

Introducing the Conflicting Meanings of “Justice” Using a Candy-distribution Exercise

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Introduction

Environmental justice (EJ), as both a body of scholarship and social movement, is concerned with the intersections of social justice and environmental issues. By the 1980s, scholars and activists began to document anecdotal evidence suggesting that locally undesirable land uses (LULUs), including landfills, toxic waste sites, and hazardous industrial facilities, were more likely to be located in low-income communities and communities of color than in wealthier, white neighborhoods (for historical accounts, see Cole and Foster 2000 and Gottlieb 2005). Key studies conducted by the United Church of Christ (1987) and Robert Bullard (1983) established empirical evidence for this pattern. In 1991, EJ activists organized a national conference (FNPCES 1991) at which they articulated the goals of the movement and President Clinton signed an executive order requiring federal agencies to consider EJ concerns, which led to the creation of an EJ program within the U.S. EPA (EPA 2015). Since that time, activists and scholars have broadened their consideration of EJ issues to include many socio-ecological concerns related to power, privilege and the environment, including disproportionate access to environmental amenities and resources (e.g., parks and open spaces, clean water and air), climate change issues (e.g., unequal impacts and tensions between economic development needs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions), and food and agriculture (e.g., farmworkers’ health and rights, elitism in sustainable food movements).

As awareness about EJ has grown, more instructors have integrated these topics into their courses. Some students enter environmental and sustainability studies courses with very strong ideas about injustice and passionate abhorrence for anyone with conflicting views, while others have not thought about justice in context of environmental concerns. The exercise described below was designed to challenge such views and introduce EJ by asking students to critically examine what a “fair” or “just” situation is. This is accomplished through an activity in which students distribute resources (candy and hypothetical parks) and hazards (hypothetical industrial sites) among their classmates and then discuss both the outcomes and their decision-making processes. Ultimately, the exercise will demonstrate that “justice” is not a straightforward concept (Schlosberg 1999; Shrader-Frechette 2002) and that decisions that seem just for one person or group might be unjust for another.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this activity, students should be able to:

- Compare and contrast different ideas of justice
- Apply ideas of justice to environmental controversies
- Develop their own personal definition of justice in the context of environmental issues

Original Course Context

- 35 to 60 minutes in one class meeting
- No student background knowledge or preparation needed
- Designed and tested in small classes of 10-40 students with both lower-division and upper-division courses, including an upper-division environmental justice course and required environmental history and ethics course
- Adaptable to sustainability and environmental studies courses of any class size (if class is broken into smaller groups)

Instructor Preparation & Materials

This activity works well as an introduction to concepts related to environmental justice; if the course includes EJ content, this exercise should be used before introducing other EJ material. If the instructor has a limited background in environmental justice, s/he may want to begin by familiarizing themselves with concepts

from the field. The table in Electronic Supplemental Materials (ESM) A summarizes some core EJ terms and questions to guide introductory content and discussions with students (that could be used to prepare handouts and presentation slides as desired). In addition, the introductory section of the Toxic Waste at Twenty report (Bullard et al. 2007) and Holifield's piece (2001) on defining environmental justice provide useful framing for this exercise. Instructors teaching natural resource issues might find the reader by Mutz et al. (2002) to be helpful.

The instructor should prepare two sets of cards or slips of paper depicting environmental amenities and disamenities (e.g., ESM-B). For the first set of cards, find an image depicting a smokestack or other environmental disamenity (hazard) and print enough copies for one-half to three-quarters of the students. For the second set of cards, find an image depicting a park or other environmental amenity and print out enough copies for one-quarter to one-half of the students. The number of environmental disamenities (hazards) and amenities should not be equal. The instructor should consider finding images that will be meaningful to the students, perhaps reflecting nearby locations and issues. The instructor should also acquire a bag of individually-wrapped (as the students will be handling them) candy pieces that includes more pieces than there are students in the class. This is an important consideration. If presented with the same number of candy pieces as students in the class, students may be more likely to distribute the candy equally. This makes the resulting discussion less interesting and productive. Similarly, in the author's experience, providing fewer candy pieces than there are students in the class leads some students to quickly offer not to have any candy and the exercise is completed without a great deal of deliberation; this also limits the ability to facilitate a productive class discussion about the exercise.

