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# Informational Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Social Justice in Library and Information Services

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a conceptual framework of social justice for library and information science (LIS) and services responsive to their core concerns and drawing from the disciplinary literatures in both philosophy and LIS. The framework is introduced in terms of the multifaceted concept of informational justice, defined as the just treatment of persons as seekers, sources, and subjects of information. The article also expands on the central aspect of informational justice, namely iDistributive justice, defined as the equitable distribution of access to information. An iDistributively just system is one that ensures all persons have sufficient access to information, where access is understood as a capability sensitive resource.

## INTRODUCTION

The profession of librarianship has long had a social ideal at its core. At the founding meeting of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1876, the library was praised as an “instrument always working in the direction of moral and social development” (Garrison, 1979, p. 35). With the ALA’s adoption of the “Library Bill of Rights” in 1939, protecting intellectual freedom and fighting censorship developed into a “professional imperative” (Wiegand, 1999, p. 11). More recently, the profession has expanded its scope beyond the confines of the library itself. In 1990 the ALA adopted the “Policy on Library Services to Poor People” (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 14), calling for, among other things, promoting equitable access, public awareness, and public policies to aid those who are poor (ALA, 2014). These social ideals are encompassed and extended in current discussions of *social justice* within the LIS professions (Britz & Blignaut, 2001; Dadlani & Ross, 2014; de la Peña McCook, 2001; Duff, Flinn, Suurtamm, & Wallace,

2013; Gilliland, 2011; McMenemy, 2012; Mehra, Rioux, & Albright, 2010; Pateman & Vincent, 2012; Usherwood, 2011). In order for this trend in LIS to have its promised impact, however, there is a strong need for LIS to develop its own understanding of social justice. This article addresses this challenge by developing a practical account of social justice for LIS that is relevant in the twenty-first century.

The term *social justice* is resonant with a number of positive associations—e.g., fairness, equality, inclusion, and diversity. The concept itself, however, remains undertheorized. As Rioux (2010) points out, “few studies of LIS are explicitly guided by established social justice theories” (p. 10). Philosophers have developed the most sophisticated accounts of social justice, so it is natural to look to philosophical theories for guidance (Mehra et al., 2010; Rioux, 2010). It is not clear, however, how useful it is to simply apply to issues in LIS a theory of social justice developed elsewhere. While such established theories must be brought into the conversation, they may not speak directly to the particular concerns of LIS professionals. The approach taken here is to pull from various philosophical accounts of social justice to help in developing a relevant framework of social justice for LIS in terms of what this author calls *informational justice*.

The theory of social justice for LIS starts with its historical roots in philosophical theories of social justice. These provide an understanding of how LIS professionals and scholars are using the idea of social justice in their work. Using these conceptual resources,<sup>1</sup> a multifaceted characterization of social justice is developed. This characterization highlights two features of a social justice orientation (an institutional focus and an ethic of care, solidarity, and respect) and three elements of social justice (distribution, participation, and recognition). The second part of the article describes a framework of social justice for LIS in terms of *informational justice*, defined as justice for persons and communities in their activities as seekers, sources, and subjects of information.

The final part of the article focuses on one aspect of *informational justice*—justice for persons as seekers of information. As such, all persons deserve an equitable share of information resources, what is called here *iDistributive justice*. While information equity (Lievrouw & Farb, 2003) is often held up as a goal for LIS (see, e.g., Kranich, 2001), it is not a straightforward matter to define what is meant by an “equitable share” of information. If social justice is to be a goal in the LIS professions, then we must have a way to assess to what extent we are achieving this goal. In order to do that, we need to specify the goal more precisely by asking two questions: (1) What is being distributed? and (2) What is a just distribution? Drawing from philosophical theories of distributive justice, the answers to these two questions form the foundation for the related concept of *iDistributive justice*. It will be argued that the focus of *iDistributive justice* should be on ensuring access to information as a capability sensitive resource, while un-

derstanding access as relational and multifaceted. It is also argued that a just distribution of access to information is one in which every person has sufficient access to exercise his or her basic capabilities.

### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of social justice in the context of information systems and services. As such, it draws on literature from both LIS and philosophy in articulating a conceptual framework of *informational justice* that can be applied in a wide range of LIS settings and contexts. The discussion presented here emerges from applying a methodological approach of philosophical research. Such an approach is similar to the stance employed by numerous philosophers throughout history and referred to in this article, e.g., John Rawls, David Miller, Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, Martha Nussbaum, and Amartya Sen. It involved intensive and close reading of these and other theorists, and the application of critical and contextual thinking to the core concerns of justice, information, and society. Based on the resulting analysis, various new terms and definitions were constructed, conceptual frameworks were developed, and justifications for these definitions and frameworks were articulated. The intent of this article is to present background information, develop the framework, and lead the reader through the reasoning for the framework. The intention is for the work to provide valuable theoretical and conceptual tools that will help LIS professionals think more clearly about social justice and act more mindfully and deliberately as social justice advocates as a result.

### PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

While philosophical discussion of the concept of *justice* goes back to at least Plato (Kamtekar, 2001) and Confucius (Chan, 1994), the term “*social justice*” is relatively new. The Jesuit Priest Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio (1793–1862) is credited with having introduced the term in the mid-nineteenth century (Miller, 1999). In the late nineteenth century, social justice became a topic of discussion among philosophers and social critics. At that time political theorists, such as John Stuart Mill, were responding to challenges to classical liberal theory posed by communist and socialist theories (Miller, 1999). The first book-length treatment of the topic, Westel Willoughby’s *Social Justice: A Critical Essay* (1900), conceived of social justice as a critical project that reveals the “discrepancies in many places between the ethical ideals actually held, and the social and economic conditions really existing” (p. 7).

Adding the adjective “social” to “justice” emphasizes the fact that society as an entire system may be evaluated on the basis of whether it is just. As Miller (1999) puts it, “Social justice requires the notion of a society made up of interdependent parts, with an institutional structure that

affects the prospects of each individual member.” (p. 4). Philosophical accounts of social justice focus on what is termed the “basic structure of society,” including the “political constitution, and the principle social and economic arrangements” (p. 4). The feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young (2011) takes an even broader view, stating that social justice “concerns all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings.” (p. 9). The subject of social justice, then, is the entire social system. Social justice requires us to ask big questions about the existence of injustices in the economic, political, and cultural spheres.

