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Killing An Inconvenient Truth: Social Justice and Forms of Oppression in Modern Society.

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Abstract

Considered different, (less than human?) - Some are hated for what they are - for what they have been changed into, and believed to be. Others oppressed for what they symbolize - discriminated against for what they remind people of. Many are excluded because their wants are the same as other persons'. Many others are not listened to; made voiceless and even invisible, resilient, they stay. All humans have the same needs – biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Nobody is asking for preferential treatments - We do not present impossible choices. All we are saying is – in relating to who appears to be unlike you, Seize the opportunity diversity offers; learn more about self, others and our world, Collaborate with others - so all become increasingly more human. (FMB, San Antonio, December 2008)

Introduction

After a full day's workshop on Planning for Development as Human Progress in a remote part of the world, a young wealthy entrepreneur, upon hearing others complain about all the work they still had to do to reach their objectives remarked – “Blame it all on social justice!” This young person had understood that the collective learning arising from the community had the following interrelated messages: First, it was necessary for people's lives to improve since all had the right to better living conditions as biological, social, psychological, and spiritual beings. Second, for this to become reality, people had to change their vision of the world, adopt new attitudes, and behave in ways that consistently recognized and respected the dignity of others, especially those who seemed different, meaning those whose dissimilarities (singularities?) stood out more. Planning for progress in terms of reaching the highest possible goals as human beings in community basically involves these two demands. Though neither is easy to implement, neither is an impossible task to undertake. And when

undertaken with critical consciousness, consistency, simplicity and humility, with the conviction that some success will be attained, the perspectives of bringing about some concrete changes in people's beliefs about others and their behaviors in relationships with other people could improve (Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990).¹ This undertaking I have called the "dialectics of daily living" (Boakari, 2006). They are primarily individual and everyday responsibilities, and an encouraging social environment with other critically conscious individuals can only be helpful.

The dialectics of daily living are reference to the fact that under normal conditions as rational beings, we tend to lead thinking lives. Faced with any particular situation, we think about it and then reflect upon our response alternatives. Reacting in one way or the other is generally based upon our definition of the situation, and this is always real in itself. Through this process of reflection, selection and then action, we are able to carry out our daily responsibilities. At the same time, we can incorporate our perspectives about the future. In other terms, the thinking-acting-reflecting spiral denotes the dynamic nature of daily living. While facing the challenges of today, we evaluate them based upon past experiences and simultaneously contemplate the consequences and challenges that will follow. This is dialectical because as one phenomenon gets completed, another is already on the verge of becoming real. We are living today (being) and self-organizing (becoming) for the future (Boakari, 2006, p. 06).

“Change that is transformative in this sense cannot be hidden; it is evident in the life of a group that is real community.”

¹ The book, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (1990), is a compilation of interviews of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, two leaders in the movement to bring about social transformation through popular social consciousness and active participation. As the editors state, the stream of ideas expressed in the interviews is at once abstract and filled with concrete examples of the struggles of both men to change systems" (p. xi). While the contributions of the former are rooted in the US, the ideas and hopes expressed by Freire are Latin American. Nonetheless, in talking about human beings, their struggles, strategies and hopes, both popular educators speak the same language of a Pedagogy of Hope whereby men, women, youth and children recognize their humanity and come together to make it meaningful in their daily rights and responsibilities as social agents using "principles such as love and democracy" to assist people to assume their conditions and strive to "control their lives" (p. 196).

Transformative progress as a historical phenomenon sustained by change imbued with dynamism for further modifications occurs when there are social agents who untiringly work to bring about new realities that are meaningfully effective because their consequences can be seen and felt in the daily lives of all kinds of people in community. Change that is transformative in this sense cannot be hidden; it is evident in the life of a group that is real community. The idea of community here is crucial because it is only in the context of a community that humans relate to one another, and accordingly, can influence changes both in their lives and in those of other individuals. It is also only in community where socio-cultural factors influence persons to become human beings and to go on to be social agents. Respecting others, sharing social services and material goods as equitably as possible, recognizing and consciously living with those who appear to be unlike one-self, as well as treating those with various kinds of limitations (physical, psychological, and social-cultural) with care, respect and dignity, are some corollaries of the requirements for human progress that is of concern here. That humans become better when they can live in peace with one another, building upon their differences to strengthen their commonalities and bring about more equality across the board, seems to be a universal claim whose manifestations could be contextual. There are arguments about what strategies are best for attaining these objectives but not about the essence of the goals themselves. In this regard, what is social justice? What are some of the hindrances to making social equity and equal access to opportunities more present in contemporary society? Why is it that some people's dignity as human beings is neither respected nor recognized? In the end what is it all about?

“The concept of social justice essentially refers to the principles of equality and equity in all aspects of life for everybody in a community.”

What is Social Justice?

The concept of social justice essentially refers to the principles of equality and equity in all aspects of life for everybody in a community. As guidelines for

daily life and the way responsible human beings ought to live, these principles are built upon perspectives and persistent practices (habit forming) that are permanently all-inclusive. By this same token, these orientations are against any measures, activities and behaviors that lead to any kind of partiality regarding life in relationship with other people. In matters of social justice, priority is given to mantras such as “Of all at all times”, “For all in all places” and “Never willfully against anybody.” In the beauty of its complex simplicity, social justice demands much and recommends a lot, but none of these demands and recommendations is beyond the common person. And for a determined group, only possibilities would exist. Besides, its justification is very basic: without concrete efforts to make social justice a reality in human society, living in peace would become very difficult, if not impossible in certain circumstances. Western civilizations and empires like the Greek and Roman are believed to have collapsed and vanished because priorities favored human pleasures and indulgencies and ignored respect for the poor and excluded. Today, examples of urban violence, increased criminal acts of different kinds by persons from varying walks of life and social conditions, as well as international exploitations under the guise of assistance, easily come to mind in this regard. The absence of neighborhood solidarity, accentuated workplace competitiveness (sometimes with out-of-bounds disloyal practices), acts of making some individuals invisible, treating some others as if they were less than human, taking advantage of others because of one reason or the other, are some cogent reminders of how justice in society is made less present today. Making fair-play and respect integrated parts of the relationships between persons and the contexts in which they are involved is essentially an individual responsibility. When this is shared, this responsibility becomes social and its growth tends to be more lasting because it benefits more members of society.

