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Dr. Myra Houser

Social Justice

30 Nov 2020

Personal Credo

As I look back on when Dr. Wight and I were creating my schedule for my first semester of college, he recommended I take the Social Justice course. At the beginning of the semester, we were asked why we chose to take this class. I carelessly said, “My advisor put me in this because it aligned well with Psychology.” Little did I know how much this class would shape me as a person, a member of society, and give me such a changed worldview. Although I trusted that Dr. Wight had placed me in a useful class, I genuinely had no idea what social justice really was or what it even meant. When first thinking about the question of “What is Social Justice?”, I knew the words “help” and “caring” had to be included, but I didn’t really know how. Today’s world is full of people from all walks of life and we as humans should strive to understand those around us. No matter how different others are from us, everyone has their own story and their own struggles. While it is a lot easier said than done, understanding people takes empathy and open-mindedness. Throughout the course, I truly realized how diverse our world is and how peace and freedom do not come easily. Throughout this semester I finally understood the true meaning of social justice and its definition. Social Justice is the process of building a sense of equality, empathy, and acceptance for all members of society in order to achieve the goal of making life better for all. I will be able to further explain my knowledge of social justice and its meaning by diving deeper into the course literature, class discussions, and my personal experiences.

While the social justice definition is not clear and concise, one word that jumps out to me is “equality”. While we as a society have made large steps to a more equal world, many aspects have had little to no change. For example, racial inequality has been a concept that has been around since the beginning of times. While the United States has made advancements in this issue such as ending slavery and segregation, there are still massive measures that have to be taken to make the world racially equal. The first step has to come from the heart of individuals. In my Sociology class that I took this semester, we were asked to take the Implicit Bias Test on a various number of topics. This test is used to measure unconscious bias. One test was to see whether or not the test taker correlated White and Black people with good or bad adjectives. This test made me realize how easily we can be unconsciously biased about certain races and have absolutely no idea that we are. Another way I have seen inequality play a large role in the social injustices in our world is in the book *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond. The book thoroughly portrays the racial and ethnic segregation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin through the numerous stories of home evictions and the personal lives of those evicted. The families who are facing evictions in the book are also facing personal issues or even have been a victim of generational poverty. While Desmond’s book focuses much on housing and eviction, the main point is to show the inequality that those in poverty are facing. Poverty is a known issue in today’s world and has become a main subject when discussing where government money should be issued.

This brings the question of how we as individuals can help the poverty crisis and the racial inequality we are surrounded by daily. Ways that we as individuals can prevent these various social injustices, is by projecting fairness to all who we meet. We as humans often are unconsciously biased when we meet people who are not like us whether that be due to the color of their skin or where people are on the economic scale. The first step to solving these issues,

like almost any other problem, is by bringing more awareness to the issues. By speaking up, we are bringing to light the inequalities that people in our society are facing. This, ultimately, joins people together that have similar views, in order to make a difference. By bringing awareness to the inequality that people are facing, we are taking that first step to ending inequality. Equality is the idea that every individual should have equal opportunities and be able to have the ability to achieve any goals or aspirations. Equality should not include bias or any lack of opportunity due to race, gender, economic level, or even religious beliefs. We, as members of society, can only achieve pure social justice when we treat everyone as equals. This can only be done when the problems are brought to light and are ready to be solved by people from all walks of life. Today, people have differing opinions of how situations should be solved. This often makes it hard to come to an agreement on fixing an issue and has prevented society from moving forward. People with diverse opinions and experiences must have a substantial desire to move forward and work together to achieve pure equality.

A social justice definition must also include the idea of empathizing with others. Empathy is the ability to understand someone's situation and their feelings. Without empathy, we would be unable to help or solve issues that others are facing. By having a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which individuals or groups are going through, we can better relate and help to alleviate the problems being faced. Empathy plays a large role in solving issues and achieving the idea of social justice altogether. If people did not care about others and their struggles, the world would be a miserable place. When we are going through personal problems, we often look to others to confide in and help ease the stress and anxiety that we might be feeling. One example that stood out to me when empathy had played a large role in helping others, was in the book, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is a civil rights defense

attorney who is working to free a wrongly condemned death row prisoner. Stevenson discusses the corruption of the court systems and how it has played a role in the wrongful convictions of many Americans. Without empathy, Stevenson would not have felt compelled to work towards the freeing of Walter McMillian. Like Stevenson, we, as humans, do not typically partake in solving issues unless they mean something to us. Empathy is a quality that most people possess and are seen in many different ways. If we see someone begging for money on the side of the road, it is not uncommon to see someone roll down their window to hand them food or money. While empathy is a trait that most of us possess, we often forget to place it where it is most needed.

Empathy can be given to those in need in various types of ways. Organizations that target the needs of certain groups are showing a large amount of empathy to those in need. For instance, Habitat for Humanity is a group that provides affordable housing for families and is constructed by volunteers. Habitat for Humanity is just one way in which empathy is turned into useful and beneficial help to those in need. Another way in which empathy can be used in achieving social justice in the world is by lending an ear to listen. Being able to listen to people and their situations, creates an opportunity to improve and better understand the need for change. In order to make a difference, a leader has to understand the people they are leading. In doing so, a leader will know what areas need to be addressed. Empathy is crucial for reaching true social justice because it allows a community to come together and better understand and relate to one another.

