February 19, 2013 · 8:00 am

[↓ Jump to Comments](http://acpacsje.wordpress.com/2013/02/19/social-justice-not-just-another-term-for-diversity-by-paul-c-gorski/#comments)

[**Social Justice: Not Just Another Term for “Diversity” by Paul C. Gorski**](http://acpacsje.wordpress.com/2013/02/19/social-justice-not-just-another-term-for-diversity-by-paul-c-gorski/)

I’m fascinated with the language of equity and diversity work, especially the words we use to describe the essence of what we do in service to that work. I’ve spent much of the last 15 years working with colleges and universities and all manner of other organizations to help them bolster their equity and diversity initiatives. During that time I’ve paid particular attention to the terms they choose to use, usually in a strategic or defeated effort not to upset the very people and institutional cultures that any equity and diversity initiative worth a whit ought to upset, if even just a little. So there’s diversity and multiculturalism and intercultural relations and cultural competence.

And then there’s “inclusive excellence,” which seems en vogue these days, rendering me baffled. It’s as though somebody took the two vaguest words in the higher education lexicon and smushed them together, a concerted effort at uber-vagueness. I’m assuming whoever did the smushing figured, hey, if nobody knows what it means, nobody can be offended. Now I’m waiting for somebody to add the word “innovative” to the term, squeezing in the third vaguest word in the lexicon. If I wait long enough somebody surely will slap the word “critical” onto it so we can all feel pretty darn progressive with our *innovative approaches to critical inclusive excellence*. I think I just named the theme for ACPA 2018!

What confuses me even more than inclusive excellence, though, is what feels like a sudden caché associated with “social justice.” I can remember when those of us who built our lifework around social justice were booted so far to the margins *by people who were all about “diversity”* that we found clever ways to mask our intentions in job interviews, campus programs, and conference proposals. Instead, it was *intercultural* this and *intergroup* that or the *six* then *seven* then *nine strands of diversity*. And if you were a person of color or queer or had some other identity that frightened the shuddering straight white Christian masses, you hardly could say “racism” without being labeled a radical. That’s still true in many contexts, actually.

Just recently I attended a fantastic one-day student affairs conference. There were three time slots for breakout sessions and each slot included a session with the words “social justice” in its title. In one of the presentations, [Michelle Espino](http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCP/staff_details.cfm?bio_id=122919410082220121), [Kimberly Griffin](http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCP/staff_details.cfm?bio_id=122124372082220121), and [Julie Park](http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCP/staff_details.cfm?bio_id=11433358081620111), three super-dynamic faculty members from the University of Maryland’s newly reshaped [Student Affairs Concentration](http://www.education.umd.edu/EDCP/programs/CSP/index.cfm), all women of color, described how social justice was threaded through their entire program. I thought, “No way this would have happened ten years ago.” Diversity, maybe. Social justice, no. I left feeling a little social justice giddy.

This sounds like good news, I know. So why do I feel worried?

The trouble, for me, is that I’m not so sure our commitments and our practice have kept pace with our language. I worry that our evolution from “diversity” and “multiculturalism” to “social justice” is more a shift in language than a shift in consciousness or shifts in institutional cultures. I know there are pockets of fantastic social justice work, like Michelle, Kimberly, and Julie’s Concentration and their scholarship, but I worry that in most cases we are using “social justice” to describe the same sorts of things we were doing, more or less, when we used to call it “diversity” or “intercultural programs.” Intergroup dialogue, for example, used to be an intercultural relations program, now it’s “social justice.” Service learning, by its very *service* nature, would fall toward the very beginning stages of most social change continua, but it’s described now, in many cases, as “social justice.” Don’t even get me started on social entrepreneurship, many of whose advocates seem to think we can channel capitalism in service to social justice.

I know what some of you are thinking. You’re thinking that this language thing is just semantics. I admit that I become frustrated at times when a conversation about heteronormativity or sexism devolves into an intellectual competition, won by whoever wields the most suitable language or theoretical framework. In this case, though, language is important. I have watched *diversity* and *equality* and *inclusion* be appropriated by people and institutions wishing to sprinkle them with glitter and feign the appearance of institutional change, the same way so many people use Safe Space stickers.

