

On impersonal justice: libraries' neutrality as an act of change

Libraries'
values and role
in societies

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Abstract

Purpose – This study introduces Simone Weil's impersonal justice concept and its relevance to libraries' identity and role in societies. The article presents the constituents of impersonal justice and a theoretical justification for the coexistence of neutrality with libraries' commitment to social causes.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual analysis of 3 Weil's works, 13 scientific articles and 12 libraries' official documents was applied, looking at relevant concepts and findings, contexts of use, arguments and types of authority.

Findings – Five constituents of impersonal justice were found: universality, concreteness, unicity, inviolability and inappropriability. Impersonal justice, based on the inviolable value of each individual and the universal expectation of good, allows for a more accurate definition of social justice. Besides, it justifies libraries' commitment to climate change, migrants and Black lives matter, among other causes.

Originality/value – In contrast to previous works, this paper focuses on clarifying concepts by applying conceptual analysis to Weil's works, Library and Information Science (LIS) sources in scientific and normative contexts. Additionally, the analysis of arguments and types of authority for justifying claims pro and against neutrality allows the reconstruction of the argumentative discourse beyond the examined sources.

Keywords Impersonal justice, Simone Weil, Social justice, Human rights, Neutrality, Activism, Sustainability, Libraries, Argumentation analysis, Conceptual analysis

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1. Introduction

Promotion of equal opportunity through free access to library materials and activities is a constant in libraries' strategic plans and normative documents (e.g. [Folkebibliotekloven, 2013](#); [Fichtelius et al., 2019](#); [ALIA, 2018](#); [American Library Association, n.a.](#); [Canadian Libraries Association, 2017](#)); however, libraries' aspiration to contribute to democratisation processes has not always and everywhere been concrete and consistent. When the historical and political landscape changes, libraries' societal mission evolves not only with people's information, socialisation and integration needs ([Aabø and Audunson, 2012](#); [Lloyd et al., 2017](#)) but also according to conflicting and competing forces such as the state, the civil society and the market ([Klausen, 2001](#); [Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004](#)).

The aspiration to address urgent social causes by offering services to the communities where they are present, on the other hand, implies that people are the ultimate goal of libraries through the preservation and transfer of knowledge. Besides, it expresses libraries' ambition to be agents of change. What vision of the human being inspires and should inspire libraries' services? Here, it is assumed that this vision is anything but abstract; however, beyond being based on the concrete needs of libraries' reached audience and human rights, it should rely on what Simone Weil (1986) calls the human expectation of good (p. 72) and the principle of impersonal justice.

Weil's philosophical approach to the concept of person and the definition, although not systematic, of impersonal justice is introduced in a short but dense essay titled Human personality (Weil, 1986, pp. 69–98). Here the author explains why this concept is essential for every human being, although particularly relevant for victims of injustice. This study contributes with

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knowledge about the concept proposed by Weil by analysing three different works to have a broader context: *Human personality* (Weil, 1986, pp. 69–98), *Reflections on the right use of school studies* (Weil, 1951, pp. 105–116) and *The need for roots* (Weil, 2005). These works are chosen because they offer a detailed picture of Weil's philosophical vision of the human being, the difference between justice and rights and the deep relationship between individuals and collectives.

Thus far, previous studies on librarians' engagement in social movements (e.g. Jensen, 2008; Higgins and Gregory, 2013) have argued that either the library's neutrality position is in contradiction with its active participation in social causes or that the justifications for its involvement might have an impact on legitimacy (Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004; Kann-Rasmussen, 2023). However, there is a paucity of investigations calling for defining, examining and reconciling these concepts, with some exceptions (Roberts and Noble, 2016; Burgess, 2016). To address this gap, the present investigation focuses on clarifying concepts by adopting Weil's philosophical approach. To examine the potential of Weil's theory, conceptual analysis was applied, and five constituents of impersonal justice were identified. Then a sample of 13 articles and 12 libraries' normative documents were analysed for relevant concepts to understand if they could be traced back to the constituents of impersonal justice. Arguments for sustaining claims pro and against neutrality were also investigated. This study's primary contribution is conceptual. It can be found in the first section of the present investigation, where Weil's concepts of the human person, impersonal justice, and their relevance for librarians are presented. The rest of the paper reports the research findings and discusses their relevance.

2. Theoretical framework

Weil is not commonly considered a prominent political thinker. However, her theoretical stand for justice and criticism of personal rights are an unexpected challenge for authoritative political philosophers and jurists (Andrew, 1986). Justice, according to Weil, cannot be expressed in terms of human rights because they are based on the notion of "sharing out, exchanging, and measured quantity" (Weil, 1986, p. 81).

The author's idea of person is similar to Hobbes' in *Leviathan*, chapter 16. *Person* means *face*, while *persona* in Latin signifies *disguise* or *outward appearance* (Andrew, 1986). Persons are then actors who assume a role. For Weil, every human being is more than an actor playing roles in society and more than an undefinable abstraction (Weil, 1986, pp. 70–71). This first shift from abstraction to concreteness represents the achievement of recognition where I accept you exactly as a whole, for what you concretely are and in your uniqueness. For doing this, attention, the distinctly human quality, is a necessary precondition:

It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, (. . .). For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth (Weil, 1951, p. 115).

Furthermore, there is something in other human beings that is not just theirs or mine, but it belongs to everyone. Weil calls it sacred (from the Latin *sacer*, which means separated, inviolable). Something so intrinsic in human nature to be not the property of any person, i.e. *impersonal*: an indomitable expectation of good.