The continuing Catholic tradition of social justice adds a personalist ethic that aspires to treat every person as part of the human family (de la Peña McCook, 2001). In an address on social justice (2006), Pope Benedict XVI called for respect for both the needs and rights of individuals and “genuine solidarity that commits people to live and work always for one another and never against or to the detriment of others.” The importance of solidarity and the value of human connections of care are emphasized in a number of more *communitarian* philosophies, including the Feminist Ethic of Care (Noddings, 2013) and the African philosophy of Ubuntu (Murithi, 2006). Combining both of these perspectives, a social justice orientation includes both an understanding of social justice as a matter of social institutions and an ethic of solidarity, care, and respect for individual persons and communities within these institutions.

In contemporary political philosophy the term “social justice” is often used synonymously with *distributive* justice (Miller, 1999, p. 2; Young, 2011, chap. 1), which is contrasted with *retributive* justice. While retributive justice (also called *correctional* justice) is concerned with appropriate punishment for violations of law or morality, distributive justice is concerned with the just distribution of goods among the members of a society (Velasquez & Clair, 1990). Philosophical theories of social justice concern the just distribution of what the political philosopher John Rawls (1971) calls “the benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (p. 4). Philosophers disagree about what should be distributed (Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010); should we be concerned with the distributions of satisfaction of preferences, or resources, or capabilities? Philosophers also disagree about what a just distribution should look like (Lamont & Favor, 2013); should goods be distributed according to desert, equally, so as to create greatest benefit to the least well-off, or so that everyone has a sufficient amount? In the section of this article on iDistributive justice, these various theories of distributive justice will be discussed in detail.

Some philosophers, most notably Iris Marion Young (2011), have argued that the distributive paradigm of social justice is too narrow. Young defines social justice as “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” (p. 16). She argues that social justice not only concerns

the distribution of benefits and burdens among members of a society but also the ways in which persons are depicted in “cultural imagery and symbols” (p. 20). Some of the latter, such as racist, classist, or sexist imagery, can prevent us from recognizing all persons as equally valuable and worthy of respect.

Nancy Fraser’s (2001) conception of social justice combines these two aspects of social justice. These aspects of social justice can be called, following Fraser, *distributive* and *recognitional* justice. According to Fraser,

What is needed is a broad and capacious conception [of justice], which can accommodate at least two sets of concerns. On the one hand, such a conception must encompass the traditional concerns of theories of distributive justice, especially poverty, exploitation, inequality, and class differentials. At the same time, it must also encompass concerns recently highlighted in philosophies of recognition, especially disrespect, cultural imperialism, and status hierarchy. (p. 4)

In order to bring these two aspects of social justice together, Fraser proposes a third aspect: what she calls the “principle of parity of participation,” requiring that “all members of the society interact with one another as peers” (p. 6). Fraser argues that a society lacking distributive or recognitional justice will also lack participatory justice, and vice versa.

### THE PLACE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LIS

While some LIS scholars and practitioners only offer diffuse characterizations of social justice, a number of others provide precise definitions of the term adopted from their philosophical and historical origins and extrapolated to varied LIS contexts. These echo philosophical concerns of social justice in terms of equity, participation, inclusion, diversity, institutions, commonality, and other areas as applied in LIS. According to Mehra et al. (2010), for example, a socially just society is one in which “individuals and groups are treated fairly and receive an equitable share of all the benefits in society” (p. 4820). Rioux (2010) gives a similar definition, but uses the term “equal” rather than “equitable” (p. 11). The notion of an equal or equitable share is most frequently mentioned in the literature and captures the concern with distribution. Morales, Knowles, & Bourg (2014) characterize social justice as including respect for diversity, inclusion, and “the ability of all people to fully benefit from social and economic progress and to participate equally in democratic societies” (p. 440). Singh (2014) points out that social justice concerns society-wide or institutional policy, defining social justice as “a policy of inclusion in which a society or institution provides all individuals with equal opportunities” (p. 50). Williams-Cockfield (2014) defines social justice as “the advancement of equality and commonality within a society that understands and values human rights.”

Based on a survey of LIS articles referring to social justice, the author identified a number of key concepts and approaches. Social justice is characterized in various ways in the LIS literature; the following three strategies are the most typical: (1) categories of people or communities burdened with social injustice; (2) descriptions and definitions of social justice; and (3) strategies for achieving social justice within library and information services. The following provides a snapshot of both the range of approaches and the frequency with which they are used in the literature.

Works on social justice in LIS often specify persons and communities who are oppressed and disadvantaged<sup>2</sup> due to their

- ethnicity and/or language (Henderson, 1988; Naidoo, 2014);
- race (Dunbar, 2006);
- sexual orientation (e.g., Naidoo, 2014; Vincent, 2012);
- gender status (e.g., female, transgender, intersex) (Vincent, 2012);
- physical ability (e.g., Naidoo, 2014; Hill, 2011);
- health status (e.g., Henderson, 1988);
- religion (e.g., Naidoo, 2014);
- immigration status (e.g., Naidoo, 2014; Vincent, 2012);
- age (e.g., Vincent, 2012);
- income level and housing status (e.g., Vincent, 2012).

Authors in LIS also describe social *justice* using such phrases and terms as

- freedom (e.g., de la Peña McCook, 2001; Williams-Cockfield, 2014);
- human rights (e.g., Samek, 2007; Williams-Cockfield, 2014);
- dignity and/or agency of the individual (e.g., de la Peña McCook, 2001; Duff et al., 2013);
- democracy and/or representation (e.g., Duff et al., 2013; Mehra, Albright, & Rioux, 2006; Morales et al., 2014);
- inclusion and/or participation (e.g., de la Peña McCook, 2001; Hechavarria, 2014; Morales et al., 2014; Singh, 2014);
- commonality, common good, and/or community (e.g., Mehra et al., 2006; Rioux, 2010; Williams-Cockfield, 2014);
- diversity (e.g., de la Peña McCook, 2001; Mehra et al., 2006; Morales et al., 2014);
- equity or equality (e.g., Dadlani & Ross, 2014; de la Peña McCook, 2001; Duff et al., 2013; Hechavarria, 2014; Mehra et al., 2006; Morales et al., 2014; Rioux, 2010; Singh, 2014; Williams-Cockfield, 2014).

