

Structural Injustice Animation

Transcript

Rebecca Richards [RR]: *What is 'Structural Injustice' and why is this kind of injustice distinct from other kinds of injustices?*

Agomoni Ganguli-Mitra [AGM]: Yes, so I think the first thing that's worth clarifying is that structural injustice is concerned with the inequalities in societies and sometimes globally, that result from how people positioned in society and in relation to each other. It's not about punishment or liability for wrongdoing. It's also not about distributive justice, which is concerned with fairness in the distribution of resources or opportunities. Rather, it's the idea that as a great number of people (in society) or even globally, go about their own business, following their own projects and their own perfectly legitimate self-interests and goals...well some of the outcomes of these behaviours and actions will have effects that are unfair on others, or that give rise to particular forms of inequalities.

So imagine that over a decade, young professionals, with relatively modest means, start moving into relatively poor urban neighbourhoods. And that over this time, the neighbourhood transforms in a way that suits the needs and tastes of these young professionals, which then attracts more of them, and so on. You might find that the house prices go up, that small businesses lose out to hipster coffee shops and large chains. And suddenly, people of have lived in those neighbourhoods for generations find themselves driven out, because they can't afford the rent anymore. They move out further away from the city, away from good schools, perhaps face even longer commutes, or can't hold their former jobs and they are faced with increased inequality and poverty, through no fault of their own (and ostensibly, through no one else's fault either).

So really, structural injustice is the result of the fact that in order for a large number of people to flourish, be happy or do the things they want to, others might suffer, or face inequality and oppression. These then give rise to certain kinds of responsibilities to ameliorate these injustices.

RR: So what kinds of responsibilities?

AGM: An important feature of the kind of model I am talking about is that this is not about liability, or pointing fingers at individuals who have done something wrong in particular. Rather it's a call to collective responsibility to make things better. In that sense it's forward looking. It asks us to consider how our own actions and behaviour as well as those of our institutions or governments, are contributing to the oppression of others (while we flourish) or to rising social, economic, political, or health-related inequalities.

RR: *Why are structural injustices of particular importance in the context of global health emergencies?*

AGM: So, there might be this notion that because humanitarian crises are called 'natural' disasters (think of the phrase 'act of God') or that health emergencies are caused by a mosquito-borne virus, human responsibility is somewhat limited. But there is a reason why health crises happen where they happen, and that goes beyond 'there was a huge flood', or 'there are mosquitos in the area'. There is a reason why Ebola happened and spread where it did. Stronger health systems, stronger economies, would have coped better. Often the severity of an emergency or the havoc it wreaks will also depend on the social structures and institutions of that context. Also, our responses to health emergencies tend to be acute and limited. We need to save lives, we need to attend to the injured, and quickly. But this overlooks existing social, economic, political inequalities, and might even reinforce them. So we need to ask ourselves, are our public health or policy response inadvertently reinforcing gender discrimination, or are they inattentive to individuals with disability, for example?