At the bottom of the *heart* of every *human* being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all *experience* of *crimes* committed, suffered, and witnessed, that *good* and not *evil* will be done to him (Weil, 1986, p. 71).

While the concept of “person” is related to the role played in society and the idea of property, the impersonal is tied to people’s uniqueness, and cannot be the property of any one (Andrew, 1986, pp. 64–66). As Andrew clarifies, when justice is reduced to a “relation of proprietors”, rights cease to represent what is morally right, becoming an expression of privileges (p. 66). The same can be said about truth. Freedom of thought needs a regularisation of the power of the press, media and political parties to protect individuals from suggestion, propaganda and falsehood (Andrew, 1986, pp. 84–86).

This position about regulating freedom of expression and association (Weil, 2005, pp. 21–31) needs to be placed in Weil’s historical context. Although highlighting a recurring and actual phenomenon in any sort of explicit or slithering totalitarianism: the dismantling and privatisation of public media to manipulate public opinion through the exercise of power.

Being accused of supporting a utopian position, Weil looks for a strategy to protect people who cannot distinguish truth from lies. The incapability of verifying if a source of information is trustworthy and reliable is often related to people’s unequal access to education, information and opportunities, which are needs denied to the afflicted ones. We can wonder what the difference is between an obligation to meet the needs of others and the obligation to respect the rights of others (Andrew, 1986, p. 82). Denying one’s needs (Weil, 2005, pp. 9–38) is equal to a sentence to death, and people must be alive first to be objects of rights. As Weil explains:

The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself (. . .). Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual. An obligation which goes unrecognised by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognised by anybody is not worth very much (Weil, 2005, p. 2).

In Weil’s vision, individuals are subject to obligations and objects of rights. This entails that an individual alone in the universe continues to have obligations, but rights cease to exist (Weil, 2005, p. 2). “Rights are always found to be related to certain conditions” to be applied or recognised, but obligations are independent (ivi, p. 3).

It is up to every society to recognise people as objects of rights and to establish the conditions according to which these rights are actual. This is increasingly regulated by citizenship and depends on economic, religious and political factors.

Weil distinguishes two types of cries invoking justice. The first sounds like: “Why am I being hurt?” (Weil, 1986, p. 93), while the second one sounds: “Why has somebody else got more than I have?” (ibidem). The first refers to impersonal justice and the second to rights. Both cries are evidence of injustices:

We must learn to distinguish between the two cries and to do all that is possible, as gently as possible, to hush the second one, with the help of a code of justice, regular tribunals, and the police. (ibidem).

Hushing the second cry does not mean ignoring it but prioritising the first while acting collectively to heal the second. Without the acceptance of the inviolable value of each individual and the satisfaction of their needs (Weil, 2005, pp. 9–38), the second cry could be distorted into: “Why should somebody else have the same I have?”. To achieve social justice, impersonal justice must first be pursued. However, healthy human beings must also be rooted in their cultural traditions (Weil, 2005, pp. 40–44) to flourish:

The degree of respect owing to human collectivities is a very high one, for several reasons. To start with, each is unique, and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced. (. . .) Secondly, because of its continuity, a collectivity is already moving forward into the future. It contains food, not only for the souls of the living, but also for the souls of beings yet unborn which are to come into the world during the immediately succeeding centuries. Lastly, due to this same continuity, a collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living (Weil, 2005, p. 7).

The individual is not a subcategory of the collective that can be absorbed or sacrificed to it. On the contrary, individuals make *natural* groups because of their political nature in the Aristotelian sense. That makes every society unique, a keeper of the past and a clearing towards the future. However, some societies do not serve the individual but “devour souls” (Weil, 2005, p. 8), cultivating and promoting unfair forms of discrimination. In this case, Weil claims that “the obligation for those inside as for those outside the collectivity is an identical one.” (ibidem).

This has powerful implications because it entails that everyone is responsible when the individual, a group, or an entire society is a victim of injustice, even if not directly belonging to it.

When a party (but also any secular or religious institutions) controls the distribution of power, democracies and “freedom of expression” are both reduced to “freedom of propaganda” (Weil, 1986, p. 74). Democracy becomes an empty word for promoting a political agenda, and rights are used to guarantee privileges.

2.1 *Neutrality as an act of change*

Those claims are fundamental for all those institutions asserting to be a public service, struggling for a more democratic society like libraries are. To understand libraries’ neutrality through Weil’s lens, we need to follow her approach toward words commonly taken for granted.

Neutrality comes from the Latin *neuter*, *ne* (“not”) + *uter* (“whether”), a semantic loan from the ancient Greek οὐδέτερος (*oudéteros*). It answers “which of the two?” with “neither”. If a person or an institution says to be neutral, this expresses its position concerning something. It expresses the decision to follow a different path, a different choice in front of others, or contrasting proposed alternatives. There can be many reasons for a neutral position, but what is the historical and core reason motivating libraries?

If knowledge is somehow the fruit of the times carrying the weight of the values of that time (and the lack thereof), libraries, by safeguarding what has been, allow the construction of what can be. To contribute to the transfer of knowledge and the free formation of opinions, the old and the new, libraries need to stay neutral. Nevertheless, libraries’ neutrality cannot stand if it is empty of meaning. Libraries are neutral regarding other positions, but this does not mean they do not already have a clear position. They stand for what belongs to every human being, to what Weil defines as impersonal justice, and Agamben (2017) calls it *inappropriate* (pp. 67–69).

