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The Equality Chameleon: Reflections on Social Identity, Passing, and Groupism

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This paper explores issues of social and multiple identity and their implications for equality law and practice. The paper considers three principal dilemmas – passing, groupism and the limitations of participatory justice as a political strategy for the achievement of equality. The objective is to contribute a 'thick' understanding of issues of identity and identification with which to inform and situate the development of the UK's 'single equality approach'. The paper argues that the negotiations of identity required of members of minority groups is a form of work.

Introduction

Social theorists and equality practitioners increasingly draw attention to the ways in which individuals experience and manage multiple social identities. In the past popular, mainstream Western definitions of identity defined individual's social identities in terms of 'physical' or essential characteristics, such as the possession of male or female genitalia, black, brown or yellow shades of skin or the possession of impairments of one kind or another. In contrast, critical social theorists and social anthropologists (Barth, 1959, 1969) developed definitions and understandings of social identity as socially constructed, contingent and fluid. The New Social Movements in the 1970s began mobilising around recognition of their 'group's' claim to a larger share of society's resources and a place at the negotiating table. The staking of claims in terms of single dimensions of social identity creates at least three difficulties. First very few people have only one of the traits associated with each of the New Social Movements.[1] Secondly, which trait(s) an individual should prioritise and mobilise around is a complex issue, bringing the personal and the political together in a very immediate way. Thirdly, if social identity is socially constructed and fluid, how meaningful can the static memberships attributed to individuals for the purposes of law, policy and politics be?

Some social statuses are inherently less 'attractive' than others. Intrinsically participation as a strategy for the achievement of equality depends on individuals being willing to label themselves or be labelled publicly in certain ways.

Some minority social traits and identities are embraced and chosen by individuals, some are imposed on them and are disadvantageous to them.[2] This problematic of simultaneous advantage and disadvantage constitutes the main motivation for the exploration of the three dilemmas in this paper. The objective of the paper is to provide a complex or 'thick' understanding of social identity and the ways people engage actively with their identities, and to place this in the policy context formed by the development of

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the 'single equality approach' in the UK and the recognition of additional single identity dimensions in European antidiscrimination law. Social identity is something manipulated if not actually chosen by individuals. It is also something people manage in situationally specific ways).

Auditing and monitoring of equality, and collective social politics have however been organised around a simpler categorical and static approach to identity. Three dilemmas of the politics of recognition and identity are explored here: passing, groupism and participatory justice as a political strategy for the achievement of equality. All three share similar problematics operate at different social levels, the micro but, meso and macro respectively.

The paper is loosely based on the authors' own experiences of negotiating and managing social identity. As a female Irish Catholic nationalist living and working in the North of Ireland with acquired disabilities, and a working-class family background, I have had many opportunities to observe and participate in the manipulation of my own identity and to be frustrated by the attribution of stereotypical characteristics to me by others. 'Feeding the machine' of others' expectations, while at the same time trying to challenge and resist them, has often felt like a full-time job. Passing as middleclass, passing as British, while acting as an honorary male and managing my disabilities in order to hold on to my job have all been demanding and often oppressive experiences of obeisance to the routine regimes of privilege in time and place.

Responding to multiple identity

The paper argues that the negotiation of processes of identification in situations where multiple identities are available for assumption or ascription is a skilled and complex form of work, demanded of minority group individuals. The options available range from full disclosure, adoption and prioritisation of a social status through to nondisclosure and denial of a status or trait (Skeggs, 1997).

To criticize some of these options as excessive individualism, and Bourdieu (1999) and others have decreed involvement in the organisations of civil society as the only acceptable political response, we have found this to be a judgemental and authoritarian response to the negotiations of our multiple identities that are demanded of us daily. It could be argued to be theft of our right to formulate for ourselves our political response. Like misrecognition in Bourdieu's sense and absence in Young's sense, the imposition of 'approved' responses is arguably yet another form of symbolic violence and a denial of the importance of experiential knowledge and authenticity.

