What I've Learned About Activism, Privilege, and Negotiating Boundaries as an Early Career Academic

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Abstract: This article reflects on the author's experiences as an early career academic engaging in activism for social justice goals that is often oppositional to and not supported by academic social work. The author reflects upon two major efforts that he was actively engaged in; the first was related to organizing a national campaign against a major social work research organization that attempted to hold its conference in a location under boycott by low wage workers, and the second related to acting as an ally for a group of undergraduate students seeking to travel to Ferguson, MO in order to protect voter rights and stand with community members against racial injustices. Through these experiences, the author has faced difficult challenges that often put him in a position to have to choose between the values of academia and those of social work and humanity.

Keywords: Academia, activism, Ferguson, LGBTQ.

My Pathway to Activism and Academia

I am a 36-year-old white male first generation college student, long-time community organizer and activist, turned academic by virtue of my position as an assistant professor at a Research I institution. I grew up in subsidized housing complexes in working class Midwest communities. My pathway to a Ph.D. was filled with challenges and pitfalls. Being a first generation college student growing up in poverty, I lacked the priming for college preparedness, the financial resources, and the social support and mentorship from my family to be successful in higher education. As a result of these challenges, I flunked out of college twice before finally going back at the age of 25. After failing to be successful at college earlier in my life, I became defeated and depressed. During my time between failing out of college and going back, I had the opportunity to work a variety of low wage and working class jobs that included working in a parts factory, being a jackhammer operator in a steel foundry, cleaning offices for rich executives, and working in manual labor construction jobs. I also started to become much more aware of injustice than in previous points in my life. By the time that I was 25, despite not being successful in school, I organized two active neighborhood watch groups as well as a productive block club in several communities. At 25 I found my way back on the path to higher education by way of the local community college. I decided to pursue social work because of its emphasis on social justice and historical legacy of community work. The fear of failure and depression that once filled my body and soul had been replaced with an anger and resentment for what so many of my family and neighbors were going through as a result of the auto industry beginning to fold, cuts to social welfare programs, and an increase in the visibility of social problems like homelessness and mental health. For me, a Ph.D. wasn't about teaching and research, but about power and stratification; a mechanism to achieve social change. The trick was never to allow higher education to change my sense of social responsibility and the deeper resentments that I had about social inequality, but instead to use it as a means to speak to power and cultivate radical change.

The Activist in Me

I am and always will consider myself a community organizer and activist who became a social worker. Part of the benefits of higher education is that it provided me with opportunities to learn from multiple sources of knowledge. Although when I first chose social work as a career, I did so because I thought that it was a profession with radical roots in advocacy and activism, I quickly learned, as discussed by Reisch and others, that social work was much more about maintaining the status quo through promoting social welfare and incremental change than about transforming social systems (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Reisch, 2011; Solomon, 1976). The more radical changes that have come about have always been more related to social movements and citizen led efforts than to professional driven activism (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Sen, 2003). During my time in school, I focused on community organizing as my area of practice, because it was a natural fit given my past history. During my time in school, I often found myself feeling like the 'anti-social worker' because my activist nature and radical values. When expressing my values to work with communities to challenge institutional racism, economic inequality, and discrimination against the LGBTQ community through social action in social work classes, I would often receive little support from faculty or colleagues. Community organizing was about SWOT analysis, top down community development, and research driven

assessments; it was not about challenging the status quo through social action. In my doctoral program, I received some support for my social action agenda as long as it tied into research, but I also felt as though people were trying to temper my activist values in order to socialize me and prepare me for the reality of academia (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Professors would regularly say things like, "Good luck doing that as a university employee" or "I wouldn't even attempt that as a junior faculty member." Whether folks realized it or not, social work education through its teaching and practices was rendering the professional ethics and values related to social justice and advocacy to watered down passive practice and rhetoric.