“Social justice is an umbrella concept that tries to explain and describe the basic principles of equality, equity, respect for the dignity of other people, and respect for the environment.”

I have explained that it is social justice, or equity or social fair-play, in human relationships that determines how we understand, shape and operate being together as individual persons dependent upon other people. It is this dependency – better still, interdependency – that essentially makes us living beings whose

humanity is basically possible because of other people. In the absence of some degree of social fair-play, life with others would be difficult, if not impossible. Because of social justice, we can afford to be future-oriented by hoping, planning, and developing expectations whose realization we consider highly possible (Boakari, 2006, p. 01).

Social justice is an umbrella concept that tries to explain and describe the basic principles of equality, equity, respect for the dignity of other people, and respect for the environment. Also included is the rational consumption of goods and services which are expected to guide human relationships and community living at all levels, both in micro-relationships and macro-relations. Because of its complexity and universal applicability, principles related to justice and respect in society are also treated in certain documents that have been elaborated with the historic development of how people have conceived this essential cement for helping make human living less traumatic and more beneficial for all. These principles with the objective of guaranteeing human conviviality and dignity for the individual have been expressed in historical documents of universal importance. For instance, while the Preamble of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December, 1948 states “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,” the next three articles go on to emphasize that -

“All human beings
are born free and
equal in dignity and
rights.”

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person (United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

In this same way, to emphasize the collective charge and individual for making human society possible, the Constitution of the United States declares in its Preamble that -

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America (US Constitution).

From a document elaborated in the 18th century, these words serve as a resounding reminder that despite social transformations, various historical experiences, and industrial and technological changes, humans continue to have the same basic needs while facing the same problems. To help satisfy these needs for all and to proactively face the problems that prevent social justice in all societies continue to be universal tasks. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even more recent constitutions like that of the Federal Republic of Brazil (1988) support the position that justice in human communities is always a worthwhile cause, an intelligent means and a dignified goal to strive to attain. In the Preamble, the Constituents who elaborated the final document solemnly state, in the names of all Brazilians -

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even more recent constitutions like that of the Federal Republic of Brazil (1988) go to support the position that justice in human communities is always a worthwhile cause.”

We, the representatives of the Brazilian People, convened in the National Constituent Assembly to institute a Democratic State, for the purpose of ensuring the exercise of social and individual rights, liberty, security, well-being, development, equality and justice as supreme values of a fraternal, pluralist and unprejudiced society, founded on social harmony and committed, in the internal and international orders, to the peaceful settlement of disputes, promulgate, under the protection of God, this Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil (Congresso Nacional, 1988).

These preambles and the articles that follow basically point to efforts to explain and offer guidance about what constitutes human dignity, collective security, social harmony, individual prerogatives and responsibilities. The ideals stressed refer to the need to humanize society through appropriate strategies that bring improvements in the daily lives of people of both local and distant

communities. These documents and others that are similar serve as permanent reminders that the principles of human dignity, collective social well-being, and justice in human relations are worth fighting for and that having them reign as integral parts of society is a goal whose attainment may be a process, but a measurable one. A good measure of how this ideal is being developed or not consists in how often one fails to see oneself in other people in our daily activities. Can social justice be partially present, or it is either present or not? No matter what, there is no need to justify its absence or partial presence. When it is not present, it is because some human beings are not recognized as such and are being treated disrespectfully.

The universal nature of these ideals has been referenced in the aforementioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in its Article 25:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself (*herself*) and of his (*her*) family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his (*her*) control (United Nations, Declaration of Human Rights).

Religious institutions contribute to making fair-play and justice in its different dimensions more real in relationships for the purposes of life in the world and beyond. For example, the Catholic Church disseminates its orientations about social justice principally through papal documents and special orientations from Bishops and Regional Bishops' Conferences. The central messages over the years have been "translated" into seven Social Teaching Themes that include "Life and dignity of the human person; Call to family, community and participation; Rights and responsibilities; Option for the poor and vulnerable; The dignity of work and the rights of workers; Solidarity; and Care for God's creation" (<http://www.usccb.org/>).

The Office for Social Justice, St. Paul and Minneapolis (OSJSPM), in a more didactical manner summarizes these principles in Ten Areas as follows:

“Religious institutions contribute to
“Still in the Catholic Church, among several perspectives about peace and justice for all humans is Liberation Theology.”

“Human dignity; Community and the common good; Rights and responsibilities; Option for the poor and vulnerable; Participation; Dignity of work and rights of workers; Stewardship of God’s creation; Solidarity; Role of government; and Promotion of peace” (www.osjspm.org/). These two ways of presenting the same message are an attempt to demonstrate how consistently the Church has historically worked for the humanization of the world family by engaging in policies, directives and educational programs with the objective of making societies more human-centered and permanently changed for the betterment of life all over the world. To be Church is to be the bedrock of human values and a permanent source of support for any- and everything that lead to concrete results affirming human dignity, individual freedom and social unity. There are arguments that different groups in this same Church could understand these issues differently. Nonetheless, these are fundamental beliefs and values leading to common concerns that justify the continuing Christ’s legacy of bringing peace, unity, and brother/sister-hood (humanity) to all God’s children as co-creators of the universe. This can only be seen as a call to unity in the struggles to work for attitudinal and behavioral changes in social and environmental matters. These general areas of concern as highlighted by both the US Catholic Bishops’ Conference (1998; 2003) and the OSJSPM include primary provisions for peace, harmony, respect, dignity, environmental responsibility and solidarity between all peoples united through the privilege of being humans on a common mission with individual and collective responsibilities. When these responsibilities are assumed realistically and habitually, individual and collective rights would be guaranteed.

