing views, challenging both the mind-body dualism and the division between the individual and the social (Scheffler 1974; Biesta & Burbules 2003).

Dewey argues that theories of intelligence as an individual possession are misleading and may prevent us from making the most of human intelligence. He also provides insights into how we should develop human collaboration based on his theory of social intelligence. Pointing to some earlier theories which have, in his view, misinterpreted this notion, he points out that philosophical liberalism's[2] conception of the individual is isolated and atomistic. This misconception, he argues, dims the connections of an individual with everything that surrounds and creates her as she pursues understanding of the world and attempts to reform it through "initiative, inventiveness and intelligently directed labor" (Dewey 1919, 107–108). At the level of society this has led to seeing social action as a field of singular wants, wills, feelings and sensations formed in their own bubbles, mostly driven by a passion for financial profit or other gains (Dewey 1927, 249; 1930, 78). A second line of critique for Dewey is what can be termed an elitist conception of intelligence, which, in his view, originates from the Western history of Enlightenment, Christian philosophy and the philosophy of ancient Greece. In this view, he argues, intelligence is seen as the possession of highly educated people, and as separate from solving everyday problems (Dewey 1916, 269–275; 1917, 38).

In the following, we begin by providing an overview of Dewey's theory of intelligence as a social phenomenon, focusing on how, according to this understanding, it forms, manifests and cumulates in interactions. We point out the connection between the notion of intelligence and action, problem solving, and learning as a reformulation of habits. We then discuss some presumed implications of Dewey's theory in terms of the contextuality of intelligent action, the importance of taking relevant, experience-based information into account, the use of a particular method of inquiry and modification of educational settings. In conclusion, we contend that the Deweyan notion of social intelligence provides an additional conceptual angle to address some of the challenges related to understanding contextualized citizenship and its learning.

Social intelligence in Dewey's philosophy

Dewey presents intelligence as something which forms and manifests in interaction. This notion is based on his critique of the model that presents the individual and the social as antithetical or as opposing forces (Dewey 1918, 57; 1919, 194; 1927, 351), arguing that this view leads to the false conclusion that effective intelligence is an individual possession (Dewey 1927, 367; 1935, 38). An individual human, in Western tradition, is seen as the building block

of society, someone who makes independent decisions and choices. However, Dewey maintains that it is impossible to identify anything completely individual, discrete and apart from the endless network of interactions with everything that surrounds it. This understanding does not reject the meaning of the parts – that is, individuals – but makes it rather useless to focus on them on their own. No change of scale or spectrum will alter the fact that things are what they are in relation to their surroundings (Dewey 1927, 351–352). The artificial isolation of an individual from the environment is not beneficial for the understanding of either.

In response, Dewey presents the individual and the social as inseparable. He conceptualizes intelligence as a fundamentally social phenomenon, gained through individual experience in social relationships, practices and interdependencies, having value and operating within this social frame. He also points out that the human environment is formed both by material surroundings and, of especial importance, by interconnected human actions: a cultural matrix that is the medium in which each individual grows, lives and acts (Dewey 1916, 282–283, 304; 1938a, 481). Only in association with others does one become a conscious centre of experience (Dewey 1919, 198). The environment in which the individual experiences interaction with others – thereby socially forming habits and adopting morals – is the source of the individual's formation (Dewey 1938b, 22). Dewey goes to extremes by stating, "Conceive mind as anything but one factor partaking along with others in the production of consequences, and it becomes meaningless" (Dewey 1916, 139).

Thus Dewey provides a particular understanding of the notion of experience and its relation to intelligence. He sees individual experience and the surrounding world as inseparable, and intelligence as an organizing factor within experience (Dewey 1919, 132). In the course of any experience, according to him, an individual changes and develops due to interaction with the world (Dewey 1934, 251). Furthermore, this interaction is never a one-sided and passive observation of objects, as even a newborn child experiences the objects of the external world through their meaning, as well as the effects that these objects – and actions taken in relation to them – may have (Dewey 1916, 279–280; 1934, 251). To treat experience as something that happens in a vacuum inside an individual misses the fact that experience is constantly fed from springs outside the individual (Dewey 1938b, 22).

All kinds of association with others has an effect on the mentality and character of an individual (Dewey 1930, 80–81), leaving the stamp of a community (Dewey 1922, 218) via a web of concepts and categories "within which and by which individual thinking, however daring and original, is compelled to move" (Dewey 1938a, 482, quoting Concord's *From Religion to Philosophy*). Individuals have the power to react, respond to and change their environment, including "the intelligence, the knowledge, ideas and purposes that have been integrated in the medium in which individuals live" (Dewey 1935, 48–49). By joining this social interaction, by sharing in activities that manifest common beliefs, judgment and knowing, a person "gradually acquires a mind of his own" (Dewey 1916, 304; 1922, 130).

