

Universe of Obligation

Currently Viewing Original Text ◆

What does it mean to be a member of a group? In groups we meet our most basic needs; in groups we learn a language and a culture or way of life. In groups we also satisfy our yearning to belong, receive comfort in times of trouble, and find companions who share our dreams, values, and beliefs. Groups also provide security and protection from those who might wish to do us harm. Therefore, how a group defines its membership matters. Belonging can have significant advantages; being excluded can leave a person vulnerable.

How the members of a group, a nation, or a community define who belongs and who does not has a lot to do with how they define their *universe of obligation*. Sociologist Helen Fein coined this phrase to describe the group of individuals within a society “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.”¹ In other words, a society’s universe of obligation includes those people who that society believes deserve respect and whose rights it believes are worthy of protection.

A society’s universe of obligation can change. Individuals and groups that are respected and protected members of a society at one time may find themselves outside of the universe of obligation when circumstances are different—such as during a war or economic depression. Beliefs and attitudes that are widely shared among members of a society may also affect the way that society defines its universe of obligation. For instance, throughout history, beliefs and attitudes about religion, gender, and race have helped to determine which people a society protects and which people it does not.

Although Fein uses the term to describe the way nations determine membership, we might also refer to an individual’s universe of obligation to describe the circle of other individuals that person feels a responsibility to care for and protect. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes how individuals often define those for whom they feel responsible: “[Eighteenth-century philosopher] David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society, and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them.”²

Scholar and social activist Chuck Collins defines his universe of obligation differently from the example Sacks offers. In the 1980s, Collins gave the half-million dollars that he inherited from his family to charity. Collins told journalist Ian Parker:

Of course, we have to respond to our immediate family, but, once they're O.K., we need to expand the circle. A larger sense of family is a radical idea, but we get into trouble as a society when we don't see that we're in the same boat.³

Citations

1 : Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 4.

2 : Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), 30.

3 : Ian Parker, "The Gift," *New Yorker*, August 2, 2004, 60.

Connection Questions

1. What factors influence the way a society defines its universe of obligation? In what ways might a nation or community signal who is part of its universe of obligation and who is not?
2. What do you think might be some of the consequences for those who are not within a society's universe of obligation?
3. What factors influence how an individual defines his or her universe of obligation? In what ways might an individual show others who is part of his or her universe of obligation and who is not?
4. In the 1800s, sociologist William Graham Sumner wrote, "Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is, to take care of his or her own self." Do you agree with Sumner? Why or why not? Is it wrong to prioritize caring for those closest to you over others? How does Sumner's suggestion about how we define our universe of obligation differ from Chuck Collins's view?
5. How would you describe your nation's universe of obligation? Your school's? Your own?

Related Content

<https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-2/universe-obligation>

Copyright © 2020 Facing History and Ourselves. We are a registered 501 (c) (3) charity. [Privacy Policy](#).

Our headquarters are located at:
16 Hurd Road, Brookline, MA 02445
[Accessibility Feedback](#)