Still in the Catholic Church, among several perspectives about peace and justice for all humans is Liberation Theology. As a conscious choice to work alongside the poor and for the most abject of these, in making an “option for the poor” (in mind, spirit, material goods, political strategies, formal educational attainment, and satisfaction of social needs), this theological orientation, despite different perspectives, basically consists of the effort to think clearly about the meaning of religious faith in the context of oppression, war, poverty, inequality

and environmental destruction, and the effort to live a compassionate, courageous and life-sustaining response to those conditions. Over the past several decades, people inspired by Liberation Theology have sought to give voice to a response that both addresses the needs of those who are injured and oppressed, and also works to change the structures and ongoing processes of injury and oppression.

Liberation theology varies greatly according to the culture in which it arises, but its underlying themes are immediately recognizable across the world: the transformation of everyday life through a new awakening of compassion, courage, truthfulness and justice. It is a work in progress, born out of enormous pain and extraordinary hope, which is sure to inspire many and offend many (www.liberationtheology.org).

Maybe a good summary of these values can be found in the words of Pope Paul VI, when he said, “If you want peace, work for justice.” Justice and peace are so intricately interrelated that one is only possible when the other exists. They are complementary states of being that demand the development of those conditions that go to make human living less demanding and more satisfying. Working for peace and justice refers to concrete concerns about human life and those conditions in which different human groups live. Though the Pope’s words serve as an important indication of how the Catholic Church views social justice as the mission of all men, women, youth and children, other religions also recognize the importance of social justice, living according to the principles of justice, as humans being human with/to other persons. This ontological concern for all humans is expressed in various ways. Here are some according to the website www.salsa.net/peace/quotes.html:

“If you want peace,
work for justice.”

You should love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus, 19:18).

None of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself (Islam, 40 Hadith of An-Nawawi 13).

Ascribe not to any soul that which you would not have ascribed to you, and say not that which you should not. This is my command to you, you must observe it (Baha'i: Baha'u'llah, The Hidden Words, Arabic, 29).

One should not behave towards others in a way disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire (Hinduism, Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, 113.8).

Tse-Kung asked, "Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?" Confucius replied, "It is the word *shu* – reciprocity. Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Confucianism, Analects 15.23).

These quotes provide a working summary of the principal ideas related to social justice and the humanization of the world that religions are about. As basic principles, religions mainly serve as a guide that followers need to translate into concrete actions and practices whose consequences should focus on making all persons as more human as possible. Principles regarding living in peace with respect for the dignity of other persons in relationships could have different names in different parts of the world (Mbiti, 1970). Nonetheless, what they denote may be recognized universally. For instance, among my people, the Mende of Sierra Leone, West Africa, proverbs like "When my stomach aches, my brother's head hurts" and "You are here because of me" deliver the same message. For us, God, the Almighty, is *Ngewo*, the "All-encompassing genderless sky that equally and always equitably sees, guides and protects all." Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, a similar idea is expressed in the following proverb – "One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself (*herself*) to feel how it hurts."

“When my stomach aches, my brother’s head hurts.”

Desmond Tutu, South African Archbishop and Nobel Laureate reminds us of what his people say – “I am here because we are.” In these words the Archbishop is referring to the principle (force) called *ubuntu*, the belief that any human being is imbued with elements of collective goodness because the individual cannot live in isolation. Through this generosity with self, the world, and others, one gains connectedness and is assured of integrity because of the power that resides in the spirit of the community that makes the individual, while this latter helps give meaning to the collectivity. To humiliate, cause deliberate shame and bring harm and unnecessary suffering to another person mean absence of both self-love and respect for life in community. This does not necessarily have religious implications as it would in Western culture; for the African, this principle of oneness in being, as well as behavior that is other-centered and based upon known shared values, are merely the essence of human life (Tutu, 1999). Reciprocity as a characteristic manner of relating to others and to the environment serves as key-word and reminder of the ideal for all persons.

“To humiliate, cause deliberate shame and bring harm and unnecessary suffering to another person means absence of both self-love and respect for life in community.”

These principles related to peace are ideals, but they are dreams that need to be transformed into engagements on different fronts against injustice in its varied subtle forms and veiled manifestations. There are several groups and movements in different parts of the world, and even in local communities, working for a society that emphasizes justice and equality. For instance, in San Antonio, Texas, two such organizations are the San Antonio PeaceCenter and the Women’s Global Connection (WGC). While the former focuses on working toward peace and nonviolence at different levels, the latter strives to promote social education and leadership skills, especially directed at women in the world, particularly in countries rife with injustice and poverty (www.womensglobalconnection.org). The development of these networks and permanent struggles to get more people involved in their activities to bring about real peace in the lives of many others are worth recognition. It is good to remember that there are hundreds of such organizations existing today as

evidence of how complex and widespread is the concern for a more equitable society.

From what has been presented, it seems evident that the most reliable source of peace and unity is social justice. Both individuals and human society stand to gain much when certain attitudes and habitual behaviors demonstrating respect for positive reciprocity and its implications in human relationships become part of the daily routine of individuals. Nonetheless, this is not the case in many everyday relationships. What is generally noticed is the absence of these values and more open manifestations of abuses against other people (Freire, 2000).² In effect, these are ways of inhibiting social practices based on the conception that all should be allies for human growth in mutual respect for one another in community.

Some hindrances to social justice

After the attempt to present the issues to be discussed as human dilemmas, I continue by offering some observations about social justice, the element that gives real meaning to the questions in discussion. Without the concept of social justice in its varied Western forms of expression (Human, Civil and Constitutional Rights) and the need for humanizing society, the discussion about negative “-isms” would be moot. Discussions and other activities take place around social justice because of its importance for humans as historical subjects responsible for

“Principles of social justice as the essence of life in community do not know boundaries or time zones; they are universal and ubiquitous.”

