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Dr. Houser

Intro to Social Justice

28 November 2020

Social Justice

“What is social justice?” Google gives the definition as, “Justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society.” This is the question we, as a class, have been trying to answer all semester. We have read books, listened to guest speakers, and discussed in great detail different potential answers to the question. Social justice means something different to each student, and I have finally determined what social justice is to me. Social justice is an ideology, a mindset that a person can cultivate and enhance by listening, serving, and fighting for those around them.

When we are born, we are instantly brought into a broken world with sadness, grief, and injustices. I believe that we have an innate desire to right the wrongs we see within our society. However, there are many wrongs to right and not every single person in the world can try to fix all of these elusive problems. That is why I believe we all have an issue or two that we are drawn towards. An issue that touches us in profound ways, and we cannot seem to have inner peace until we are helping to resolve that issue. For me, that issue is gender inequality and its many facets. Before we can try to solve them, there has to be a way to organize these issues so we can better understand one another and have clarity when discussing important social issues. I have been able to put all the social justice issues we have talked about and the ones I have seen in my own life into three different groups. These groups are social issues, economic issues, and crime related issues.

Social issues cover a broad range of issues, but mostly consist of race, gender, and education. The most recent race issue in America has been the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement was started because black American men have been killed at a disproportionate rate by police. While the movement has been around for a while, it was recently brought back up with the wrongful killing of George Floyd. Racial inequality is a social justice issue in America because black people and minority groups are not treated as equal as white women and men in America. While this may sound like a ridiculous claim to some, especially because of the Civil Rights Act that we passed in the sixties, there are examples of this in normal everyday life. Black people are more likely to be followed around in stores by employees than their white counterparts. And if two job applicants are equally qualified across all spectrums, the black applicant with a black name is less likely to get hired than the white applicant with a “normal” white name.

Gender inequality is also still very prevalent in today’s society. While women are now allowed to do the same jobs as men, they are still going to get paid less than their male counterpart. This in part has to do with how we as a society view gender and gender roles. Society expects women to have to eventually take a long period of leave due to having a baby and then wanting to stay at home with the baby for the first few months of its life, while men stay in the workforce to bring home a paycheck for his new family. Even though this does still happen, women should not be punished in terms of a paycheck for having a child. Women are constantly having to smash the glass ceiling in corporate America. Another aspect of gender roles that feeds into gender inequality is toxic masculinity. Boys are taught from a young age that it is not okay for them to cry, because “men don’t cry.” Boys are also taught that they must not be feminine or show any feminine characteristics, because it is simply not what a man should be.

Men are seen as strong, protective, tough people. These messages are embedded into their brains and as they grow up they become toxic to themselves but also to others. They do not know how to properly show emotion and they cannot have any feminine traits in fear as coming across as a sissy or gay. This is a fundamental problem with our society.

The last main topic in this grouping is education. Education plays a vital role in how well one succeeds in America. America's education system is fundamentally flawed. Children go to the school that is in their district. Children who grow up in good neighborhoods have the probability of going to a well funded school that will help them advance to the next stage in their life whether that be college, vocational school, or something else. Children who live in lower class poorer neighborhoods are more likely to end up at an underfunded school with a higher percentage of dropout rates. I have seen this in my own life in Shreveport, Louisiana. I live on the outskirts of town so I was to attend the high school in the closest district to me. The district closest to me is a poor neighborhood with a high crime rate, and the high school there is not good. Only 58 percent of high school students graduate from that school and there are no ACT prep classes or nationally affiliated student organizations. My mom did not want me to go there, and had me test into a Magnet college preparatory high school of the arts. While it was a better school, and helped me get into a good college, it was also thirty minutes away from my house, and the bus did not pick up and drop off in my neighborhood. Even if students want to attend a better high school than the one provided for them, sometimes they cannot.

Economic social justice issues are prevalent in two ways, through poverty and the federal government. The poverty rate in America as of 2019, was 10.5 percent. While this number reads as small, that 10.5 percent means that thirty four million people in America were in poverty last year. (Census, 2019). That is a ridiculous number, especially since America is one of the most

developed countries in the world. During class we read a book entitled, *Evicted: Poverty and Prophet in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. Desmond tells the stories of eight different families struggling to make ends meet and pay their rent to the landlords. This book highlighted what modern day poverty in a developed country looks like and served as the backbone to many discussions on who is right or wrong in the book. Should there be rules or guidelines implemented so landlords cannot take advantage of their tenants, or is it completely up to the tenant to make sure their rent is paid when it is supposed to be paid? While we went back and forth with arguments for and against these moral hypotheticals, we realized that part of social justice is giving a voice to the voiceless and fighting for people, like struggling tenants, who do not have the time to fight for themselves.