“The afflicted ones silently beseech to be given the words to express themselves” (Weil, 1986, p. 85), writes Weil, because the injustice silenced their voice. Libraries’ mission is to preserve and guarantee access to knowledge, to past and new voices and to give everyone the possibility to be heard and read. They offer informational, literary, scientific and educational services, a place to meet, socialise, debate and grow as a human being as well as a citizen “no matter the person’s social status, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic identity, or disability status” (Martin, 2020, p. 131). Briefly, libraries could be one of the few institutions left to manage knowledge and information, defending Weil’s principle of impersonal justice, without which no democracy is credible. Impersonal justice also implies that no institution or political party can claim ownership over what constitutes impersonal justice, but they all should be committed to it:

Clearly, a political party busily seeking, or maintaining itself in power can discern nothing in these cries except a noise. Its reaction will be different according to whether the noise interferes with or contributes to that of its own propaganda. But it can never be capable of the tender and sensitive attention which is needed to understand its meaning (Weil, 1986, p. 73).

According to Weil, power not only affects the capability of a political party to hear the cry for justice but it allows exploiting it. Therefore, appropriation of social causes rooted in the

principle of impersonal justice by political parties or religious groups to promote their agenda should be considered unethical and deeply contradictory to the principle itself. It can be argued that religious beliefs are the justification of this expectation of good, but Weil explains:

This obligation has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience. (...) It is recognized by everybody without exception in every single case where it is not attacked as a result of interest or passion. And it is in relation to it that we measure our progress (Weil, 2005, p. 4).

This expectation is from humans and it generates an obligation from another human.

Any public institution and political party should be responsible for safeguarding what belongs to everyone. Accusing librarians, information specialists and scientists in any field of lack of neutrality when defending this concept has, therefore, no justification. Furthermore, to defend what is *inappropriate* does not imply losing objectivity, but putting objectivity at the service of every human being, as it should be in any public institution and scientific field. Assuming that nobody can *be* neutral, does not cancel the obligation to *stay* neutral (Ridi, 2018) as it is required in science and in a plethora of other professions. That implies that librarians have the obligation to let any voice be heard. Censorship, online (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2021) or in physical libraries (Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004) only makes some information more attractive for groups who leverage it to gain consensus. However, the transfer of knowledge and free formation of opinions also entails communicating facts not rumours, opinions or misinformation and critical points of view against the risks of some ideologies, propaganda and harmful information practices. Libraries are and can be much more than shelves, books and collections, and librarians can mediate far beyond what has been (Haider, 2014).

Neutrality is an act of change if filled up with Weil's impersonal justice not only in respect to libraries' role in society but also concerning their identity, at least for the following reasons (1) it does not confine libraries and librarians in the land of accomplice silence, on the contrary, it allows and justifies their commitment with social causes; (2) it promotes a closer and more constructive interaction with patrons and other public institutions; (3) it shows that some causes are not the property of a political party even if they also belong to the political discourse; (4) it justifies their legitimacy beyond the recognition of political colour.

3. Related works

The role played by Library and Information Science (LIS) in changing "existing patterns of power imbalances, social inequities, and marginalised realities" (Mehra and Hernandez, 2016, p. 150) has been defined as an ongoing "working in progress" (ibidem) and as such has become a meaningful, but amorphous field of study (Jaeger *et al.*, 2015, p. 10; Winberry and Bishop, 2021). This is because the contributions are not often framed within the discourse of human rights and social justice, although the topics are adjacent (Jaeger *et al.*, 2011). For instance, digital articles have been explored in search of archaic law denying equal rights for sexual minorities in India (Mehra and Hernandez, 2016) and the role played in "curbing inequalities" by community libraries in South Africa investigated (Mnkeni-Saurombe and Zimu, 2015). In a recent editorial, Mehra (2021a) urges not only libraries, educational agencies and universities but also corporations to break their silence and neutral position against historical racism and atrocities enforced by law in the USA.

Swedish public libraries' significance in the migrant and minorities integration process has been deepened respectively by Pilerot and Lindgren (2018) and Eriksson and Michnik (2019). From their findings, public libraries' emerging role is as a place to search for shields, meet other people, read, find information and learn the language (Pilerot and Lindgren, 2018,

pp. 69–70). On the other hand, their relevance in improving active participation in society is overestimated and not equal among patrons from different cultural backgrounds (Eriksson and Michnik, 2019, p. 318).

Accessing the extent of the current literature on the field, Winberry and Bishop (2021) found that one of the significant difficulties in collecting the material for the review was the lack of consistency in using the term “social justice” in documents approaching the topic. Their findings show that interest began appearing more regularly after 2000, increasing progressively until 2018, when the number of publications failed. The most common research contexts were archives, academic settings, public libraries, LIS education programs and community settings. Finally, their study accounts for research contributions as indirect or direct action. A recent survey of LIS literature regarding anti-racism, equity, inclusion and social justice conducted by Jones *et al.* (2022), sketches the research landscape on the topic over the past decade. Of particular relevance is the individuation by the authors of areas and topics, which respectively confirms how the interest in these issues is growing, but at the same time yet marginal and how rich the number of subject terms extracted (over 1,800 subject terms) resulting in 44 categories representing topics across the retrieved corpus.

