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Social Justice Begins At Home

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Abstract

With social justice in constant evolution, the current state of the field within higher education involves both thriving steps towards equity and vast barricades hindering forward movement. Drawing on a clear foundation of theoretical concepts involving social justice, this article considers ways higher education paradoxically contributes towards the process and goal of social justice and replicates the identical systems of privilege and oppression it is striving to deconstruct. This article suggests one path in the journey towards social justice begins with self-work to then shift systemic dynamics to dismantle oppressive structures. Individuals and campuses are offered insights, strategies and forms of praxis to meet the ever-changing field of social justice to create sustainable transformation.

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Introduction

When asked about the current state of the field of social justice in higher education my immediate answer is some things are better, some things are appalling, and the academy often perpetuates a great deal of both. By things I mean the equitable treatment some people receive on campuses while others do not, the policies and practices that serve some and exclude others, the practice of praxis by some and not in others, and the varying degree of critical consciousness of campuses, administrators and leaders to be responsible and accountable to their mission statements and values. When I reference the academy, I mean us individually and the campuses to which we are connected.

I offer such critique from my experience as a former student affairs administrator and current consultant with my work focused on social justice, leadership, and organizational change primarily with institutions of higher education. I realize this may be an unpopular perspective in an academic journal, and nevertheless, it is my most honest answer. As a social justice educator and scholarly practitioner, I am torn to be my authentic self in an answer that is complex with multiple truths.

On one hand, there has been significant movement by colleges and universities to meet the needs of people of varying identities, to raise awareness of less recognized identities and include the dynamics of the intersection of identities into the conversation. The dynamics of power and privilege are at least entering the work, and more campuses realize social justice extends beyond well-written mission statements with the “right” jargon. The optimist in me believes (most) institutions understand social justice is more than numbers, i.e. diversity. Of course, it is also my experience many institutions lack effective long-term structures to support an array of diverse identities but at least people are being recognized as more than numbers. The optimist in me also believes most people and campuses are doing the best they can most of the time with what they know and have.

Conversely, I think social justice efforts are at best, moving much too slow and at worst, failing miserably. Many campuses, and those working within them, do not have a clear understanding of social justice and yet include it in everyday conversation used to guide strategic efforts such as recruitment practices, hiring practices, curriculum design, learning outcomes, and budget allocation. Additionally, the current intellectual terminology associated with social justice seems to keep us in a purely academic space of conversation usually absent of sustainable action. This approach distances us from our own critical consciousness and responsibility, individually and systemically, in either maintaining or transforming the status quo. We are willing to discuss social justice at the surface level and resistant to digging deeper,

being uncomfortable and doing our own work. The cynic in me wonders whether individuals and campuses truly want to change and what they are genuinely willing to give up for change to occur. In our places of privilege, which are abundant in academia, we are comfortable and complacent, and disrupting that state of comfort and security is terrifying.

To balance my multiple truths about the current state of the field of social justice, I attend to the realist in me. In this space, I know that while the process to reaching social justice takes continuous self and systems work it is indeed purposeful and liberating. The work is all about me and has nothing to do with me. The realist in me knows it is a difficult, sometimes painstaking process. Even though I get tired, frustrated and discouraged in the work, I maintain grace and hope for humanity, which I believe are at the core of social justice.

Social Justice

With social justice as the hot topic on campuses throughout the country, I often find a lack of understanding and meaning of the concept. Instead, social justice is interchangeably used with terms such as diversity, inclusion, equity, and multiculturalism, which distorts our efforts and makes them ambiguous. And while it may be a close relative of these terms, social justice has its own trajectory in academia and more importantly, in the communities that live beyond the academic walls.

Many definitions vary in verbiage but possess similar meanings of reducing inequities, the need to change the status quo, and shifting unequal power structures (Bruner, 2008; Smith, 1994). The one that guides my work towards social justice comes from Bell (2007),

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure...Social justice involves actors who have a sense of agency as well as a sense of responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which they live. (pp. 1-2)

Within this definition, we are included as part of the process in working towards the goal rather than having social justice as a problem to solve or fix. When viewed as a problem to fix, an outcome to be obtained, or something to check off our to-do-list, we approach social justice from that of the other, and distance us from our responsibility in systemic structures. Therefore, from a place of systemic privilege it has us making decisions about what we think the other

needs; from a place of systemic oppression it has us asking for what we need based on what the other has.