> The stuff of belief and proposition is not originated by us. It comes to us from others, by education, tradition and the suggestion of the environment. Our intelligence is bound up, so far as its materials are concerned, with the community life of which we are a part. We know what it communicates to us, and know according to the habits it forms in us.
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> (Dewey 1922, 217)

This makes intelligence in many ways cumulative, and stresses the importance of cooperation in intelligent action. From the Deweyan point of view, participation and cooperation are something in which humans are born as they gradually develop in the network of social ties and relationships that bring with them the history, past achievements and restrictions of societies. Individuals may join the intelligent social action at hand, and also engage with the previous achievements of others, taking those achievements further, in a way that would not be possible for any individual alone. Individuals' minds and actions are dependent on the cumulated shared heredity transmitted through education, instruction and communication (Dewey 1899, 69; 1927, 300, 366). The individual adopts as her own some phase of the cumulatively built intelligence of a multitude of cooperating individuals (Dewey 1935, 48–49). With the aid of her surrounding world and its proceedings, an individual can easily overcome problems that decades ago were impossible for undoubtedly genius minds to solve. Vice versa, she would indeed fail sooner than later, if she were to try and solve problems that to most of us seem mundane, if she were to try on her own in isolation, no matter what a mastermind she is.

> Henry George[3], speaking of ships that ply the ocean with a velocity of five or six hundred miles a day, remarked, "There is nothing whatever to show that the men who to-day build and navigate and use such ships are one whit superior in any physical or mental quality to their ancestors, whose best vessel was a coracle of wicker and hide. The enormous improvement which these ships show is not an improvement of human nature; it is an improvement of society – it is due to a wider and fuller union of individual efforts in accomplishment of common ends." This single instance, duly pondered, gives a better idea of the nature of intelligence and its social office than would a volume of abstract dissertation.
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> (Dewey 1935, 48)

In the pragmatist framework, intelligence is, in the final analysis, understood in terms of the possibility of action that it may provide (Dewey 1916, 353–354; 1935, 34–35; see also Peirce 1878, 293), meaning that the concept of habit (see further in Holma & Kontinen, this volume) is crucial for understanding the relationship between intelligence and action. Individual and collective habits – the mainspring of human action according to Dewey – are tested ways of possible action, ways of responding to the world and the

problems it poses, by "selecting material from the store of knowledge amassed in past experience" (Dewey 1922, 51; 1935, 37). Habits, too, are socially passed on and learned in interaction, and they may change if they cease to act as solutions to the problems faced.

Thus, one of the crucial roles of intelligence is to modify old habits in order to provide possibilities for action that meets the new conditions (Dewey 1935, 37). The process of clarifying a new problem to be solved is set in motion by moments of disruption, both between the individual and her surroundings (Dewey 1922, 91; 1934, 20–23), and between the internal and external relations of society (Dewey 1935, 58). Indeed, change and disruption are fundamental to the process of learning, as they challenge old habits of thought and action. Dewey suggests that education, being a means for both continuity and reformation in society, should be reconsidered, starting with a scientific understanding of human nature and mind as operating through experience and the formation of habits (ibid., 34–35). Nevertheless, one-sidedly aiming changing habits through education would be useless, unless the environment and problems to which those habits respond to are also worked on and changed (Dewey 1922, 19–20; 1935, 44–45).

To conclude, if we compare the Deweyan view of intelligence, which sees it as a function of association and communication (Dewey 1927, 334), with the view which sees intelligence as an individual possession, it seems that the former provides us with a different, yet very reasonable conceptual framework for analyzing and developing human communities and societies. In the next section, we reflect the main implications of Dewey's theory of intelligence.

Reflections on the implications of Dewey's theory

Dewey suggests that if we create conditions for intelligence to flourish, we also create a better functioning society, one that gains from the growth of individuals and their capability to engage with intelligent action. In what follows, we reflect on four potential implications of Dewey's theory, which are, in many ways, connected to what Dewey calls social inquiry: a method that incorporates members of a society into its intelligent and experimental reformation (see further Rydenfelt, this volume).