The related works show that many studies may not fall within the topic(s), merely because of differences in vocabulary. While a difference in vocabulary is always relevant in science, it becomes particularly significant in a field such as LIS, where consistency of labelling, keywords and definition are one of the main issues. As Winberry and Bishop (2021) explain, “related terms such as diversity, inclusion, and equity among others as well as general topics such as civil rights might also be used to describe social justice adjacent research even if the term itself is not used” (p. 14).

In other fields, for instance, Geography, Psychology and Public health, scientists and practitioners encountered the same difficulty in defining the concept and the same conflict, when faced, with regard to neutrality. Merret (2004), underlines that social justice is “a frustratingly slippery idea to define” but nevertheless of fundamental importance for the balance of the curricula in geography studies. The author demonstrates how individualistic and community-oriented notions are complementary to understanding the concept and explains how geography is relevant to it. Social injustice, in fact, is often related and expressed by using geographical terms such as ghettos, borders, margins, peripheries and regions.

Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002), describing the relevance of the concept for three psychology traditions, highlight how the critical tradition argues against scientific neutrality. Hiding behind neutrality has legitimated “unjust campaigns ranging from colonialism and slavery to public health initiatives like eugenics, to radical somatic ‘therapies’ such as insulin shock and lobotomy” (p. 484). However, the authors underline the lack of arguments sustaining the epistemological legitimacy and objectivity of the critical tradition’s claims.

Finally, in their work on the relevance of social justice to the nurses’ field, Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo (2012) make a comprehensive conceptual analysis of different fields and contexts to define the concept better. The authors individuate attributes such as fairness, equity, justice and the sufficiency of well-being; and antecedents such as society, respect, political will and popular support, justness and equity. They presented the definition of social justice “as full participation in society and balancing benefits and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society” (in abstract).

The literature highlights how social justice is a modern concept and value that should be fully integrated into libraries. The question is whether social justice is in contradiction with neutrality. Gorman (2015) warns about “the dark side” of values (p. 7), i.e. the risk of turning them into absolute. What makes a value “good” or “bad” is not the degree of agreement around it but how it serves a profession “dedicated to serving humankind” (p. 8).

4. Method and research questions

As earlier studies suggest, there is a lack of consistency in the definition of concepts due also to the topic's novelty. Weil's approach seems to be promising to seek clarification and reconcile the perceived contradiction between the library's position of neutrality and its mission in society. To examine the potential of Weil's concept, this study seeks answers to the following questions.

- RQ1.* How can Weil's approach to impersonal justice be conceptualised to give meaning and justification for libraries' commitment to social causes?
- RQ2.* What are the strengths and limitations of Weil's approach in studying the above issues?

To identify relevant research material involving theories and practices (Furner, 2004), official documents and reports published by different Library agencies worldwide (e.g. Swedish Library Association, American Library Association, etc.) were retrieved and investigated. Google Scholar and EBSCO Academic Search Premier were searched for peer-reviewed publications in English using the following query: (librar* or information professional* or information science) AND (social movements or activism or social change) OR (social justice or social inclusion or human rights).

On EBSCO, the searches oriented to full text only identified 4,069 potentially relevant publications over 2021–2023. Retrieval was completed in June 2022. The first 300 relevant hits were scanned, and 18 articles were downloaded for further analysis. After the closest reading, 11 studies were deemed to meet at least one of the following criteria: studies related to LIS explicitly engaging with relevant concepts; studies related to LIS displaying a critical attitude to such concepts; and finally, studies related to LIS where steps for making change were proposed. Finally, the findings were broadened by the two more recent literature reviews presented in the related works (Winberry and Bishop, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2022).

A total of 25 publications were used as research material and are presented as such after the list of references. Worldwide libraries' official normative documents were selected trying to represent as many countries as possible.

This material, although with a partial representativeness of the field's richness and complexity, offers a unique insight into the debate about social justice and neutrality. The selected LIS' articles highlight the perceived conflict from the perspective of discriminated communities, broadening and giving balance to the discourse.

Since this study aims to investigate the strengths and limitations of Weil's impersonal justice concerning libraries' identity and societal mission, conceptual analysis was deemed the most suitable method. According to Furner (2004), conceptual analysis is a method of inquiry treating concepts such as impersonal justice and social justice as classes of objects, events, properties, or relationships (p. 233) to improve the understanding of how they can be used (p. 234). This is possible by looking for contexts in which these concepts are used to classify entities or phenomena, how they are used as evidence in arguments (p. 255), but also, in the case of Weil's works, applying inference to function and inference to meaning (pp. 257–258). To answer the research questions, the following steps were taken: first, Weil's works were read many times, searching for concepts relevant to the finality of this investigation. Impersonal justice was found meaningful for a better understanding of social justice and for giving a new perspective on neutrality. Then her works were analysed looking for how this concept was used and its meaning, identifying antecedents, consequences and five constituents, answering the first research question.

Finally, the research material was investigated, focussing on how social justice and relevant concepts related to library neutrality and societal mission were used, if defined and how, in what context, and if they fell at least in one of Weil's constituents.

Arguments sustaining claims about neutrality were also analysed to understand (1) what motivated the different defended positions and which gap between theory and praxis needed to be addressed; (2) to reconstruct the argumentative discourse exceeding the confines of the studied contexts (Greco, 2023). In doing so, the framework for individuating and classifying different argumentative approaches (2023) and types of authorities (2022) developed by Foderaro and Lorentzen (2023) and Foderaro *et al.* (2022), was adapted. Since in the related works, there were systematic reviews embracing scholarly publications on the topics published within the last 40 years (1980–2020) and reporting on relevant concepts and contexts, their results were used to widen those of this study. A coding scheme was developed using constituents deducted from Weil's works, relevant findings, concepts, contexts of use, arguments and types of authorities. The coding scheme, together with arguments can be found in the [supplemental material](#). Finally, based on the findings, a definition of social justice enriched by the impersonal justice concept is proposed.

