

Equality, Equity or Justice-Finding the Greater Good

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Inequality has been a universal issue debated over many centuries throughout the world in many nations. The United Nations defines inequality as the “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights or opportunities” (https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wess/wess_dev_issues/dsp_policy_01.pdf). According to Merriam-Webster, equity is “justice according to natural law or right, freedom from bias or favoritism” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity#examples>). However, equality is defined as “the quality or state of being equal” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equality>). Which should we value more?

The illustration of three people trying to watch a baseball game over a fence is a great way to explain the difference and see which concept may be more valuable. One individual is of short stature, another of average stature, and another of tall height. The short individual cannot see over the fence and neither can the average height individual. Only the individual of tall stature can see over the fence because of his “natural” advantage of being taller, which he was born possessing.

Equity would be providing crates so that the two individuals who cannot see over the fence can now be at the same height as the taller individual. The shorter individual may need two crates to see the game whereas the individual of average height needs only one. However, the concept of equity would deem that the naturally tall individual does not receive a crate since he can already see the game over the fence without one. However, equality would be equally providing each of the individuals with one crate- putting the shortest individual at a disadvantage, as they would still not be able to see over the fence with one crate. Is it more just to provide equal opportunities or outcomes? That is a question to be examined critically. Therefore, equality has been argued to be fair in what is provided but not in the outcome. Likewise, equity has been argued to be most fair in its outcome but not what is provided to all. Justice in theory removes the unfairness of distribution of

goods and the outcome by removing the barriers altogether that prevent equality and equity. You may ask yourself well what in the scenario would be the barrier that caused the issues of equality and equity in the first place. The clear answer is the fence. If the fence, was not there to begin with or was short enough or opaque enough all three individuals would have equal opportunity to watch the baseball game.

An example of equality in healthcare would be a clinic that offers free check-ups every morning. This could put certain people at a disadvantage if they work in the morning and this is the only time appointments are scheduled. Likewise. The same clinic could demonstrate being equitable by offering services with fees based on the income of individuals seeking those services. Therefore, both with equitable and equal approaches, the clinic would still fail to meet the needs of certain groups of people.

This same example could be applied to a healthcare professions student admissions scenario where two students both may have high grade point averages but one comes from a wealthy family and another from a low-income household. At times, universities may offer more assistance to the student with the low-income household through opportunities like student loans, grants, and scholarships whereas the high-income family student may not benefit from these. Perhaps the student with the high grade point average and high-income family will only benefit from the merit based funding. However, both examples are only equitable in nature because they do not assist the student who did not earn a high grade point average and wishes to be admitted to the same school. That student would not be able to equally participate in the merit based funding. Therefore, the answer to the aforementioned question is clear: Equity or equality, which should we, value more as human beings? Neither concepts are of true value. Why? Neither are ultimately valuable because not everyone wins with those concepts implemented. The key word however is justice.

Social justice is a term commonly used in the education of health care professional students. Interestingly, Redman & Clark (2002) defines social justice as the “equitable distribution of benefits and burdens in society”. The concept is focused on the “equitable” balance and distribution of social benefits and burdens. Although this may be the means to an end, perhaps the higher aspiration should be to attain true justice that removes the barriers altogether—not the ones we can’t change like our height but those that can be changed like the barriers that our patients face to get healthcare in

general or the barriers healthcare students face to getting in and graduating school. We as healthcare professionals and educators need to open our mind as to what those barriers or “fences” are in our realms so that we can work with our leadership and policymakers to make change that will be truly effective and fair not only in outcome but also in the provision of goods. We admonish you to not only identify these “fences” but also more importantly earnestly work to tear them down.