



Social Justice

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What is it?

Social justice refers to both a goal and a process of full and equal participation of individuals and groups within society to meet their mutually defined needs. Social justice encompasses economic, political, and cultural justice. As a goal, social justice is envisioned as equitable access and distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights. The process of reaching the goal of social justice is necessarily participatory, inclusive, and democratic, affirming human diversity and human capacities for agency, creativity, and collaboration to create a more equitable and just world for all.

Who uses the concept?

While principles of justice from a Western cultural perspective originated with Ancient Greek and Enlightenment philosophers, the modern term “social justice” is attributed to Italian Jesuit priests concerned with moral philosophy based on the work of Thomas Aquinas. Activists, educators, religious leaders, politicians, and policy-makers among others use the concept of social justice today. The transdisciplinary field of cultural studies, emphasizing the historical construction of knowledge, structures and dynamics of power, and social change, is particularly focused on social justice.

In public discourse, social justice is often used as an ideal to which groups, institutions, and nation-states aspire and are held accountable. Historic and contemporary conditions of social injustice—the inequitable access to resources, rights, power and privilege, resulting in exploitation, exclusion, and genocide—galvanize demands for social justice.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue is critical to both the process and goal of social justice. Social *in*justice is rooted in systemic exclusion, silencing, and dehumanization of individuals and groups based on differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, religion, language and sexual orientation. Thus, communicating and working effectively across lines of difference is central to the on-going process of achieving social justice.

What work remains?

Social justice is foundational to ethnic studies, gender and women’s studies, and sexuality studies. While social justice has gained attention recently in other disciplines, more development in communication studies, and particularly in intercultural communication, is needed. Interdisciplinary approaches that bridge theory and practice, attend to intercultural alliances and coalition building, and the importance of communication in building relationships and systems based on social justice is critical.

Resources

- Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Goodman, D. (2011). *Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Sorrells, K. (2013). *Intercultural communication: Globalization and social justice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.