This together with the portrayal of passing as group betrayal, turn the microlevel dilemmas of identification into something that contributes to rather than challenges the divide and rule tactics of elites. It should be resisted within emancipatory models and practices.

The policy context

One of the responses of the political centre in Europe to the increase in claims for recognition of a variety of social statuses has been to broaden the range of social traits for which protection from discrimination may be sought. Thus age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion and belief have joined the longstanding ground of gender,

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in the EU's antidiscrimination law portfolio. In the UK, however, the response has also been to develop and institutionalise a 'single equality' approach (see from 'Negative to Positive' this issue). Debate and advocacy for the single equality approach was led in The House of Lords by Hepple in 1997. The debate focused on the supposed difficulties posed for employers and the expense caused to the public purse by the existence of multiple single dimensional equality provisions, which had grown up over the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, each with its own unique set of interpretations of key terms, its own case law and generally each with its own enforcement authority. Debate on the desirability and possibility of generic equality law was also stimulated by the Human Rights Act (2000). A single equality bill for Northern Ireland has been drafted, presumably as a trial for subsequent adoption in Great Britain. In the UK, government responded to the requirement to implement the EU's Equality and Race Directives through the Equality Act (2006) and the Disability Act (2005). The principal of genericism underlying the single equality approach and the decision to create a single equality and human rights commission for Great Britain (CEHR) has been vigorously contested by both the disability and the black and ethnic minority movements and their Commissions. As a consequence, the Equality Act (2006) provided for the CEHR to be established in 2007, but a separate Office of Disability Issues has been created within the Prime Minister's Office and the Commission for Racial Equality will shadow CEHR for two years. The compromise architecture reflects the anxieties and fears of these 'communities of interest', that their particular concerns may sink to the bottom of a hierarchy of inequalities within the single equality approach. In addition, most movements hold that there is something distinctive about the inequality and oppressions experienced by people identified in terms of 'their' particular dimension. The argument that there is something distinctive or special about each equality and identity dimension recognised by government could be argued to be the last vestige of essentialist perspectives on equality and social identity.

Byrne and McLaughlin (2006) have explored the issue of genericism in relation to disability. Whether 'single equality' will work equally well for all 'groups' is discussed by Goodlad and Riddell (2005).

One of the political conundrums faced by the new Social Movements has been the contradictory benefits of recognition by government. On the one hand, recognition of minority group status gives voice and sometimes access to material resources, on the other hand, bureaucracy necessarily treats as fixed and essential a single dimension of social identity. In turn, this gives the false impression of homogeneity within the social group identified. Other disadvantages of being administratively defined and recognised are well known and rehearsed in the disability field.

The advent of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the 'single equality approach' has prompted organisations and social groups to consider whether their political interests are best served through adherence to a single dimension of (in)equality and social identity.

The equality chameleon: identification or identity?

In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), Barth theorised ethnicity as a form of social organisation: this means 'the critical focus for investigation is the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff it encloses' (1969: 15). Barth argued that a critical feature of ethnic groups is the dualistic nature of the identification processes

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involved. Ethnicity involves both 'voluntary' assumption self-claiming of the identity and the ascription of the identity to those concerned by others (Vermulen and Govers, 1994). *Ascribed identity is that which is attributed to individuals by others; assumed identity is those social traits and/or group memberships we ascribe to ourselves* (see Jenkins, 2004). Barth drew attention to the interactive and contingent nature of ethnicity, in particular the way that ethnic groups are formed by the maintenance of cultural and social boundaries constructed through social interaction and social institutions rather than through objective or essential features of particular societies. As Barth writes, in constructing a boundary: '*[t]he features which are taken into account are not the sum of the objective differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant*' (Barth, 1969: 14). Ethnicity, defined in this way does not refer to static or pre-determined groups. In Barth's formulation, ethnic divisions can be expressed on different levels, and different units, such as 'community', 'culture', 'language-group, corporation, association or population, are all potentially ethnic groups' (1969: 34).