² In this text, Freire (2000) sadly reports as television channels did on the evening news of April 21, 1997 that “Today, five adolescents killed, with cruel barbarity, an indigenous of the Pataxo tribal group, who was found quietly sleeping at a bus stop in Brasilia. They told the police that they were joking. How strange! To believe to be playing by killing another person. They set his body on fire as one would a useless object as if it were something without any value at all for anybody. To satisfy their cruelty and pleasure in seeing death, for them the Indian was neither a *you* nor a *he*. He was *just that, that thing over there*. Some kind of inferior *shadow* in the world. He was inferior and an inconvenience; an inconvenient and offensive object” (p. 65). To drive home the point, these adolescents were middle class youth of European origin and their parents, high-level civil servants in a society that prides itself on its diversity and multiethnic-racial composition! The national ideology of a “racial democracy” has remained an underpinning in private conversations and public policy discussions.

developing and maintaining the structures and systems we have in society. It can be forwarded that social justice refers to those principles and their translation into everyday human practices that recognize all human beings as equals and accordingly demands that each and everyone be treated as equally and equitably as possible at all times and in all places. Principles of social justice as the essence of life in community do not know boundaries or time zones; they are universal and ubiquitous. Practices built upon social justice serve as the life-force of a community. Social justice is the fundamental recognition and acceptance of the humanity in us and in others. It serves as an invitation to develop daily practices that bring to reality this consciousness and its concomitant expectations (Macedo, 1994).

One of the tragic ironies of today's globalized world, most characterized by differences, is that many people still do not know, or are not able to deal effectively with, those who exhibit characteristics that do not appear to be the same as theirs. For many, anybody or anything that appears different presents confounding problems. Individuals who are dissimilar, or made to seem more different than similar, are seen as threats. Some go to the extreme of believing that those who are not similar to them, individuals who do not look like them, those who do not share their world vision and even social preferences are not only different but inferior. Along this line of thinking, such persons go further and seem convinced that those who dare to be different must pay the price for being what they are... To be without a family, not to belong, presents a social threat that must be prevented, sometimes at all costs.

“To be without a family, not to belong, presents a social threat that must be prevented, sometimes at all costs.”

In these terms, two basic groups are in consideration – one whose members do the defining of a particular phenomenon and the other which is objectified through this definition because of how its members are perceived in relation to the phenomenon of interest. It is important to note that these definitions may have little or nothing to do with “real reality.” These definitions and even the phenomena may be mere socially contextualized constructions. Nonetheless, as Schultz did remind us, humans build their realities through their own elaborations,

constructions and definitions. Those who do the defining, the socio-economic, cultural and political movers, blame the defined others for their physical, social and cultural conditions. There is an in-group that claims to be the center of all that happens and most of the members seize the opportunities offered through this line of thinking to lord it over other people considered not to belong, the out-group. These may be intellectual constructions, one might argue, but the facts of real life demonstrate that these definitions do have concrete consequences in the lives of real people. Differences as unlikeness may be socially constructed, but their economic, cultural, political and everyday outcomes can be equally positive or negative for this or that group of individuals in society. There is a general tendency to emphasize the negative outcomes as these call for social awareness and corrective actions.

The mental gymnastics performed by some members of the dominant group that develops the widely accepted definitions in society can be described in these lines: ‘I belong to the group that is the most intelligent, most hardworking, most important, most powerful, and consequently, I deserve all I have and enjoy because my group is unique and all-deserving. Members of other groups do not deserve what my group controls because they are inferior in every way imaginable; in fact they are not like us; they are very different; they are inferior, and may even be less human than we are.’ This “ethnocentric monologue” (Rocha, 2003, p.09), easily employable at both the macro and micro levels in social interactions has contributed to a myriad of historical problems in the field of human encounters and relationships. While ethnocentrism can be used to account for the enslavement of many different groups, Nazism, colonialism, genocides, the unchristian phase of Christianity in the middle ages, and today’s hegemonic presence of some national/cultural groups the world over, this view that centers everything on only one culture’s values is also present in many everyday interactions between people who emphasize those characteristics that seem to stand out as being unlike their own in the persons they interact with. The unquestioned belief (accompanied by conformist attitudes and behaviors) that one

“I deserve all I have
and enjoy because
my group is unique
and all-deserving.”

group's culture and world view serve as sole measures for validating others not only creates room for conflict but also points to blatant ignorance in assuming that all the complexities in the world can be fully grasped and effectively explained by the members of one group.

A fundamental question that cannot be easily silenced is the following: Why is it that when people generally meet and interact with others, what stands out and determines the nature of these encounters are those elements that appear to be different? It seems that what calls attention the most are those characteristics that are unlike those of the other as perceived by the individual who belongs to the more powerful group. Simultaneously, the person perceived as less powerful tends to view her/himself the same way as those who do the defining in society because he/she has assimilated the values and social perspectives of this latter group. In this process wherein differences are given priority, similarities are downplayed or neglected outright as they seem to need coherent explanations. On the other hand, differences are treated as if they do not seem to need much explanation. They are believed to be evident, natural, and customary; common sense, which serves as a very effective instrument for social exclusion, provides and sustains all the evidence presented in support of this understanding. Differences are more easily constructed, maintained and explained away because they seem to need less mental energy to deal with; they encourage intellectual laziness and honor sloppy thinking practices. During these processes, individuals who raise questions, demand evidence-based arguments, dare to present contradictory positions and perspectives are accused of faulty reasoning and may be neglected. Worse still, such persons may suffer the consequences for standing out because according to ancient wisdom, the nail that dares stand up must be made equal to the others. This will be necessary even if it involves hammering it down many times over. The end in this case is assumed to justify the means.

“Differences are more easily constructed, maintained and explained away because they seem to need less mental energy to deal with.”

It must be emphasized that differences in and by themselves are merely markers in and of the world we construct and historically shape. Without these markers as pointers, it is difficult to imagine what life would be like especially in

community. Just as similarities help define who I am, differences also provide the comparative parameters (phenomena) needed to clarify who I really am. In other words, differences and similarities perform the same basic psychosocial functions in that they help the individual locate, define and guide her/himself. Unfortunately, however, whereas similarities tend to be considered more positive and give origin to more constructive possibilities, differences are generally treated with negative connotations and implications that tend to more easily depreciate other persons. Similarities seem to bring comfort and tranquility. Differences tend to invoke challenge, provoke irrational responses, and force many to react in ways that neither recognize nor respect the other as a human being.