Other authors focus on social *injustice* using terms such as

- poverty and homelessness (e.g., Longstaff, 2011);
- discrimination (e.g., Longstaff, 2011);

- violence and hate (e.g., Longstaff, 2011);
- oppression (e.g., Duff et al., 2013; Dunbar, 2006).

The philosophy surrounding relevance of social justice in LIS is also varied. Some argue that it is not the job of librarians, archivists, and other information professionals to advocate for social justice, because our professional obligation is to be neutral brokers of information (Greene, 2013). The argument for professional neutrality says that LIS professionals ought not to give special status to particular points of view (e.g., those promoting particular social goals or conceptions of justice), but to provide a wide range of points of view (Mathiesen & Fallis, 2008). According to these neutralists, if LIS professionals take positions on social and political issues, they will undermine their ability to be seen as neutral brokers of information. By not favoring particular points of view, LIS professionals thereby serve all people no matter what information they are seeking. Through neutrality, LIS professionals thus express their equal concern for all patrons.

This justification of neutrality, however, is anything but neutral—LIS professionals value neutrality *because* they value such things as equality, justice, and service. LIS is the discipline that seeks to design systems and services that link people to information. Public librarianship, for example, is based on the belief that doing so has a social value, because an informed citizenry is better than an uninformed one and a life with access to a rich array of information resources is better than one without such access. Thus the real question is not whether LIS professionals should be neutral, but when and whether neutrality actually serves these values and when it does not. Neutrality serves these values when, for instance, information professionals provide the same level of service to a person whose beliefs they violently disagree with as they do to those with whom they agree. It does not serve those values when we fail to attend to the ways in which libraries and other information services may be reinforcing the exclusion and marginalization of underserved populations. The author suggests that seeking social justice, then, is not antithetical to the true value of neutrality.

The question arises, what is the unique role of libraries and librarianship in the promotion of social justice? It is important to keep in mind the breadth of concerns about social justice. Social justice applies to all aspects of a person's life, from her health to her ability to participate in political decision making to her opportunities for leisure. However, while it is necessary to keep social justice writ large in mind, the primary focus for LIS is on justice with regard to persons as seekers, sources, and subjects of information: what will be called here *informational justice*. What makes informational justice of central concern, and thus why libraries and other information services are particularly important, is the fact that informational injustice produces and reinforces other forms of social injustice, while information justice undermines systems of social injustice. Indeed,

informational justice serves as a good proxy for social justice writ large, because opportunities to receive and share information are central means for enhancing all aspects of people's lives.

### NEED FOR A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LIS

Based on the above summary of social justice as it has been discussed in the disciplines of philosophy and LIS, a multidimensional account of social justice seems appropriate. As Rioux (2014) has pointed out, social justice is "a diverse concept without a universally-accepted definition" (p. 25). This suggests that it may be preferable to avoid providing a single definition of social justice for LIS, so as to avoid prematurely limiting its scope. Following this approach, a single unified definition of social justice is not provided here. Instead, based on the forgoing literature review, it is possible to isolate five features of a social justice approach as potentially relevant to the LIS professions; these include two essential components of a social justice orientation and three important foci of social justice in terms of their potential relevance to the LIS professions.

#### *Components of a Social Justice Orientation*

- *Institutional perspective.* Institutions, economies, and cultures can be unjust without any individual person intentionally acting unjustly. A focus on social justice in LIS must keep in mind the importance of large structural and cultural forces and attend to how they shape the life prospects of individual persons and communities.
- *Ethic of care, solidarity, and respect.* It matters how those concerned with social justice relate to their fellow human beings. A social justice orientation in LIS approaches these issues with an attitude of care, solidarity, and respect for the individual human beings and communities involved.

#### *Foci of social justice*

- *Distribution.* The way in which institutions, economies, and cultures distribute goods (such as resources, opportunities, abilities) is socially constructed and should be evaluated in the LIS professions from the perspective of justice.
- *Participation.* Social justice recognizes the agency of all persons and avoids treating people as passive recipients of assistance. All persons within the community should have a voice and influence within social systems and institutions that affect them, including the LIS professions.
- *Recognition.* Cultural imagery and symbols may create and reinforce structures of domination and oppression; thus we should attend to the ways in which persons and communities are represented within various cultural institutions, including LIS settings and contexts.



*Strategies for LIS to Promote Social Justice*

A review of the literature in LIS on social justice shows a number of interconnected strategies for how libraries and other information services can (and often do) promote social justice.<sup>3</sup>

- Creating and supporting diversity in the information professions (Morales et al., 2014). Example: The University of Arizona's Knowledge River program recruits and provides financial and other support for Hispanic and Native American students seeking an MLS (Montiel-Overall & Littletree, 2010). (For more examples see Morales et al., 2014, pp. 443–444.)
- Providing information resources about and for social justice and social injustice (Jimerson, 2007; Morales et al., 2014). Example: Archives and libraries devoted to the collection of information about human rights and documenting human rights violations (Mathiesen, in press).
- Treating people justly as seekers, sources, and subjects of information (Rioux, Mehra, & Albright, 2007). Example: The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials set out principles to guide ethical stewardship of Native American cultural materials (Underhill, 2006).
- Using the voices and resources of library professionals and organizations to directly advocate for social justice locally and globally (Longstaff, 2011). Example: The American Library Association has passed a number of resolutions supporting social justice legislation in such areas as immigrant rights (ALA, 2007), marriage equality (ALA, 2009a), and universal health care legislation (ALA, 2009b).

These four strategies can be seen as mutually supporting and enhancing the ability of LIS professionals and organizations to create a socially just society. Promoting diversity within LIS professions and organizations directly increases social justice in the society by increasing it within those professions and organizations. Creating a diverse workforce of informational professionals also creates an environment in which a diverse range of people are more likely to be treated justly in the provision of information services. One way to treat people justly as seekers of information is to provide them with resources to learn about the existence of injustices and about what social justice is and how to fight for it. Finally, by promoting social justice in society in a direct fashion, the profession shows itself to be an engaged and progressive force in that society.

