

Universe of Obligation Excerpt

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.

Universe of Obligation Excerpt

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.