

## **SOCIAL CONSCIENCE**

*the ability to reflect on deeply-held opinions about social justice and sustainability*

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### **What is social conscience, and why is it relevant?**

Conscience can be described as internalised values: a person's intuitive 'moral compass.' While rational, philosophical, or religious arguments are often used as justifications, conscience itself is primarily emotional: we associate feelings of pleasure and pride with right action, and feelings of guilt and shame with wrong action. These emotions help to motivate choices and behaviour, playing an important role in the maintenance and transformation of social norms. In many ways, the norms of society are the sum of our collective values and priorities – as society shapes us, we shape society.

In addition to a sense of right and wrong for personal action, individuals possess a sense of right and wrong for collective action – what might be called *social conscience*. Individual conscience compels us to act morally in our daily lives, avoiding or helping to relieve the immediate suffering of others, whereas social conscience compels us to insist on moral action from the wider institutions of society and to seek the transformation of social structures that cause suffering. While individual conscience is reflected in norms of personal interaction, social conscience is reflected in the ways we organise ourselves more broadly.

Across the political spectrum, most people experience a gap between the kind of world they see and the kind they want. On a personal level, social conscience is what bridges that gap. If we can understand our own social conscience, we can make more conscious choices to help shape society according to our values. If we can understand the social conscience of others, we can find common values and goals among seemingly diverse groups and build movements for change. Understanding social conscience, whether our own or others', helps to identify assumptions, values, and visions, making it an important element of sustainability literacy, and a useful tool for effective social and ecological transformation.

### **A model for understanding social conscience**

Social conscience is shaped by a person's moral framework, but its interconnected elements – *consciousness, structure, and agency* – can be examined independently of particular values or political views.

## Consciousness

The words conscience and consciousness are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Consciousness, as used in expressions such as 'raising consciousness,' describes a person's knowledge and awareness, and in this case, their knowledge and awareness of the gap between their ideal world and the real world. Information and experience can be seen as neutral, while consciousness implies a process of value judgement, classifying situations broadly into right, wrong, or neutral. Consciousness also calls upon a person's assumptions and worldview to explain situations, identifying them as fair or unjust, individual or systemic, safe or dangerous, etc. Consciousness can (but does not always) link 'personal troubles' with 'public issues', to use the phrases of American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959).

To give an example, homelessness is an issue of both social and environmental sustainability - while homeless people contribute least to pollution and environmental destruction, they are the first to suffer from them. Homelessness may or may not be on the moral 'radar' of someone who is not experiencing it first-hand; it may be considered a normal part of city life - a non-issue, morally speaking. If considered an issue, a person becoming homeless might be seen as the result of unlucky coincidence, personal failure, punishment for sins, or particular social forces. These four examples are not mutually exclusive, but each fits into a particular kind of worldview dominated by random chance, individual choice, divine will, or complex social systems, respectively, and would elicit a particular kind of response - charity, tough love, evangelism, or social change. Each person's worldview influences the way they treat new information or experiences, but information itself only sometimes has an impact on worldview. Raising consciousness of an issue, while important, is only one element of motivating action to transform it.

## *Structure*

What sets social conscience apart from individual conscience is its structural or systemic focus. In the first three explanations about homelessness above (unlucky coincidence, personal failure, or punishment for sins), someone may feel compassion and a desire to help a person who has become homeless, on an individual level, from a personal sense of conscience. In the fourth explanation (social forces), they might question the structural reasons for homelessness and want to pursue solutions at a social or political level. Social conscience therefore moves beyond personal, individual interactions, to a wider desire to contribute to a more ethical society.

Conversely, a lack of understanding of social structure contributes to the opposite of social conscience, what might be called social apathy - the feeling that, despite sympathy or compassion, 'it has nothing to do with me,' or that 'it's not my problem.' When an unfortunate situation is the result of mysterious or misunderstood social forces, it is easy to misplace blame, for example, by blaming marginalised groups such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or women for acting in a way which leads to their marginalisation. It is also easy to assume a bureaucratic solution is underway, or should be, without making efforts to ensure that it is. Even when government and civil society are seen as incompetent or inefficient, it is a common assumption that they alone have the responsibility for solving social problems.

## *Agency*

The third element of social conscience is agency, which is a sense of personal power, as well as personal responsibility. While consciousness identifies situations where the reality falls short of the ideal, a person's sense of agency allocates responsibility for action – is it possible to intervene personally, or should someone else be intervening? Individuals cannot care deeply and act effectively on every social and ecological problem they come across, but they can identify problems they feel are both important and that they have the agency to act on. Both consciousness and agency are based on an understanding of social structure, and ultimately, on values. Therefore, a crucial skill is the ability to identify areas where we feel a sense of agency, and find ways of effectively intervening in those areas that align with our deepest concerns, our knowledge of social structure, and our personal values.

