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## **Environmental Equity and Environmental Racism**

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### *Introduction*

Social welfare developed to meet the needs of an industrializing society. During this time of rapid growth, social workers helped to establish many safe guards we take for granted in our society including: employment (workers compensation, unemployment insurance, and Social Security), child welfare (prevention of child abuse and neglect), mental illness (humane treatment of individuals with mental illness), and poverty (Medicaid and Medicare programs). Though social welfare has a history of working with vulnerable populations this history has generally not extended to issues relating to the natural environment. Some social welfare scholars have begun to address environmental issues (Berger and Kelly, 1993; Besthorn, 1997; Cahill, 1994; Coates, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 1998; Hoff, 1994; Hoff and McNutt, 2000; Hoff and Polack, 1993; Pandey, 1998; Park, 1994; Rogge, 1993, 1996, 2000) but much more needs to be done to infuse social welfare with an understanding of the interplay between human society and the environment.

Two concepts related to this intersection that have received a great amount of attention in fields outside of social welfare, but not in social welfare, are environmental equity and environmental racism. These concepts are complex and highly polarizing. Environmental equity is a broad concept that describes the disproportionate burden of environmental effects and the lack of equal opportunities in society faced by racial or ethnic minorities and people who are

socioeconomically disadvantaged. Debate surrounding issues of environmental equity can be difficult and emotionally charged. This paper is an attempt to frame the important concepts underlying the issue of environmental equity and more specifically, environmental racism, and to describe the importance of these concepts to the field of social welfare.

Reverend Ben Chavis, Director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, coined the term environmental racism in 1982 after events in Warren County Virginia, led him to believe that race was the predominate issue in the decision to place a toxic waste storage facility in the area. Reverend Chavis believed the decision to place the facility in a socioeconomically depressed, predominately minority community was a form of institutionalized racism. The Coalition Against Environmental Racism defines environmental racism as "racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, enforcement of regulations and laws, and targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and siting of polluting industries" (Coalition, 2000). This definition suggests that environmental racism takes form in the realm of policy-making, regulation and laws, and seems to suggest that there needs to be an intention of racism for there to be environmental racism. Another definition of environmental racism given by a prominent environmental justice advocate is: "...any environmental policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race or color" (Bullard & Johnson, 2000: p559). Bullard's definition points to the fact that policies might not be intentionally detrimental to one group, but might still lead to a situation where environmental racism can occur. Environmental racism occurs in many different ways: (a) the siting and operation of hazardous waste facilities or other locally undesirable land uses (LULUs) in or near poor, minority areas; (b) the lack of representation faced by people of color in local, regional, and national decision making processes; and (c) as a part of the very foundation our society through the lens of white privilege.

### *Environmental Justice and Environmental Equity*

The modern environmental justice movement began in 1982 with civil disobedience activities in Warren County, Virginia. Residents and environmentalists united in an attempt to block the construction of a toxic waste disposal facility in Warren County, a predominantly poor, black community. Several hundred people were arrested during the failed attempt to protect the community, including Congressman Walter Fauntroy (Mohai and Bryant, 1992). Congressman Fauntroy, backed by community outrage, petitioned the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) to study the effects of race on the placement of landfills in the South. The GAO study was followed closely by other studies and the environmental justice movement was born. This is not to say that environmental justice work did not exist prior to the GAO study and the civil disobedience in Warren County. Prior to the events in Warren County there were several studies looking at race effects from environmental hazards. The turning point for the environmental justice movement, and the significance of Warren County, was the coming together of the Environmentalist and the Civil Rights networks (Sierra Club, 1993).

Building on the foundations laid down by the GAO study and the energy created through the process of merging two entities into a single movement, a series of seventeen principles of Environmental Justice were developed in 1991 by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. These principles were developed and put forward in an effort to focus the Environmental Justice movement. The Principles of Environmental Justice offer a broad overview of the environmental justice movement and the vision the Leadership Summit has for the future. Included in the principles are guidelines on environmental equity,

steps needed to overcome racism and environmental racism, a description of the sacredness of the natural environment, and a description of humanity's place within the natural environment (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit Report, 1991).

There are many terms wrapped within the concept of environmental justice that are easily confused and can lead to misunderstanding in further discussions. It is important that a common definition be understood before other areas are discussed. Though common threads exist in the literature, there are no agreed upon definitions of environmental justice. The environmental justice movement has applied (practical) and theoretical (abstract) goals and, therefore, needs a definition that links both. The definition of environmental justice created by the Coalition Against Environmental Racism (2000) does a good job of incorporating both practical and abstract aspects of environmental justice.

The right to a safe, healthy, productive, and sustainable environment for all, where 'environment' is considered in its totality to include the ecological (biological), physical (natural and built), social, political, aesthetic, and economic environments. Environmental justice refers to the conditions in which such a right can be freely exercised, whereby individual and group identities, needs, and dignities are preserved, fulfilled, and respected in a way that provides for self-actualization and personal and community empowerment. This term acknowledges environmental 'injustice' as the past and present state of affairs and expresses the socio-political objectives needed to address them (p.1).

