Unit 1: Introduction – What Does Social Justice Mean?

Directions:
Each of the units in Social Justice 12 starts with a reading package to introduce you to the social justice issues covered in that unit, and to set the stage for your further investigation in a unit inquiry project.

What Does Social Justice Mean?
EMMALINE SOKEN-HUBERTY at Human Rights Careers

Retrieved from: https://tinyurl.com/yuubkppb

Justice is the concept of fairness. *Social justice* is fairness as it manifests in society. That includes fairness in healthcare, employment, housing, and more. Discrimination and social justice are not compatible. While "social justice" as a term sees widespread use these days, it's not new. It appears in The Federalist Papers and was most likely first used in the 1780s. As the Industrial Revolution wound down, American legal scholars applied the term to economics. Now, social justice applies to all aspects of society, including race and gender, and it is closely tied to human rights. More specifically, what does social justice mean?

Social justice depends on four essential goals: human rights, access, participation, and equity. Social justice can't be achieved without these four principles.

Human rights
The connection between social justice and human rights has strengthened over the years. It has become clear to activists and governments that one can't exist without the other. When a society is just, it protects and respects everyone's human rights. This connection is essential since human rights are recognized globally. Various treaties help keep governments accountable.

Access
Being able to access essentials like shelter, food, and education is crucial for a just society. If access is restricted based on factors like gender, race, or class, it leads to suffering for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Social justice activists work to increase and restore access, giving everyone equal opportunities for a good life.

Participation
Social justice isn't possible if only some voices are heard. Unfortunately, that's often what happens and the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable are silenced. Even when society tries to address problems, solutions won't work if those most affected can't participate in the process. Participation must be encouraged and rewarded so that everyone – especially those who haven't had a chance before – can speak.

Equity
Many people believe that "equality" is one of the principles of social justice, but it's actually "equity." What's the difference? Equity takes into account the effects of discrimination and aims for an equal outcome. There's a graphic that demonstrates this well: three people are trying to see over a fence. One of them is already tall and able to see – they represent the most privileged in society. The other can just barely see and the last person – the most vulnerable in society – can't see at all. "Equality" gives everyone one box to stand on, even though the tallest person doesn't need it and it still doesn't allow the shortest person to see. "Equity" doesn't give the privileged person any boxes. Instead, the middle person gets one box and the last gets two. Now, everyone is at an equal level.

EQUALITY EQUITY LIBERATION
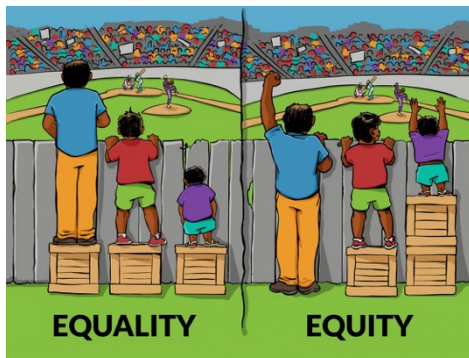
Examples of social justice issues

With the four principles we discussed above, social justice is possible. Where is social justice needed? Depending on the nation, some social justice issues are more pressing than others. Overall, most societies struggle with similar ones. Here are a few examples:

Racial equality

Racial inequality is one of the most common social justice issues in the world. Most states have a history of racial discrimination and prejudice of some kind. It affects a racial group's ability to find work, get access to healthcare, and receive an equal education.

Gender equality

The way things stand, it will take 100 years for global gender equality to become a reality. In the United States, it's 208 years away. Obstacles like the gender pay gap, weakening reproductive rights, and unequal education opportunities hold women back. Social justice activists consider gender equality, which affects other issues like racial equality, one of the most important social justice issues of our time.

LGBTQ+ rights

People in the LGBTQ+ community face high levels of violence and discrimination all over the world. Among other challenges, it affects their ability to find employment, shelter, healthcare, and safety. It's more dangerous in some states than others, but even in the most progressive countries, social justice for the LGBTQ+ community is not well-established.

What social justice means

Social justice means that everyone's human rights are respected and protected. Everyone has equal opportunities. This doesn't guarantee that society will be perfect and everyone will always be happy. However, everyone will have a fighting chance at the life they want. They aren't held back by things out of their control like systemic obstacles or discrimination. There isn't one clear framework for what successful social justice looks like in practice, but that's why principles like participation are so important. As long as a nation values social justice and remains committed to equality, progress is possible.

Bias And Inclusivity: A Self-Reflection Exercise

KATRINA SAWYER at Workr Beeing

Retrieved from: https://tinyurl.com/2h3u2b7b

In recent years, and even more so in recent months, events around the world have called attention to social justice issues in society. From Black Lives Matter, to Pride Awareness, to the #MeToo movement, groups that have historically faced bias and discrimination have been central to conversations about equity worldwide. Whenever conversations about bias arise, a key question comes to the forefront: who is perpetrating bias and how do we eliminate it, in the hopes of having a more inclusive society?

