

# Creating Space for the ‘Uncomfortable’: Discussions about Race and Police Brutality in a BSW Classroom

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**Abstract:** During the summer of 2014 I was developing my syllabus for a cultural competency course I would teach in the fall to a group of BSW students. On August 9th of that summer Michael Brown, a young black man, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson Missouri. As the fall semester approached and I was putting the finishing touches on my syllabus, I knew that I would speak with my students of the events unfolding in Ferguson. But I was anxious of what such conversations would look like. This narrative offers an overview of the critical dialogue that I engaged in with students about race and police brutality that semester. It also documents my journey in learning to create space for ‘uncomfortable’ classroom discussions that foster critical reflection about race in America and preparing social work students to practice in a multiracial society.

**Keywords:** race, police brutality, social work education, BSW, cultural competence

## Creating Space for the ‘Uncomfortable’: Discussions about Race and Police Brutality in a BSW Classroom

From early childhood when a parent first hushes their child from pointing out differences in skin color between themselves and others, to the person who proclaims they are ‘colorblind’, we have been taught to discount race. Race has been placed among the things that are better left unsaid and something that we have learned to ignore as if our differences do not matter. More so, we like to believe we live in a society in that the color of ones skin does not influence social class, education, employment, health, and a multitude of other contexts, but the reality is that the experiences of people of color, both past and present, tell us otherwise.

Beyond the anecdotal evidence from our forefathers and mothers, we have empirical research that supports these differences in well-being that are experienced between races. And yet still we just don’t want to talk about race, at least not in our daily lives. Talking about race is uncomfortable and actually having a dialogue about race could be unpleasant, impolite, or start an argument. So we talk about race in general terms, safe terms, and politically correct terms that leave little room for real growth or progress around the issue.

Our employers and institutions of higher learning too often leave it to special courses, trainings, or seminars specified to discuss issues of diversity and even then we have a hard time having the real

conversations that are needed. It is human nature to not want to be or feel uncomfortable. However, it is often within the discomfort that we are challenged to look inward as to why we are uncomfortable in the first place, which may allow us to truly achieve a deeper level of consciousness and understanding about race relations and about ourselves.

## In the Beginning

During the summer of 2014 I was developing my syllabus for a cultural competency course I would teach in the fall to a group of BSW students. I had envisioned my course in a multitude of ways that I hoped would challenge and push my students toward growth and development around issues of race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, ability, and spirituality. Imperative to my teaching strategy was to avoid the pitfalls of ‘playing it safe’ or having superficial lectures about difficult topics such as race. Then on August 9th as I was clearing up my family’s breakfast dishes from that morning, I heard a breaking news report from the television in the other room. The news reporter stated that a white police officer had shot an unarmed black man near the St. Louis area. I placed the plate I was preparing to wash in the sink, grabbed a dishtowel to dry my hands and began moving towards my living room where the television was. As I came within sight of the screen I saw an aerial view from a news helicopter hovering over a street where a motionless body lay while several police officers stood near by. I shook my head in solitude for the family of the young man lying in the street and for the sorrow they must feel as they saw their loved one’s lifeless

image forever etched into video so that their loss could be replayed over and over again by the media. And I shook my head for the loss of yet another young person to such a violent unnecessary death. As the news reporter relayed the details of what they thought had transpired it became apparent that this initial news coverage would guide direction of future media, the community's response, and police investigations.

That week headlines across the country recounted the news story of a black unarmed teen shot by a white police officer. The way the last moments of Michael Brown's life were described varied depending on what news outlet was reporting the story and were reflective of inherent bias of each media source and their intended audience. However a recurring theme emerged as most descriptions focused on race in describing a black vs. white situation. As the news coverage continued that week my initial predictions started to unfold as racial tensions rose and the fear, ignorance, and denial of problematic race relations in America could no longer be ignored in light of the current situation.

I knew all too well what race relations looked like and felt like in and around the St. Louis area. While completing my master's degree in the early 2000s I lived in University City and had a practicum placement in an agency in the inner city of St. Louis that served a predominately African American community. During my time in the St. Louis area I often felt there was not space for me as a woman of African American, American Indian, and White ancestry, as everything was clearly divided in Black or White with little room for 'other'. So when Darren Wilson, a white police officer, killed Michael Brown a young unarmed black man, it was apparent to me that there was much more to be told about how and why these events unfolded. And that Darren Wilson himself probably didn't even completely understand the historical, social, and political momentum that pushed him to end an unarmed man's life.

