

## "Fostering Inclusivity through Social Justice Education: An Interdisciplinary Approach"

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### *Introduction*

Teaching at a private, conservative religious institution poses unique challenges for equality, diversity, and inclusivity education (EDI). Most of our students are from Texas, and as expected lean conservative or libertarian politically. Furthermore, many come from a broadly evangelical Christian background, a tradition with many contemporary voices disparaging social justice as too “liberal.” Finally, attending a private, tuition-driven institution means high tuition and, while financial aid is comparable with peer institutions, many of our students come from relative economic privilege. Given these factors, it is necessary to first introduce students to the contemporary realities of inequality and oppression and thus the *need* for EDI. This chapter proposes a conceptual framework and pedagogical suggestions for teaching basic concepts of social justice. Understanding the realities of social inequality and its roots can foster a better understanding of the social forces and structures that perpetuate inequality. Furthermore, this approach can plant the intellectual and empathic seeds to challenge in-group bias and hopefully germinate into fruitful interaction with diverse others. Finally, this rich, interdisciplinary encounter with social inequality and justice can prepare students to work for just social structures that will lead to a more inclusive world.

The co-authors co-coordinate a two-semester, team-taught social science course in an interdisciplinary core program housed in an honors college. “What is justice?” provides the conceptual framework for the course. Justice is an inherently multi-disciplinary concept, ideal for an interdisciplinary social science course that begins with foundational readings from the Western philosophical canon. Significant works in contemporary psychology, sociology, economic theory, and contemporary political philosophy follow. These readings include an extended sociological study of the black middle class in contemporary America, and the disadvantages that African Americans face due to the history of racism in America and the structural forces that continue to perpetuate racial inequality. These socio-historical studies reinforce philosophical claims that a just cultural and political order is essential for individual flourishing. Bringing together theoretical and social scientific perspectives allows students to see the reality of social forces.

The course integrates four different approaches to justice: theoretical, social scientific, narratological, and experiential. The essay offers an overview of each approach. The discussion of the experiential dimension of the course references practical pedagogical strategies for making social justice and inequality real for our students.

### *Theoretical Approaches*

Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* introduce students to the question “What is Justice?”. For Socrates and Aristotle, justice is both a personal virtue (a quality of the *psuché* or “soul”) and a necessary aspect of a good, well-ordered society. Socrates concludes in Book IV of Plato’s *Republic* that justice emerges from a well-ordered soul and a well-ordered society. The internally harmonized person possesses justice because she is guided by wisdom and does not let herself be overcome by the desire for honor or profit (*Republic* 443d, Bloom 1991). The just person has a well-balanced soul where every psychological faculty does its part; societal justice is similarly

achieved when everyone minds their own business and is content with their role in society (*Republic* 433b). Therefore, justice is a “negative” social virtue in the *Republic* in the sense that it involves individuals not infringing upon the roles and duties of other citizens.

Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that justice is a *particular personal virtue* that “deals with honor, material goods, security, or whatever single term we can find to express all these collectively”; moreover, it is the *whole of virtue*, since “...the best man is not the one who practices virtue toward himself but who practices it towards others...” (1130b1-5, 1130a5-10). Of the cardinal virtues, only justice is social because it turns the person outwards towards the needs of the other and prevents the craving or grasping for more than one’s share of societal goods. Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle and concludes that “justice is a habit according to which someone has a constant and perpetual will to *render to each his right*” (Aquinas 2008, p. 170). A just person is disposed to take her fair share and no more, ensuring that others receive *their* fair share—their right. Personal justice promotes a just society where everyone receives their proper share or what’s owed them. As a theologian, Aquinas adds that justice is what human beings ultimately owe God (2008, p. 66). Students with religious backgrounds especially appreciate the addition of Aquinas to the course, which otherwise consists of mostly classical primary texts. These readings show students that justice embodies ethical, theological, psychological, sociological, economic and political dimensions.