The first reflection concerns the contextuality of all theorization. This is to say that we must refute the idea that philosophy can offer universal, wholesale solutions, and we should take seriously the inevitable contextuality of intelligent action. Dewey accuses philosophers of often treating social issues in a way that seeks to present general and universal answers to specific and detailed problems. By doing this, he claims, philosophy closes inquiries, rather than conducts them (Dewey 1919, 188). Dewey argues that the quest for universal answers actually hampers the ability to solve problems, because an attempt to solve a problem whose conditions have not been clearly determined is "simply useless" (Dewey 1938a, 488). He underlines the absurdity of this effort by presenting the analogy of trying to build a universal railroad in

general, regardless of geography, human populations and needs, and so on (Dewey 2015). The trouble with wholesale solutions is not only the consequent lack of details; equally troublesome is the fact that general answers that have worked at one point of history often become irrelevant due to the temporality of problems. In other words, wholesale solutions make the taken-for-granted assumption that a solution that once worked in a certain setting should be, as a rule, applied to completely different settings as well, without inquiry into current conditions. When we understand that the world is in constant change, we recognize the need to analyze whether solutions once tested and proven suitable – including our own habits – still work with the new problems that arise in new situations. As "intelligence develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given" (Dewey 1917, 45), it could be alleged that wholesale solutions fail not only in determining the sphere of action, but also in opening new possibilities beyond our present imagination in any particular context.

The second reflection relates to the connection between the notion of intelligence and experience-based knowledge. Dewey is suspicious of an elitist conception of intelligence, stating that "the combined observations of a number cover more ground than those of a single person" (Dewey 1927, 268). There, Dewey takes a critical look at the scope of philosophy of the time,[4] which he accuses of favouring its own class interests rather than contributing to the general goal of asking and solving questions that truly matter in people's lives. In his book, *The Public and Its Problems*, he is against promoting the formation of an expert elite, as "[a] class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all" (ibid, 364). This would strongly counter his insistence on social inquiries that are specific and detailed. In contrast to holding onto elitist, private knowledge, he argues that, to solve social problems in the best possible way, we must have the best possible knowledge of them, their causes, effects and so forth. In the elitist view, such knowledge lies with well-read intellectuals and experts in specific areas. However, a full understanding of problem, according to Dewey, requires highly experience-based knowledge, since everyone has extensive intelligence regarding his or her own life situation. The danger of the failure to see the intelligent potential embedded in everyday lives and common habits, consequently rejecting some pieces of the puzzle, is that we cannot get a sufficiently clear picture of our total reality. To attain this, we must be able to gather a wide range of interpretations of reality from the individuals that constitute and reform the social. To make all human potential flourish we must be interested in knowledge from actual lived experiences and make use of it, not reject it as seemingly unintelligent.

Knowledge produced by lived experience is also the source of remedies for problems, promoting change towards a better situation. As Dewey states, "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be

remedied" (Dewey 1927, 364). Although individual thinking flows through socially formed channels, it is also a potential source of new ideas, of intellectual variation in observation, imagination, judgment and invention, sometimes differing from current belief and, thus, suggesting change and progress and putting it in motion (Dewey 1916, 304–306). In the course of problem solving, these variations should be nourished, given the opportunity to spread and to reach those in charge of conducting changes as specialists in their own social fields (Dewey 1927, 365): to inform those whose responsibility it is to fix the shoe, to continue with the analogy.

Therefore, Dewey's view of social intelligence does not exclude specific expertise, gained, for instance, from education. His view implies, however, that to solve contextualized problems, such expert knowledge alone does not suffice; rather, it requires experience-based knowledge from everyone. At best, participants with different experiences can form a community of inquiry in which social intelligence grows through collaborative experimentation.

Our third reflection is thus related to Dewey's "method of social inquiry" and its use of experience-based knowledge. In Dewey's view, in order to direct social affairs so as to produce a better society, we must follow the principles of scientific experimentation and inquiry, which, inspired by the spirit of his time, he regards as distinctive dimensions of material and technological progress in human history (Dewey 1927, 238; 1935, 51, 64). He stresses that the scientific method is a self-regulating mode of intelligence, suggesting that the same kind of idea should also be a precondition in social inquiry. Then, inquiry and experimentation can be conducted through controlled provision of knowledge by all inquirers, without relying merely on "the happy intuitions of individual minds" (Dewey 1935, 34). In Dewey's view, the social sciences have long ignored the development of this kind of method, leading to a situation in which social policies promoting changes in society are often randomly formed on the basis of generalizations that obscure information and knowledge of the specific situation. Of course, Dewey's view of the possibilities of this kind of method in solving societal problems can be seen as overly optimistic from the contemporary perspective (Holma & Kontinen 2015, 29–30); however, some dimensions of his idea of shared inquiry which takes experience-based knowledge seriously are relevant, even if we take a critical position on the wider idea.

The fourth reflection concerns the educational implication of Dewey's idea of social inquiry. For instance, Dewey had the view that the habit of scientific inquiry – which he suggested be extended to social matters – should be learned at school, in every branch of study, in a way that would enable connecting thought with the possibility of action, and action with context: that is, the "habits and ideas from which it sprang" (Dewey 1935, 34–35). This kind of education would better reveal the surrounding relations of the world, providing learners with the power of re-adaptation in changing conditions, thus making them less easily objects of someone else's ends (Dewey 1916, 328–329). This idea resonates, for example, with the principles of critical

education: becoming conscious of conditions and achieving the ability to act upon them (cf. Freire 1970/2005, 176; Shor & Freire 1987, 45–46; see also Bananuka & John, this volume).