My Indoctrination as an Activist in Academia

When I defended by dissertation, I hardly had time to take a breath, given that it was the "market" time of the year, where recent graduates are essentially compared and scrutinized alongside their peers by hiring committees looking to fill open positions. Since I graduated in winter semester, I was coming to the hiring party late, and while I received some interest from a few schools, I did not secure an academic position for the following fall. Instead, I continued working as an adjunct lecturer teaching 4-5 classes a semester just to make it, while also trying to write and apply for positions for the next year. As I was preparing a paper for a major social work conference, it came to my attention that the conference was going to be held at a hotel that was being boycotted by low wage hospitality workers and the local labor union. After doing due diligence in researching the facts around the boycott, I wondered why on earth a social work related organization, be it research focused, could possibly justify holding a conference at a hotel that treated workers so poorly and was doing everything possible to stop workers from forming a union. While I had came to accept that social work and academia were not radical, this issue was not overly radical, but simply an important concern of economic justice that I assumed most social work educators, researchers, and/or practitioners would likely support, if they knew about it. Without thinking much about it I started e-mailing the organization's board members, many of them on faculty at the school that I was employed with at the time. I quickly learned that while I may have thought of social work as an increasingly conservative profession, academia was even more conservative or at least less interested in the ethics and values of social work than the profession itself.

Decision makers told me that the organization was aware of the boycott, but due to financial constraints and contracts, was not able to relocate the conference. During the course of these communications, I started e-mailing social work and allied colleagues from around the country and internationally to let them know about it. I also started an online petition to stop the conference from being held at the boycotted hotel. My organizing strategy was mainly social action based mobilization, taken from my readings of Alinsky and others; however, I also wanted desperately to build some community for radical and progressive social workers and/or find these spaces for myself (Alinsky, 1969; Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001).

During my time organizing the national campaign, which many were involved in as well as in other similar campaigns, I was regularly told by mentors, colleagues, and supervisors to be careful of my actions, if I wanted to secure a position in academia. I was told that I was essentially making a lot of enemies through my activism and organizing work, which could harm the progression of my career. I was taken aback by how few academic social workers were willing to speak out on the topic of economic justice and take a visible stand against holding a major conference at a place of business that oppressed workers. I couldn't help but think about the implications of the lack of interest in this issue within the academic social work community, especially given the fact that many of the low wage workers involved in the labor struggle at the hotel were persons of color. While many colleagues told me that it wasn't about not caring about economic or social justice, but about the importance of keeping the only social work research organization alive, I couldn't help but wonder if our own privilege as academics had blinded us to what was important in terms of the values, mission, purpose, and ethics of social work. Although I made enemies in my organizing work against the conference, I also found new allies scattered around the country, who happily joined in the effort, but many of them also politely cautioned me against taking it too far, given my position as a beginning level academic without a full-time home. The final result of the organizing effort to stop the conference was that the conference was relocated to other facilities outside the hotel, future contracts would include better loopholes so the organization could get out of them, and a greater awareness and dialogue about our professional responsibility as social work academics in regards to promoting social justice was created. I also came away from the experience, for better or worse, having drawn very clear lines in the sand about who I was as a person, social worker, activist/organizer, and

academic.

My Early Days on the Job

Despite what many foreshadowed for me, I did eventually attain a tenure track faculty position at a research I institution the year following my activism to relocate the social work research conference. Now, looking back, some of my early career struggles to fit in at my new institution, probably had as much to do with me getting the position in the aftermath of my activism as my qualifications. While my new home has been welcoming to me as a colleague and community member, I also have been amazed by how little my new academic home feels like a school of social work. When I was driving across country to start my new position, I drove right through Ferguson, MO in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown. Upon coming to the school, I immediately started e-mailing faculty and administration about the injustices occurring in Ferguson to learn more about how we were responding as a school of social work and how I could help out. I received very few responses, which I also learned was due to my boldness in just e-mailing faculty, many of whom I had not yet met; however, I also received a brief message telling me about what other departments or entities were doing and that maybe I should connect with them. I was confused because even in the very privileged places that I have taught, attended school, or was otherwise affiliated with, the school of social work was a sort of go to place for guidance on addressing injustices and for engaging in difficult dialogues around sexism, racism, and homophobia. Here though, this seemed to not be the case. I decided to use a simple tactic that a mentor of mine had previously taught me; sometimes when it isn't easy to discern what to do next, the best course of action is to wait patiently until it becomes clear.

