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Equity, Equality, and Justice: Defined

Jerry (Jay) Thomas

Often the definition of equity and equality are incorrectly interchanged. Because of these inaccurate explanations, the relationship between equity, equality, and justice also becomes misrepresented. When a governing body or ruling class is allowed to define ideas that carry such impactful social implications, the result is division and an overall lack of awareness throughout society. Bipartisan politics have created a culture of extremes in the United States. On one end of the spectrum, equality has been effectively achieved and has always been the goal of this nation's forefathers. On the opposite end, pundits utilize statistics representing systemic race and gender-based discrimination to express the notion that not only is there an absence of equality, but it has never truly been the goal.

Many Fortune 500 companies and institutions have adopted neo-liberal equity, inclusion, and diversity practices with the goal of increasing representation. In many instances, those in lower social classes are the ones paying the most to fund these practices, leaving them further disadvantaged. Taxpayer money in the form of grants is often awarded to institutions and corporations to fund diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

In 2022, the National Institute of Health allocated over one hundred thousand dollars to provide equity and inclusion training to students involved in a pre-doctoral training program in molecular and cellular biology at UC Davis. The majority white staff and student body utilized this money to learn how to better represent and include people of color while taking money that was essentially provided by working class people of color at a tax rate of 10–12%. The individuals intended to benefit from these practices are not authentically engaged nor are they adequately benefitted by the work being done.

Upon superficial examination, all people have the same opportunities to achieve, which insinuates a state of equality. This assumption of equal opportunity can be heavily debated, but the true test of validity is whether it equates to justice. If a specific demographic of people were disenfranchised for two hundred years, do they suddenly have equal voting power the day their voting rights are restored? However these terms are defined, either adequately or arbitrarily, the goal of each is to obtain justice.

Justice is only achieved when the barriers to entry no longer exist. Equity is a mechanism that when properly utilized creates a state of equality. To offer equity is to make whole. For example: Sarah and Michelle are running a four lap race. At the beginning of the race, Michelle is informed that she is banned from the competition because of the brand of shoes that she is wearing, but Sarah is allowed to begin. After Sarah completes an entire lap, Michelle is informed her brand of shoes is no longer banned and she may join the race. As it stands, Sarah has three laps to the finish line while Michelle still has the entire four. One who believes in the present existence of equality believes that since each racer now has an equal opportunity to participate, justice has been served. However, those who adopt the equity model understand that Michelle has been highly disadvantaged and must be made whole for the outcome of the race to be fair and just. Deciding whether to start the race over, to allow Michelle to run a lap while Sarah waits, or to agree on another equitable solution should be up to those most heavily impacted by the decision.

If one wishes to determine whether or not there is a lack of justice, all one must ask is: “is this just?” This plays out across all spheres of people’s lives, including in housing, healthcare, and education. Where justice is scarce, equity and equality needs are not being met. A lack of justice in housing is the reason that in 2019, the United States overall homeownership rate was 64.6%, while only 42.1% amongst Black Americans. A lack of justice in healthcare is the reason that in 2021 the Center to Advance Palliative Care’s Project workgroup discovered that Black patients receive

less pain assessment care and subsequently poor-quality pain management. A lack of justice is also why the history being taught in our schools is mainly from a Eurocentric perspective and largely focuses on white figures' achievements. The impact of Indigenous, Asian, Black and migrant Americans is continually minimized.

Equity leads to equality which subsequently produces justice. The most accepted socially constructed definition of equality implies that all people are created equal and should be treated the same. It is an insult to our collective intelligence to pretend that this is our current reality. This idealized state of equality would be heavily dependent upon changing individual minds and hearts. A more realistic and attainable definition of this term would be the following: an equal opportunity to overcome and to achieve. In the most basic terms, all people should have equal access to the best food, education, healthcare, housing, ownership, and wealth. The best—not the bare minimum. Marginalized communities are underfunded because of oppressive and intentionally inequitable policies such as redlining which refers to systemic, government supported racial discrimination in housing that outlines areas where Black residents are encouraged to live while denying loans and credit to buy homes where they are unwanted. As a result, the available jobs in these areas produce wages below the poverty line. Subsequently, the standard of healthcare, education, housing, and access to ownership is also inequitable and seemingly unachievable.

Stokely Carmichael often spoke about freedom surrounding civil rights and what it would take to be achieved. He believed that we must dismiss the fallacious notion that white people can give anybody their freedom and furthermore that no man can give anybody his freedom. I believe the same about our equity. In order to understand why there is such a lack of equality, equity, and justice, we must understand the systems of oppression that create barriers to the aforementioned. We must dismiss the fallacious

notion that anyone can give us our equality, equity, or justice . . . or take it from us.