While all four strategies are worthwhile, it can be said that the third—treating people justly as seekers, sources, and subjects of information—is the core of what it means to be a socially just information professional or service. The rest of this article will focus on what it means to promote justice in the defining activities of LIS. The framework is introduced in terms of the multifaceted concept of informational justice that is defined as the just treatment of persons as seekers, sources, and subjects of information. The article also expands on the central aspect of informational justice,

namely iDistributive justice, defined in terms of an equitable distribution of access to information. An iDistributively just system ensures that all persons have sufficient access to information, where access is understood as a capability sensitive resource.

### THE FRAMEWORK OF INFORMATIONAL JUSTICE

Informational justice is a multifaceted concept, reflecting the three ways in which persons may be related to information—as seekers, as sources, and as subjects. To be treated justly as a seeker of information, persons should have an equitable access to information: this is called iDistributive justice. To be treated justly as a source of information, persons should have an equal chance to contribute to the production and provision of knowledge: this is called iParticipatory justice. To be treated justly as a subject of information, persons should be fairly depicted in the overall information array: this is called iRecognitional justice.

#### *Three Foci of Informational Justice*

- *iDistributive justice.* Information goods and information services should be equitably distributed among all members of the society.
- *iParticipatory justice.* All members of the society should have opportunities to communicate their point of view alone or in concert with others, to have that point of view taken into account, and to take part in shared decision making about the provision of information resources.
- *iRecognitional justice.* Contents of information available within the information environment should include fair and accurate representations of all members of the society.

The “i” has been added before each of the terms so as to highlight the context of information services and systems. In the rest of this essay, however, in order to promote readability, the “i” will often be dropped. The reader should keep in mind, however, that the terms “distribution,” “participation,” and “recognition” will hereafter be used in their informational sense.

As with distributive, participatory, and recognitional justice (Fraser, 2001), iDistributive, iParticipatory, and iRecognitional justice are mutually reinforcing. An information system or service that promotes distributive justice will also contribute to participatory and recognitional justice. Conversely, an information system or service that is rife with participatory and recognitional injustice is unlikely to be distributively just. Thus, it is important for libraries and other information services to consider all three types of informational justice.

Information services and systems that are *distributively just* may contribute to participatory justice by providing persons with the informational resources to develop and support their voices in public discussions. In addition, by providing equitable access to all, a distributively just environment

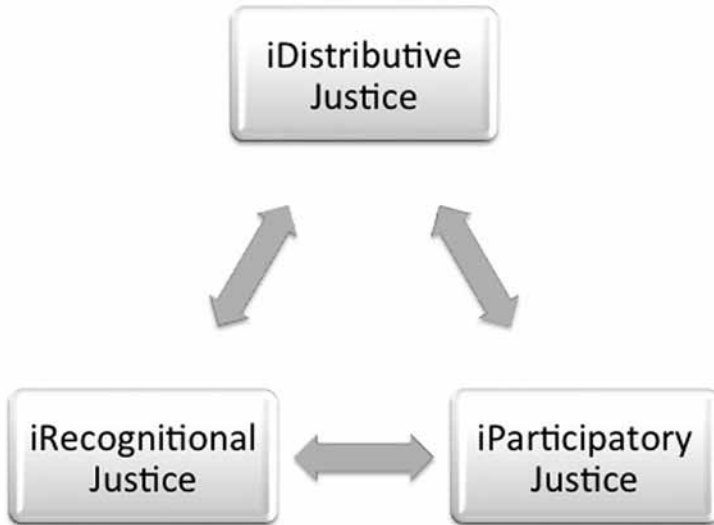


Figure 1. Relationship of mutual support between forms of informational justice.

insures that a wide range of people are exposed to those points of view. Distributive justice thus contributes to recognitional justice by creating an information environment that is welcoming to all people and by providing the information necessary to correct false information and stereotypes.

Information services can support *participatory justice* by providing opportunities for marginalized individuals and groups to express themselves. Participatory justice may contribute to distributive justice by providing more sources of relevant information for the community and by giving all members of the community—particularly those whose interests are often neglected—a voice in the design and implementation of information services so as to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of those services.

*Recognitional justice* has recently become a central concern in librarianship, as is evidenced by efforts to create more culturally competent professionals (Montiel-Overall, 2009) and to ensure that libraries avoid collecting children's books that reinforce stereotypes (Naidoo, 2014). Recognitional justice contributes to distributive justice by creating information environments in which all can feel included and thereby more able to access the information they need. Recognitional justice contributes to participatory justice by undermining stereotypes that contribute to the silencing and ignoring of marginalized populations.

### A FOCUS ON iDISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

iDistributive justice is defined as an equitable distribution of information goods and services. This still leaves the question of what counts as an "equi-

table” distribution. To answer this question, we need to delve more deeply into theories of distributive justice. A theory of distributive justice requires that we specify a good and a rule (Anderson, 2010, p. 81). The “good” refers to the thing distributed, while the “rule” refers to how we determine the just distribution of the good. In the following subsection, two theories of goods are considered—the resource theory and the capability theory. It will be argued that we should think of the good of iDistributive justice as access to information, where access is understood as a capability enhancing resource. In the next section, various rules of equitable distribution are considered. It will be argued that we should adopt a sufficientarian rule of distribution, where sufficiency is determined by access to information necessary for persons to exercise their fundamental capabilities.

*Theories of Distribution—What to Distribute?*

There are three standard philosophical theories of what good(s) we should be trying to distribute equitably.

*Distribution of Preference Satisfaction.* This *utilitarian* approach is most often adopted by those working in economics and public policy. For the utilitarian, the good to be distributed is the total amount of pleasure, happiness, or preference satisfaction that people (and perhaps other sentient beings) enjoy (Bentham & Mill, 2004). Preference utilitarianism, the view that we should seek to satisfy people’s preferences or desires, is a commonly assumed framework for assessing success in the supply of services. Suggested assessments of library service frequently couch preference satisfaction in terms of “customer satisfaction” (Hernon & Whitman, 2001).