It was about two months into the semester, when a potential role for me in regards to the events happening in Ferguson became clear. I was sitting at home on a Sunday, when a colleague forwarded me a message written by a student requesting for faculty support to help them fund a trip to Ferguson on Election Day to work the polls in order to ensure the protection of voter rights. In the message it appeared that while a few faculty had donated some funds, students hit a snag with not being old enough to legally rent a van for the trip. The trip, if it was going to happen at this point, was set to leave the very next day. I thought about it briefly and to be honest, as I wrote an e-mail reaching out to the

student for more information, I was hoping to get away with pledging a small donation along with my moral support. I was after all, now amidst a very busy semester in the life of a junior faculty member. I had two grants that I was in the process of writing, proposals for conferences yet to be written, and papers that demanded my attention. I had little time to venture away from it all to play chaperon to a student field trip to Ferguson that would likely make little impact or lead to anything that I could place on my tenure review report. I wrote a very brief e-mail pledging my support for the students' trip and asking the lead organizer if he had found someone to accompany them. He quickly replied that another professor had helped them set up activities and training once they got to Ferguson and a few folks donated money, but no faculty was willing to take them. The student also forwarded a message sent out by the university legal team, letting everyone know that this venture in activism was not a university sponsored activity or endorsed by the university in anyway. Having been in a similar spot as the student, during my days of campus activism and more recently as I organized against the social work conference, I understood the challenges that institutional barriers can create to activism and social change. I also thought about readings on the topic and conversations with mentors about using privilege in positive ways and the responsibility that comes from having privilege (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Checkoway, 1995; Spencer, 2008). I also wanted to find a way to make a difference and to get involved at my new institution; I just thought that it would be with faculty colleagues as opposed to student activists. Within an hour of hearing back from the student organizer, I rented a van and messaged him back for more details. Upon hearing the news that I was willing to pay for the van and drive the students to Ferguson, where I would work alongside them at the polls, he was elated and also relieved.

The Road Traveled

On our way to Ferguson under the cover of the night, I had the chance to learn more about this interesting group of young activists who have decided to get involved in addressing injustice a thousand miles away, despite being within an institution and state that was conservative in values and void of social action. I learned that the students were all undergraduates from a variety of majors. It was interesting to me, but not surprising, that none of the students were social work majors. Some students were in-state students, while others were from all over the country. All students however, were from geographic communities that faced historical racial injustices, and as a result, were

involved in or witness to community organizing and social action from a young age. This made me think back to my own work in the south and hearing about the power of intergenerational organizing (Payne, 1995; Southern Echo, 2008). The students seemed to embrace me as an ally, but with caution early on in our trip. I remember students talking about allyhood and a white student responding, "Being an ally should start with not attaching that label to yourself, but doing the work of an ally, and allowing others to label you, if deserving of it." I remember hearing this from another student of mine, but it really hit home for me this time. The thought of calling myself an ally, now seemed pompous, arrogant, and void of meaning. I don't think it was until the way back home that all of them realized that I was a professor with a Ph.D., as I introduced myself and went simply by my first name.

When we arrived in Ferguson, we had only a couple hours to sleep before getting up for voter rights training. I wondered if their enthusiasm for social action would wane between 3:00AM and 5:00 AM, when we would have to rise for training. I was so nervous and anxious myself that sleep eluded me that night. I was trying to think about everything that could go wrong the next day and how I should respond to each scenario. While I was at Ferguson as an activist ally to students, I couldn't help, but feel that I was responsible for the students' well being and their experience. The next morning, I was surprised by how excited the students were and the energy that they brought. During the course of the day, I saw them grow more and more comfortable in how they approached people at the polls and their comfort in talking and interacting with the community members of Ferguson. Students seemed to enjoy the personal level conversations with local community members about race, poverty, and injustice. I remember one of the students asking a man at the poll his name, only to find out later that he gave them a fictitious name. The man upon admitting this said, "Shit, I didn't know who the hell you people were or what you were here for…I am older than you, been around, and have learned to not trust everyone that I meet." The conversation was lighthearted, but the presence of myself and another white person was also another reason that the man stated for his discomfort when first meeting us, which took me back to the concept of double consciousness discussed by W. E. B. Dubois (Dubois, 1903; Hill-Collins, 1993).