Downplaying human similarities, while overemphasizing apparent dissimilarities, are the two complementary processes that most account for developing stereotypes and maintaining stereotypic perspectives in human relationships. Stereotypes arise when people use impressions gathered after preliminary encounters and observations to make judgments about people and phenomena in general. These assessments which could be extremely simplified also tend to be biased as they are dependent upon the existing wisdom of the dominant group. Stereotypes tend to be preconceived notions, baseless inferences about a group and its members as well as about certain situations. Considering that preconceptions do not create themselves, they are based upon what group members think and how they define some situations or a person who belongs to this or that group. The individual is not judged on her/his merits but on those characteristics attributed to the group he/she is assigned to or claims to belong to. In this same way, certain situations are assessed based upon predefinitions that the group has historically developed and maintained in order to guarantee its own cohesion, territoriality, and scope of influence. Like other social guide posts, stereotypes can be misleading tools that can cut both ways. Positive stereotypes (all hip-hop lovers are good students) help boost the self-esteem of group members. On the other hand negative stereotypes can easily damage the self-respect of the members of the group so characterized. Stereotypes negative in

“It must be emphasized that differences in and by themselves are merely markers in and of the world we construct and historically shape.”

nature easily turn someone into a target of different kinds of violence because he/she belongs to an agglomeration stereotypically categorized as “a threat.”

As Hinton (2000) points out, “much of the study of judging other people has emphasized the view that we see people as members of a particular category of people based upon certain characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity or occupation” (p. 6). He goes on to clarify that stereotypes are “categorical judgments” (p. 6) that exclude particularities in order to facilitate placement within one group or the other, a task that needs to be performed in order to perceive; stereotypes determine what is and what is not in order to help one remember normal expectations and habitual response patterns. As humans, perceptions are necessary for us to be social agents in relations with others and other elements. These perceptions involve meaning-making as they determine what we do with or about that which is perceived. Perceptions as meaning-making exercises demand that we depend upon social customs and practices within the group. Perceptions need social reinforcements in order to be validated because they help the perceiving agent distinguish between phenomena – recognize and accept (fully or to some degree), or make invisible and neglect completely or in some situations.

“As humans, perceptions are necessary for us to be social agents in relations with others and other elements.”

What is perceived and how this is interpreted determine whether similarities or dissimilarities are emphasized and made the center of attention. When differences that evoke feelings of separation, distance and unlikeness are stressed, differentiating treatments could easily follow. Defining someone based upon the group (social category) to which he/she belongs facilitates developing and maintaining differentiating treatments which in turn become habitual and normal. This process leads to the construction of “-isms” that could be either positive or negative. Some common examples of such “-isms” include those based upon racial, sexual (gender and sexuality) and age variations with emphases on those differences that highlight negative elements. Even people’s places of origin could lead to negative “-isms” that are used to set them apart. There are some health conditions, especially leprosy and HIV/AIDS, that also lead to

differentiating treatments. Ageism (especially with regards to older individuals, so-called “senior citizens”)³ and racism are the channels selected for advancing this discussion. Other negative “-isms” like those mentioned above have characteristics and *modus operandi* that are basically much like what I discuss here. Behaviors supported by attitudes built upon worldviews that work against a just and more peaceful life in community because human beings are respected in their fundamental condition as humans follow a similar pattern.

Ageism refers to a set of negative attitudes based upon unfounded notions regarding individuals in an age group. In this regard, even though people in all age groups could suffer because they are placed in one group or the other and then negatively defined, I will concentrate on older persons in this discussion. Notions about older persons are used as justification for disrespectful and undignified behaviors in relating to them. These persons who have lived longer are not considered just as other ordinary human beings but as a group set apart, a set of persons whose dissimilarities are made more pronounced because our society values youth and youthfulness more. (The considerable wealth and economic influence of corporations and companies in the business of rejuvenation [appearing, staying and behaving young] provide the evidence for this claim). It is a fact that with age, certain difficulties and deficiencies become more evident. Nonetheless, like all others, what any older person needs are attention, respect, purpose, support, conviviality, dignity and caring. All over the world, this group of citizens continues to grow in numbers. As such, knowing more about ageism is important in order to know more about the realities in which we presently live.

“It is a fact that with age, certain difficulties and deficiencies become more evident.”

³ It needs to be clarified that ageism is multi-faceted; just as it can refer to older people, its consequences, especially the more negative ones, can also affect children and adolescents. Reports about child abuse, domestic violence against children, as well as sexual abuse and other forms of violence perpetrated against adolescents provide proof for such a claim. Disrespect for children’s rights, the silencing of and other discriminatory practices against younger persons, easily blamed upon “generation gaps,” are forms of ageism – persons treated negatively and differentially because of their biological ages (and physical appearance).

Generalized inferences about the older person's presumed inferior physical conditions, mental capabilities, emotional equilibrium, and economic situation are used to define each individual who appears to be a senior citizen. Accordingly, the person considered older is treated as if he/she were weak and sick, with questionable levels of intellectual competence and uncertain emotional balance. In most cases, this same older person may also be assumed to be economically disadvantaged or with more propensity to become so. In most cases without reason or facts, every person considered to belong to the category of being older is placed in the same group as most other senior citizens, especially those whose characteristics and conditions make them already more socially, physically, emotionally and economically disadvantaged or vulnerable. The individual person is not taken into consideration. It is the group he/she is assigned to that defines what ideas are constructed about him/her and consequently, how he/she is treated by others, especially those who form the social majority, those who elaborate the definitions that serve as the yardstick in that particular area of human life and/or condition. These criteria are culture-specific and temporally determined too.

“It is the group he/she is assigned to that defines what ideas are constructed about him/her.”

