

WHAT IS SOCIETAL OR INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION?

By Susan O'Halloran

Some people believe that it's natural for people who are different to have conflicts. However, when people don't get along, it often has more to do with injustice than the differences between them. If some groups get more unearned advantages than others, that's a recipe for trouble.

A first grade class of children, for example, might get along just fine, but what if the adults start treating them unfairly? What if the children who wear glasses get ice cream and the others don't? What if the children who have brown eyes have to do homework but the others don't? How long would that classroom remain peaceful?

A key to understanding why we have the social problems and cultural clashes we do today is to explore the theme of justice throughout history — how were the institutions of society set up to insure that some folks got more than others?

Defining systemic discrimination

When there's discrimination on a huge, wide scale, we call it systemic or institutional discrimination. If a dogcatcher abused his or her power and was mean to dogs that would be an example of individual discrimination. But if a county had a law that banned all dogs and allowed their mistreatment that would be an example of an institutional or systemic discrimination. Words with the suffix "ism," such as racism or sexism, are describing institutional discrimination. Systemic discrimination is different from individual discrimination in four ways:

- in *permanence* (for example, you can't change your skin color or gender),
- in *duration* (how long the discrimination has been going on),
- in *intensity* (how severe the oppression and mistreatment is and how many institutions are involved) and
- in *consequence* (the effects of the discrimination on people's lives).

Someone may discriminate against you because of how you are dressed. But if your mistreatment happens only once in awhile when you go to a certain restaurant, and if it doesn't have a huge effect on your life (plus you can choose to change your clothes), that discrimination would be more random than systemic. That doesn't mean it isn't unfair and it doesn't hurt, but it is different from people who are *almost always* faced with unfair treatment from *almost all* of society's institutions. They cannot change the thing that brands them as outsiders and the cumulative effect on their lives is severe.

For example, before the 1960s, the discrimination against people based on the color of their skin (permanence) had been going on for hundreds of years (duration). People lost

their livelihoods and their lives, plus they were barred from certain schools, jobs, banks, transportation choices and so on (intensity). Every institution in our society was involved (intensity again). Plus, the effects have been felt in every major area of life — education, housing, and employment — for generations and still has impact on people's lives today (consequence).

Getting the right prescription

The point of differentiating between individual and institutional discrimination is not to have a who's-got-it-worse contest, but to have the right diagnosis so that we can prescribe the right cure.

If a country, for example, had a policy of rounding up certain groups of people and putting them in jail, it wouldn't really make a huge dent in that group's predicament if the jails held classes to train *the jailers* not to discriminate. Yes, it would make the captives' time in jail easier, but they'd still be in jail. To have a more thorough and lasting change, all the systems in that society - legal, governmental, criminal justice and so on - would have to be overhauled.

Designing programs on three levels

It is extremely important to look at your own biases and how you treat others. But dealing only with personal prejudices and interpersonal relationships will never bring us the kind of society we want.

Of course, each level - personal, interpersonal and societal - influences the other. It's a circle. If we were more secure as individuals, if we weren't afraid that there wouldn't be enough for us, we would be less likely to create unjust societies. If societies were more even-handed then individuals would be treated better and, therefore, feel better about themselves, experience less stress and be more inclined to create fair institutions. Around and around we go.

If our society is not just, it will be much harder for people to get along, no matter how much individuals work on their own biases (the personal level) or how well people treat each other one-on-one (the interpersonal level).

When you are designing your organization's diversity and inclusion program, you must plan for a deep dive on all three levels of change: personal, interpersonal and societal. Then, you must be able to show people how to apply the learnings from those three levels to your particular institution.

Including awareness and skills training around the societal aspects of discrimination can be the missing ingredient in your organization's diversity and inclusion initiatives.