Activities

The following steps guide students through a set of decision-making processes to allocate environmental amenities (candy pieces and e.g., parks) and disamenities (e.g., smokestack). The instructor will provide some prompts, but the decision-making processes and outcomes will be completely executed by the students.

1. Explain to students that this activity should facilitate their thinking about environmental justice, which refers to the patterns of the distribution of environmental harms and benefits, and the decision-making processes around these issues. Encourage them to not overthink the exercise while participating and explain that there will be a broader discussion about the issues it raises after completing it. (2 min.)
2. Place a bag of candy in the middle of the classroom and ask students to distribute it among themselves as they see fit. Tell them that you will not participate, that they must distribute ALL of the candy, and that they should let you know when they are finished. After all of the candy has been distributed, ask them to reflect on how and why they shared resources as they did and if this was a difficult task. State that the next task will likely be more difficult, as it involves difficult considerations of trade-offs. (5-15 min.)
3. Place the amenities and disamenities cards in the middle of the classroom. Ask the students again to distribute these amenities and disamenities; all cards must be given out and students may acquire more than one card. In this exercise, having the card means that a student lives within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of the image on the card. Again, tell them that you will not participate and that they should let you know when they are finished. (5-10 min.)
4. After students distribute all the cards, ask them to reflect on the outcome and process of each activity (the candy activity and the amenities/disamenities activity) in a short guided writing response. What was the outcome of each activity and to what extent is that outcome fair or just? What process did the class use to distribute the candy, environmental amenities, and disamenities? To what extent were those processes fair or just? (5 min.)
5. Class reflection and discussion can be facilitated using the starting question "How did you distribute the candy and cards and why?" and those in ESM-A. In larger classes, instructors may wish to have students discuss these questions in small groups and reconvene to discuss common and divergent responses. The instructor should use the guiding questions to draw out and illustrate the different approaches to justice

described in ESM-A, and use the board/screen to underscore the new concepts and terms introduced. (10-15 min.)

6. Ask students to share with their neighbor how their ideas about fairness and justice have or have not changed as a result of the activities and discussion. The instructor should ask the students to summarize what they have learned through these exercises and then record these insights on the board. At this point, the instructor may wish to introduce the key distributive environmental injustices in the U.S.; in most cases, LULUs (locally undesirable land uses, such as toxic release inventory sites and landfills) tend to be located in communities of color and low-income residents (Bullard et al. 2007, Ch. 3). Explain that environmental justice activism, which tends to focus on concerns about the “environments” where people “live, work, and play” emerged in the 1980s as a way to address environmental issues not being addressed by the mainstream environmental movement (Gottlieb 2005). (5-10 minutes)

Follow-up Engagement

- The Executive Summary and Chapter 1 from the United Church of Christ’s “Toxic Waste at Twenty” report (Bullard et al. 2007) provide a nice set of follow-up readings to help students understand the historical development of environmental justice as movement and scholarship.
- Ask students to conduct research on the unjust distribution of LULU’s and identify two or three procedural or structural factors (see ESM-A for definitions) that led to the unjust outcomes.
- Share a news report about a recent environmental controversy, or have students find their own examples. Ask them to explore the ways different forms of justice are supported or denied by various actors in the environmental controversy case study.
- Have the students form groups and ask each group to find an organization working on environmental justice. Ask them to identify the advocacy approaches used by this organization. Students could also be invited to engage in some form of environmental justice activism for a cause that they personally support and reflect on their engagement in a follow-up essay.

Connections

- Issues of environmental justice can be related to energy extraction (e.g., mountaintop removal coal mining), food and agriculture (e.g., farmworkers’ rights and pesticide drift), climate change (e.g., implications for small island nations and the idea of “just” sustainable economic transitions), and urban planning (e.g., urban redevelopment/gentrification, providing access to greenspaces designed with the community’s needs in mind).
- Discussions of current environmental controversies can be linked to the underlying conceptions of justice and fairness valued by various stakeholders. For example, recent controversies surrounding hydraulic fracturing for natural gas extraction can be framed and examined with the following questions:
 - From an economic perspective, who benefits from these activities and who is burdened?
 - What are the environmental impacts from hydrofracking, especially those related to human health? Who is most affected by these impacts?
 - Who makes decisions about hydraulic fracturing and how are those decisions made?
 - What are the long-term impacts of hydraulic fracturing on communities?

Electronic Supplemental Materials

- A: Table of key terms and questions
- B: Environmental amenities and disamenities cards

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