Another word that comes to mind when defining social justice is acceptance. Acceptance is the ability to recognize a situation or a condition. When a person accepts someone or something they are able to embrace a new way of thinking and understanding the world with a

wider perspective. The need for belonging is innate in humans and it is up to us as humans to accept one another no matter the condition or differences. We, as humans, are all different and unique, but we often forget how to accept those different from ourselves. This idea relates a lot to the racial injustices we have seen in history and even in today's world. If everyone accepted one another, we most likely would have world peace. While acceptance is not a quality that every human on Earth possesses, we as humans should strive for it.

One example of learned acceptance in humans, can be found in Andrew Solomon's book *Far From The Tree*. Andrew Solomon spent ten years gathering interviews and composing the book *Far From The Tree*. Throughout his book he uses numerous accounts of different families and their life stories with their children. By using experts in certain areas of study, Solomon was able to fully understand conditions as well as explain them in *Far From The Tree*. These conditions ranged from children being schizophrenic, deaf, prodigies, criminals, or disabled. Solomon's main point for his readers to comprehend, was that accepting the differences in others does not come from the love you have for them but can ultimately deepen that sense of love. Solomon also discusses the importance of identity and how self acceptance can only come from others accepting you. *Far From The Tree* allows readers to see the different lives that people live and the struggles that parents and children have, but to be able to accept and identify with those people.

While accepting others is a lot easier said than done, it is a concept we should strive to achieve. Being able to accept others and their differences creates a better relationship between mankind. Some ways that we can attempt to accept others is through our everyday interactions. Ways in which we can be accepting towards others is by not being quick to judge as well as avoiding comparisons. By doing this, we as a society can put everyone on an equal pedestal no

matter the economic, racial, or mental differences. Acceptance plays an enormous role in fulfilling social justice. Social justice is the act of aiming to help others and their needs in order to meet a common goal of making the world a better place. Therefore, by accepting others, we have positioned ourselves to achieve this desired goal.

After taking this course, I have realized how evident social justice has become in my everyday life. I have seen many acts of equality, empathy, and acceptance play a role in bettering the community I live in. One example that came to mind when thinking of equality in my community has been the Black Lives Matter protests. This summer, especially, many people gathered together in hopes to bring to light the racial injustices that our country has seen and to bring an end to it. Police brutality became a large factor in the protests when a man named George Floyd from Minneapolis, Minnesota was wrongfully killed by a police officer. His death was one of many that began the sudden protests across the country. The protests were done to point out the racial injustices that African Americans have been fighting for centuries. One term that was coined throughout the various protests was “Black Lives Matter” and was held on numerous signs during the protests to show the fight for equality. The protests that I observed this summer in my community were just one of the many ways that people have fought for equality over the years.

One way in which I have seen empathy distributed in my community is through my own church. I attend Friends in Christ Lutheran Church in Bryant, Arkansas and for the past eight years our church has teamed up with the Bryant Rotary Club in a mission called Kids Closet. The Kids Closet is a service project that provides local children with new clothing, shoes, coats and jackets, underwear, and backpacks for school. This year, the Kids Closet served over 400 local kids with new clothing. The needy children are referred by school counselors and teachers, the

Boys and Girls Club, local churches, and concerned citizens. The Kids Closet has been created to restore dignity to children by providing basic items free of charge. This is just one example of how much my church has exemplified empathy towards members of my community and especially to people in need.

One way in which I have seen acceptance personified in my community is through our high school football program. The Benton High School Football Team's number one fan is a African American man with a mental disability. It is known by the entire community that he is, in fact, their number one fan. He is on the sidelines at every game, home or away, and is always the first person to talk to you at the games. This year, due to COVID-19, he has been unable to attend any of the football games. Members of the community came together and did a drive-by parade in front of his house to show their love and appreciation for him and his panther pride. This is just one example of how people who might look or act differently from us should not be treated differently.

Before taking this class, I had no idea how drastically our world is divided and how much we need to join together to improve ourselves and the situations we are surrounded by. Throughout this course and my own experiences, I have found the true meaning of social justice and what that term entails. While we all have our own definitions of what social justice is, I believe the building of equality, empathy, and acceptance are a part of it. Fighting for what is right and achieving the goal of making life better for all, is the main matter in social justice. Our world is full of differing people, opinions, and beliefs, but one idea that we as a society should all agree upon is: justice. While this can be difficult and confusing to go about, the need for creating justice is necessary to better mankind. In order to fully grasp the idea of social justice and to practice it, we must first create equal opportunities to all, feel empathy towards others and

their struggles, and lastly, accept people for who they are. These concepts can be seen in books of authors like Desmond, Solomon, and Stevenson, as well as, my own personal experiences.

Works Cited

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