

# Examining social justice and equality politics essay



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Social justice and equality is a significant issue in almost all societies around the world. It encompasses other important issues like human rights, social policies, social welfare problems and the like. It includes concerns about race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational attainment and other factors that “categorize” individuals in a certain community.

Therefore, the intricate relationship between social justice, equality and social welfare is vital in understanding the values, norms and attitudes that individuals in a certain society possess.

In this paper, I will talk about social justice and equality and how it affects social policies and social work practice. I will also discuss certain relevant concepts like poverty and human rights, and I will also cite some social justice issues faced by vulnerable populations in Canada.

Let us start the discussion by defining what “social welfare” is. According to Hick (2007) social welfare has numerous usages, but it can be seen more often in four basic themes. Social welfare can be a philosophical concept or “an abstract set of principles that enable society to seek solutions to social problems”. It can also be seen as a “product” or “legislated documents that prescribe how income security and social services are to be carried out”. The third theme is that social welfare can be seen as a “process” or “a series of change that is never fully developed due to shifting contexts” and lastly, social welfare can be seen as a “framework of action” which is both a product and a process. (p. 2)

Canada is known to be a “ social welfare state” wherein social services and income security programs are available to citizens and these programs are provided by the government in various levels. (Hick, 2007, p. 1)

However, there are debates arising nowadays that questions Canada’s position as a “ welfare state” because of the tax cuts in funds that are allocated for social welfare programs such as income supplements and other monetary assistance for people who need help.

Hick argued in his book that Canada’s social welfare services provided by the government are diminishing, and citizens rely more and more in non-profit and for-profit organizations. Cutbacks on government spending budget for social services has been implemented and strict eligibility criteria has been set in order to determine who are the people “ deserving” of assistance.

Hick also stated that Canadian citizens are disagreeing over whether income security programs should be extended, strengthened or reduced. These differences are because differences in political ideologies, economic theories and basic notions and views about income security programs in our society. (Hick, 2007, p. 20)

In my opinion, the government should not cut budgets on social welfare programs and policies. I think that it is the duty of the Canadian government, as a “ welfare state” to help its citizens in every way possible in terms of attaining socially-just and equal programs and projects with regards to social welfare.

So, what is a socially-just welfare system? Our definition of a “ socially-just” welfare can be different because of the different experiences we have. Our definitions may vary because of factors which affect our perception and behavior such as our family, mass media, our religion, education, socio-economic status or the experiences we had in relation to social welfare. For example, if one belongs to a low-income family, his/her definition of “ socially-just” welfare can be those programs that give monetary, social and psychological assistance to all low-income families, without the need for strict criteria of eligibilities. This is because he/she experiences firsthand how hard it is to belong to a low-income family. On the other hand, if one belongs to a high-income family and he/she works hard in order to earn money, he/she may argue that a “ socially-just” welfare system is the one who employs strict rules on eligibility. He/she may argue that people’s taxes should not be used to “ assist” people who are not in great need of assistance. In short, we may have different views regarding a “ socially-just welfare” system because of the experiences and factors that shape the way we perceive things.

There are also emerging theories on what is a “ socially-just” just welfare system. For example, ideas such “ Social Investment State” by Anthony Giddens (1998) proposes a social investment state that focuses on “ social inclusion by strengthening civil society and providing equality of opportunity than equality of outcomes”. Giddens believe that jobs should not be low-paying and dead-end in order to attain social inclusion. Also, an inclusive society must provide the basic needs of those who cannot work. (as cited in

Hick, 2007, p. 105-106) This is one of many views that we can use in analyzing the aspects of social welfare.