These questions are tough to answer. Systems that produce bias often operate in ways that seem invisible to those who benefit from them. They can even be hard to pinpoint for those who don't benefit. For example, many individual decision makers in hiring processes believe in equity. But, when two candidates have similar qualifications, decision makers are likely to choose the candidate who is most like them.

As a system, over time, if a lot of decision makers look the same, the ranks below them will skew that way as well. In these situations, it can be hard for decision makers to see their bias (e.g., "I had two great candidates, but I picked the one I had a better gut feeling about"). It can also be hard for those who face bias to figure out why they weren't selected (e.g., "It could have been because of my race, but the other person was also well-qualified, so it's also possible it was something about my performance").

I always approach diversity and inclusion conversations with the attitude that most people want to do the right thing. There are certainly people who intentionally want to hurt others and proudly endorse stereotypes (i.e., overt bias). However, the majority of people want to be inclusive of others and to judge them objectively. But, good intentions are not enough to challenge and change systems. The fact of the matter is that, in order for bias to be disrupted, action is key. What can help? Doing self-reflection is a great way to help you to act in better alignment with your good intentions.

Your perspective changes what you see. Bias can narrow your view if you don't try to widen your lens.

Step 1: Identify Your Biases

We all have blind spots. Blind spots are areas in which we don't have a lot of perspective. This is because our lived experience doesn't align with another set of lived experiences. In other words, you are likely to think about whether something is good or bad for your company from your own perspective. But, if you haven't also thought about how a particular policy or decision might feel from a different perspective, you have a blind spot. Just like when you're driving, you may intend to make a good decision, but your blind spot causes you to miss something important in your environment. It's much better for you to see what you're missing, in order to keep yourself and those around you safe and secure.

A good way to recognize your potential blind spots is to start with your close relationships. What does your close circle of friends or family look like from a demographic perspective? Do you have any friends who identify differently than you do in terms of gender? Do you have any close friends who are not from your racial group? Are there any LGBTQ people in your close circle? Folks with different abilities? Individuals who are of a different religious background or maybe are not religious at all? Anyone who immigrated to your country of origin? If your answer to any of these questions is "no", then you might have a blind spot in that area.

Even if you have a close friend who falls into a particular category, have you ever had a meaningful conversation with that person about how their identity has shaped their life experiences? While I would never suggest you go out and find some friends in these categories for the purpose of filling your own blind spot (it wouldn't be too fair to your new friends!), this will help you to understand where you might need to educate yourself the most.

If you don't take time to listen and learn from others' perspectives, your view is overly biased by your own experiences.

Step 2: Start Learning
Life is all about learning and growing. Our bodies physically change as we age. Our minds should too! We should always be striving to learn and grow our perspectives over time. Recognizing that you have blind spots can be painful. A lot of folks get defensive when they are challenged to recognize what they don't know. But, if something hurts, it means you're working a muscle you haven't worked before. For example, if you go to the gym but never break a sweat, you probably won't see a lot of change in your health. The same is true for our minds.

Recognizing that what you know about the world is limited to your own experiences is crucial. It opens the door to listening and learning from others. There are so many wonderful resources out there, written and produced by people from so many different perspectives. Taking time to educate yourself through these lenses is critical.
For example, if you don't have a lot of Black women who you are close to, take some time to read books about race and gender that are authored by Black women. If you don't have a lot of friends who are outside of your socioeconomic group, take time to read texts or watch YouTube videos that are about the effects of poverty on people's life trajectories. Now that you have a sense of where your blind spots are, you can start learning with an open mind. If you find yourself thinking, "well that's not been true in my experience", that's 100% the point. You are learning about a different perspective, which may require you to adjust some of your own self-centric thinking about how the world operates.

Step 3: Take Action to Stop Bias
Once you feel that you have located potential blind spots, and have tried to educate yourself on new perspectives, you are ready to start demonstrating your commitment to equity. You might want to join an Employee Resource Group at work and ask how you can help the group further its cause. Maybe you push your team to re-examine how decisions are made and whether or not processes are truly inclusive. Perhaps there are biased comments or judgments about people that are being vocalized but not corrected. If appropriate, you might want to take a stand to call these behaviors out. You should also commit yourself to ensuring you aren't doing these behaviors yourself. There are many ways to be an ally, but it always requires actual action, and not just words.

This process also requires listening and learning along the way. You will make mistakes. Apologize for them and ask how you can get better. Take advice about how you can get better and follow it. You may have to repeat this cycle multiple times. That's okay. No one is without blind spots. Everyone can benefit from learning from others' perspectives. Being committed to respectful, collaborative, continuous improvement is being inclusive. Everyone benefits from a more inclusive culture, even majority group members. So, while it isn't easy, it's worth the work. The first step is being humble, recognizing your limitations, and committing to improvement.

Have you taken steps to recognize your biases? How have you overcome your own defensiveness? What actions have you taken to educate yourself about perspectives you might have overlooked in the past? How have you demonstrated your allyship at work?