Visible and invisible difference

It is not only ethnicity which is dualistic, sexual orientation, hidden disabilities and social class or origin are all also dualistic and as such contain the seeds of the everyday dilemmas of passing, groupism and multiple identity. Should one seek to maximise one's own power, influence and possibilities of success in a given set of circumstances by disclosure or nondisclosure of some traits?

Passing refers to the behaviour of disclosing or not disclosing a non-visible difference, for example a hidden impairment; sexual orientation or social origin. The decision making involved is strategic, instrumental and moral in nature. Nondisclosure has been regarded and criticised by some within the social movements as cowardice, anti-collective, betrayal and so on. Yet there is little existential difference between disclosure behaviours and the prioritisation or claiming of some but not other aspects of one's potential social identities in some settings but not others – for example, I prioritise my gender at a women's movement meeting, but my national identity at a community festival. This is not to deny that disclosure behaviours are moral and social, but it is to question the emotional and moral disapprobation often attached both to the practice and to discussions of it.

Some identities are easier to manipulate than others, passing as middle class for instance and therefore claiming a legitimate presence as a professional is relatively simple compared with the demands of not being identified as disabled, that is of hiding impairments so as not to be disabled by them.

Decisions about passing have consequences for others, but to equate nondisclosure with group betrayal seems self evidently reductionist and simplistic. Passing is not necessarily an alternative or in opposition to collective action. Passing is situationally specific, so that in one set of circumstances I may engage in it in relation to one or more dimensions of my identities and the social statuses available to me and in others I will not. This is no different in nature or character to the selection and prioritisation of some of the statuses available to me in some stages of life but not in others. Neither the social identities ascribed to me nor even those assumed by me are like joining a club. One does not join once and for all. This was the great insight of both de Beauvoir in respect of 'the other' and Barth in respect of 'the boundary'.

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The behaviours involved in manipulating social identity may be argued to be a form of work, and a burden of work largely unknown to those from dominant majority groups. The work is that of securing legitimacy and credibility of presence; presence being inherently questionable in relation to people identified in terms of minority group traits.

Ascription means that not all aspects of social identities are manipulatable by the individual. The balance between ascription and assumption varies between social statuses. In addition some differences are visible to others, others are not; some arouse stronger emotions in others than do others, some overlap with other statuses, very few are mutually exclusive. Almost everyone 'has' multiple identities, although not everyone has any or multiple minority group traits. Which aspects of our potential identity we invoke, or others invoke for us, varies depending on the circumstances and the relevance of some characteristics over others in creating and maintaining the social boundaries we are implicated in at the time.

Identity and participationism

In addition to the complexities of ascription versus assumption, some group affiliations are more open to ascription than others. For example use of a wheelchair is highly visible, use of a hearing aid less so, thus there are some social traits and some 'groupnesses' where the scope for manipulating, using and controlling the identification is inherently low and others where it is high. The work involved in identification processes is therefore complex, multiple, sustained and significant. It is also work which is unequally distributed – those with multiple minority group affiliations open to them or ascribed to them must juggle their various othernesses in order to secure beneficial or even neutral outcomes.

I may choose to prioritise and disclose or not some aspects of myself in order to achieve acceptance by and legitimacy of presence in the dominant and majority society. I may do so in order to gain a competitive advantage. I may also prioritise and/or disclose some aspects of myself in order to acquire acceptance by and legitimacy of presence in minority society. The claiming of minority social statuses by members of dominant and majority social groups and statuses in order to gain acceptance into the organisations and social networks of social minorities, is a phenomenon familiar to people in most postcolonial societies including Northern Ireland, positive action provisions exist. Such assumed and voluntary identifications can never mirror the experiences of minority individuals for whom voluntarism is not an option. In addition, the work involved in manipulating processes of identification in order to acquire acceptance from the elite and be tolerated in the workplace, or other public space, is higher stake and more onerous as well as more involuntary than that of staking claims in the social networks and organisations of minority groups.