As the fall semester approached and I was putting the finishing touches on my syllabus, I knew that I would speak with my students of the events unfolding in Ferguson Missouri. But I was anxious of what such conversations would look like. I was also unsure of how and when I would speak about

Michael Brown during the semester. I also wondered whether my students would be receptive to such a conversation? Or would they become hostile or distant if their view about the incident were different from that of my own? How would the racial make-up of a class that was over 80 percent White impact our dialogue? And how would the students respond to a woman of color presenting these issues? Would it be different if I were a man or if I "looked" white? These were just some of the questions that slipped through my thoughts. These thoughts could have easily deterred me from engaging in such an anxiety producing discussion with my students. But as I reflect now, I realize that my decision to choose to talk about Michael Brown was my conscious choice to stand for social justice and to model the social work behavior I hoped my students would also embody. As fate would have it, it was not me who first uttered Michael Brown's name that semester.

During the first couple of weeks of the semester I found myself focused on building rapport with my students and creating a safe space to share and talk about difficult topics. Yet during the third week of class a young White student chose to talk about Ferguson and Michael Brown for her media log assignment. Her presentation would be among the very first presented to the class and her choice of such a controversial issue was unexpected so early in the semester. In the assignment students were asked to present a critical critique of a media source (i.e. television, radio, videos, movies, newspapers, magazines, billboards, books, the Internet, music) to their classmates that demonstrated some overt or implicit value, attitude, behavior, or judgment that they considered to be prejudicial, oppressive, or discriminatory against a particular individual or group of people. The premise of the assignment assumes that prejudice, oppression, and discrimination (whether conscious or unconscious) exist in virtually every social setting, interaction, and facet of human life. By becoming more sensitive and attentive to the various ways in which we are influenced by these oppressive forces – primarily in ways that we are often unaware of– we may begin to change some of those conditions as part of our professional and personal commitment as social workers. The student chose to share a news story that related the shooting of Michael Brown. She contacted me shortly before class to voice some concerns she had about presenting the material and it was obvious that she had some hesitations in what and

how she should talk about it with the class. It was also clear that she was still developing her own opinions around the incident. But regardless, she took us there and I accepted the opportunity. The discussion was difficult and you could sense the uncertainty and discomfort of the students grow during the student's presentation – after all, we had only been in each others presence two times before and we were still getting acquainted.

As the student ended her presentation and the floor was opened for questions I took the liberty to guide the discussion. First, I seized the opportunity to talk with my students about the unique position we were in that semester, a position that would allow us to explore race relations in America through current events. I was also honest with my students that talking about the growing racial tensions in Ferguson and across the U.S. was tough and that we couldn't compartmentalize it to a 'topic' of the week. So, I vowed that as a class we would revisit the discussion as new events occurred and talk about their implications for us as social workers throughout the semester.

### **In the Middle**

Shortly after we first spoke of Michael Brown and the happenings in Ferguson, a young white student timidly raised her hand and asked "So how do we talk about race?" From the tone of her voice and her body posture I could see the risk she took in asking that question. But I was so grateful that she took that chance, because it gave me the opportunity to say, "That is why we are here." The student seemed to exhale after my response as though the answer provided her some reassurance that we were in this together – and we were. During the semester I was open about my own personal experiences and bias about the shooting of Michael Brown; my views as a mother, a person of color, and a social worker bleed through and as they did so did the views of my students. My personal perspectives and that of some of my students did not always align. These differences in opinions and experiences offered opportunities for critical dialogue that could have been easily ended if we did not allow space for reflective conversations that respected the contributions of all class members. Locke & Faubet (2003, p. 329) state, "To understand others, people must understand themselves; to understand

themselves people must interact with others. Personal experience with a diverse mix of people can lead to better understanding of our own cultural identity...." I like to believe these words resonated throughout my teaching that semester, as I tried to integrate a variety of mediums to expose my students to the reality of the "other," or to those they deem as different from themselves. I offered extra credit for students who attended a community forum on the Michael Brown case that hosted speakers from the St. Louis area. Several of my students chose to attend and it was imperative that I was there to process the event with them.