I’m afraid that, without vigilant self-checking, we—the community of people committed, at least ostensibly, to social justice—might be fooling ourselves into thinking that we’re doing social justice when we’re only doing diversity. Now that social justice is “cool” in an increasing number of circles, now that it has become a bit safer (especially for people with no visible oppressed identities) and a heck of a lot trendier, more and more people are jumping on the bandwagon. But how many are after the caché and not the commitment? I’m afraid that social justice is being coopted, especially now that it has become a profitable industry in higher education, with its t-shirts and buttons and prestigious institutes and conferences so expensive they exclude a vast majority of social justice activists. I worry about what it means that I see way more backpack buttons with racial justice themes than people committed, beyond sporting some buttons, to racial justice.

After fifteen years trying to push boundaries in the social justice world, this is something I’ve learned for sure: when we fail to stay committed to their basic principles, once-progressive movements quickly devolve until they look like the very things they were fomented to transform. Sure, the principles need to be somewhat elastic, but that’s so we can bend them *forward*, not *backward*.

Recently, feeling the weight of these concerns as colleagues and I designed a new [degree program and minor in Social Justice](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Social-Justice-Concentration-at-New-Century-College-GMU/429938643692261) at George Mason University, I decided to recommit to what, for me, were core social justice principles. I, after all, find myself tripping more often than I’d care to admit, tempted to do social justice in ways that guarantee maximum student participation or institutional support or funding rather than ways that have the most potential to create the greatest societal or institutional change. For example, I never would exploit a group of LGBTQ students by parading them to class after class, asking them to make themselves vulnerable so that students who identify as heterosexual can accumulate cultural capital on their backs, especially in an institution that drags its feet whenever LGBTQ people raise concerns about heterosexism. But for three years I invited a local nonprofit that arranges panels of recently homeless people to parade economically disadvantaged people around campus. Oh yes, I do trip.

In an effort to preempt some of my future tripping, I recommitted to:

(1) Put justice before peace: Racial justice, rather than racial harmony or awareness, is the inverse of racial injustice. Social justice is the inverse of social injustice. So the results of my social justice work should be less injustice.

(2) Point awareness toward action. Intercultural awareness can be a step toward social justice, but it is not, in and of itself, social justice. Nor are recognizing the existence of oppression or understanding privilege or engaging in cross-cultural dialogue in and of themselves social justice. These are the sorts of activities that *prepare us for social justice*. But they also can be distractions from social justice if they don’t point toward action for social change.

(3) Evolve. Social justice as a movement is always evolving, so I have to evolve with it. If I’m still doing one-identity-at-a-time rather than [intersectionality](http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article__Mapping_the_Margins_by_Kimblere_Crenshaw.pdf), for example, or if I’m failing to connect [environmental injustice](http://www.nrdc.org/ej/) with social injustice, I’m already a couple decades behind.

(4) Spend my institutional likeability. Because my visible identities afford me great levels of privilege (or what I call “institutional likeability”), I have great levels of responsibility to stand *beside* and *with*, but not *for* or *in front of*, colleagues, students, and others from disenfranchised communities in service to social justice. Doing diversity instead of social justice is one way I bank, rather than spend, my institutional likeability, augmenting my privilege.

Finally, and just as importantly, I recommitted to being precise with my language when it comes to diversity and social justice. I recommitted to vigilance, to helping protect the essence of social justice movements, at least as I interpret them, from being pulled so far from its progressive roots that it becomes indistinguishable from diversity or interculturalism or, *wince*, inclusive excellence.

[Paul C. Gorski](http://www.twitter.com/pgorski) is an educator, activist, creative writer, and scholar whose lifework is social justice. Most recently, Paul co-designed the newish Social Justice program and minor in New Century College at George Mason University. Paul works with colleges and universities across the U.S. on transcending “diversity” initiatives and committing, instead, to holistic equity plans. For more on Paul’s work, visit [EdChange](http://www.EdChange.org) or [send an e-mail](mailto:gorski@edchange.org).