Instead, Bell's holistic approach begins with the individual and then involves all members of the community to work together. It has us be individually and collectively responsible, within our dominant and subordinated identities, to come to the table and collaborate. Such action takes intentionality, time, authenticity, and letting go of our egos. Needless to say, both the goal and the mere work to actualize it have the propensity to overwhelm or liberate us. Even in the rough moments when we want to quit, let us remember the latter as our work is meaningful, and as social justice takes form, there continues to be forward movement to transform our communities and beyond.

Forward Movement

Similar to our personal process, social justice too is on its own process. Within the past few years, identities beyond race and the gender binary are researched with more depth and included in the discussion of social justice. Transgender identity is beginning to surface in the literature and people are incorporating this identity into training sessions and discussions around inclusion. Although most of us are stuck in the gender binary, which is problematic in and of itself as it excludes people along the gender spectrum, we are engaging this identity on the systemic level from admission forms to policy review. Of course, I think an equally powerful point of engagement is from our own socialization with gender that in the current state of modern technology begins before birth with the question, "what are you having?" Some other not so new identities finally being considered and discussed in more tangible ways include bi and multiracial identity, nationality, and ability. However, I also recognize there are other identities that have been given little, if any, appropriate attention including religion, class, and size.

The phenomenon of multiple identities and their ensuing intersections has also become part of today's social justice process. In working towards social justice we do so in our wholeness, which includes all of our identities, and although intersectionality has been theorized over the past 20 years (Mehrotra, 2010; Hurtado & Sinha, 2008) we are finally in dialogue and engagement about real time dynamics that occur as a result. From my experience, simply discussing intersecting identities is complex and messy because there is no definitive, easy answer or pragmatic ways to engage in the phenomenon. It calls the question, "how do we reconcile the dynamics of our own individual dominant and subordinated identities operating simultaneously to then engage with others who are going through their own experience?"

Hence, it can be a complex and messy process of engagement and learning. I have found an effective starting point is to recognize such dynamics internally and name it to others. It takes intentionality and patience to merely understand there is something to recognize moreover naming it is a whole other level of action.

The naming of the dynamic followed by processing with friends and mentors helps me sort through the challenging associated thoughts and feelings. A significant by product in naming it with others is they then have the space to do the same. This vulnerable action has the potency for powerful dialogue, authentic relationships, and a shift in the way we do business with our colleagues and on campus.

In my own journey, I spend time learning about my group identities from both a theoretical framework and practical lens. As a biracial Woman of Color, raised working class poor with a doctoral degree, heterosexual, Catholic, able-bodied, United States born citizen, I seek out friends and colleagues with similar identities to share stories, struggles, and successes and ask questions. I am in praxis with my triggers and their roots, particularly when one of my subordinate identities is in conflict with one of my dominant ones. I seek clarity on my emotions, thoughts and needs with the realization I no longer need to "fix" myself and instead know I have a lifetime of work to deconstruct that which I have learned throughout the years. This constant practice, which I believe is life-long, aids me to be critically conscious to pay attention to dynamics within and around me. It narrows the gap that can often arise in social justice conversations and instead has me actively and genuinely present and engaged in them.

Distancing Ourselves in the Conversation

I find many well-intentioned people want to discuss social justice, but in ways that distance them from the challenging conversation. The work is approached in a purely academic, intellectual capacity with no action beyond philosophizing. In many of my training experiences, participants pull out the proverbial social justice dictionary and theories staying in a theoretical headspace without actively engaging their own bias, struggle, and work within social justice. When there is action, it often remains at the individual level. Terminology such as microaggressions, intersectionality, and internalized oppression are discussed in relation to dynamics observed on campus but that is where the conversation ends.

The knowledge of these concepts is powerful to understand our experiences and ways of thinking. However, use of this conceptual language to engage in critical dialogue creates distance between people and perpetuates the dynamics of "one-up, one-down," defensiveness and fear of engagement. Although scholarly and I believe well intended, much of the

terminology found within the field of social justice maintains a structure of elitism and creates a distance from individual's socialization, lived experience and associated feelings, particularly in relation to those outside of academia.