Throughout the trip to Ferguson, I struggled at times to know where my various roles as an

activist/organizer, professor, social worker, and ally started and ended. There was one time where I become very uncomfortable and very aware of my own whiteness and privilege as well as in the fact that I was an outsider in Ferguson. The students wanted to see the memorial where Michael Brown was shot and killed. As we drove into the apartment community where he was slain, we saw a memorial of stuffed animals, flowers, and cards stacked several feet high down the middle of the road, creating a median of sorts. When we parked, I saw students getting their camera phones and technology ready to document the memorial, and I struggled to know whether to voice my concern or not. Finally, when I went to speak, all I could say was that we must remember that we are not from Ferguson and while this might be an exciting experience in activism for us, Michael Brown was this community's son, nephew, friend, brother, and neighbor. As I got out of the van, I instantly felt the need to protect students from potential disgruntled community members as well as to protect the community from possible Twitter posts, Instagram pictures, and selfies, I stopped close to the memorial, but kept a safe distance from it. I was not only feeling a sense of being a geographical outsider from this community, but of being one of two lone white faces in the community. I felt a sense of my own white privilege in a way that no class, activity, or academic experience had prepared me for. I said a silent prayer and went back to the van, feeling comfortable in my decision to leave the students. The students for the most part, were African-American; they were in a sense part of this community in a way that I was not. As I walked back to the van, another student came with me, sensing my discomfort and reassuring me that he understood why I went back to the van and why I didn't ask others to come back. He said, "Man, the whole way down here, all I wanted to do was see the memorial that they kept showing on the news, but now that I'm here, it just doesn't feel right to be staring at someone else's pain…it's fucked up."

During our trip back home from Ferguson, the atmosphere and attitudes of students were positive and vibrant, despite being physically and mentally exhausted from the experience. I remember one of the students stating, "We need to bring this shit home to right here, and start doing something about it." During one point in the conversation, a student voiced that while we were all exhausted and feeling a sense of accomplishment, the people of Ferguson were still feeling tired and still struggling every day for justice. This comment affected me as I had thought about this point, but never voiced it because I was struggling with my role throughout the trip. I wasn't their

professor on this trip, and these reflections, if uttered by me, could easily turn a collaborative exercise in activism into a classroom learning experience; however, when the student voiced it, others listened and seemed to absorb the words. I learned that students and young people are fully capable of deep critical learning and reflection, if they are given the opportunity to allow it to emerge organically from practical experiences.

What I Learned about Academia

When I returned back to the school the next day after returning from Ferguson, I was faced with e-mails about advising concerns, courses, and committee work, but received only one e-mail from a colleague asking me about the Ferguson trip. I received only a few messages from other colleagues around the country. Here I was trying to fully process my experience in Ferguson, and what my role as an ally should be within my own school of social work as well as within the larger social work community, but in my own school it was as if nothing had happened. The only time that I remember feeling similar was when my mom died. When someone dies, even through you grief, you notice who is around or not around, who calls and sends condolences and who doesn't. After a period of a week or so following their death, the entire world around you is back to normal and acting as if nothing ever happened, but for you, your entire world has changed forever. After Ferguson, I felt different because now the injustices were more real, the students and I had been a guest in their community, and it was harder to tune out the news features and reports on Ferguson. I'm not even sure what I wanted or expected from my colleagues. I guess in my naïve thinking, I had hoped that some colleagues would stop by my office, call me, and/or e-mail me to offer their support for the trip and to find out how it went. I even hoped that a couple folks might want to get involved in the effort moving forward. I had no reason to expect that any of this would happen, everyone has their own causes and projects, none should be seen as more or less important than others, but still it was hard not to take note in these early days on the job that few of my colleagues seemed interested in social action and activism. They were on boards, part of work groups and committees, and engaged in research, but when it came to speaking out and acting on larger social issues, at least in the workplace, few seemed vocal. I will say that the one or two people who did take the time to hear about my experience and voice that they may want to get involved in the future meant even

more to me, given that they were the minority and not the rule.