### *Social Scientific Approaches*

Beginning with these philosophical conceptions of justice shows students that the importance of a just society has deep roots in Western intellectual culture. Furthermore, beginning with these philosophical and theological sources is persuasive for those students who are inclined to take *tradition* as an important source of authority. Crucially, the philosophical understanding of societal justice and its relationship to personal flourishing facilitates the turn to contemporary

scientific explorations of justice. We begin discussing these perspectives in the first, more theoretical, semester by integrating several psychological theories. For example, while reading Plato, students learn about the contemporary notion of *cultural emotion regulation* (CER). CER stipulates that culture largely determines how a member of that society views the world. Cultural complexes “constitute a person’s reality, because they focus attention, they guide perception, they lend meaning, and they imbue emotional value” (Batja and Allen 2007, p. 488). CER proponents emphasize the psychological and moral influence of cultural complexes, indicating that cultural views causally influence the self’s psychological tendencies. For example, whereas a member of an individualistic culture generally seeks personal fulfillment and happiness, a member of a collectivistic culture often feels a strong sense of social obligation and interdependence (Kitayama et. al. 1997; Levine et. al. 2001). Those complexes provide parameters for the ways that people will experience and regulate their emotions. Since cultural complexes largely constitute the individual and lend meaning and value to one’s life, personal fulfillment requires just social structures.

Focusing on the birth of the modern social sciences provides a sociological perspective on justice in the second semester course. Karl Marx introduces the class to modern notions of social inequality and the role of societal structures in constituting the individual. Marx’s concept of historical materialism is the idea that “the nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production” (Marx and Engels 2010, p. 33). Individuals are constituted by their material, economic conditions. In the modern capitalistic economy, “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities” (Marx 2010, p. 42). Capitalism alienates workers, depriving them of their creative capacity, which for Marx is a distinctive aspect of our humanity. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and W.E.B. Du Bois provide early empirical support for social structures. For instance, Durkheim’s study of suicide as a sociological phenomenon evidences that “individual pathologies are rooted in *social* conditions” (Edles and

Appelrouth 2010, p. 119). This finding gives rise to Durkheim's notion of social facts—social or cultural realities that shape the individual's values and behaviors (Durkheim 2010, p. 112-13). Du Bois engages the question of social inequality in his study of African Americans in Philadelphia, and observes, for example, that Blacks receive low wages for undesirable work (mostly household and service sector labor) and are charged more money for lower quality housing than their white counterparts (Du Bois 2010, p. 340-343). Du Bois highlights social facts that make it more difficult for African Americans to flourish.

Contemporary research reflected in Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Case for Reparations" drives home these early findings. Alexander and Coates trace the history of laws and customs in America that severely limited the rights of African Americans, showing the contemporary reverberations of these unjust social structures. For instance, Coates traces the history of discrimination in the housing industry, highlighting practices such as redlining, where the Federal Housing Administration labeled neighborhoods "according to their perceived stability.... Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated 'D' and were usually considered ineligible for FHA backing. They were colored in red" (Coates 2014). Coates draws on historical data to argue that housing discrimination isn't merely an historical fact but continues today as seen in the profound difference between the average wealth of middle class black and white households with the same income (Shapiro and Oliver 1995; Sharkey 2009). Historic racist social structures continue to reinforce inequality. Alexander opens her book with a similar method of argumentation, showing how racial hierarchy and the subordination of African Americans is deeply embedded in America's cultural practices and laws, beginning with chattel slavery, morphing into Jim Crow laws, and manifesting today in the mass incarceration of African Americans. She notes that between 1960 and 1990, the U.S. incarceration rate quadrupled (Alexander 2012, p. 7). Since African Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites, she labels mass incarceration as the New Jim

Crow. These data-driven historical studies highlight the ways that social structures constrain individual agency and are intended to reinforce those theoretical positions on social justice that students encounter early on in our Social World sequence.

### *Narratological Approaches*

Theoretical and scientific approaches are compelling to some students, but many remain unconvinced. After all, socially instilled moral intuitions are not easily altered (Haidt and Graham 2007). Furthermore, some researchers have argued that “most undergraduates are in fact not ideologically pliable. By the time they reach college, most students have developed a political point of view” (Marranto and Woessner 2017). As noted, many of our students come from conservative cultural and religious backgrounds, and relative economic privilege. They often assume that the individual can overcome social forces through hard work; thus, it is not social structures that perpetuate inequality, but individual agency. These last two pedagogical strategies—narrative and encounter—are intended to overcome such skepticism.

