

Social Structures and Structural Injustice



Experiential Ethics 2024

Housekeeping

- Op-Ed: almost ready!
- Independent Project:
 - General Idea of the project
 - Start working on this!
 - Week 8: Project Workshop
- Advocacy Assignment: extended deadline

Case: Sandy

- Sandy, a single mother with two children, faces eviction from her poorly maintained, central-city apartment building, which a developer plans to convert into condominiums.
- Despite her search efforts and assistance from an apartment finding service, Sandy discovers that affordable rental apartments close to her workplace are scarce. The few available options are either too expensive or located in undesirable areas with long bus commutes.
- Eventually, she settles for a small one-bedroom apartment far from her job, where her children will share the bedroom, and she will sleep in the living room. Sandy learns she needs a three-month rent deposit to secure the apartment. Having spent her savings on a car down payment, she faces potential homelessness due to typical landlord policies.

Practical Activity 1

- In groups discuss the following question:
 - Who is responsible for what happens to Sandy?
 - Why?
 - What did they do (precisely) to cause the Sandy situation?
 - Was the conduct of the “perpetrators” unethical?
- 10 minutes
- Round of presentations in which each group reports their conclusions (agreements/disagreements)

Practical Activity 2

Would your answer/view to the previous question change if

- a) Sandy is an alcoholic.
- b) The landlord is a very rich man.
- c) Sandy was in jail a few years ago.
- d) Neighbors near Sandy's workplace organized to ban affordable housing.

Structural Injustice

- Structural injustice occurs when everyday, normal social practices systematically put some in positions of vulnerability and others in positions of security.
- Structural injustice is maintained by ordinary, well-meaning people embedded within institutions that constrain their choices – by us.
- the concept of ‘structural injustice’ capture a wrong that is attributable neither to individual action nor to a law or policy.
- Someone is the victim of structural injustice when they suffer a wrong as a result of being in a *social-structural position*.
- “Structural injustice, then, exists when social processes put large groups of persons under **systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities**, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them.” (p. 52).

Structural Injustice

- What makes structural injustice different from other moral wrongs?
- Why is this a matter of justice, as opposed to misfortune or bad luck?
- In what ways is Sandy prevented from developing/exercising her capacities? What capacities are relevant here?
- Is there an identifiable set of capacities that all human beings should have the possibility of developing and realizing? (Flourishing Lens)
- In what sense is Sandy dominated? By whom?

Could Algorithms be a True Fix for Structural Injustice?

Kasirzadeh discusses Mandy's case, in which an algorithm designed to be "fair" grants her a loan to pay her rent.

Why is Mandy a victim of structural injustice? Why isn't the bank's algorithm, which has been programmed for distributive fairness, sufficient to solve her problem?

Individual and Structural Responsibility

Am I responsible for structural injustice?

Individual and Structural Responsibility

Am I responsible for structural injustice?

1. **Liability:** What am I blameworthy for?
 - a. Backwards-Looking

2. **Accountability:** How am I positioned to prevent or repair harms in my communities?

Social Connection Model of Responsibility

- 1) it **does not isolate perpetrators**: in cases of structural injustice, finding some agents guilty of perpetrating specific wrongful actions does not absolve the thousands/millions of others whose actions contribute to the outcomes from bearing responsibility;
- 2) it judges **background conditions of action**: in many of these cases, the harm does not come about as a result of deviation from a norm/law, but precisely because the normal rules and conventions of our practices are followed and these background conditions of action are themselves unjust;
- 3) it is more **forward-looking** than backward-looking: structural injustice is ongoing, rather than an isolated event that has concluded; “the point is not to blame, punish, or seek redress from those who did it, but rather to enjoin those who participate by their actions in the process of collective action to change it.”
- 4) its **responsibility is essentially shared**, meaning that each individual agent's contribution cannot be isolated or identified, and they are all responsible for the outcomes in a partial way;
- 5) it **can be discharged only through collective action**: none of us can change practices and institutions on our own; political action, which involves communicative engagement through diverse avenues (state, market, civil society, private sphere); how any agent will meet their responsibility further depends on a series of parameters: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability.

Practical Activity 4

- What would it take to change Sandy's situation? How could the other actors contribute to that change, even in small ways?
- What would it take to change Mandy's situation? How could actors in her story contribute to that change, even in small ways? What role could algorithms and/or other technology play in mitigating structural injustice of the kind Mandy faces?