The biggest lesson that I learned about academia as a result of this experience was that academic social work is different from professional social work. Academic social work is more closely aligned with institutional culture and values than professional ones. People may engage in activism and be involved in causes, but perhaps they separate them from their job. I also couldn't help but to acknowledge the privilege that comes from working in academia. Despite not feeling a great deal of explicit support for my activism in Ferguson, I also did not receive negative sanctions about my trip. I am doubtful that in my former positions as a line level social worker and supervisor that my supervisors or colleagues would have been as accepting of me just taking off work for three days to engage in an activist effort. In this way, colleagues and administration supported me. Despite feeling some anger and resentment towards academia for not being more supportive of activism and social justice, especially in social work, I discovered that I am in the best place possible to create change as a result of being a social work academic as a result of the flexibility, power, and privilege afforded to me in my position.

What I Learned About Activism

I have realized that being an activist in academia means that the road traveled is not an easy one, but it is also far easier than the road traveled by those facing injustice everyday (Adams & Horton, 1975). Despite social justice and advocacy being represented in social work values and ethics, how each social work academic defines social justice or chooses to engage in advocacy will likely differ from one another. Sometimes the choices made may be driven by the professional culture of the school or organization, or by personal values and choice, or a result of awareness. Part of finding my own path comes in defining what is important to me. For me, I am an activist and organizer who values academic activities such as; research, service, and teaching. I am trying to learn to accept that not everyone has the same values as me or defines themselves the same as me, which is no different than in most other areas of civil life and organizing work (Szakos & Szakos, 2007). There are also colleagues and communities of social justice minded academics and social workers for which I have been privileged to meet as a result of my activism. These individuals are scattered around the world, but have been a steady and critical source of support. Despite having times when I have felt isolated or alone because of my values, these smaller activist

communities have responded with encouragement, resources, and support that have helped me to feel connected and grounded in my role as an activist. Being an activist in professional and academic social work carries with it a certain stigma. Many social work educators teach students that activism is too value driven to be useful in professional practice. When I have engaged in activism inside academia, I have been forced to consider whether or not my cause was the mountain worthy to die on as my mentor framed it to me. In other words, during my charge to get faculty and students involved in discussing racial injustice and about the events happening in Ferguson, I backed off, after my initial attempts were met with a lukewarm response.

Eventually, I found an outlet to get involved in Ferguson by way of collaborating with student activists, but I needed to practice patience. When I am in activism mode, I am more passionate about the issue or issues at hand and generally more invested, which is a huge strength, but it can also lead me to take things more personally and less objectively when others do not seem as interested in an issue. One of the final things about activism that I have thought often about in recent months is how activists tend to fit into one of two categories; activists who are engaged in social action because they are experiencing inequality and oppression and those activists who are generally well intentioned, but very privileged members of society, which is also part of my own scholarship on community organizing (Brady, 2014). My activism was birthed as a result of my own experiences growing up in poverty, but has changed over time as a result of my education and social status; I am now a privileged activist and with that a greater sense of my own privilege and the responsibility that comes along with it. A privileged activist can come and go from communities and causes with great ease, staying to celebrate victories, while being able to leave tough situations and losses by virtue of their privileged status.

Learning the Power of Privilege

I remember sitting in my first social work class and hearing the term 'privilege' used for the first time and thinking how ridiculous it sounded (Hill-Collins, 1993; Spencer, 2008). It wasn't that I didn't believe that racism, sexism, and discrimination were real, but as a poor white first generation student, who was being evicted from his home at the time, the idea that I somehow had magical powers because of my whiteness or

