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# Analysis of Personal and Institutional Discrimination

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Analysis of Personal and Institutional Discrimination

Discrimination is the “unequal treatment of persons, for a reason which has nothing to do with legal rights or ability” according to (Legal Dictionary, 2012). This includes discrimination based on race, gender, age, culture or social class, just to list a few. The effects of discrimination make a huge impact on society and how these groups are viewed and treated. There are different ways in which discrimination occurs; discrimination from individual to individual and also from groups or organizations to other groups by way of institutional discrimination. Discrimination affects individuals throughout their life; whether they are the perpetrator of discrimination or the victim or whether they are targeted by other individuals or entire organizations, discrimination is real and still occurring today.

**Personal Discrimination: The Victim**

Personal discrimination occurs when one person treats another differently or thinks negatively about a person based on their gender, age, race, sexual orientation or any other characteristic that my vary from the perpetrator’s own views and values. In one instance I was the victim of discrimination based on my age. I am a hair stylist and when I first started in the industry I was 19 years old. I could often see the apprehension in my clients when I introduced myself as their hairstylist. There is one instance in which I can specifically remember being treated negatively because of my age and how terrible it felt. According to the person-in-environment classification system there are several categories to assess the level of discrimination. I was discriminated based on my education and training and my age. (Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2011) I had a client in my chair that was approximately 50 years old and her dialogue from the beginning was very hesitant. As she explained how she wanted her hair cut and styled she continued to question my abilities by saying things like, “You’re so young, are you sure you know what I’m talking about?” and asking, “How long have you been a hairstylist for?” followed by, “You look like you could still be in high school.” While being treated this way I began to question my abilities and the thought crossed my mind, “maybe she’s right, maybe I don’t know what I’m doing.” Throughout the service she was questioning every move I made and mid-haircut I knew that there was no pleasing this woman, she had her mind made up that I was not competent enough to produce a respectable haircut because I was so young. This treatment by my client definitely affected my self-esteem and therefore affected my quality of work. I don’t think that this treatment caused me to turn the situation into a self-fulfilling prophecy but I can definitely see how situations like this could. At the end of her service, she was unhappy just as she predicted from the start and instead of working with me to fix the problem she began speaking to me like a child, “Oh sweetie, it’s okay, you’re young and just don’t have enough experience, I’m sure one day you’ll be a great stylist.” After the client left I began second guessing my choice to go into the industry but over time I have learned that you can’t please them all, everyone is entitled to and has their own opinion and views and there’s very little I can do to change their values and opinions.

**Personal Discrimination: The Perpetrator.**

Along with situations in which I was the victim of discrimination there have also been instances in which I have been the perpetrator of discrimination and prejudice. I was raised in a small town that was predominantly white with very little diversity therefore I am very uneducated when it comes to other cultures and their cultural norms and values. My family was always a part of the upper middle class and although I did not do this consciously, my friends were also from families that were part of the white upper middle class and still continue to be to this day. This has caused me to be a bit hesitant when confronted with minorities, especially minorities who are in poverty or homeless. Living in such a small town we would always hear about the dangers of big cities such as Flint and Detroit; the drugs, the violence and the poverty and homelessness were things we were taught to look down upon. Being raised with these values and mores has caused me to be cautious when confronted with homelessness especially in big cities. According to (Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2011, p. 18), “Mores are the strongest norms and comprise the basic moral judgments of a society.” While visiting Detroit in December I needed to get gas. I am not familiar at all with Detroit or where I might find the nearest gas station so I drove until I came across one. On this drive I observed so much poverty by way of the people on the streets and the quality of housing. I was always told by my parents, “Keep your doors locked when driving through bad areas and never get out of the car.” With this in mind I came across a gas station and landed in what I’m assuming was a very bad part of town. There were what appeared to be many homeless people gathered outside the gas station and approaching cars asking for money. I thought about turning around and finding another station but I was about to run out of gas. I made sure to pay at the pump and wait in the car with the doors locked while my gas pumped. My thoughts and ideas were definitely prejudice and judgmental of these people and I’m sure that they could sense my fear when I locked myself in the car. Looking back at the day I feel bad for how I perceived these people but this situation shows how big of an impact your upbringing, cultural and family values affect your individual outlook on life in general, especially life different than your own.

**Institutional Discrimination: Homelessness**

“Over the course of the year, 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness” according to (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2004) Homelessness is a growing issue in our society and my prejudice views have made me want to become more familiar with the issue at hand. I have found that homelessness is not only an issue of discrimination on a personal level but on an institutional level as well. According to (Kendall, 2006) institutional discrimination is “the day to day practices of organizations and institutions that have a harmful impact on members of subordinate groups.” The homeless population is not eligible for numerous assistance programs because of their lack of a physical address and resources. There are many factors that lead to homelessness such as poor physical and mental health, poor economic situation and drug dependency. All of these factors working together tend to lead the individual into poverty and eventually to the streets. There are many instances of institutional discrimination by the government toward the homeless population as stated by (Discrimination against the homeless). Homelessness and poverty has ultimately become a crime due to laws prohibiting life on the street along with stricter punishment and the targeting of the homeless on lesser charges such as having open containers or loitering. (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2004) This treatment does not help fix the underlying problem of homelessness but in turn makes the situation worse by pushing homeless people out of an area and away from services and assistance. Many of these laws violate the homeless’ Constitutional rights, “Courts have found that a law that is applied to criminally punish a homeless person for necessary life activities in public, like sleeping, violates that person’s Eighth Amendment right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment if the person has nowhere else to perform the activity.” (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2004) Due to the stigma surrounding homelessness which as I stated earlier I made opinions based on, the homeless are not getting adequate and fair assistance in order to get off the streets. There are many assistance programs out there for the homeless according to (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012) but the qualification in order to receive this assistance is rarely met. Therefore the government provides assistance and resources for the homeless and they accept that it’s a growing problem but make it nearly impossible for the homeless to take advantage of this assistance due to strict qualifications. This combined with the punishment and forced movement of the homeless make it impossible for these people to become an established part of a community long enough to get the assistance they need.

**Conclusion**

Discrimination affects millions of people every day. Whether it’s by an individual or an entire organization; whether targeted toward people of a certain race, gender, age or ability, it is still happening. Each and every one of us have been a victim of discrimination in some way and have felt the effects just as each of us has been a perpetrator and passed judgment on another for various reasons. It is important for us to understand the factors that control why we make these judgments and the reasons why others may make these judgments against us in order to help victims and perpetrators of discrimination we encounter in the social work field. This is also important in alleviating the effects of discrimination on a personal, micro level and on an institutional, macro level.

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