For example, in many countries where Western values predominate, the negative treatments of older citizens present a rather interesting contradiction:

The same society that extends the lives of men and women, struggles to accept older persons. What is even worse is that either directly or indirectly, they are blamed for getting old. People forget how much they contributed to the construction of the country [and]... are constantly accused of being a burden on society (Almeida, 2004, p. 31).

As a social antidote to this contradiction, there are legal dispositions in these countries that should protect the rights of older individuals as full participatory citizens in society. Taking Brazil as an example, its Statute for the Old (Congresso Nacional, 2003) legislates that members of this growing population group have the right to the following – health, work, equality, education, political participation, development, social recognition, recognition of their economic

conditions, violence-free living, and environmental accessibility. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights basically stipulates these same values that emphasize the rights to a life of dignity, respect and protection from all harm and suffering for all human beings.

In its treatment of older citizens, perhaps Western societies can learn much from so-called traditional societies and communities scattered all over the globe. These societies may be considered “backward” because of the stages of their technological advancement, but many are believed to be much more advanced because of their value systems in which all human life and conditions are given due considerations. Whereas many of these less-advanced communities in countries in Africa and Latin America have not successfully incorporated older values and practices with more modern ones, most Asian communities have more successfully constructed an integrated cultural milieu where the old and the new live together in harmonious unity (Gannon, 2004). It is in this regard that former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, is reported to have reminded the world that, “In Africa, it is said that when an old person dies, a library disappears....Older persons are the intermediaries between past, present and future. Their wisdom and experience constitute the true vital force for the development of society” (Almeida, 2004).

“Racism makes it possible to use differences that are natural as factors for discriminating against certain people in society, excluding these people from having equal access to opportunities and negatively stereotyping them.”

In itself, old age is only a human condition. It can be defined and used as a positive human factor or as a justification for differentiating treatments. The characteristics and/or conditions of an individual do not matter; all “-isms” are constructed, defined and maintained by some people in some human communities. As human beings the responsibility to be respectful of and responsible for others are ethical requirements and should be a commonality; regarding this ethical value, there are no contextual or temporal differences: they are human rights.

As a doctrine about how other persons are viewed and treated, racism has a past that needs to be remembered in order to emphasize its historical

construction and relevance Initially the term race was understood as lineage and was employed to refer to groups within the same European societies. The notion of lineage was exported to the peoples of Africa, Asia and South America, and their differences led to ethnocentric reactions by the European invaders. Ethnocentrism is much more diffused and can be considered a normal reaction to protect one's culture and group values. The problem arises when it is transformed into racism as a consistent attempt to mark differences as bases for domination and exploitation. This notion helped establish and sustain colonialism. It made it appear logical to separate human beings into Europeans (superior?) and non-Europeans (less equal?), and go on to hold that the former had a natural right to dominate and control the latter because of their acclaimed superior characteristics and much better natural endowments. This uncalled for rule and governance by foreigners continue to be judged just since no colonizing nations have ever been called to task for their inhuman relationships with other human beings because of self-enrichment, cultural domination, and empire building. For a long time, it was even believed that the colonial powers had a natural right, a moral and divine responsibility (White man's burden) as superior beings to govern the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Indigenous populations).

Racism, a form of segregation that is most talked about, is based upon the belief that human beings can be divided into groups along ethnic-racial characteristics and dimensions. Though there is more than enough proof that there is only one race, the human race, discussions about human beings and groupings are still race-centered or ethnically-based. Skin color (phenotype) is most commonly used as criterion for this division that is believed to be genetic (genotype), more deep-seated and thus a more powerful explanatory factor for believing that some people are inferior psychologically, intellectually and morally because of their racial type.

This idea has been explained by Darder and Torres (2009) in these words:

If "race" is real, it is so only because it has been rendered meaningful by the actions and beliefs of the powerful, who retain the myth in order to protect their own political-economic interests...."race" is socially

constructed and its origins clearly steeped in an ideology of exclusion, domination, exploitation, even genocide....” (p. 157).

Racism can then be said to be a doctrine that affirms that races do exist and that there is a natural hierarchy among them and that there is one in particular, Western European, that is consistently superior to all others. A logical consequence of this world view is the development of negative attitudes that attribute dehumanizing qualities to those groups and their members that do not belong to the groups defined as superior and so allowed to be dominant. Racism makes it possible to use differences that are natural as factors for discriminating against certain people in society, excluding these people from having equal access to opportunities and negatively stereotyping them. Above all, by naturalizing historically constructed social inequalities, racist practices succeed in blaming the victims of racism for their “problems.” In the context of everyday social interactions between individuals, racism leads to inhuman treatments and disrespect. When race is used as justification for explaining away discriminations, social inequalities and injustice in society, racism becomes criminal domination because psychological violence is combined with cultural and physical forms of violence (Cunha Jr., 1995).

“Above all, by naturalizing historically constructed social inequalities, racist practices succeed in blaming the victims of racism for their problems.”

Since the humanity of the victims of racism is denied, many face problems of identity and self-worth. The racist falsifies social reality and the dominated victim assimilates the values and conceptions constructed by his/her dominating agent (Frantz Fanon, 1967). Accepting the stigmatized, negative and inferior identity constructed by those with power is an unconscious process in the socialization of the dominated. To collaborate with their negative identities, the victims of racism are made to pass for more inferior members of society, and as such, not to deserve a fair share in the goods and services offered by society. Many of the victims live with this situation, believing that these discriminations are the normal ways of life, that in fact, they are natural. Consciously or not, they help in their domination and discrimination! Situational definitions also go to help maintain the discriminating relationships because to question what is already

established is not common practice. So efforts have to be made in order to question the *status quo* of the unequal relationships between these groups of human beings illogically defined for special interests (ideological orientations) as belonging to different racial groups.