It may be that passing has been a particular bone of contention within the social politics of identity because disclosure and nondisclosure involve some degree of revelation of feelings of self-hatred, fear and insecurity as well as rejection of 'others like me'. Carol Thomas's (1999) analysis of self and other hatred in relation to disability is illuminating in this regard. Bauman (2002), Calhoun (2003) and Bourdieu (1999) all assume that recognising 'others like me' according to some social trait generates solidarity and bonding, but this is not necessarily so – especially when the social trait involved is inherently negative in an existential sense. Bonding with people who share the disjunctions and contradictions I do in daily life may or may not occur for all sorts

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of reasons. The contradictions arise, as the *habitus* and *praxis* I have as a member of a minority group clash with, and depart from, those of the powerful and their routine regimes of privilege (Cassin, 2006). Experiences of these contradictions are not likely to be identical when the likelihood of multiple identification and identities is recognised.

Considerations of the obligations we owe to others 'like us', as well as to ourselves are part and parcel of the dilemmas of passing. But to argue that there is only one right political response to the everyday dilemmas and work of multiple identities is to practice the very authoritarianism minorities rightly reject when it comes from the powerful. It is also to risk inhibiting the emergence of novel forms of political response.

The emotional aspects of identity and identification, together with the fact that some are intrinsically defined in negative terms, mean that the likelihood of assumption of some identities is lower than of others. Poverty for example has an intrinsically negative existential status such that it has to be understood as a shameful and corrosive *social relation* (Jones and Novak, 1999). The same could be said of disability.

The relational understanding of poverty has been illuminated by participatory approaches to research. Such approaches highlight the non-material aspects of poverty, such as lack of voice, disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem, shame and stigma, powerlessness, denial of rights and diminished citizenship. These represent what I shall call the relational/symbolic aspects of poverty. They exemplify what Nancy Fraser terms symbolic justice, rooted in 'social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication' (Lister, 1997: 14). In other words, they stem from everyday interactions with the wider society and from the ways that people ascribed this social trait are talked about and treated by politicians, officials and the media. Terms such as 'the poor and [poor people] can be experienced as dehumanising and "othering"' (Lister, 2004: 7). The wheel developed by Lister in respect of the intersubjective meaning of the poverty label could be applied equally well to disability, if the material core of unacceptable hardship in the poverty wheel were replaced with a core of pain, limitation and inequality of 'moral worth'. Although corporeal experiences lie at the core of most impairments and disability, the greatest part of the intersubjective experience of disability consists of noncorporeal factors of a social, cultural and environmental nature.

Fraser (2003) dismisses as misleading the common equation of the politics of recognition with identity politics. The appropriate form of recognition claim depends, she argues, not on the specificity of the social status concerned, but on the nature of the misrecognition. 'In cases where misrecognition involves the denial of common humanity . . . the remedy is universal recognition' (Fraser, 2003: 46, cited in Lister, 2004: 188). What requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of group members as full partners in social interaction (ibid.: 113). This Fraser terms 'participatory parity' and it constitutes the basis of what is now described as the participationist strategy for equality.

Fraser's position is that the struggle for social justice requires integration of the politics of recognition, respect and redistribution. Such integration is also the basis of the normative framework of equality developed by Baker *et al.* (2004) and summarised by Baker and McLaughlin (this issue). The final part of this paper returns to the issue of participatory justice.

Despite Fraser's argument that the participatory strategy does not depend on mobilisation around single identity statuses, it may legitimately be argued that participatory justice as a strategy for equality will be limited by the differential likelihoods

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of assumption of some social statuses rather than others – the difficulties of mobilising and developing forms of collective action in relation to poverty and disability are examples where participatory justice as a strategy for the achievement of equality may be problematic.