In a globalized economy wherein every action of almost all countries affects each other, we should always take into consideration the three important aspects namely social justice, equality and human rights intersect. " Human rights" are " inherent rights without which we cannot truly live as human beings." The International Bill of Human Rights is the primary basis of the United Nations (UN) to promote, protect and monitor human rights and fundamental freedom. (Hick, 2007, p. 115-116)

According to Mishra (1999) " globalization undermines the ability of the national governments to pursue policies of full employment and demand management". Furthermore, he said that globalization increases the inequality in wages and working conditions and high-paying jobs are shrinking while part-time employment flourishes. Mishra also pointed out that globalization prioritizes deficit reduction and tax cuts over social security systems. Lastly, he stated that globalization shifts power multi-national corporations and away from the labor and civil society, thus weakening the support for social welfare programs. (as cited in Hick, 2007, p. 122-123)

In my opinion, social justice, equality and human rights are all forms of protection for people in one way or another. All three preserves the right of the individual to have access to resources like employment, education and leisure. Also, reaching social justice and equality will surely alleviate the condition of individuals and will be able to make them attain the best state of

well-being possible. All three concepts focus on the improvement of the individual, not just in monetary forms but most importantly as a complete and contented citizen. But as we have mentioned earlier, these three will not be attained as long as there are existing problems in the society like inequality, discrimination and lack of opportunities.

Upon mentioning the hindrances in attaining justice and equality, let us now discuss “poverty”. According to Hick (2007), Canada is one of the only few countries without an official poverty line. However, Statistics Canada produces the Low Income Cut-off or LICO, which reveals that “in 2004 around 3.5 million Canadians or 11.2 percent lived below the after-tax LICO level”. (p. 205)

Poverty can be measured in terms of income, or in terms of how low or high can you locate yourself in the continuum line of LICO. However, according to Hick (2007), poverty is beyond income. Poverty can also be “social exclusion” or the marginalization of individuals. It means that individuals have limited opportunities or abilities to participate in social, economic, and cultural activities of society. The use of social exclusion is an attempt to broaden the definition of poverty beyond income levels computation. It views poverty as the inability to pursue well-being because of lack of opportunities. (p. 210)

In my opinion, how we view poverty is affected by the socialization we have as we grow up. We can see poverty as a lack of material or monetary wealth or we can view poverty as social discrimination or social exclusion. If one experiences the exclusion because of prejudice against him/her because

he/she is seeking assistance of the government, that in is self can be “poverty.”

Poverty is an important issue because there is a percentage of the Canadian population who belongs to these distinctions. Poverty is evident especially to migrant workers as they are sometimes deemed to have “incompetent” credentials. “Credentialism” issue arises as degrees and certification from non-traditional source countries may not be as readily recognized.

Discrimination, non-recognition or undervaluing of foreign educational skills, credentials and education are most likely the factors why most immigrants live beyond LICO as opposed to Canadian-born citizens. (Hick, 2007, p. 218)

Kazemipur and Halli (2001) found out in their study that with everything else held equal (like education and language) the odds of poverty increases by 56 percent if one is an immigrant. (as cited in Hick, 2007, p. 218)

High poverty rate among immigrants is an example of a social justice issue related to vulnerable populations. Because of the combination of discrimination, limited opportunities to work, hesitance of employers to hire immigrants because of “adjustment issues” and undervaluing foreigner skills and credentials, immigrants are singled-out. They are not able to realize their full potential and are forced to live below the “poverty line” because of the reasons mentioned above. According to Hick (2007) these deep-seated problems cannot be solved by the labor market alone. Variety of policies is needed such as employment and pay equity, recognition and promotion of the “hidden skills” of new immigrants to prospective employers, the provision of language and skills training to the new

immigrants and the expedited recognition of foreign credentials. Hick argued that these policies are needed to address the social exclusion of recent immigrants and racialized communities". (p. 218)

This discrimination of migrant workers because of the fear that they are "not as good" as Canadian Citizens is a clear manifestation of injustice. In a society that calls itself a "social welfare" state, this kind of inequality must be eradicated. In my opinion, inequality and injustice arises in a society like ours when people start to mistreat and judge others in terms of their race, ethnicity, gender, social class and the like. As migrants workers adjust to the culture and practices in Canada, it would be unhelpful if people will judge them instead of helping them.

Another vulnerable population in Canada is the Aboriginal peoples. According to Hick (2007) 31. 2 percent of the Aboriginal peoples live below LICO. (p. 218) They are discriminated along with other immigrants in terms of skills and educational attainment, thus making it hard for them to find a high-paying job, or even a sustainable job.