5. Findings

Overall, the analysis of the research material indicated a strong perceived gap between declared values and praxis in different contexts ([supplemental material](#)). Social justice is presented either as a broad conceptual umbrella (Mongeon *et al.*, 2021; Rioux, 2014; Singh and Rioux, 2021; Jaeger *et al.*, 2015; Winberry and Bishop, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2022) or as an evolutionary concept (Poole *et al.*, 2021). It is left to be defined by his goals which are fundamental to counter racism and inequalities, “giving voice to communities who have been forced into silence” (Senteio *et al.*, 2021, p. 12) and a host of other societal challenges. Since societal challenges are tied to societies, there are differences in emerging topics in the research material and literature. However, they all seem to fall under the common denominator of injustices suffered by groups at different levels in different contexts in societies.

According to the conducted analysis, there are two main levels of injustice involving groups and collectives and one recurrent type of injustice, i.e. systemic, meaning that information infrastructures, contexts, technologies, institutions and policies are sites of power that shape and perpetuate inequalities (Mehra, 2021b; Mongeon *et al.*, 2021; Bhakta, 2022; Matthews, 2021; Chancellor *et al.*, 2021). Antecedents of social justice are in the first place societies (Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo, 2012) but also groups living in them (Ely, 2021; Mongeon *et al.*, 2021; Bhakta, 2022; Matthews, 2021; Senteio *et al.*, 2021; Ndumu, 2021; Ren *et al.*, 2021). These societies are organised and structured in such a way as to favour certain individuals, groups and communities rather than others. Therefore, antecedents of social justice are *injustices*, in every infrastructure of societies, aiming to subdue individuals, groups and collectives perceived as *different* from those who are in positions of power (privileged/majority). The consequences of social justice are, in the first place, to dismantle this imbalance of power in order to achieve balance and equity. The definition of social justice proposed by Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo (2012) is consistent with the literature's findings; however, it confirms how social justice, thought in these terms, can only be defined by its goals.

Academic, public and digital libraries services and websites, LIS publications, repositories, research designs and curricula are just some of the contexts investigated by library practitioners and researchers worldwide to dismantle white supremacy, systemic racism, power imbalances, inequalities and hypocrisies, just to name a few. Even if many authors engage with the topic(s), not everyone takes a specific position on the core value of library neutrality explicitly stated in some of the official documents ([Supplemental Material](#)), but when they do take a position, it is critical (Chancellor *et al.*, 2021; Matthews, 2021; Mehra, 2021b; Jones *et al.*, 2022).

Neutrality is either presented as an outdated concept (Mehra, 2021b; Jones *et al.*, 2022; Matthews, 2021), or as humanly unattainable (Chancellor *et al.*, 2021; Matthews, 2021). It is

recognised as the root of librarians' lack of engagement and associated with a *passive attitude*, while social justice is tied with *positive action* (Jones *et al.*, 2022).

These claims are sustained mainly by proof rooted in previous scientific studies (Chancellor *et al.*, 2021; Matthews, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2022) perceived as authoritative (individual expert opinion) and conducted by others or by the same authors. In these studies, neutrality is introduced respectively as a myth (Jensen, 2008), or as a limitative “construct” and a “fallacy” discouraging librarians' engagement with Black community issues (Gibson *et al.*, 2017).

Other evidence proving the existence of power imbalances and systemic racism at different levels are also provided (Mehra, 2021b), even when neutrality is not explicitly discussed (Bhakta, 2022; Ely, 2021; Ndumu, 2021; Ren *et al.*, 2021).

In all the normative documents collected, a strong commitment to accessibility and against barriers and inequalities is declared through the use of related terms, even when social justice is not explicitly named. These statements are usually grounded in the Lyon Declaration (2014), the UN's Agenda 2030, the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 19 of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter of People's Rights, which are considered authoritative. However, it is not always clear what concrete measures to adopt to reduce such issues in the communities of reference. Therefore, some of these guidelines seem to fall into what Mehra (2021a) defines as “performative” messages or statements which do not follow further examination or a structured practice against systemic racism. Access to resources and services presupposes citizenship, as it is clear from the implicit or explicit references to citizens in the texts, with the exception of *AJLLA* (no date) where it is clearly stated otherwise. Moreover, the authoritative publications used as grounds for claims in favour of activism in the Library's official documents are not treaties but the so-called advocacy documents, which do not directly create legal obligations for countries, even if they are expressions of shared values. The analysis of arguments demonstrates that the discourse is broader, actually going beyond the boundaries of the examined material. It involves LIS professionals in different contexts, but also scientists in other fields, as proven by the literature engaging with the topic (e.g. Ridi, 2018; Fondacaro and Weinberg, 2002).

Previous works aiming to justify librarians' activism (Roberts and Noble, 2016; Burgess, 2016) have either proposed a definition of neutrality as a practical way of supporting libraries' crucial values, i.e. social responsibility and diversity (Roberts and Noble, 2016); or by bypassing the problem introducing policies (Burgess, 2016). However, these strategies have neither improved the definition of the concept nor have offered a robust theoretical justification against the appropriation of these same causes by partisan institutions.