Examples of narratological approaches are an extended ethnographical study of a black middle-class neighborhood in Chicago, and several short films. Mary Pattillo’s *Black Picket Fences* is set in the 1990s and describes life for African Americans living in Groveland, a pseudonymous black middle-class neighborhood in Chicago’s southside. In addition to a wealth of sociological data, Pattillo presents the stories of individuals told in their own words. Groveland is unique in certain respects, yet it also resembles similar middle-class neighborhoods that developed in large part due to redlining. These neighborhoods are just outside the inner city—they were suburbs when originally developed—and comprised of mostly African Americans, many of whom have owned their homes for generations. But because their homes are in predominately black communities, their value is well

below that of the same home in an average, comparable white suburb. Neighborhoods like Groveland are also unique in that they border the inner city, where crime, drugs and homelessness are usually most prevalent, exposing residents to illicit behavior that suburbanites typically do not encounter. Furthermore, children often are fed into public schools with poor graduation rates, high teacher turnover, and failing test scores. Our students learn of the struggles that teenagers living in Groveland face and how hard it is for them to succeed, given all the cards stacked against success.

Films such as Morgan Spurlock's *30 Days: Minimum Wage* and the biography of Cesar Chavez—*Fight in the Fields*—offer students more opportunities to enter into someone else's story and *imagine* what it would be like to struggle against overwhelming social forces. Spurlock's attempt to live on minimum wage for 30 days enables some students to envision how difficult life is for those on the margins. Studies in empathy show that people identify stronger and have stronger positive feelings with people that they take to be part of their in-group (Xiaojing et. al. 2009). Many—perhaps most—students can put themselves in Spurlock's shoes and feel the struggle to live on minimum wage. These narratological accounts are a crucial aspect of a social justice education because imagination is critical to empathy, and empathy is essential to prompt students to care for people in different life situations.

### *Experiential Approaches*

The narratological approach is a pedagogical response designed to engender understanding and empathy in our students. But the narrative approach still leaves an experiential gap between the student and the other. Closing this gap is aided by students *encountering* others face to face, forcing reevaluation of assumptions that promote alienation rather than identification. When encountering the other in concrete circumstances, the student must grapple with another human being in their

particularity and struggle, making it more difficult to disassociate the other and dismiss their experience.

The course provides several opportunities for students to encounter the other. When reading Weber on class, status, and party and learning about Cesar Chavez's efforts to organize immigrant farm workers in *Fight in the Fields*, a panel of Latino Americans speaks to the class and answers questions about their experiences living and working in Texas. Similarly, when reading Coates, Du Bois, and Pattillo, an African-American panel consisting primarily of local leaders meets with our students. These first-hand encounters make it difficult for students to dismiss and rationalize away the experiences of those who live and work in the same space as they do, providing a powerful and hopefully transformational moment.

Another opportunity for encounter is our version of experiential learning, where the students visit one of several philanthropic organizations that aid the working poor in our community. These "field site" visits occasion both a mini sociological investigation and engagement with both service providers and clients. For example, students who visit the Waco Family Health Center (WFHC) are confronted with the reality of poverty and the lack of access to adequate health care for those on the margins. They learn how the combination of poverty and lack of health care leads to negative consequences such as a disproportionate number of premature births (e.g. Henderson 1994). From The Texas Hunger Initiative students learn about the state's high rate of childhood food insecurity, which is unfathomable considering that Texas has the second largest gross state product in America. The class session following the site visits provides the opportunity for debriefing and discussion, and the reactions of students are palpable. Most students simply have no idea how many people are suffering in their own community, and how difficult it is to escape the cycle of poverty. Part of the assignment is to connect what they witnessed during their field site visit to our theorists, providing students the opportunity to relate the ethics and social theory they engage



in the classroom with contemporary life and practice. The combination of field site visits and the subsequent classroom reflections on those experiences is rated consistently as one of the most meaningful and pedagogically important course elements by students in their course evaluations at the end of the semester.

### *Conclusion*

Taken together, our hope is that this two-semester course will help our students understand the importance of breaking down barriers that prevent inclusivity in our world. However, the inherently insular nature of our campus as well as the University's largely homogeneous student population require that forms of "barrier deconstruction" are designed into the curriculum. Combining theoretical explorations of social justice with empirical verification, narratological approaches, and first-hand encounters with members of the community inspires the kind of empathy necessary for development of a personal ethic, an important first step in social justice education.

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