The dilemmas of multiple identity, passing and disclosure discussed above are arguably the equivalent at the micro level to the dilemmas of 'groupism' at the meso level. Both are examples of the additional work, and political and moral dilemmas generated by being 'other' and by the contradictory character of recognition.

The dilemma that group recognition by the state gives influence and voice while simultaneously giving more control over civil society to the state, for example over definitions and 'membership', is joined by the further dilemma that the bureaucracy often requires social identity and group affiliation to be fixed and static. Minority group recognition thus involves the creation of a parallel 'documentary reality' at odds with the social reality of everyday life.

Ideally, groupness would be responsive and strategic so that a unitary identity could be adopted when it is politically strategic to do so and rejected when it is not. Such fluidity and contingency does not, however, characterise the dynamic formed from recognition of minority groups by the state. This dynamic has recently been analysed by sociologists in terms of 'groupism'.

In the case of societies emerging from ethnic group conflict, many people have intuitive sympathy for the argument that such societies are unlikely to leave social divisions behind while they simultaneously fix those divisions in 'aspic' through ethnic head counts in monitoring systems and institutions. Monitoring of progress towards objectives of reduced inequality and increased social justice would however be impossible without these kinds of enumerations.

Groupisms

The rejection of philosophical binarism called for by Bourdieu (1998) means that we accept that human beings are both group and individual beings. The desire to be part of a group co-exists with individuality rather than being in opposition to it. Group affiliation or identity is more or less relevant in different circumstances for many different reasons, it is nether static nor, as argued above, singular; nonetheless once given a social status or identified with a group, it is evident the individual shares the respect or status accorded to the group, and requires for well-being and self-esteem, ontological security and respect at both the group and the individual levels. Group respect and esteem may however have more significance in some circumstances than others (Serett, 2003).

When processes of ghettoisation, localism and particularism combine, they may create 'locked in' communities. Such communities have low levels of social mobility and give high significance to individual's memberships of subgroups within the community.

One consequence is the amplification of minor differences between people within the 'community' and an increase in the significance attached to the relative positions of individuals, families and social groups within the 'community's internal hierarchy. The 'narcissism of minor difference' that results can be difficult for outsiders to understand and may appear irrational or self-punishing. McLaughlin (1990) provided an analysis of such amplification, focusing on the work it generated for women in relation to familial respectability in Derry City. Bauman (2002) writes of the same phenomenon in terms of

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the creation of social 'distance' between individuals and groups. These processes may result in excessively charged and negative ethnic intergroup relations. Brubaker attributes this problem to 'groupism' rather than to ghettoisation.

Groupism

Brubaker (2002) argued that an equality industry or set of vested interests have exaggerated the importance and significance of group social identities at the expense of the individuality of the people concerned. Brubaker argues that this is ultimately harmful to minority social groups. The attribution of meaning and significance to group social statuses arises partly from the activities of the organisations of civil society, partly from governmental and administrative practices, partly from the interaction between the two and partly from the kinds of spatialised social processes noted above.

> One problematic consequence of this tendency to take groups for granted in the study of ethnicity, race and nationhood and in the study of ethnic, racial and national conflict in particular. This is what I will call groupism: the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of ethnicity, nationalism and race. (Brubaker, 2002: 164).

Brubaker attributes groupism to the vested interests of 'the equality industry' created by state recognition of social group statuses and their inscription into equality measures. Brubaker is, of course, right that recognition by the state generates its own dynamic in terms of the agendas and position of organisations claiming to 'represent' minority groups and individuals. That dynamic is neither one-way nor necessarily beneficial.

Recognition of a group by the state means the state takes control of the definition of the group concerned. The amount, volume, occasions for and conditions of voice are all likely to remain within the power of the state. The trade-offs between recognition, incorporation and influence and the burden of strategic work demanded of civil society organisations parallel those at the micro level involving passing and disclosure. Both involve complex strategic decision making and uncertainties.

