

# Reflections on Engaging in Social Action against Social Injustice, While Developing a Survey to Study It: Restorative Social Justice as a Lived Experience

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**Abstract:** Engaging in social justice research is a dynamic process as the elimination of oppression and inequality in society is a constant struggle. This reflection paper focuses on the development of a yearlong social justice and social action project informed by police brutality cases such as those involving Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. This paper provided two sets of reflections on this social justice research project: the reflections of the facilitator of the project; and the reflections of the team involved in the process. The project began in January of 2015 with the team identifying concepts and measures related to social justice and using those concepts to design and launch a study that focused on social workers' engagement in social action. The death of Freddie Gray on April 12, 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland transformed this project from a social justice research project to a social action initiative. After the death of Freddie Gray, some of us were engaged in peaceful protests, volunteering to clean up communities affected by the protest activities, or providing crisis support to the children and families in the community. Within the community, the language used to describe this social action process shifted from calling it a *riot* and a *protest* to calling it an *uprising* and an *awakening*. Our reflections reinforced the idea that social justice research, under the right context, can provide a forum for what Paulo Friere called Praxis- reflective action. We expect that the research activities that will emanate from this social action initiative will further invigorate similar social justice research projects in communities around the country and around the world.

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## Project Introduction by the Instructor – December 2014

By December of 2014, I had been the instructor at the University of Maryland for 14 years teaching the first part of a yearlong doctoral research practicum, which features the design, administration and analysis of a survey that focuses on a topic of relevance to the profession of social work (See Svoboda, Williams, Jones & Powell, 2013 for a detailed discussion of the practicum). In my role as the instructor and facilitator of the first half of the practicum, I provided the methodological framework for designing the study (based on Aday & Cornelius, 2006; Cornelius, L. J., & Harrington, D., 2014), and facilitated the overall instrument design process, while the student team developed the indicators for the study, finalized the sampling strategy and implemented the study. The project runs from January to December of each year. In the December before the start of the project year, I would routinely meet with the students and brainstorm with them about potential topics for the practicum. This would give them time to decide on a topic before the project year begins.

Prior to our first meeting in December of 2014, I sent the students two topics for their consideration: Behavioral health integration and social work practitioners' readiness to implement the Affordable Care Act. During the meeting the student team added the following two topics to the list: Responses to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown: Faculty perceptions regarding African American males; and student perceptions of diversity within schools of social work. The December meeting ended with no firm commitment to a study topic.

## Student Team Topic Development – The Road to Choosing a Focus on Trayvon Martin/Michael Brown as a Social Work Research Project December, 2014 – January, 2015

In 2012, an unarmed 17 year-old boy named Trayvon Martin was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. The volunteer was acquitted of the murder which outraged many in the nation. In the fall of 2014, a young man named Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in the town of Ferguson, Missouri. These incidents were only a couple in a series of deaths of unarmed men of color at the hands of police officers that have made the national spotlight

in the last few years. Communities around the country including Sanford and Ferguson ignited in response, and a nationwide movement of protests and social activism followed.

In early December of 2014, some of the students and faculty from our social work doctoral program gathered for a monthly PhD Program Committee meeting. During this meeting, several students voiced their concerns that our School of Social Work might not be doing enough to respond to or acknowledge the acts of violence and police brutality that were in the news spotlight, from such cases as Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. This evolved into a discussion about what role the School of Social Work in a large urban institution such as ours should have in addressing social injustice and racism. While there was debate about how exactly the school should respond, there was a general consensus that as social workers, we all have a stake in taking action against social injustice, whether that be through education, research, or joining in the protests.

The following day, all of the students who were beginning their first semester of the research practicum course in January of 2015 met with the instructors of the course to have a preliminary discussion about potential research topics. One of the students in this class, who had attended the Program Committee meeting the prior day, thought the issue of social workers taking action against social injustice was interesting and timely, and proposed this as a possible research topic. At that point, the idea was very raw and unpolished, and there was a good deal of discussion around what the topic really meant. Were we interested in racism? Were we interested in issues of diversity within schools of social work? Were we interested in social workers' perceptions of their responsibility to defend social justice? A few other topics had also been suggested, so we spent the time between this meeting and the first day of class in January to consider all of the options and do some literature searches on the topics of most interest to each of us.

In our first class meeting of the spring semester (January 21, 2015) we established that the majority of the class was interested in studying the social work profession's role in taking action against social injustice. We agreed that recent incidents such as the

cases of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and the resulting social activism in Sanford and Ferguson were important moments in civil rights history, and as social workers and PhD students, we wanted to respond.

First, we were interested in learning how other social workers perceive their role in protecting and promoting social justice, specifically in response to acts of oppression and racism. Second, we wanted to contribute to the social work literature on the topic because our literature searches yielded limited results. Ultimately, we felt that as former social work practitioners and current social work PhD students, we had a responsibility to take action against social injustice, and conducting this study is one such action.

### **Instructors First Take on the Student Topic Choice – January 2015**

While a study that focused on responses to tragedies like those involving Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown was introduced in December, my initial reaction to their selection of this topic both in December and at our first formal session at the end of January was decidedly muted as this topic was different than any other one pursued by the previous cohorts of students. After class, I thought some of the students found my initial reaction to their choice curious, given my passion for social justice research.