Dewey also argues that educational systems often mislay a lot of intelligent potential. On the one hand, many without access to formal schooling are nevertheless highly intelligent, especially when it comes to understanding and changing their own life conditions. Moreover, Dewey suggests that this lack of formal schooling can even be a positive factor, as it facilitates the ability to learn from experience, rather than losing the appetite for learning in a school that might have taught things not meaningful to the student's context (Dewey 1938b, 29). This underlines the fact that there is a lot of intelligent action produced outside formal education, and a successful educational system must be able to acknowledge these sources in order to include them and the potentially precious knowledge provided by them. This acknowledgement augments the pursuit of shared intelligent action. In contrast, if an educational system imagines that it already has the solution to every problem without engaging in further inquiry, and that it only needs to deliver these solutions to its recipients, it is bound to go astray.

Considering the point of view of an individual not allowed to train or participate in intelligent social action, this of course appears a waste of potential and capacities, and thus a personal loss. Throughout his work, Dewey was convinced that we cannot assign intelligence and education to a small elite. Instead, everyone must have access to intelligence and a chance to participate intelligently (Dewey 1898, 383; 1899, 5; 1916, 269–270). Looking at society, on the other hand, an enormous potential is lost if its educational systems fail to acknowledge and make use of some of the intelligence that is manifest in the habits and actions of its members. Equally, society is harmed if it takes the intelligence provided by established sources in a taken-for-granted way and without critical appraisal.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we contend that the Deweyan notion of social intelligence provides an additional conceptual angle from which to address some of the challenges related to understanding contextual citizenship and its learning. Dewey's theory offers a powerful challenge to the idea of independent and isolated human beings in individual possession of different degrees of intelligence, who, based on this intelligence, make deliberate choices as members of human communities. Indeed, it inspires a shift in analytical starting point from isolated individuals to social practices where intelligence is produced; this resonates with understandings of citizenship in Africa as something not primarily exercised in accordance with the idea of a liberal individual, but within "intermediate solidarities" (Englund 2004). In the light of Dewey's idea of associated behaviour that "brings customs and institutions into being" (Dewey 1927, 301), we should focus on intelligence, not as the property of an

individual, but as related both to the structure of the social context and its institutions, and to habits of association, communication and the solving of shared problems: elements that may both hinder and foster the full flourishing of social intelligence.

These points are all worth considering when conducting empirical studies, but also when planning or implementing action that aims at strengthening societies and communities. The four reflections presented in the previous section may be helpful in building research settings and developing best practices: focusing on real-life contexts, making use of experience-based knowledge, using the method of social inquiry and revising our educational operations.

In the particular context of this book and its concern with educational interventions to strengthen citizenship in sub-Saharan Africa, these reflections would imply: 1) embarking from the contextual experience of local people; 2) acknowledging the knowledge of those without formal education but, nevertheless, in possession of extensive experience of everyday problem-solving; 3) initiating social inquiry into problems people consider relevant to their situations; and 4) appreciating everyone's participation in educational initiatives. In so doing, the social intelligence formed, at its best, can provide new possibilities for action. Although Dewey's notions are based on an unconditional belief in the possibilities of a model of scientific inquiry to bring about progress – something that contradicts our contemporary knowledge of global challenges – they nevertheless provide fresh ideas to be developed further in our investigation and promotion of learning that leads to a more engaged citizenship.

Notes

1 It is important to note that the Deweyan approach to intelligence is different both from the idea of intelligence which is the basis for psychological IQ tests and from everyday ideas of intelligence such as the image of a classic "intellectual" that we may picture when we discuss the subject. Although these conceptions may be useful in certain settings, they often fail to address the social aspect of intelligence as well as lacking understanding of the connections between intelligence and social action. Additionally, when Dewey uses the term *social intelligence*, he does not refer to the more recent use of the term, especially in popular psychology (cf. Goleman 2006), which mainly refers to a person's knowledge and capacities in social situations.
2 Although sharing a common heritage, liberalism as a diverse political and moral philosophy is not to be confused here with economic liberalism. Dewey himself subscribes to the core tenet of liberalism: the idea of liberating people from old oppressive power structures and modes of thinking (Dewey 1935, 40), but argues that liberalism involves a false conception of intelligence as a separate possession formed apart from the social world.
3 Henry George (1839–1897) was an American journalist and political economist, and the father of a political philosophy called Georgism.
4 It should be noted that as Dewey talks of philosophy here, we should presumably consider including at least social psychology and sociology in this critique, as they were emerging partly under philosophy's sphere during the time of Dewey's criticism.

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