

Defining Social Justice - Nicotera, A. (in press). Social justice and social work, a fierce urgency: Recommendations for social work social justice pedagogy. *Journal of Social Work Education*.

In the fierce urgency of now, I believe that a shared social work definition of social justice will help advance social work curricular transformation, pedagogy, and practice. Thus, I offer for the social work profession's consideration the following social work definition of social justice. It is the result of my application of the Circle of Insight to the urgent need for reassessing and reformulating social justice social work theories (Banerjee, 2005; Chatterjee & D'Aprix, 2002; Hodge, 2010; Morgaine, 2014; Morris, 2002; Solas, 2008), and it integrates social work, and social justice and peacemaking, statements, principles, and research (Adams, Bell, Goodman, & Joshi, 2016; Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters, & Zuniga, 2013; Austin, 2014; CSWE, 2016; CSWE, 2015; Finn & Jacobson, 2008; Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; IFSW, 2014; IFSW, 2012; King, 1967; Libal et al., 2014; NASW, 2017; Pyles & Adam, 2016; Reisch & Garvin, 2016; Sayre & Sar, 2015; Wink, 2000), and over twenty-five years of learnings from my teaching, advocacy, activism, and clinical work.

Prelude

Social justice in social work is a both/and concept:

- It is both means and end, both process and purpose.
- It is both now and not yet; it confronts present injustices and points toward and promises a fair and just future.
- It respects and promotes both individual rights, liberties, and freedom, and social responsibility, accountability, and the common good.

Definition

Social justice in social work both invites and insists on the following (7 Es):

- Equitable distribution of resources
- Equal access to basic liberties and opportunities
- Empowerment of all persons, especially the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed
- A person-in-Environment perspective that actively:
 - Challenges discrimination, oppression, and unjust policies and practices
 - Recognizes and respects human dignity, human rights, and diversity, and
 - Works in solidarity with those working for justice, especially those in need

- Engagement with persons and groups that is restorative, in that it seeks to heal, reconcile, and repair broken, fractured personal and social relations, and structures
- Education of all persons that
 - Invites critical consciousness with respect to oppression and discrimination
 - Liberates, loves, and empowers
 - Understands societal success to be measured by the well-being of those in greatest need, the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed
- Enlightenment that challenges all to recognize our inherent dignity and interconnectedness, to see the other as one's sister, brother, and self

Postlude

When I asked Dr. Ira Colby, social work leader, author, educator, policy and clinical social worker, former dean, and former president of CSWE, about the heart of our social work understanding of social justice, he shared that for him there is one critical question we must ask when contemplating social justice action: Is it (our action/policy) fair and just? I have pondered Dr. Colby's question at great length since our conversation (Colby, 2017).

As a result of my Circle of Insight guided reflections, I offer this postlude to my social work definition of social justice. I suggest that in order to determine if our action or policy is fair and just, to answer Dr. Colby's question, we must ask yet another question, echoing Gandhi's Talisman (Gandhi's Talisman, 2018): How does our action or policy affect the disadvantaged, vulnerable, and oppressed? If it harms, oppresses, or discriminates, then it violates our commitment to social justice. If it heals, reconciles, and restores, it respects, and is consistent with, our commitment to social justice.

[References.](#)