There is, however, a serious problem with this approach when it is applied to environments in which there is poverty, discrimination, and oppression. Subjective evaluations of satisfaction are vulnerable to the distortion of *adaptive preferences*. Adaptive preferences are preferences that persons adopt based on their circumstances—they are adaptive to their environment, be it physical or social (Khader, 2011). Persons who have fewer opportunities due to a variety of social factors—such as racism, sex-

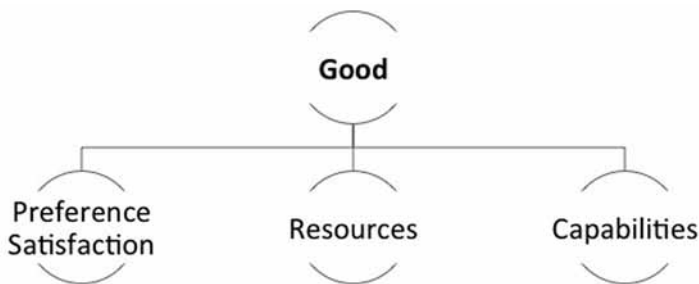


Figure 2. Theories of the Good.

ism, poverty, or disability—may adapt their preferences to what they are likely to get (Burchardt, 2005). A woman in a sexist society, for instance, will likely lower her expectations for career success, and thus her preferences for advancement opportunities in her career will be more easily satisfied than those of her male peers. Thus a system that merely looks at preference satisfaction will likely get results that are skewed in ways that reinforce existing social inequities. For this reason, a less subjective account of the good is preferable.

*Distribution of Resources.* Instead of considering whether people are satisfied, we can look at the resources they actually have. The most well-known *resourcist* theory is Rawls's theory of "justice as fairness," presented in his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls called his list of resources "primary social goods" ("primary goods" for short). Primary goods include "rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth" (p. 92). According to Rawls, we can focus just on primary goods when considering distributive justice, because these goods allow persons to acquire all sorts of other goods that they might want. As Rawls puts it, with primary goods, people "can generally be assured of greater success in carrying out their intentions and advancing their ends, whatever these ends may be" (p. 92).

It is plausible that access to information should also be included among the primary goods. Information is an essential all-purpose resource, much like income (van den Hoven & Rooksby, 2008). Rawls included both liberties (and freedoms) and more tangible goods and services in his list of primary goods. Similarly, information as a primary good includes both a liberty aspect and a tangible good aspect. The first is the freedom or liberty to receive and communicate information; the second is the actual availability of information as a thing. It is important to make this distinction, because one could be free to have information in the sense that there are no laws limiting one's access, while at the same time lacking actual access to information because the informational resources are not available. In the context of LIS, this seems like the obvious account of the good to adopt—if we care about informational justice, then what other good could we be concerned with distributing other than information resources?

There are problems, however, with *resourcist* theories of the good. This was famously pointed out by Amartya Sen in his seminal paper, "Equality of What?" (1980). According to Sen, the problem with focusing on whether people have access to certain resources is that, depending upon one's physical, mental, and social situation, the same set of resources can lead to very different outcomes. For example, take two people who have exactly the same resources. It may seem that the distribution between them is just. Suppose, however, that one person has a severe disability and that this disability requires expensive assistive devices to carry out everyday life tasks. In that case, even though both people have the same resources,

they do not get the same benefit from these resources. As Sen points out, this is not an unusual problem:

If people were basically very similar, then an index of primary goods might be quite a good way of judging advantage. But, in fact, people seem to have very different needs varying with health, longevity, climatic conditions, location, work conditions, temperament, and even body size (affecting food and clothing requirements). So what is involved is not merely ignoring a few hard cases, but overlooking very widespread and real differences. Judging advantage purely in terms of primary goods [or resources] leads to a partially blind morality. (pp. 215–216)

The sort of situation with which Sen is concerned arises frequently in the context of information services. Even when everyone can get information from their public library, for instance, they will vary in their ability to use and benefit from the information available. So, for example, a person who is vision impaired will not be able to get the information s/he needs from the resources of the library without access to various assistive devices and/or resources in Braille.

*Distribution of Capabilities.* As an alternative to the resource approach, Sen (1980) suggests that we measure not resources, but *capabilities*, i.e., the ability to do things. Capabilities would include such things as “the ability to move about” one’s environment, the ability “to meet one’s nutritional requirements, the wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered, [and] the power to participate in the social life of the community” (p. 218). As Rawls himself was at pains to emphasize, the reason resources are valuable is because they are all-purpose means that allow us to pursue our ends, whatever they may be. Sen takes this a step further. He points out that we care not so much about resources per se but about what we can actually do, experience, and be. So, our measure of distributive justice should be keyed to our abilities to function in these various ways that are important to us.

In the case of informational justice, Sen’s theory would have us look to whether the distribution of information resources and services is enabling people to engage in important life activities and states of being. So, for instance, he wouldn’t have us seek to measure how many computers we have, or how many people accessed the archives, or even how many people were satisfied with their experience. Rather, he would have us look for indicators of whether access to our services is helping people do and be what is important to them (Britz, Hoffmann, Ponelis, Zimmer, & Lor, 2013; Hill, 2011). While the capability approach reminds us to focus on outcomes rather than resources, it is not clear that it provides a useful framework for LIS. How are LIS professionals and researchers to evaluate the levels of capabilities in a community? If we can determine the levels of capabilities, how do we know how library services impact upon them? The capabilities approach is a theoretical framework for evaluating the re-

source distribution of an entire society. Trying to directly apply the theory of capabilities to LIS is unlikely to be a good fit.

### DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION ACCESS—A CAPABILITY SENSITIVE RESOURCE

Luckily, in order to specify the good of iDistributive justice, we do not need to resolve the debate between resource and capability theorists. This section develops a theoretical framework that takes the insights of both theories into account. It is suggested here that access to information should be understood as a *capability sensitive resource*. This requires us to change our focus from thinking of information as the resource, to thinking of *access to information* as the resource. It also requires that we define *access* in a way that incorporates the concerns raised by Sen about resource theories. The following definition of information access seeks to incorporate both of these features:

A person has access to information when he/she has the freedom or opportunity to obtain, make use of, and benefit from that information. (Mathiesen, 2014, p. 606)

A key feature of this definition is that it makes information access a relation between persons and information (or information services/systems). Whether some information is accessible depends both on the state of the information and on the state of the person who seeks to access it. Thus one can make information accessible by changing either the condition of the information or the condition of the person who wishes to access the information. So, for example, if there is a website with information about a health condition and the person who needs this information does not have access to the Internet or the skills to use it, then this information is not accessible to her. In this case, the information can be made accessible by either providing a printed copy of the information to the individual, or by providing her with access to the Internet and training in how to navigate it. This relational account of access takes into consideration the differential capacities of persons to, in Sen's words, transform resources into functionings. Thus this account of access is sensitive to the differences among persons in their abilities to benefit from information as a resource. Emphasizing the relational nature of information access makes it possible to identify the multidimensional nature of access. In determining whether information is accessible for some person or group, information professionals must consider the following five factors (Mathiesen, 2014):

- Availability: Does the needed information exist?
- Findability: Can information seekers find the information?
- Reachability: Can the information seekers actually get to the information?