All three elements – consciousness, structure, and agency – must be in place for a strong sense of social conscience (see Figure 1 at end of chapter). Different combinations of these elements will shape different forms of social conscience. Although the term 'social conscience' is most often associated with the left end of the political spectrum, it is just as applicable to the right when seen as the expression of particular values. As an analytical framework, then, this model can be used to understand and relate different types of social conscience regardless of the political values they express.

### **Reflection on values and social conscience**

Because social conscience is entwined with emotionally-charged assumptions and worldviews that may seem self-evident to those who hold them, it is not necessarily an easy topic to discuss. But the model above can be used to identify values, find emergent patterns of social conscience and understand how different world-views work. Taking a step back can help learners avoid judging other people's social conscience, even if it may seem incompatible with their own, and realise that each person believes their way of looking at the world is 'correct.'

The questions below are intended to encourage learners to talk about their personal values and motivations, but can easily be adapted for less formal spaces outside of the classroom. They could be used for self-reflection, or conversations in pairs, with one person 'interviewing' the other. Participants could be instructed to listen carefully for assumptions and ask for clarification, paying attention to the language being used. Each set of questions builds on the previous one, and it may be helpful for the 'interviewer' to weave themes from one response into the next set of questions, asking for points of clarity or drawing out patterns. Clearly, the categories of questions are not set in stone - one answer may cover several or all of the categories - and there are no right or wrong answers.

#### *Background – developing rapport and setting the context*

- What was it that led you to this course? Why were you initially interested in it?
- What do you enjoy about the course?
- When the course ends, what do you think will 'stick' with you?

### *Consciousness – values / ‘other’*

- In terms of social and ecological sustainability, what do you consider most precious about the world, as you see it today?
- How close are the world as you see it and the world as you’d like it to be? Which elements are close together, and which are far apart?
- Which of these do you feel most passionately about? Why?
- If you had to describe these issues as moral issues, how would you frame them?

### *Structure – worldview / society*

- Thinking about these issues, how are you connected to them?
- Does your daily life have a direct effect on these issues? Indirect effect?
- What are the root causes of these issues?

### *Agency – action / self*

- Whose responsibility is it to take care of the issues that concern you?
- Do you have the power to be part of the solution on any level?
- If so, how are you using that power? If not, what blocks it?
- Who or what do you serve?

## **Constellations of social conscience: using this model as a tool for understanding**

It will become clear in the course of conversation that each person has a unique ‘constellation’ of social conscience – their own particular blend of consciousness, structure, and agency. Many people are passionate about similar issues, but understanding *why* they are passionate, *how* they are passionate, and about *what*, exactly, will help us work more effectively with them. In a world on the brink of collapse, none of us can transform everything, but each of us can transform something. If we reflect on our values and where we feel called to serve, we can focus our efforts and better understand the efforts of others, rather than getting caught up in what we ‘should’ be doing or criticising those working in different ways from us.

Thinking about social conscience is also a way to understand the motivations of people whose politics are very different from our own. Most people act in ways they believe to be morally correct, but if we do not understand their moral code then their actions may seem irrational, misinformed, or evil. Lakoff (2002) presents a model describing fundamental differences in the ways conservatives and liberals view morality. Both groups have a strong social conscience, but in very different constellations – to the point where some phenomena that one group considers a problem, the other considers a solution (for example, social welfare programmes). But this makes perfect sense when we consider the two groups’ different understandings of social structure, different ideas about personal responsibility and agency, and different values about what is precious in life.

In pairs or groups, learners may wish to discuss the origins of their own constellations of social conscience – for example, family or religious upbringing, social conditioning, life events, significant books or films, role models, etc. To what extent do learners feel they ‘own’ their social conscience? To what extent has it been passively accepted from outside sources?

Where has it been shaped by life experience? Having discussed these questions from a personal perspective, there will be rich material to consider more broadly the effects of life history and moral worldview on the way other people approach social and environmental issues. More importantly, the experience of exploring these questions can help learners gain skills in reflecting on their own values and motivations – skills which are crucial for sustainability literacy.

**Social conscience and social movements**

The remarkable diversity in modern social movements is not just a diversity of issues, approaches, or demographics – it is also a diversity of values. On one level, we are all working toward the same goals of sustainability and social justice, and seeing people with so many different concerns working together is a great cause for hope. But are we really clear about the goals that we and others are working towards? If learners can develop awareness of social conscience within themselves and others, they will have a better understanding of what they are working for, who they are working with, and why it matters, ultimately creating space for more effective cooperation.

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Lakoff, George (2002) *Moral politics: how liberals and conservatives think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mills, C. Wright (1959) *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Neafsey, John (2006) *A sacred voice is calling: personal vocation and social conscience*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books

**Figure 1**