maleness sounded ridiculous. As time went on in my coursework, I began to understand conceptually what privilege meant, but as with many white students, I also grew cynical to how privilege was taught in courses. So many readings and exercises did little more than promote white students or students with obvious privilege to feel guilty, while students of color were made to feel uncomfortable or pushed into roles as educators to white students about racism and discrimination (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). As I moved into my own early career academic role, I became more aware of my privilege. I make more money than at any point in my life and more than most people. By virtue of my education, I am generally well respected in area businesses or when communicating with professionals. Being a wealthier white male has allowed me to buy a newer vehicle, so I am less likely to be pulled over by police. Sometimes though I feel like I am walking between two worlds. Despite being aware of my privilege, I have experienced classism and poverty most of my life. Even now, when a colleague or acquaintance makes a comment about my choice of dress or tattoos, I have an emotional reaction to it. One time I was at a meeting with some decision makers and someone remarked, "you look like a student, I didn't realize that you were a faculty member." While the person likely didn't mean anything by it, I felt as if they had just called me poor white trailer trash, something that I heard a lot growing up. What I am also learning as an early career academic is how to use my privilege and the power that comes from it to achieve positive social change. During my advocacy against the social work conference, I remember people saying that I had courage to publically speak out against a major social work organization when I was on the job market. But in reality, I never really thought about my lack of privilege or power, only that I was in a much more privileged position than the low wage workers who were fighting for economic justice at the hotel under boycott. When the students and I were at the Michael Brown memorial site in Ferguson, I became very aware of my multiple forms of privilege, from race, to sex, to class. Here I was, a white male of higher social class, similar to the police officer that killed Michael Brown, preparing to approach the site where Mr. Brown, a young Black man, was killed. The students, who were primarily Black, were eager to approach the memorial and even take pictures of it. As I started to approach the memorial, I saw Black residents walking along the sidewalks by the memorial, and something inside me told me that it was disrespectful to go on any further. I turned around and went back to the van. In all of my years of social work education, practice, and teaching, I had never been more aware of my privilege

than at this moment in time. I thought about my many discussions with colleagues and students about what it means to be an ally and activist with privilege. Being respectful of spaces is important. While I felt welcomed and embraced throughout Ferguson during my time there working the polls with students, I think the memorial site was a boundary that as a privileged white man and outsider of Ferguson, I did not feel comfortable crossing. The students may have felt differently, because while they were outsiders of Ferguson, they were still members of the larger African-American community, and so while I did not feel comfortable approaching the memorial, I did not fault them for doing so.

Epilogue: New Developments

Since originally writing and submitting this narrative in the winter of 2015 and with the encouragement of the editors, I wanted to provide an update on what student activists have been up to since coming back from Ferguson, MO. As a result of racial injustices experienced by Black students on campus at the university, along with the birth of larger activist movements such as #BlackLivesMatter in relation to racial injustice around the nation, university students organized the a university activist group on campus. Many of the students who I accompanied to Ferguson were part of this movement to hold the university administration, faculty, and students accountable for racial injustice and for creating a more equitable campus community. The university activist group was embraced by many Black students at the university, but also faced a great degree of scrutiny from white students and some faculty as well as other students of color, who felt discrimination from the white normative campus community, but also from the university activist group, which some students of color felt was only for Black students. During this time I kept a distance from student activists as I wanted to respect their space and need to organize separate from faculty members, especially well-intentioned white guys like me. I checked in with students from time to time and showed support for their cause via Twitter, interviews with the local paper, and through heated dialogue with colleagues. During one such discussion, a colleague remarked, "I just don't understand why the university activist group is doing this to the university, it's bad publicity, and the university really attends to students of color better than many other schools." This type of exchange highlights the deep divide between Blacks and whites on campus. It also further illustrates how

even educated social workers who teach about white privilege, may not really get it. During this time, the university activist group held marches around campus, where students would place duct tape across their mouths to symbolize that Black student voices were not heard on the campus. One of the things that struck me during a march was the presence of white students, who also put tape across their mouths in an act of solidarity with Black students. While I understood that their intentions were good, it troubled me that they really didn't understand how to be an ally or what their role was in minority led movements.