At one point in the semester I asked my students to visualize standing in an elevator alone and as the doors slowly open a stranger whom they would be uncomfortable being alone with steps in. I rhetorically ask "what does this person look like?" Is their skin a different color than your own, what is their gender, are they wearing a piece of clothing that identifies them as a member of a particular religious or ethnic group? As I look around the now quiet room I witness a few students slowly nodding their head. I assume that they see what I do when I practice this exercise myself, a person who our families, friends, society, and the media has taught us to fear. It is the person who we hold our belongings a little tighter around and avert our eyes from whether or not we really have a valid reason to. I tell the students, "Do you feel that? " That feeling in the pit of your stomach?" That is our discomfort and that is our work. The person who stepped in the elevator with us is not a real treat or problem they are a manifestation of our own personal bias and prejudices and that is your work and not theirs.

At about this point in the semester, it became clear to the students that increasing cultural competency in my classroom was not about reciting sweeping generalizations about racial and ethnic forms of communication or family structure, but about critically reflecting on themselves and their experiences that influence their reactions and relations to those they view as 'different' from themselves.

Though some may disagree, I hypothesize that if we had asked Darren Wilson prior to August 9th, 2014, who stepped into his elevator alone, he most likely would have seen a young black man, perhaps a man that looked very similar to Michael Brown. Though

this is just speculation, the research tells us that there is an abundance of negative portrayals of black men shown in the media that perpetuate stereotypes of the black man as dangerous or someone to be feared (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Until society accepts and acknowledges such biases that permeate our society more people color will continue to lose their lives due to ignorance and an irrational fear that has been manifested within the media and ultimately within ourselves.

Contrary to this, my students and I talked about the influence of mass media – what photographs, video images, or headlines were used to depict Michael Brown vs. others involved in similar situations. The media has been a powerful influence in the Michael Brown case and has also been a dividing force that has distanced us from one another. Even if we accept the argument that the incident between Brown and Wilson, had nothing to do with race, I believe it is nearly impossible to deny that everything that happened after Michael Brown's death was all about race relations in America. My students shared how the media coverage of the events in Ferguson had created a division on popular social media sites, with friends and family members divided on the issue. They spoke of how it was difficult and often times infuriating to decide how to engage others in conversations around the Michael Brown case and other race – sensitive topics.

I chose to counter adverse media that perpetuated racial divides and instead relied on multimedia sources that depicted the situations that gave a different viewpoint of the same situation. For example, StoryCorp (2014a) offered a narrative of a young African-American man who was adopted by a white couple as child and grew up in largely white, middle-class suburb. During the StoryCorp interview the young man and his mother talk about how race has influenced their lives and what happened the night he was pulled over by police in 2009 (StoryCorps, 2014a). Though it is ultimately the story of a young black man being brutalized by white police officers, it is told from the narrative between a mother and her son; a relationship that extends beyond the boundaries of race. Other media sources I used included video clips from Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, which is a popular satirical comedy show among college students. In one such video, John Oliver explores the racial

inequality in interactions with police as well as the increasing militarization of police departments in the U.S. (Oliver, 2014). The video highlights the bias in news headlines and inconsistencies in reporting surrounding the days following the shooting of Michael Brown. Though John Oliver's content is for adults only, integrating satirical media sources into classroom discussions can ease the digestion of very difficult issues by showing them in formats that are familiar to students. However, key to using such media sources is having meaningful dialogue after and processing the intention of the media source with students (Tyler & Guth, 1999).

In November 2014, I attended CSWE where I heard a lecture by Michael Spencer where he said “we need to see ourselves in those we hate.” This resonated with me on multiple levels because it is not only those we hate, but simply those that we see as different from ourselves that we must see our reflection in. More so, we must witness the humanity in others to find it within ourselves. To illustrate this concept I showed a StoryCorps clip titled, “My American soldier became my Iraqi brother.” Which tells the story of an unlikely friendship between an American soldier and an Iraqi interpreter (StoryCorps, 2014b).