It is tempting to dismiss Brubaker's invention of the 'sin' of groupism, but its central dilemma turns to the issue of 'choice' of identity and social status and of group relative to individual identity. What are the circumstances when it is 'right' to recognise or give significance to the individuals' possession of specific social traits and when is it right to instead emphasise their individuality and uniqueness? This is the issue at the heart of contention about group rights.

Calhaoun (2003) argued that Brubaker had 'underestimated the importance of particular collectivities and adopted language that obscured the necessity and some of the importance of the social . . . I do not mean to imply that Brubaker advocates an asocial individualism . . . nor do I think that most other advocates of cosmopolitan democracy intend this but I do fear their arguments and those of Brubaker may encourage such a view.' Objections to the imposition of group membership have been a theme in relation to equality in the North of Ireland for many years.

The post-1998 political system and the post-1972 fair employment equality system in Northern Ireland both depend on the attribution of the ethno-national identity others are likely to attribute to them, regardless of whether or not the individuals themselves concur

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with the attribution or wish to exercise the option of not belonging to any ethno-national group. Objections that these systems infringe individual human rights are periodically made.

The rise in the significance and recognition of group 'memberships' and statuses of which Brubaker is critical reflects the political successes of the New Social Movements and the influence of those in the international human rights movement advocating participation by minority group individuals and organisations in political and policy-making processes as the strategy for greater equality.

Participatory justice, equality and identity

Young (2000, 2001), Walzer (1983) Frazer (1993) and others have concluded that there can be no single principle of distributive justice applicable to all social goods. The quest for a single set of principles of distributive justice has been at the heart of the discipline of social policy.

Taylor (1992) argues that a single set of distributional principals appears plausible only if the philosophical starting position is that of individuals as bearers of rights, and, therefore, justice as the resolution of the conflicting claims of individuals to things and to resources rather than relationships between people.

Advocates of participative justice, such as Benshabib (2000), Taylor, Frazer and Walzer, begin instead from the position that justice is the association itself – the relationship between persons and groups. Lynch has also developed this idea into the concept of the 'relational citizen', contrasting him/her with the 'anomic contractual' citizen of neoliberalism (see Lynch and Moran, 2006). The influence of the participationist strategy for equality is evident in the way that the participation policy making process of 'those most affected by inequalities has become accepted as good practice by international bodies such as the UN Development Agencies and the World Bank (see McLaughlin and Monteith, 2006). It is also the basis of the practice of equality mainstreaming.

The contradiction within the participative justice approach is, however, that mass society is characterised by a lack of consensus as to the good and value of association and participation. The value attributed to and the propensity to engage in collective activities varies systematically by social class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. The priority participationists give to social relationships over material distribution may be a luxury of their own generally privileged positions and the absence of economic scarcity in their lives. A second difficulty with the participationists' strategy is that it relies on artificially static 'memberships of social groups'; a third difficulty is the differential propensity of individuals to affiliate with some social statuses rather than others. This means, that the strategy may not be as successful in relation to say poverty, social origin/class and disability as it is in relation to ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. The fifth difficulty is of course that of the nature of the participation and representation involved. Most often participatory justice means the participation of and consultation with organisations of civil society 'representing' 'those most affected'.

These five problems with the participationist approach to the achievement of equality are not of course insurmountable, but added to Fraser's point that the nature of claims should be determined by the nature of the misrecognition involved, the conclusion must be that mobilisation around political and participation in terms of social group

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memberships is a more qualified political strategy than the rhetoric of voice and protest allows for.

Notes

1 According to Heberle (1970) a social movement is a commotion, a stirring among the people, an unrest, a collective attempt to reach a visualised goal, especially a change in certain social institutions. Movements can be carriers of evolutionary alternatives in a rapidly changing world. A more conventional definition is that it is a secondary or primary 'community of interest'.

2 The sociological concepts of minority and majority groups relates to differences in access to power, not to population numbers, though these are not always unrelated.

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