5.1 Impersonal justice constituents

From the conceptual analysis of Weil's works, five constituents of impersonal justice were identified:

- (1) Universality: impersonal justice applies to every human being, and it is not tied with the role played or recognised in a society or to rights enforced by laws (Weil, 1986, 2005).
- (2) Concreteness: impersonal justice embraces entirely what you are (Weil, 1951, 1986, 2005).
- (3) Unicity: impersonal justice recognises what makes you “different” as a positive value. What makes you different from the collective standards is what makes you unique (Weil, 1951, 1986).
- (4) Inviolability: impersonal justice recognises that every human expects no harm but good. Individuals' physical, intellectual and spiritual needs are inviolable and should be recognised regardless of citizenship and countries' laws (Weil, 1986, 2005).

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- (5) *Inappropriability*: impersonal justice considers that there are goods and values ontologically *inappropriate* (Weil, 1986, 2005). People can only be in relation to them but never become owners (Agamben, 2017, p. 68).

From the related terms and arguments in the research material, it is clear that the first four constituents are present (supplemental material). For instance, *universality* is conceptualised through human rights, sustainability and equality; *concreteness* through individuality, but also attention for children, elderly and minorities groups; *unicity* is expressed through diversity, equity, inclusivity, pluralism, accessibility. *Inviolability* is implied through concepts such as human rights and impartiality; finally, *inappropriability* is somehow suggested through intellectual freedom and neutrality. Social justice is used as an umbrella concept/value which not always represents all constituents. That is because impersonal justice is tied to the inviolable value of each individual. At the same time, social justice relies upon human rights which in every country are regulated differently because tied to citizenship. For instance, non-residents, migrants, refugees and itinerants do not have the same “quantity” and “quality” of rights as citizens and are still facing discrimination even when their rights are formally recognised. They do not have the same opportunity to access not only information, rental of premises and use library services—to stay within the scope of libraries—but also to access the librarian profession, as scientific publications point out (e.g. Senteio *et al.*, 2021; Ndumu, 2021). They do not have the same opportunity to actively present their culture in an equally valuable way and to find roots in the new one. This could be related to the lack of active societal participation among patrons from different cultural backgrounds in Sweden (Eriksson and Michnik, 2019, p. 318). In this case, people are victims of injustice at the individual and societal levels. They are denied making roots in the society that should welcome them and, simultaneously, denied the recognition of their roots.

Furthermore, the constituent of unicity is often expressed in the documents as diversity. This study presents Weil’s unicity as a more positive concept than diversity because the first accentuates the value of what belongs to an individual. In contrast, the second accentuates what in this same individual differs from what is traditionally considered “the normality” by the majority. A constant in people’s experiences with marginalisation is how their race, culture, language, clothing, etc., are framed as markers of difference (Power-Carter *et al.*, 2019).

None of the collected documents present explicit references to the *inappropriability* constituent. However, in *ALA, The Freedom to Read Statement* (2004), the idea is that freedom also means exercising choice not to belong to any party, philosophical or political vision and to give space to voices “unorthodox, unpopular, or considered dangerous by the majority”. Even if the statement’s purpose of defending individual freedom is far from the deep concept of Weil, it is a concrete step toward recognising the dignity of individuals regardless of social (the majority) recognition, which Weil underlines is also a human need (Weil, 2005).

Relevant scientific findings in the examined publications show how different concepts describe types and levels of injustices found in different contexts and societies. These concepts are all inherent, related to, or narrower than impersonal justice, with only one exception found. Antecedents of impersonal justice are, in the first place, individuals but also societies because of (1) the individual need for roots (Weil, 2005); (2) the higher power of majorities. Therefore, antecedents of impersonal justice are in an essential relationship, as well as the consequences. For them to be in balance, mutual recognition and respect are required. Individuals’ physical, spiritual and intellectual needs are obligations that only when recognised, become rights (Weil, 2005). The consequences of impersonal justice are to give to any individual, *regardless of the role played in societies*, recognition of their needs, uniqueness and inviolability. A tentative definition of social justice, enriched with Weil’s impersonal justice, could be:

Social justice is the mutual and balanced recognition of the value of individuals and collectives. It has its foundation in the respect and promotion of individuals' physical, intellectual and spiritual needs, their uniqueness, and inviolability—regardless of the role played in society – in conformity to the principle of justice regulated by the *inappropriability* constituent. This allows for “full participation in society and balancing benefits and burdens” (Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo, 2012) *by all individuals accordingly to their unicity*, “resulting in equitable living and a just ordering of society” (Buettner-Schmidt and Lobo, 2012).

6. Discussion and conclusions

Applying the conceptual analysis to Weil's works, it was found that the concept of impersonal justice is tailored to the universal value of the individual and characterised by five constituents. Four of these constituents were also present in different degrees in the research material, proving that the concept is inherent to social justice. The findings of the selected scientific publications point to an evident lack of concrete measures taken to ensure the application of normative values. This could be related to the absence of a strong theoretical justification for libraries' commitment to social causes.

From the analysis, impersonal justice restores the voices of the victims of injustices and any voice, regardless of society's recognition, while actively working for its achievement. Because society is the aggregation of people living together in an organised way, recognising the inviolable value of each individual and their needs improves justice for groups.

Agamben (2017) suggests that “the body, the language, the landscape” are some of the ontologically *inappropriate* goods, and the list can surely be implemented. However, this goes beyond the finality of this study. Even so, it justifies the active commitment of libraries with causes involving the landscape, its preservation and inviolability; the body, its unicity, its belonging to the individual and not to institutions; the language, its different manifestations and their equal value.