I chose powerful yet short video clips such as this to illustrate concepts and spark dialogue about race and difference that could easily be integrated into class discussions and overlapped with a variety diversity issues. Such media resources can be great tools for discussions about developing cultural competency but they must be carefully selected to ensure that they do not perpetuate stereotypes and are in line with specific learning goals or objectives of the course (Tyler & Guth, 1999). Exposing students to intercultural settings can also help reduce the anxiety that can experienced in unfamiliar cross-cultural encounters (Locke & Faubert, 2003) and as many of my students so insightfully noted, the more you talk about difficult things (i.e. race) the easier it is to do. So that is what we did each and every class period we talked, we shared personal stories, some were thoughtful and full of laughter, while others were reminiscent of experiences with racism and painful memories. Somehow we created a space that allowed us to share those things that were so often left unspoken. For myself and students of color in the class, it was experiences of being considered an “other”; such as being followed in stores by overly attentive

salesclerks, hassled by police officers while white peers are ignored, and defeating comments that questioned our place on a predominantly white campus. For White students it was often frustrations over friends or relatives who had said derogatory comments and discussions about how to handle them should they happen again. Regardless of race, many students shared heart-rending accounts that transcended racial boundaries. Though some of the stories recounted were difficult to hear, the tears and empathy from their peers was a beautiful sadness that exhibited the human connection, regardless of difference, that we all so desperately need.

Towards the end of the semester as a class we decided to designate time to process what had happened in Ferguson over the semester. To begin the conversation I showed Martin Luther King Jr's interview with Mike Wallace from 1964, which is mostly known for King's quote, "A riot is the language of the unheard" (CBS News, 2013). I used it as a sounding board to discuss the protests that had been happening around the nation in response to recent police brutality and the court ruling in the Michael Brown case. We then had a candid conversation that though violence cannot be condoned, we must understand that when persons or communities are pushed to their limit, manifestations of their hurt, their anger and their heartache will be communicated in anyway that they feel they can be heard. As a class we then discussed what our role as social workers might be in such situations as these issues would undoubtedly resurface during our social work practice, as vulnerable and oppressed communities of color continue their plight for racial, social, and economic equity.

On the last day of class, I asked my students what it means to be an "ally." I asked them in what ways had they been an ally in the past, and what were the risks they took in doing so? I also asked the students how they would be an "ally" in the future and for whom or for what groups? The overwhelming consensus from students was speaking up in difficult situations and helping give voice where there is none by challenging discriminatory comments and practices. Students also agreed that just because class was ending didn't mean their journey towards cultural competency was. A student suggested that the class find a way to stay connected with one

another and continue sharing stories and information to keep the dialogue going and continue learning. The students decided to create a facebook group, which grew beyond just the students in my class that semester. Today, the facebook group's newsfeed is updated on a regular basis by students who are keeping the conversation alive and challenging others to do the same. I regularly join the conversation and post links that challenge the status quo of race relations in America and continue to highlight the alarming instances of police brutality experienced by people of color.

### Towards an End

Throughout the semester I found ways of integrating course content on the happenings in Ferguson as it unfolded. Not so that it overpowered our class sessions, but as a consistent reminder that this is now a part of our history and it should not be forgotten. As time has passed Michael Brown's name as been added to a disheartening list of unarmed persons of color who have been killed by law enforcement, a list that has already grown since his death. So I remember the names of persons killed by law enforcement, Tamar Rice, Eric Gardner, Yvette Smith and many others (for full list see <http://gawker.com/unarmed-people-of-color-killed-by-police-1999-2014-1666672349>), as a reminder that though time moves on, this issue is still important, – *they are still important* – and this is still our work as social work students, practitioners, scholars, researchers, and educators.

And though my teaching that semester will not stop people of color from experiencing policy brutality, it is part of a larger effort to foster an idea within the next generation of social workers that will hopefully grow and spread beyond the length of my own personal reach. Perhaps the greatest compliment I received from many of my students that semester was 'thanks for making me uncomfortable', which is something I plan to do again and again and again, and I hope other social workers will take the challenge to dwell in this 'uncomfortable' space with me.

This manuscript is dedicated to my SW 555 class in the fall of 2014 that showed me the joys and challenges of teaching cultural competency in adverse times. But most of all, thank you to my students for embracing the "uncomfortable" and moving forward

with me in your journey towards cultural competency.

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