Basically, what characteristics do ageism (as discriminatory practices against senior citizens) and racism (as differentiating treatments dependent upon racially-defined elements) have in common? What are their common consequences in modern society? First, partial and unclear definitions are constructed whereby baseless generalizations easily appear logical and protective of the interests of some, especially those in positions of privilege. These definitions appeal to those groups whose members need to be co-opted in order to maintain the status quo. Second, basic natural human characteristics and conditions are used to differentiate between individuals in negative terms – superior/inferior, good/bad, intelligent/stupid, and other such polarizing descriptive terms become powerful resources in this process. Third, like other negative “-isms,” ageism and racism are part of daily life. In their wide variations, we come into contact with them in performing our daily tasks and routines. Fourth, all negative “-isms” have a conspiratory aspect about them. While the dominant group justifies its inhuman treatment by falsifying definitions, many victims “collaborate” by assuming and reproducing these same false conceptions of reality. Fifth, the underlying issue is one of power relations. The members of one group control others by controlling access to all kinds of resources. These divisions can only really be appreciated when they are analyzed from the perspective of power maintenance and hegemonic relationships. With regards to ageism, the question is one of age; with racism, it is one of race (generally European vs. non-European); with sexism (gender), it is whether an individual is male or female; with sexuality, it concerns heterosexual or homo-affective orientations; and with such health conditions as HIV/AIDS, the question is whether one is “contaminated” or not.

“Second, basic natural human characteristics and conditions are used to differentiate between individuals in negative terms.”

People's physical appearances and presumed (assumed) conditions are made criteria for judging intellectual capabilities, moral standards and emotional conditions, and with the help of predefinitions, these assist in placing individuals in stereotypical categories that have concrete consequences in their lives. These negative “-isms” generally close doors to opportunities in different sectors of life in society. As such, efforts are being constantly made to do away with these negative consequences and make the playing field for access to social services, psychological resources and material goods more equal for everybody. Re-establishing the dignity of people while assisting them to rebuild their self-esteem while contributing to social cohesion and citizenship formation is a goal this discussion should focus upon.

Strategies for facing challenges to social justice

This discussion finds its true meaning and purpose in provoking critical reflections about social justice and some of the challenges our modern societal values and practices present constantly. There is a continued absence of just, respectful and equal treatments in society. Little significant change seems to be effectively taking place. The police sections of newspapers the world over and 24-hour global television newscasts consistently provide evidence for this claim.

In the face of continued injustice and inequalities that multiply, one would conclude that more objective actions are needed to bring about more social justice, or at least, meaningfully reduce those occurrences that hinder it from firmly taking root among us. In presenting considerations about strategies that could help in the changing processes in many societies regarding issues of negative “-isms,” we make it clear that discriminations and exclusions are products of ideologies that can and should be reconstructed to focus on human beings in relationships with one another. However, one needs to be aware that there are individuals who would prefer to leave the social-cultural discriminations and political exclusions we are discussing just as they have been and continue to

“These negative ‘-isms’ generally close doors to opportunities in different sectors of life in society.”

be. There are others who would prefer to work within existing structures, programs and projects in order to bring about changes from within. A third strategy is one that could be considered by the socially conscious who seek to get engaged. This would involve being fundamentally against the conditions in our communities and move on to consistently engaging as an agent of structural transformation in order to transform the system into becoming more ethical and humane.

In this regard, some suggestions are offered in a summary manner so that those who are interested could go ahead and give further meaning and directions to these points for reflection:

1. Concentrate efforts on first establishing the theoretical underpinnings of diversity, social justice, ethical standards and participatory engagement. Working definitions have to be established for these concepts because any attempt to transform social reality today revolves around them. Without a critical appreciation of their contributions to the development of world views, no real transformation would be viable (Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009). Their basic implications for the community of interest have to be investigated on a continuous basis.

“Concentrate efforts on first establishing the theoretical underpinnings of diversity, social justice, ethical standards and participatory engagement.”

2. Investigate how the negative “-isms” most common in the community are constructed, maintained and reproduced. Finding out the why, when, how, who, and where of the discriminatory elements most present would be very basic tasks in this undertaking.

3. Incorporate and adopt, as much as possible, an intersectional paradigm with regards to any oppressive practice. The tendency to concentrate on a negative “-ism” in a unilateral manner does not seem to capture the reality of social oppression. As Hankivsky and colleagues (2010) and Bailey (2009) have demonstrated, for example, oppression based upon race, gender and social class are not additive and sequential. Rather, the oppressor constructs an integrated

and dynamically changing whole to continuously oppress the dominated and exploited person.

4. Establish and deal with the practical aspects of the most common discriminatory attitudes, values and behaviors using techniques that are objective and direct. An effective strategy would be to think about those who are being left out and dehumanized when the issues are heterosexism, ageism, racism, sexism, and many other exclusionary factors. Focus upon the real consequences of these conceptions in people's everyday lives. Lofty discussions would help, but the essence of everything should always relate to the real lives of some real individuals who form (have been assigned to) real existing human groups.

5. Focus consistently on social justice in all areas including the personal, professional, social and community living. This is necessary because of the systemic nature of oppression. Oppressions in relationships permeate all human interactions, at all times, in all places, and at all levels. In practical terms, some priorities could be set, but the main goal has to be integrative, working against oppression in its octopus-like diverse nature.

6. Choose to work as a team or individually. Working as a team takes more time for planning and administering. Relationships within the group would also need administering. However, the advantages may be worth the sacrifices especially if the intentions are to engage in more long-lasting activities. If participatory change is what is needed, then practicing this relational method within the group could also be a rich learning opportunity.

These strategies for dealing with forms of oppression are structured around a fundamental methodology for social interventions used by such successful transformative educators like Paulo Freire and Myles Horton (Bell, Gaventa & Peters, 1990). This methodology consists of observations, readings, reflections, group discussions, planning, strategizing, implementation,

“An effective strategy would be to think about those who are being left out and dehumanized when the issues are heterosexism, ageism, racism, sexism.”

assessing, follow up, and then, the whole process begins all over again. The difference now is that new realities would be observed, and any renewed efforts would focus on new problems and challenges. Another advantage in this methodology is that there is a continuous learning process (in spiral form) for all participants. Learning that can change lives could be developed along the way.