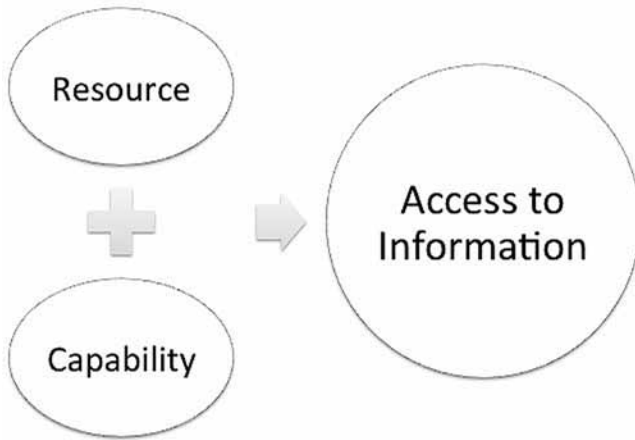


Figure 3. Access to information as a capability sensitive resource.

- **Comprehensibility:** Can the information seeker understand the information?
- **Usability:** Is the information meaningful or useful for the information seeker?

To the extent that any of these factors is missing or inadequate, a person does not fully have access to information. Thus, when measuring distributive justice, we should look at whether individuals and communities have access to information along all of these dimensions. For each of these facets there are intellectual, physical, and sociocultural determinants of access (Burnett, Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Afzal, 2011; Mathiesen, 2014, p. 609). Thus, when evaluating whether information is accessible, we should consider whether it is intellectually, physically, and socioculturally accessible. So, for example, some information may be intellectually comprehensible, because the information seeker can understand the information presented, but at the same time it may not be physically comprehensible, because the information seeker has dyslexia. Information may not be socioculturally comprehensible if it uses images and metaphors that do not speak to the cultural background of the information seeker.

To illustrate these dimensions, consider the barriers to access faced by poor people, as discussed in the American Library Association's web page on Outreach Resources for Services to Poor and Homeless People (ALA, 2014). First, there may be a problem with availability—information useful to this population may not exist. As the ALA points out, there may be a lack of “resources that address people’s experiences or current situations.”



Research has shown that information needed by poor people is underproduced, due to their small impact on the market for information (Southwell, Hamilton, & Slater, 2011). In order to solve the availability problem, LIS professionals and organizations may need to take an active role in publishing and distributing information (Koerber, 2014). Second, there may be problems with findability—this population may be underserved with resources to help them find relevant information. For example, a library may provide access to information that is of interest and relevant to the needs of poor persons, but due to staff members’ “prejudices against people who are poor or homeless” (ALA, 2014), these persons may not be provided with the resources, such as reference help, that they need to find the information they want. Third, even if they know where it is, the information may not be reachable—there may be specific barriers that poor people encounter in getting to the information. For example, such things as “library card or access policies requiring a permanent address” and “limited access to the library building by either limited means of transportation or service hours” (ALA, 2014) make it more difficult for poor people to get to the needed resources. Fourth, the information may not be in a format or language that is comprehensible to the population. For example, given the lack of educational opportunities for poor persons, it may be that materials relevant to their life situations are not available in formats that they can understand. Fifth, the information they have access to may not be usable by this population. For instance, it is likely that information targeted to middle-income persons will not be useful for those who are homeless or in poverty. Books on nutrition, for example, may recommend foods that are too expensive or are not available at the stores in poor neighborhoods (Food Research and Action Center, 2013).

#### *What Is an Equitable Distribution?*

As noted in the first section of this essay, discussions of social justice in LIS frequently use the terms “equality” or “equity.” It is not so simple a matter, however, to determine what is an equal or equitable distribution of access to information. Indeed, there are a number of different philosophical theories of what constitutes an equitable distribution of goods. Below is a discussion of four rules of distribution prominent in the philosophical literature: maximizing, egalitarian, prioritarian, and sufficientarian. Ultimately, a sufficientarian rule is defended as most appropriate for assessing whether the distribution of information access is equitable.

#### *Types of Rules*

Rules of distribution are often divided into patterned and nonpatterned. Patterned rules look at the pattern of distribution across the population and suggest that certain patterns are more just than others. Nonpatterned rules of distributive justice suggest that we look instead at whether people have what they deserve based on their past contributions or based on rules

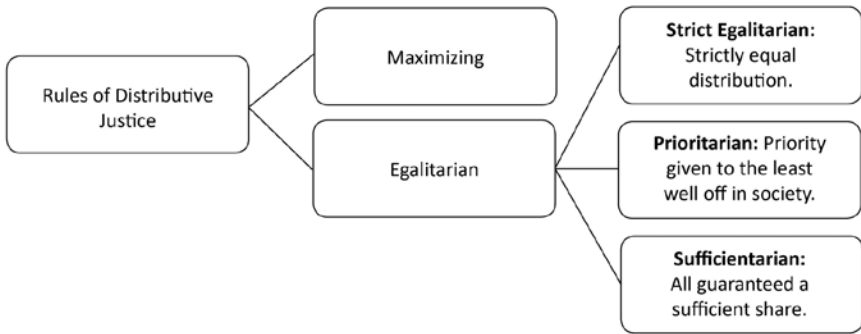


Figure 4. Rules of distributive justice.

of property and exchange (Nozick, 1974). Nonpatterned theories do not necessarily hold that vastly unequal distributions are unjust, as long as the distribution is the result of the application of a just rule of resource transfer. Nonpatterned rules are difficult to apply (because they require looking at the history of how someone ended up with their current share of the resource) and are, therefore, not good contenders for a rule of distributive justice to be applied when assessing the justice of information services. Thus, the discussion here will focus on what are called “patterned rules” of distribution.

Patterned theories of justice can be divided into maximizing and egalitarian as shown in figure 4.