As I watched events unfold, I struggled with wanting to give youth activists' space, while also wanting to help them avoid some pitfalls common to inexperienced organizers. In the end, I tried to focus on what I could do within the school of social work that would be complimentary to the mission of the university activist group, while also understanding the importance of community building among persons of color (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1994; Solomon, 1976). I started creating assignments in my undergraduate and graduate courses that would allow students to use classroom time and space to put together school wide and university forums to address difference and injustice. In our school, we have a beautiful community room that can seat over 200 people; however, most of the time the space is used by faculty and administration for various events, meetings, and trainings, and students must go through faculty or student organizations to access the space, which is a barrier to participation. In class, I practiced town hall style simulations with students to prepare them for their assignment. Students worked in groups to put on forums that discussed issues such as; sexism, racism, what it means to be an ally, and other similar topics. During this same time, I was asked by some students connected with the university activist group to put on a 'know your rights' event at the school. I helped to book the space and spoke at the event, but made sure that student leaders and the activist group members led the event.

In early March members of one of the university fraternities was caught on video singing a racist chant. This racist video went viral within a few hours and tensions on campus were high. The university activist group did not wait to hear from the administration, but quickly went to social media to plan a campus march for the next morning. After connecting with activists on campus and making sure that it was a space for white students and faculty to be in, I e-mailed social work students from my classes to let them know of the events and march. The next morning hundreds, if not

thousands of students, held a peaceful protest and march across campus led by the university activist group. Students, and many faculty and administrators of all races attended the march. The president of the university took the microphone at one point and spoke a message of disgust for the fraternity's actions and expressed his commitment to improving race relations and diversity on campus. Members of the university activist group were quickly thrust into not only the local, but also the national spotlight as guests on Reverend Al Sharpton's talk show. During this time news media contacted me for interviews and appearances, and as much as I wanted to speak out and provide my thoughts about the incident, I tried as much as possible to refer them to student activists in charge of the movement. When I was 20, I would have reveled at having the microphone to speak to power and give my commentary, but now in my late thirties, I understand that no movement should ever be about me or any one person (Kahn, 2010; Payne, 1995; Sen, 2003). It is imperative to the long-term success of social movements to allow space for local leadership to emerge and take charge (Aronowitz, 2003; Brown, 2006).

During the immediate days following the injustice by the fraternity, forums were held around campus, administrators took actions to dismiss the students involved in the racist chant, and bloggers around the nation chimed in with their thoughts about the event. During this time, I tried to use the classroom space to discuss the issues at hand in more depth, which is when I learned even more about privilege and oppression. It had not been even a few days after the fraternity event, when a white student in one of my community practice courses looked visually disgusted as I attempted to facilitate a dialogue about the deeper root causes of difference in communities. When I asked the student what was wrong, they responded, " Look, this fraternity issue was terrible, but we have used up countless amounts of class time to talk about it, can we just move on to social work material for the class?" Another well off white female student responded, "I am a member of a Greek organization that is not at all responsible for this stuff happening, and now I feel hated and fearful when I am walking around campus, because Black students look at me like they hate me." One openly LGBT identifying student, stated that he was not involved in any of the campus forums or protests, because honestly, Black people have not really supported LGBT equality over the years." All of these comments by students should not be seen as negative, because they had the courage to speak

what many others were thinking in classrooms around the country, yes, even in social work classes. What was equally illuminating to me was that almost no students of color in the classroom responded to their peer's comments or chimed in on the dialogue. During these same exchanges, I also saw some students raise their voices to counter their peer's perspectives. One student stated, " I am sick of talking about racism and injustice, tired of seeing women victimized on campus, white students allowed to be openly racist, and students of all colors being allowed to hide their homophobia behind religion…when will we stop talking about and start acting to change something?" This divide among social work students did not come as a surprise to me as I have long thought that we pat ourselves on the back a bit too often in social work education when it comes to teaching about diversity, oppression, privilege, and social justice. What these sorts of dialogues with students did for me was to open my eyes again and to commit myself to not just talking about these content areas in the classroom but to creating experiential opportunities for students to truly understand them, by moving from dialogue to actions that we can all take individually and collectively.