In this definition environmental justice is a broad concept covering personal, community, ecological issues and the inherent right of humanity to a clean and safe environment. This definition is in harmony with the Principles of Environmental Justice discussed earlier.

Within the concept of environmental justice, as noted above, is the notion that everyone is entitled to a clean and safe environment. The reality, however, is that there are inequities in the system which cause certain sections of our population to disproportionately live in areas that are neither clean nor safe. The right to equitable treatment and protection for all groups is a major concept within the environmental justice movement, this concept is known as environmental equity. The Coalition Against Environmental Racism (2000) developed the following definition of environmental equity.

...an ideal of equal treatment and protection for various racial, ethnic, and income groups under environmental statutes, regulations, and practices applied in a manner that yields no substantial differential impacts relative to the dominant group--and the conditions so-created (p.1).

Whereas environmental justice speaks of the rights of all people to a safe and clean environment, environmental equity refers to the equal protection of all groups through legislation, regulation, or practice, so that these groups do not bear an increased burden of the negative effects of environmental or social policies. There are similarities between environmental justice and environmental equity that might lead people to assume they are the same, after all both seek to assure that all people have a safe and clean environment. Environmental equity however, functions more as a tool of environmental justice. Environmental equity helps to insure equitable treatment through legislation, regulation, and other means. In this manner all groups may be assured equal treatment. Basically, environmental equity means that no single group should pay a disproportionate price for the

nation's environmental hazards (Pinderhughes, 1996). The discussion of environmental equity revolves around the concepts of fairness and unfairness (i.e., what is a fair distribution of hazardous material a community can be expected to handle and at what level do the scales tip into unfairness) (Sexton, 1999). Obviously concepts such as fairness and unfairness are highly subjective and therefore discussions of these concepts are fraught with difficulty.

The concept of environmental racism springs from the definition of environmental equity and the issue of fairness relating specifically to racial minority populations. Environmental racism contends that racial minorities are paying a disproportionate price for the nation's environmental hazards (Pinderhughes, 1996) and that minorities are faced with fewer opportunities to improve their condition (Romm, 2002). Furthermore, the concept of environmental racism posits that the disproportionate burden on minority communities is unfair and brought about through racist policies.

### *Role of Social Work*

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999) calls for Social Workers to confront racism and inequity through our practices. The NASW Code of Ethics section 1.05, *Cultural Competence and Social Diversity*, and section 6.04, *Social and Political Action*, both make explicit references to race and class. Section 1.05, part C states "Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability." Section 6.04 part D states "Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability" (National Association of Social Workers).

Until recently there was not a similar statement related to social work and the environment. In 2003, the National Association of Social Work book of policies titled *Social Work Speaks*, incorporated an environmental policy. This policy states that "...social workers have a professional interest, beyond the personal vested interest everyone shares, in the viability of the natural environment, including the noxious effect of environmental degradation on people, especially oppressed individuals and communities, and they have a professional obligation to become knowledgeable and educated about the precarious position of the natural environment" (NASW, 2003). The statement on the environment is heartening and a good first step in moving toward the presence of mainstream social work as a participant in environmental discourse.

The delay in addressing the natural environment can be seen as an effect of the origins of the profession of social work and the values of the society it supports. As stated earlier, social work developed to meet the needs of an industrializing society. Since its inception social work has tried to meet the needs of vulnerable populations within the structure of society. Certainly, social work has been instrumental in bringing about changes in society that have led to better working conditions, better health coverage and better civil rights, but this has all occurred within the confines of a political and economic system that requires continual growth and the exploitation of human and non-human resources. Social work has primarily been a reactive rather than a proactive profession with respect to overcoming inequities. In a recent essay on social work and the environment John Coates, a long time advocate for the integration of the natural environment into social work practice, stated that in order for social work to fully participate "...in the movement to bring about a sustainable and socially just society, the

profession must move away from the narrowness of individualistic and anthropocentric thinking, critique its reactive and supportive role in modern society, and become proactive in introducing and advocating new values, practices and lifestyles which are supportive of a sustainable and socially just society” (Coates, 2001). As the profession of social work continues to grow it is imperative that we critically assess that path we are on, understanding the importance of environmental issues in social work is a first step towards developing new values and practices, much as Coates and others have outlined.

Social workers have a history of assisting vulnerable populations and a documented ethical responsibility to assist these communities in need. There are a number of areas that can be addressed by social work professionals. Community social workers are in a good position to help communities organize grass-roots resistance to perceived inequitable hazardous waste facility siting and to help advocate for these communities. Social work researchers need to continue to examine issues surrounding environmental justice and develop methods to address racial and socio-economic inequities. By being aware of the effects that environmental issues have on our clients we, as a profession, are in a better position to help instigate positive personal and systematic changes.

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