In other terms, these techniques are based upon these four basic acts in working against social injustice:

- Identify (give a name to the form of oppression in question);
- Describe (define and explain the topic that is really the focus of attention);
- Connect (present and discuss concrete examples of the form of oppression under scrutiny);
- Engage (discuss various strategies for getting involved in projects for meaningful change that really affects people's everyday lives); and
- Remain critical (the intersectional and dynamic characteristics of forms of oppression need to be stressed).

“The difference now is that new realities would be observed, and any renewed efforts would focus on new problems and challenges.”

For further reflections

In a text that discusses fundamental human issues, to talk about “Conclusions” would be a misnomer. The questions that motivated elaborating this article continue to be problematic. And for most people the world over, these issues refer to their ongoing daily experiences. As such, any ideas that have been discussed can only serve as food for thought for deeper reflections about the moral call to help build more humane, just and human societies.

Planning for progress in terms of reaching the highest possible goals as human beings in community is a truth that cannot be easily revoked. Basically, it involves a relatively widespread desire to transform the conceptions people have about human life in society and to understand that peace can only become reality when there is justice in a community. And for this to take place, an increasing number of individuals must take on the responsibility to drive efforts

with the objective of transforming people's lives by influencing their world views, attitudes, value systems, and basic behaviors in their relationships with other persons.

With this background understanding of the problem, social justice is defined as a concept that strives to capture the essence of the vocation of all human beings to work for the equal distribution of all resources, respect for everybody always, and the adoption of practices that continuously give due value to the dignity of individuals because above all, they too are human. The equitable distribution that is at stake is one that basically guarantees equal physical security and psychological safety. A community built upon social justice principles makes it possible for individuals and groups to be treated with fairness as well as have an impartial share of the advantages and disadvantages within a society.

In sum, in this article, explanatory efforts focused on making it clear that the principles of social fairness, political power-sharing and psychological security are universal. Differences could exist, but never in the essence of the emphases on the human being as an individual with rights and responsibilities that have to be recognized and respected so that the society itself would enjoy its material and other resources much more meaningfully. To offer support for the argument that social justice is a value for all societies, evidence was presented from the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The perspectives about "the option for the poor" adopted by Liberation Theology was introduced. Similarly, other culturally-based philosophies that undergird the relevance of just practices in society were also presented. Through these arguments, it was stressed that social justice is a human factor, and that though cultural differences can have their influences in essence, this is a conception that only makes full sense when it is understood as a universal and ubiquitous responsibility.

Everyday experiences demonstrate that social justice remains an ideal difficult to make real in most relationships at the personal, professional and

"Different forms of oppression exist in society because of historical circumstances that favored some at the expense of many others."

even larger societal levels. Different forms of oppression exist in society because of historical circumstances that favored some at the expense of many others. Social realities were defined in ways that masked crucially dependent phenomena and these falsified definitions continue to exert uncritical influences on people, especially those who are the victims of these oppressive practices. Social, cultural, political and economic elements, instead of being employed as explanatory tools for constructing more human societies, are used to justify the unequal distribution of goods and services. Based upon ideological dispositions, traditional views and conservative practices, negative stereotypes are constructed, and these dehumanize the members of certain (natural and/or assigned) groups. These dehumanizing stereotypes lead to differentiating treatments that become commonplace. A very powerful consequence of this situation is that even some dominated and oppressed group members tend to adopt those world views, values and behaviors that lead to and justify the violation of their basic rights as human beings. With the continuation of practices that are unjust, all members of society lose because where there is injustice, true peace cannot exist.

As concrete examples for discussing stereotypical constructions, forms of oppression based upon advanced age and racial group were presented. The short-sighted nature in defining who belongs to the first group and the illogical reasoning upon which the members of the second group are defined are presented as social problems whose repercussions permeate other areas of life in community. The arbitrary performance of the intellectual (ideological?) groups that produce these definitions is reproductive and can only be questioned when there is an awareness of how systems of oppression work. This consciousness only serves as stepping stone for further action with the objective of transforming the system. Because as Paulo Freire (1998) has appropriately admonished,

No one constructs a serious democracy, which implies radically changing the societal structures, reorienting the politics of production and development, reinventing power, doing justice to everyone, and abolishing the unjust and immoral gains of the all-powerful, without previously and simultaneously working for these democratic preferences and these ethical demands (p. 67).

In agreement with this orientation, some strategies were introduced for individual and/or collective engagements. These working guidelines are not all-inclusive; they can be incorporated into other practices that have been tried by other socially conscious individuals. Once again, Freire (1998) assists us by pointing out that teaching is not to transfer knowledge. Rather it should help people think more critically and help develop knowledge that is more relevant and socially dimensioned. For more specific teaching about social justice, Bell (2007) posits that

The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part (p. 2).

“What the world needs much more of is JUST treatment for every human being in all parts of the world; in our local communities, we can contribute to this global call by doing the little things we do as SOCIALLY JUST as possible.”

What underlines the invitation to get engaged and help transform human society is the belief that people need to acquire more knowledge based upon critical thinking in order to become involved in a significant manner. The involvement that is of interest is one that constantly exposes and fights against all kinds of oppression (dehumanizing words and actions as injustices) such as – omissions, devaluing, exclusions, discrediting, misrepresenting, stereotyping, scapegoating, prejudices, making others inferior, undue appropriations, violence, marginalizations, making others invisible, and many other methods with similar objectives. To get involved on the side of social injustice is not of interest here. What the world needs much more of is JUST treatment for every human being in

all parts of the world; in our local communities, we can contribute to this global call by doing the little things we do as SOCIALLY JUST as possible.

In the words of an old story teller in his eighties (at the time), in my village in Sierra Leone, the central message about social justice and oppression (based upon natural or induced differences) in this text is the following: “Being different is not the problem. Social conditions can change. What our neighbors do and how we respond, make all the difference.”

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