While the university continued to make moves during the course of the academic year to improve race relations on campus, including hiring our first university diversity administrator to spearhead efforts, in most regards, the university continued on with business as usual. The student activists went through many ups and downs during the year. While everyone, from peers, faculty, and administrators, turned to the university activist groups for answers to how to improve race relations on campus, these students, mostly undergraduates, were faced with attending to these large level social issues that they did not create, while trying to complete courses, apply to graduate schools, work jobs, and enjoy being college students. One colleague became irritated that the university activist group had not responded to her student's requests via social media to come and speak to them or to help them start their own movement. People seemed to forget that these were young people tackling age-old problems that we as faculty members and adults should have been addressing a long time ago. While my role often changed throughout the year from an organizing mentor/trainer to a bridge person, it shifted at times to being more of a cheerleader and supporter to student activists, who were trying to continue building the movement without burning out. One way that this was addressed was that some students decided that the university activist group was being forced to deal with too much of the work to be done, and as a result a group of students, some of them members of

the university activist group, approached me about resurrecting a long forgotten chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I consulted students about how to go about building the organization, writing a new charter, and working with statewide NAACP leaders to resurrect the university chapter.

One of the challenges that we discussed was how an official student organization like the NAACP would work with the grassroots student movement group discussed in this narrative. Students decided that there was a need for both entities. The activist group was meant to be a social movement with no formal structure or association with the university, this way the movement could be much more radical in their strategy and tactics than if it were an official student organization. The NAACP would be a more formal and less divisive entity for engaging in racial justice work on campus. The NAACP could recruit students, work with state chapters, and also be able to do tasks such as book campus spaces for little cost, apply for university funding, and have a greater voice in more formalized university spaces. On April 30, 2015, more than 50 Black students and students of color packed out a room in the school of social work to hold the first formal election of officers for the university chapter of the NAACP. Students asked me to run as faculty sponsor, which I did. I was elected alongside several activist group members, Ferguson activists, and new student activists to lead the organization. As I spoke to students, I was overcome with pride for the hard work that they had accomplished and the work to still be done. I plan to continue taking a behind the scenes approach in my role with the chapter, so student leadership and agendas can be out in front.

Final Thoughts

Is social work academia completely separate and different from the values and direction of professional social work or is it simply a mirror image of the state of the current profession? I have spent countless hours considering this question as I have tried to figure out how to navigate my new role as an academic. I have quickly learned that activism is not valued at an institutional level. As a result it is doubtful that I will receive large amounts of credit towards tenure for engaging in activism or receive the support of my institution, but when I really think about it, the privilege that comes with being an academic has afforded me the flexibility and to a lesser degree, the time to engage in activism, which illustrates a certain level of privilege that comes with

being an academic. By engaging in activism, it keeps me grounded and connected to something bigger than myself, and to my past. The major difference though is that in my past, I was an activist out of necessity, but now I am an activist of privilege, and with that comes a level of social responsibility that I never truly considered previous to my start in academia. Students and community members are more likely to view me as having some sort of wisdom or knowledge because of my position and perceived power. As a junior faculty member, I feel like I am in a paradox because others may view me as having much more power and privilege than I feel that I have based on my role and challenges within my own institutional environment. Moving forward, I will continue to be critical of the status quo, both within my school and institution as well as the greater society; however, I will also proceed with a certain degree of caution when it comes to involving others in activism as my own level of privilege is much more visible to me. As a lifelong community organizer, I watched with pride and hope as once again student activists and young people led the way in the march to social justice and social change. Students marched with other young people for racial justice in Ferguson, started a student movement on their own predominantly white campus, and created spaces and organizations to continue to fight for racial justice. When people say, less talk and more action, perhaps these young people can illustrate to them, what this really means in reality. As for me, it has been a long couple of years, but I am finding a way to combine activism, organizing, education, and research into my academic career. As much as I detest academia at times and feel like I have sold out to the man, it affords me with the income, time, and space to be able to engage in social change work at a level that I never knew before as a professional social worker.

As I move forward, it isn't the words of Dr. King, Gandhi, Kahn, West, Hamer, or other famous organizers and activists that guide me, but something that my momma said on the last day of her life in December of 2012. "Son, I am so proud of you for overcoming what you have to become Dr. Brady, but I am more proud of the man that you have become in the process, and that you have never lost sight of who you are or where you come from…fight with all you have to never lose yourself in all that you do and the places that you go in life."

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