Malcom Saulis (2003) discussed the state and condition of programs and policies for social welfare in relation to the Aboriginal peoples in his article "Program and Policy Development from a Holistic Aboriginal Perspective" which can be found in our Reading text. In his article, he stated that even though Aboriginal communities are now fully capable of delivering and implementing social welfare programs, they still do not have autonomy to do programming in a way that fully takes into account the culture of their people. (Book of Readings, 103-104)



This is a social justice issue because the Aboriginal peoples are still deprived to practice and nurture the culture that they have for a very long time already. Limiting them, by not letting them incorporate ceremonies, dances, songs, drums, gatherings and the like in social welfare programs prepared and attended by their own people is equivalent to depriving them of their own well-being. Integration to “ society” should not interfere with the culture and tradition that the Aboriginal people possess.

Saulis (2003) identified the difference between Aboriginal and mainstream policy-making processes and found out that Aboriginal peoples are more interested in the “ collective” rather than the “ individual” and the approach of the former is more community-based. (Book of Readings, p. 109)

Therefore, not letting the Aboriginal peoples decide for themselves in terms of social welfare programs will not work. They have a frame of thought different from the mainstream ideas and it would work best for them to let them practice their traditions and beliefs and let them incorporate it in the programs that the government provides.

Canadian social workers therefore have a very important role in ensuring that social justice and equality is incorporated within the delivery and design of social welfare programs and policies. They are the ones who will deal with people and they are also the ones who are placed in-between the government and the recipients of social welfare programs. Social workers are the one who could see the bigger picture, as they know why certain policies are made or approved, and they also know what is happening in the “ field”.

They are the people who can see the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens of Canada who are the targets of the programs.

Social justice and equality can be factored into welfare designs and deliveries by assessing the needs of the target population. Since there has been tax cuts recently in the budget for social welfare projects, the government devised tools that would determine whether one is eligible for social welfare or not, such as income allowances and other monetary measures. What should we take into consideration in making and delivering social welfare services is not just the capacity of the individual to make money, but also the acceptance of society itself in that individual. Meaning, instead of looking at the individual's personal problems like he/she cannot find work or he/she cannot find a stable source of income, we should look at what kind of society that the individual revolve around. Is Canada's society discriminating against immigrants, Aboriginal peoples or women? Are there enough work for everybody? What state or working conditions in Canada? By doing these, we do not stereotype the individual and we do not label him/her, but we are actually looking at the holistic view of the current conditions. If Canada's working environment is not discriminating and on the other hand inviting to all citizens, then the target population of social welfare programs in terms of income supplement would be reduced.

Justice and equality should be enjoyed by all citizens of Canada, regardless of whether they are immigrants, First Nation peoples, Aboriginal peoples and the like. Government programs should be accessible to all individuals regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, educational attainment and the like.

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Since social workers are the one who are in the “ field” they can also suggest better ways of conducting social welfare programs and they can also influence policy-making projects of the government and politicians. Social workers can pin point the roots of the problem and suggest more comprehensive solutions in addressing this because they are more exposed to the individuals needing assistance.

Also, as mentioned by Hick (2007) in the first page of his book, almost all Canadians of all ages has been in need of help of social welfare programs once in their lives. Even children, single parents, women, aging citizens, disabled or people simply undergoing a difficult time in their lives has in one way or another needed help from the government. (p. 1)

In terms of international social justice issues, Canadian social workers can also influence the policy-making process of other countries who aim to be a “ social welfare state”. Because of the experiences they already have in working with Canada’s programs, they can give efficient programs for starters and they can also be open for consultations in order to guide other countries who want to adapt a “ welfare state system”.

In conclusion, I could say that I learned so much about social justice and equality in this assignment. Also, I was able to review the basic concepts about social welfare and was also able to reflect on the state and condition of social work practices and programs in Canada. I hope that the Canadian government as well as the citizens could improve the conditions in our country to further promote social justice and equality and in order to protect and exercise the well-being of its citizens.