From the onset, these terms sound distant, daunting and intellectual, and while I appreciate the stimulating beauty of intellectual engagement, it keeps us in a philosophical conversation with little or no praxis. I believe this language is systemically designed to keep us from engaging our fear that we actually do hold prejudice and may be seen as racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist, etc., or at least exhibit behaviors that define us as such. In our place of educational privilege, we do not want to be called out as frauds and are afraid of being viewed as incompetent so we hold on to the language and allow it to command our conversation. I know at this juncture, my educational identity has a head on collision with my working-class, blue-collar background and the latter screams at me to be honest, stop talking about social justice and social change, and do something, anything.

Additionally, people armor themselves with reading books and learning the latest language to then talk "to" people about social justice, rather than being vulnerable or real and speaking "with" others. We remain at a comfortable, surface level conversation, which sanctions us to remain disconnected from our personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings about privilege and oppression. When we truly engage with an issue, it tends to be because we are a member of the subordinated group and are seeking to receive the benefits and recognition of our counterparts in the dominant group.

However, in conversations where we are part of the dominant group we quickly dismiss our privilege and default to our subordinated groups. This dynamic replicates itself in most every training session or workshop I have facilitated focused on race with people who both identify as White and part of a subordinated group. They enter the conversation of race and racism wanting to focus on their subordinated identity and not their White identity including the innate privileges that comes with it. It is often a struggle for them to recognize and take ownership of their dominant group membership in race such as being White.

I can relate to this struggle in my identities of dominance. Whereas I have a great deal of pain and many stories associated with my targeted identities that deserve and need attention, I pay little to no attention to my group identities with systemic privilege. Only until recently and with nudging from trusted friends, I understand it is equally as critical for me to engage in and with my dominance in the journey towards social justice. Thus, I am constantly wrestling with and learning about my deep-rooted heterosexism, ableism, educational elitism, ageism, and

Christian privilege. It continues to be a painstaking and humbling learning experience to spend time “working” in these group memberships, and I have come to realize this is an infinite journey

Unfortunately or perhaps not, I have to be deliberate and critically conscious to pay attention in my dominant identities because in my places of privilege I am granted “the luxury of obliviousness” (Johnson, 2001). In this unearned position, I have choice to engage and be in critical reflection and action, i.e. praxis, with my systemic privilege. I am then able to learn about the ways I and my associated groups collude to keep the status quo in place, and in doing so, I can take action to dismantle and transform them.

Praxis: Engaging Privilege

The dynamics of privilege and oppression have rightfully entered the field of social justice and are challenging the norm on individual and institutional levels. In itself, simply the word privilege is laden with emotion such as anger, confusion, and a desire for disassociation. However, understanding privilege in its daily form invites us to deeply understand our connection to system dynamics. In our groups of power and privilege, we are automatically granted acceptance, respect, competence, and access to resources ultimately resulting in the ability to navigate in the world with relative comfort (Johnson, 2010). The irony of it all is that most times we are ignorant to our privilege and yet feel entitled to its benefits.

With privilege as another layer within social justice, people are being compelled to learn about their individual lens of privilege and campuses are beginning to examine these concepts at the institutional level. Although not at the immediacy I want oppression dismantled, there are pockets of people engaging group memberships that hold systemic privilege towards creating change. In addition to personal reflection, intra and inter-group discussions are being held which in turn are leading to conversations at the macro-level. A dear friend and colleague enters meetings about policy assessment, budget allocation, hiring practices, and program development with the simple question, “how does this serve (insert identity)?” This may seem small in action but I believe it is a courageous, powerful, leverage opportunity I wish all of us asked in our work.

As stated by Brookfield (2000), “without consequent social action, critical reflection is castigated as liberal dilettantism, a self-indulgent form of speculation that makes no real difference to anything” (p. 143). Easily translated, without social action we are merely talking. This is where the concept of praxis enters social justice, essentially being that of the continuous cycle of critical reflection and action for transformation. Educator Paulo Freire’s work reflects praxis as “...an awakening of critical consciousness whereby people perceive the social,

political, and economic contradictions of their time and take action against the oppressive elements.” (Brown, 2006, p. 710) Within the practice of praxis, there is “continual interplay between reflection and action” (Furman, 2012, p. 203). Praxis propels the consciousness of privilege and social justice beyond reflection and conversation and links them to action, hopefully in transformative ways.