The federal government is in charge of how the country's money gets spent, who qualifies for what social programs, and making laws affecting citizens' lives. Since the founding of America, the federal government has been in the hands of elderly white men who govern a growing diverse country. The people in charge do not represent the majority of the citizens they are sworn to serve. Oftentimes the people in office come from a line of wealth with family members involved in politics in some capacity at some point. Because the representatives do not represent the people, needs are not being met. America spends the total of the next thirty developed countries' budgets each year on the military. There are other things they could spend that surplus of money on including: social programs, free college, free healthcare, free childcare, the education department, and so many more programs that would benefit Americans. There needs to be redistribution of wealth among the federal government.

The last grouping of social justice issues is crime. Crime is legally and for the most part morally wrong. However, the way we deal with crimes and criminals is sometimes just as wrong

as the crime itself. The prison system is the only issue that fits into the crime category, but it encompasses so much. Most prisons are for profit meaning the prison is privately owned and everytime someone gets brought to the prison, they earn money off the person being there. This leads to people being put in prison for nonviolent crimes like drug possession or unpaid parking tickets. Then, bail is set extremely high so they have to wait in prison until their hearing date because most people cannot afford it. Another problem with the prison system is that most prisons treat their inmates terribly. Most inmates are forced to do work outside the prison walls as part of their “punishment” but they are not paid for the work they do or if they are paid it is under the minimum wage. Social justice advocates have problems with this system because instead of showing these inmates that they can provide good honest work to the world and get paid for it legally, they are under the impression that they are not worthy enough for a good legal job after prison. There are also issues with how the prison system does not rehabilitate inmates and teach them life skills they will need and instead has them do useless work and chores. (Mosteller, 1).

Now that we have an idea of types of social injustice in America, we can begin to evaluate which one has a hold of our heart and begin to work towards change. As I mentioned earlier, gender inequality is the social injustice I am extremely passionate about. I grew up with an absent father and a very strong independent mom. My parents never divorced, but my dad was always away because of his job and because he did not really want to be a parent. I went to a private school until I got into high school, and while I was at this school, I was appalled at the amount of sexist boys I encountered on a daily basis. One day in middle school, I was so sick of the boys teasing me about not wearing makeup and girly clothes that I went home crying to my mom begging her to let me change schools. My mom took my hands in her hands, looked me

directly in the eyes, and said no. I was so angry and hurt that I did not talk to her for a week. She did not explain to me at the time why but looking back on it, I am grateful that she did not let me transfer, because I went back to school the next day and decided enough was enough and I was going to stand up for myself. I did and surprisingly the girls in my class agreed with me and had my back. This is why gender inequality is so special to me, because women should always support women and boys should not feel as though they have to fit into the role society gave them.

There are many different ways to get involved in helping fix the injustices listed above, and when one gets involved, they are living out the social justice mindset. Getting involved at a local level is easiest and probably convenient for most people. Serving at a local level can look like helping out in your city or a part of your neighborhood, educating those around you in your social circle, and getting involved in nonprofits in your city, like the food bank. One way that was presented to us in class was the Elrod Center. The Elrod Center hosts many different ways to get involved in the community like ElderServe, Tiger Serve Day, and a variety of one day projects. Along with the Elrod Center, Reanna Johnson, recently started a program in Arkadelphia where volunteers box up food every week and then drive it to people in Arkadelphia in need.

The next level one can get involved in is the national level. This can be volunteering with national non-profits, getting involved in social justice projects, or participating in protests and marches. One important part of social justice is listening to others experiences and struggles. A good way of doing this is by attending national conferences in your state or neighboring states that have speakers and panels on the topic of social justice you are invested in. In class, we got to hear from Paul Kalinithi, who works at Our House in Little Rock, Arkansas. Our House helps

homeless families and individuals get back on their feet by providing a living space, education classes, and help with their resume. This is one way to help the homeless population and fight generational poverty.

The highest level one can affect change on is the federal level. Even though most people will never be a federal politician, there are still plentiful ways to get involved. Most high schools and colleges have a Young Democrats and a Young Republicans club. This is a good opportunity to meet with like minded individuals and discuss how policy can fix injustices. It is also beneficial to attend town hall meetings because citizens usually have time to bring up issues they have with a particular law or injustices they see in their city that they would like to see policy change. Calling your senators and representatives when a bill comes up that should be passed or not passed also helps.

While each of these things individually need to be fixed, they also all revolve and interact with one another. This is known as intersectionality. For example, women do make less than men, but black women make less than white women and hispanic women make less than black women so race and gender are intersecting. Every problem intersects because we do not live in a bubble. Every single person is made up of different labels which determines how easily they will be able to move in the world. A gay black women will have a lot more hardships and face many more injustices in the world than a straight white male. Therefore even though it is a good idea to focus on one aspect of social justice and work on that, intersectionality should always be kept in the back of your mind as a resource and an explanation.

Social justice is expanding and evolving with every new discovery and we would be foolish to think that our definition of social justice will never change. However, having a mindset

of wanting to learn and make things better for people is a strong foundation for what we as a society might build on top of it next.

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