It can be argued that because these goods are *inappropriate*, they must be regulated by laws in the interest of everyone, but laws, Weil suggests, can always be changed. Impersonal justice goes beyond what can possibly be written, explicitly appealing to human obligations and a higher concept of justice (Weil, 1986, p. 82; 2005, p. 2). Finally, the impersonal justice concept is robust because of the expectation of good which applies equally to victims and perpetrators, although limited by a human-centred vision. This is undoubtedly the major limitation. The only concept broader than impersonal justice found in the literature is *sustainability* because it is based on three pillars—economic, environmental and social. Introducing the natural ecosystems adds to the concept of justice a non-human-centred perspective which is indispensable to reaching concrete balance. Individuals and societies can, as a matter of fact, only flourish in a thriving environment.

Another limitation, this time more related to the adoption of this concept by libraries, is legitimacy. Legitimacy “consists of stakeholders' perceptions (such as those of politicians, users, and staff) of the public library, including the value they ascribe to such perceptions” (Kann-Christensen and Pors, 2004). Libraries are, therefore, the result of a compromise “between civic, industrial and projective evaluations” (Kann-Rasmussen, 2023). This, if on the one hand, allows their “survival”, on the other hand, is a substantial limitation of their freedom and values. Legitimacy, because it is tightly related to what society recognises as valuable, engulfs the individual and dissolves their uniqueness in what the majority considers legitimate.

Weil's impersonal justice, on the other hand, is simply overstepping the concept of legitimacy, considering that what is *inappropriate* and inviolable in every human being cannot be considered “compromisable”. By giving relevance to the concept of legitimacy, public libraries somehow relegate themselves to the marginal role of being faithful mirrors of the times and not agents of change. Change entails assuming the risk of being temporarily

unpopular to the same extent as the defended values. Libraries are legitimate because of their unique identity and mission in society, which is to be, for any individual, a window to the past and a door to the future, preserving what has been while acting for change. This entails the concrete risk of losing social recognition and public funds. The first is a physiological possibility in the path of change. The second is the evidence of that imbalance of power that Weil and the literature condemn. Depriving libraries and other public institutions struggling for the recognition and achievement of social justice of public funds is a way to either limit and slow down their action or express disapproval, ignorance, or rejection of their values. While ignorance can be addressed by clarifying libraries' stand for impersonal justice and improving information and communication quality, disapproval and rejection are both parts of the free formation of opinion to which libraries contribute. They prove that libraries, among other public institutions, fulfil their societal duty by being objective and committed to social causes.

From the analysis of arguments in the research material, it is clear that the debate about the core value of neutrality is broader, actual and felt by information scientists and practitioners on one hand as negative, an impediment to the practice of the profession and the fulfilment of its mission, on the other hand as positive, a precondition to it. The approach taken by the present investigation toward the concept of neutrality justifies both positions by recognising the *inappropriability* of some goods and values. This allows practitioners and scientists to be involved without being accused to side with a political party, religious group, etc. Safeguarding what belongs to everyone is an obligation to everyone.

Summarising, the literature proposes social justice as a preferred concept and value from the perspective of victims of racism and injustices. Still, neutrality cannot be described as a myth or a fallacy. By undermining the ability of scientists and practitioners to stay objective and neutral, the credibility of science as a trustworthy system and the dignity of the librarian's profession is instead questioned and devalued. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Values are expressions of beliefs, and social justice and neutrality are relevant to libraries. Polarising values makes them absolute (Gorman, 2015, p. 7) and turns them into ideologies. Instead, the librarian profession needs the construction of a common ground of shared values (Gorman, 2015, p. 8).

This paper proposes a conceptualisation of Weil's impersonal justice, identifying five constituents through her works deemed relevant to the discourse around social justice and neutrality. It shows strengths and limitations of Weil's approach and offers clarification of relevant concepts for LIS' field.

7. Limitations

This study is limited to English, Italian and Nordic languages documents. The date of retrieval (June 2022), the language chosen for the collection of scientific publication (English), the time span (2021–2023), the availability of full-text articles, and the keywords selected may have resulted in the omission of some relevant articles. However, the aim of this study is mainly to present the value of Weil's impersonal justice concept for Library and Information science. The research material was collected with this purpose; therefore, the findings could have less relevance to other fields.

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Supplementary_material_appendix

Coding scheme

Constituents of Weil's concept of impersonal justice (open).

Evaluation of impersonal justice concept compared to social justice.

Strengths → broader, inherent, robust.

Limitations → narrower, weak.

Concepts.

Compared to impersonal justice: related, broader, narrower, inherent.

Findings.

- (1) Definition of concepts
- (2) Critical attitude
- (3) Goals
- (4) Levels of injustice (individual, groups, collectives)
- (5) Types of injustice (epistemic, ethnic, religious, systemic, etc.)
- (6) Context of injustice (LIS curricula, collections and systems, etc.)
- (7) Steps for change

Arguments by context (open)–against neutrality.

Librarians' role and libraries' services.

- (1) Neutrality is humanly unattainable. Librarians and scientists are people and as such, they have political orientations, prejudices, preferences, etc. Therefore, librarians and libraries services are not and can't be neutral.
- (2) Neutrality is against libraries' missions in society because it only drives librarians to be passive spectators.
 - pro neutrality

Librarians deontology.