In our identities of privilege we can leverage our power to create meaningful, systemic change. For people at this place of awareness, many times they feel stuck, frustrated and helpless, and I hear the infamous question, “what can I do?” They recognize their systemic privilege but struggle with what to do. It is at this critical point to use discretionary power to challenge the status quo. A few examples of action include confronting exclusionary language and behaviors, examining departmental (and institutional) policies, practices, and overall culture with a multicultural lens, and assessing common behaviors, attitudes, and feelings of members of dominant and subordinated groups. It is equally important to build relationships across identities, which may be a helpful starting place, especially with the personal challenges that are often a byproduct of confronting inequities.

Personal Challenges

As the old adage goes, “with great power comes great responsibility.” Found at this junction of power and responsibility is the need to balance action with self-care. Whether individual burnout or self-preservation, in depth work with social justice is often frustrating, exhausting, and risky. As social justice educators, there is risk of an unknown shift in relationship with family and friends and quite possibly the loss of a job, reputation, and livelihood. The courageous act of simply confronting language at home or asking about a policy at work can produce resistance and sometimes a damaging reaction.

In challenging the status quo and its’ subsequent power dynamics, recognizing the political terrain is critical. Unfortunately, many of us either, do not know enough about the political terrain and consequently find ourselves in a downward spiral when discussing social justice, or we allow our knowledge of it to discourage and immobilize us. However, because there is great power in our voices, we can also gain support from key stakeholders as leverage points to support us with this valuable and dangerous work.

As systems thinker Donella Meadows (1999) writes, “folks who do systems analysis have a great belief in ‘leverage points.’ These are places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything” (para. 1). It is our responsibility to build relationships

with constituents across campus and in our communities, even with those we think may be our greatest adversary. This action expands social justice beyond our individual selves and we may find leverage points along the way to assist us in transformation.

Conclusion

I believe the current field of the state of social justice is a process, a goal and ever evolving. At any given moment, conscious or not, we have our own prejudice towards people across various groups. I know my individual, personal work, which fundamentally impacts my work systemically, means I have to wrestle with it, name it, and stay in it, with “it” being the many aspects related to social justice change. This is the quintessential self-work.

This is what I found most profound about President Obama’s recent support for same-sex marriage. He took time, in fact years, to have introspective conversations internally and with those around him. He went through his own process with this particular issue (Tracy & Viser, 2012). In doing so I assume he had to take a hard, honest look at the ways he was socialized around sexuality and the intersecting identities of race, religion, and gender, and he had to wrestle with the ways his socialization steadfastly remains intact and directs his life. I also assume he had to work through his fear of reaction and ridicule. This process is something I believe most of us struggle with when it comes to identities that are different than our own and the conclusions and stories we have developed along the way.

As we consider the current field of social justice, I think it is important to be both scholarly and practical. It is our responsibility to understand the language embodying social justice and the real life dynamics that systemically have us pay attention to and treat some people better than others based on their group identities. By us, I mean us individually and as a campus. We need to be critically conscious of the people we hire, mentor and spend time with, the stories we quickly contrive about those different than us, the conclusions we formulate based on those stories, and our resulting judgments and actions. On an institutional level, it is our responsibility to take notice of campus policies, practices, explicit and implicit cultural norms, curriculum, and demographics of all community members and their organizational positions.

We need to connect our gifted intellect with our compassionate spirit, as one without the other currently has us and this work fragmented. Social justice requires us to transcend beyond academic terminology and surface level conversation. It graciously demands us to examine our own bias and associated feelings, engage in authentic, uncomfortable dialogue and take action to create a community where all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. These radical acts can indeed transform our world, and to quote my dear friend and

mentor Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington, “my goal is to leave the world better than how I found it.” As educators, I believe it is our responsibility to do just that, and I wish each of us profound moments of insight, healing, and transformation on our journey with humanity.

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