*Maximization: The Maximum Amount of Good for the Maximum Number of People*

Maximization is often used in the evaluation of public services. As applied to information access, the maximization rule would require that we seek to achieve the greatest amount of access for the greatest number of people. So, for instance, a maximizing rule would have us consider how many people are able to use the library computers or how many people are able to access an archive. While these are important indicators, if we only consider the amount of resource available or the amount of usage the library gets, we may well be failing on the score of a just distribution of access.

To see why this is the case, consider an important criticism of the maximizing approach, most famously made by Rawls (1971). Rawls argued that summing across different individuals and seeking to increase the total amount of a good “does not take seriously the distinction between persons” (p. 27). Simply because there is more access overall does not mean that every person is getting his or her fair share of the resource. Indeed, policies that increase net gains overall may at the very same time seriously underserve certain segments of the population. For instance, in order to

get more people in the library we may cater to certain segments of the society—perhaps those who already have ample access to information through other venues. In short, it doesn't matter only that we serve the most people possible, but that those who most need the services are getting them. This is something that the maximizing rule cannot take into account.

*Egalitarianism: The Distribution Must Be Equitable*

Egalitarian rules are concerned not just with how many people get access but with how that access is distributed across the population.

*Strict Egalitarianism.* As applied to information access, strict egalitarianism (Nielsen, 1979) would require that everyone be provided with exactly the same level of access to information. Recall that access includes such factors as what is relevant and comprehensible to a person or group. Thus, for access to be equal, we would have to attend to the range of concerns and interests of all members of the community as well as their levels of literacy, etc. This may appear to capture quite well the idea of a just distribution of information. There is, however, a widely acknowledged problem with the strict egalitarian rule: the “leveling down” problem (Brake, 2004). Egalitarianism requires that in cases where we are not able to bring everyone up to the same level, we should “level down” or reduce the amount of resources held by those who have more in order to achieve equality. Thus egalitarianism seems to commit us to a policy under which, if we cannot give everyone exactly the same access, then we ought not to provide better services for some than for others. Taken to the extreme, an egalitarian rule would require that if we cannot provide public libraries for all communities, we ought not to provide them for any. It seems wrongheaded to deprive some people of resources simply because not everyone can have them. Furthermore, as prioritarians (Rawls, 1971) are quick to point out, leveling down can have bad consequences for those who are the least well-off in the society.

*Prioritarianism.* Rawls's famous *difference principle* is prioritarian; according to the difference principle, the least well-off persons in the society have priority in the distribution (1971). The difference principle approach is egalitarian in spirit, but avoids leveling down. It allows some persons to have more than others, as long as that inequality has the overall tendency to improve the situation of the least well-off. As applied to iDistributive justice, the difference principle would permit a library to allow greater information access for certain members of the community if this leads to obtaining more funding that could be put into providing greater access for those less well-off. For example, the library might institute a fee-based service, the funds from which would go to improving the services for the poorest segment of its users. Getting more resources for the least well-off, even if not equal resources, will overall tend to promote equality by empowering them. We might be concerned that a prioritarian rule is not

sufficiently egalitarian, however. Allowing greater resources to some members of the community may reinforce the sense that some are “lesser” than others. For this reason, a prioritarian rule may not be the best principle of distribution for library and information services.

*Sufficientarianism.* Sufficientarianism is an egalitarian option that focuses on ensuring that all members of the community are guaranteed sufficient access to information. Under the “sufficientarian” rule there is a minimal standard of access that must be met for everyone (Shields, 2012). The sufficientarian rule shows equal respect for all by setting an equal baseline below which none should be allowed to fall. Resources should be expended first on bringing up those who do not have a sufficient degree of access. Because the sufficientarian rule does not say what to do about those who have more than a sufficient amount, it does not run into the leveling down problem. Because the sufficientarian rule just sets a baseline, it may be combined with any of the other rules. Once everyone has sufficient access, we can adopt any of the other rules—prioritarian, egalitarian, or maximizing. Given these features of the sufficientarian rule, the theory of iDistributive justice presented here is sufficientarian.

#### *Human Rights and Capabilities*

The sufficientarian conception of justice is quite common in discussions of human rights, which set baseline standards of treatment owed to all persons. Martha Nussbaum’s theory of capabilities (2003) seeks to articulate those basic needs shared by all human beings and that are protected by human rights. Thus her list of capabilities (pp. 41–42) may be a good place to start reflecting on what information resources would be necessary for a sufficient level of access. The readers may wish to take the categories identified in Nussbaum’s (2003) following list as guidelines for the sorts of topics and skills on which library and information services should focus.

- Life: “Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living” (p. 41).
- Bodily Health: “Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter” (p. 41).
- Bodily Integrity: e.g., freedom of movement, freedom from violence, sexual freedom.
- Senses, Imagination, and Thought: This includes “being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise” (p. 41).
- Emotions: e.g., “to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger” (p. 41).
- Practical Reason: “Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” (p. 42).

- Affiliation: e.g., having close relationships and being treated with respect.
- Other Species: Relating to, e.g., “animals, plants, and the world of nature” (p. 42).
- Play: e.g., athletic and other recreational activities.
- Control Over One’s Environment: This includes both the political (e.g., free speech, political participation) and material environment (e.g., privacy, employment).

This list is presented as a starting point for reflection on what a sufficient level of access to information for every member of the community would look like. There is not space here to go through how each of the capabilities could guide us in following a sufficientarian rule of distribution of information access. To illustrate how Nussbaum’s theory might be used, however, consider the capability of bodily integrity. Focusing on women in particular, this capability would be supported by access to information about such things as domestic violence, reproductive health, contraception, and sexuality. Nussbaum’s list is by design general and relatively abstract, as the specifics must be filled in based on the culture and needs of the particular individuals and communities being served. Thus an essential component of satisfying distributive justice must be engaging the participation of various communities in expressing their needs as information seekers.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that in many cases it will not be possible for a library or other information service to provide the informational resources necessary for persons to achieve a sufficient development and exercise of their capabilities. Here we may find useful the approach taken by the United Nations to such situations. The UN holds that states should work to “achieve progressively” those human rights that require resources that may be in short supply or take time to develop (Eide, 1995, p. 20). In a similar way, LIS professionals and institutions can seek to achieve progressively a just distribution of information access.

### INFORMATIONAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE

This article developed the concept of informational justice to provide LIS professionals with a framework for recognizing the central social justice issues within information services. While fully implementing this framework must be left for future research, at this point some practical implications for the design and evaluation of LIS services and programs can be derived from the framework. To illustrate these practical implications, suggestions for possible programs or activities are given below.

The first lesson that can be drawn from this framework is that when designing programs and services, a social justice orientation requires making

ourselves aware of the social injustices imbedded in large institutional systems and cultural assumptions. It should be kept in mind that the nature of oppressive systems is to obscure their own existence and impact; thus constant questioning as to whom we might be leaving out of our definition of “community” is imperative. This institutional perspective, however, may lead to creating static categories that reduce people to simplistic social and cultural stereotypes. This is where the attitudinal aspect of the social justice orientation is important; a professional with a social justice orientation treats persons and communities with care, solidarity, and respect. The attitude of care fosters change through direct empathic relationships with those whom LIS professionals serve. Care alone, however, is insufficient as it may lead to an attitude of paternalistic superiority, which can diminish people’s sense of self-efficacy and agency. Thus the value of solidarity—that is, seeing persons as equals and creating bonds of fellowship and community—is essential. Respect for individuals and communities recognizes that they are self-determining; their intentions for themselves are more important than, and may outstrip, even the most well-intentioned outsider’s understanding. Activities supportive of a social justice orientation could include the following: instituting book or film groups that focus on works about and by underserved members of the community; inviting advocates from these communities to speak to staff; and encouraging staff to engage with communities outside the walls of the library.

The second lesson that can be drawn from the framework is that creating services and systems that equitably distribute access to information among members of the community requires a nuanced understanding of the communities to be served. Given this, it is imperative to assess and evaluate the resources available to historically marginalized and disadvantaged members of the community, such as senior citizens, youth, persons with disabilities, and sexual, racial, linguistic, and ethnic minorities. Using Nussbaum’s list of capabilities, LIS professionals could analyze whether their information service makes accessible materials that support the capabilities relevant to the mission of the service. The information-gathering stage may require moving beyond reliance on some of the traditional methods for measuring services, such as gathering usage statistics or surveying current patrons. Gathering only information about those currently using the information service does little to reveal what keeps some members of the community from using the service. Furthermore, due to “adaptive preferences” those who are chronically underserved and marginalized in the community may not expect as much, and thus may be less demanding than more privileged patrons. Qualitative methods, such as structured or unstructured open-ended discussions with underserved members of the community, may be more appropriate. It may be useful to use the five facets of accessibility (availability, findability, reachability, comprehensibil-

ity, and usability) and the three determinates of access (physical, intellectual, and sociocultural) to generate a list of questions that can be used as a frame for data collection. One question might be, for example, "What are the sociocultural barriers to finding health information for Hispanics in our community?" (see Mathiesen, 2014 for more examples). The model of access as a multifaceted relation between persons and information can then be used to evaluate the accessibility of information. Given the relational nature of access, it is important to keep in mind that information may be made more accessible by addressing either the resource side or the seeker side of the equation. For example, the intellectual barrier of illiteracy can be addressed by providing information in nontextual formats and by providing literacy education. The availability facet may be addressed by information services taking a role in authoring or publishing needed information.

The third lesson that can be drawn from the framework of informational justice is that the just distribution of information also requires the just treatment of persons and communities as sources and subjects of information. By seeking to include more voices within the information environment, LIS professionals and organizations help ensure that comprehensible and usable information will be available to all members of the community. By seeking to ensure that persons and communities are accurately and diversely depicted within the information environment, LIS professionals can make a significant impact on the perceptions and expectations that shape the opportunities of marginalized members of the community. Finding ways in which a diverse array of members of marginalized and stigmatized communities can work with LIS professionals in building diverse and accurate representations is one means to correct for unconscious biases and stereotypes. In this regard it is essential that the LIS profession itself strive for diversity along multiple dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing from the disciplinary literatures in both LIS and philosophy, this article presented a conceptual framework for understanding social justice as related to LIS. The following summarizes the basic principles of this framework:

- Social justice orientation includes both an institutional perspective and an ethic of care, solidarity, and respect.
- Social justice is concerned with issues of distribution, participation, and recognition.
- Informational justice requires that persons be treated justly as seekers, sources, and subjects of information.
- In these roles, persons deserve iDistributive, iParticipatory, and iRecognition justice.

- These three forms of informational justice are interdependent and mutually supporting.
- iDistributive justice concerns the distribution of access to information.
- Access to information is a relationship between some information source or service and a person or group of persons.
- Information is accessible when it is available, findable, reachable, comprehensible, and usable.
- A just distribution of information is one that ensures that all persons have a sufficient level of access to information.
- In seeking a sufficient level of access, we should focus on information that supports and enhances people's capabilities.

There is more work to be done on the theory of informational justice, both in the realm of theory and in the realm of practice. In addition to presenting the overall framework of informational justice, this article focused primarily on iDistributive justice. While there was not space to develop them here, two other foci of informational justice—iParticipation and iRecognition—deserve equally careful conceptual development. Future theoretical work will expand on these concepts, providing detailed frameworks similar to that here developed for iDistributive justice. Another important feature of the framework presented here is what was called the “social justice orientation.” More needs to be said about how this orientation plays out in the LIS professions. Finally, in order to be at all relevant, this framework should be applied in varied LIS settings. As a philosopher of LIS, the author must leave that work to information research professionals and empirical researchers, who she hopes will find this framework useful.

## NOTES

1. This literature review is limited to works that explicitly use the term “social justice.” Once social justice has been explicitly defined, as I attempt to do in this essay, it should be possible to offer a broader literature review that includes all works that focus on social justice issues, even ones that do not specifically use the term.
2. While it is important to specify where attention should be focused in addressing social injustice, no list can capture all disadvantaged or oppressed social positions in all cultures or contexts. New forms of social domination and exclusion may emerge, and hidden forms may come to light. For example, while the importance of ensuring accessibility for persons with physical disabilities has become a more central issue (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Goggin & Newell, 2003), persons with mental disabilities and mental illnesses are not typically included within discussions of accessibility (Ridella, 2014).
3. This list does not necessarily identify all possible approaches, just some of the most commonly discussed ones.

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