- (1) Librarians have the obligation to ensure equal access to any user and to any document, to all publicly available information. To do that, they have to stay neutral in building a collection and when offering information services to users.

Librarians' role and libraries' services.

- (1) Librarians are not creators of content. They make available what the publishing market provides and must offer the “widest diversity of views and expressions” (ALA, The Freedom to Read Statement, 2004). Moreover, librarians neither can have knowledge of the entire collection nor competence to judge its truthfulness. Therefore, they can't be accountable for possible bias or falsehood existing in libraries collections.
- (2) Libraries' mission in society has multiple facets and cannot be reduced exclusively to social causes. Neutrality guarantees a balanced attitude to managing different calls.

Other.

The power of persuasion of good practices.

Intellectual freedom is a core value for ALA because it shows that “the answer to a 'bad' book is a good one, the answer to a 'bad' idea is a good one.” (ALA, The Freedom to Read Statement).

Type of authority (open).

E.g. Laws and policies, Scientific evidence, Advocacy documents, Other type of evidence.

Supplementary tables

Constituents	Concepts	Contexts	Arguments/ types of authority	Sources
1, 2, 3 and 4	Human rights (related, inherent) Sustainability (broader, inherent for economic and social) Neutrality (related)	Library identity and mission in society	Pro 1 Agenda 2030 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	Strategi för ett starkt biblioteksväsende (2022, pp. 6–7, 16, 41) Swedish Library Association
1, 2, 3 and 4	Human rights (related, inherent) Inclusivity (related, inherent) Sustainability Diversity (related, inherent) Individuality (related, inherent) Equality (related, inherent)	Library services and collections Academic libraries Digital Literacies Library identity and mission in society	Not present	Improving library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (2019, p. 5, 8, 12, 13, 18) ALIA core values policy statement (2018, pp. 1–2) Australian Library and Information Association

Table S1.
(continued) Normative documents

Constituents	Concepts	Contexts	Arguments/ types of authority	Sources
1, 2, 3 and 4	Diversity Pluralism (related, inherent) Inclusivity Equality	Library identity and mission in society	Not present	Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion (2017) <i>Canadian Libraries Association</i>
1, 2, 3 and 4	Accessibility (related, inherent) Human rights (related, inherent) Democracy (related, inherent) Diversity Equity Inclusivity Intellectual freedom (related) Public good (related, inherent) Social responsibility (related, inherent) Sustainability	Library identity and mission in society	Pro 1, 2, 3 + other	Core Values of Librarianship (2019) and related documents American Library Association (2019a, b)
1, 2, 3 and 4	Accessibility Impartiality (related) Objectivity (related) Equality Independency (related, inherent)	Librarians' deontology	Pro 1	The Librarian's Code of Conduct: Fundamental principles (1997) <i>Italian Library Association</i>
1, 2, 3 and 4	Accessibility Inclusivity	Library identity and mission	Not present art. 19 UN's Declaration of Human Rights African Charter of People's Rights	Vision, mission, values and objectives (n.d.) African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AFLIA) (n.a.)

Table S1.

Source(s): Table by author

Libraries' values and role in societies

Findings	Concepts	Contexts	Arguments/types of authority	Sources
2 and 4	Diversity Equity Inclusivity Social justice (related, inherent)	Academic libraries	Not present	Ely (2021)
2, 4 and 5	Equality	LIS scholarly publications	Not present	Mongeon <i>et al.</i> (2021)
1 and 3	Diversity Equity Inclusivity Social justice	LIS curriculum	Not present	Poole <i>et al.</i> (2021)
2, 4 and 5	Health equity (related, inherent) Data equity (related, inherent)	Health librarians' role Data disaggregation	Not present	Bhakta (2022)
2, 4 and 5	Social justice Inclusivity Equity	Public libraries	Against 1 and 2 applied also to scientists	Matthews (2021)
1 and 4	Equity Social justice	LIS research	Not present	Senteio <i>et al.</i> (2021)
2 and 4	Diversity Social justice	LIS curriculum	Not present	Ndumu (2021)
2 and 4	Diversity	MLIS curriculum	Not present	Ren <i>et al.</i> (2021)
2 and 7	Social justice	LIS curriculum	Not present	Singh and Rioux (2021)
2, 4, 5, 7	Social justice Inclusivity	LIS curriculum	Against 2 Other evidence	Mehra (2021)
1	Accessibility Inclusivity Multiculturalism (related, inherent) Social justice	Scholarly publications	Against 2 Literature	Jones <i>et al.</i> (2022)
2, 4, 5, 7	Equity Inclusivity Racial justice (narrower, inherent) Social justice	LIS curriculum	Against 1 Literature	Chancellor <i>et al.</i> (2021)
1	Social justice	Scholarly publications	Not present	Winberry and Bishop (2021)

Source(s): Table by author

Table S2.
Scientific publications

JD

Constituents	Concepts/ Articles	Concepts/Documents	Sources
Universality	Social Justice Equality	Human rights Sustainability Equality	* = Present in all the Research material
Concreteness	Social Justice Individuality	Minorities' rights, elderly and children's' rights	*
Unicity	Social Justice Equity Inclusivity Diversity Multiculturalism	Diversity Accessibility Pluralism Inclusivity	*
Inviolability		Human rights Impartiality	Present in all the normative documents
Inappropriability		Intellectual freedom Neutrality	Present in all the normative documents with Arg. PRO 1, 2, 3 + Other
Source(s): Table by author			

Table S3.
Synopsis constituents/
concepts/research
material

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