I actually found myself in a peculiar place during this class session. As an Afro-Caribbean who grew up in El Barrio- East Harlem, this issue is too real for me to take casually. I grew up in a community with a long history of a polarized relationship with the police. On a personal level, *I am painfully aware every day that even as a Black Professor, when I step out onto the street I am treated the same way as any other Black man. I know within my heart that on any given day Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Trayvon Martin or Freddie Gray could be me.*

Also unbeknownst to the students, I had also witnessed decades of discussions, conferences, fora, reviews, data analyses, town halls, and marches regarding the persistent social injustices in society. *I had reached the point where I have to work hard to hold myself back from rolling my eyes and saying "when will we stop this analysis paralysis and commit to structural social transformation that lifts up the tide for all of us?"* As it relates to Trayvon Martin and

Michael Brown I had been decidedly silent out of frustration at the lack of national acknowledgment of the systemic mistreatment of African American males by police officers and the disproportionate representation of African Americans and Latinos in the correction system.

So here I am on my first day of a yearlong project left with the charge of *objectively* fostering the autonomy of my students to develop their research study, without trying to influence their decision making based on my professional or personal experiences. I knew I could not possibly be totally objective as here I am having the students read a book about social justice research being a lived experience and we are now getting a chance to practice what I preached. *Yes, be careful what you wish for in life....*

So what did I do in the face of all this? I tried to stay the course the best I could (no pun intended). My charge was very clear: to allow the students to develop the topic while giving them the tools to guide the process. I also knew that we had several tools at our disposal that would help us as a team to develop a survey that would be responsive to the issues at hand. In particular, as always, I asked the students to journal their involvement in the process and use the journals to fine-tune the development of the study. I also asked the students to keep extensive weekly project minutes of our meetings to help us keep track of the survey development process. This turned out to have direct relevance to documenting the impact of the Freddie Gray incident on the project.

I also introduced to the class a conceptual issue that I knew would help them in this process – Paulo Friere’s concept of Praxis - or reflective action (Friere, 2000). In this case, I talked to the team of seven doctoral students about Friere’s insistence that *in order to become true transformative agents of change we have to both think and do – not just engage in analysis or action without reflection*. I also talked about the importance of doing that in concert with the effected community we wish to engage. Thus, I sent the charge for them to develop a study that was sensitive to the challenges of those who are facing injustices.

### **Student Team Topic Evolution – January through the Freddie Gray Incident**

Early on, our research topic was roughly defined as social workers’ social action and political participation. We explored different ways to conceptualize race in the context of social justice, such as critical race theory and race formation theory. Others presented their position on social cognitive theory and theory of reasoned action. These conversations further highlighted our need to formulate a more clearly-defined topic.

Eventually there was disagreement between two possible research questions: “What factors impact social workers’ engagement with advocacy activities?” and, “What factors are associated with social work engagement in social action against social injustice?” While there were significant methodological strengths for answering the first question, such as the existence of tested scales measuring advocacy, our group strongly felt compelled to move forward with the second question, given the urgent call for social action. We wanted our project to have a direct and lasting impact on the social injustice that was surrounding us.

Concurrently, our questions needed to be feasible within our given timeframe and use an accessible sample as outlined by course objectives (Svoboda, Williams, Jones, & Powell, 2013), so we discussed how possible research topics could relate to various types of social work samples. We considered sampling the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), or the state Board of Social Work Examiners (BSWE). Throughout this process, we were aware that no matter which organization we chose, there would be the possibility that what we find may suggest a corrective effort. It is, after all, our intention to support our colleagues’ vow to participate in social action on behalf of our profession. We ultimately chose the NASW sample because it is the most populous professional social work organization and therefore it likely will provide access to a representative sample of social workers.

Similar to most group processes, there were leaders among the group who drove the formulation of the project. Though we were all clearly affected by the recent racial awakenings, there were some group members who were more passionate about using

research as a tool to improve social action and others who called on their practitioner skill sets. Irrespective of people's individual approaches, we felt that our project could produce meaningful contributions to the communities we serve and to our profession.

### **Instructors' Reflection on the Topic Development Process – January through the Death of Freddie Gray**

Between the end of January and the third week of February, we covered several topics that overlapped with social justice, social action and advocacy, including critical race theory, cultural competence, oppression, social dominance theory, social inequality, police brutality, and privilege. Given the time constraints of our project, we had to move from the broad array of what can be studied to what was feasible, based on our resources and on our sample. While most of the intervening process focused on the mechanics of linking theories about social justice to the measurement of social justice, we still had to step back and look at the study in perspective to what was going on around us.

On the date that the class finalized their topic (Feb. 19, 2015), I deliberately pushed the class by asking them *"to be bold and daring in the development of study instrument. You never know what part of your portfolio ends up being a timely significant issue in terms of its implications or practice, policy, and education."* Little did I know that within a couple of months our city would end up being center stage on this issue .

In my discussion with the class, I asked them to step back from the topic and asked *how can we use the findings from our study to discuss the need for structural change as a way of addressing these incidents of injustice.* I purposely asked about structural change as it appeared that most of the media coverage of this issue focused on how individuals and families were affected by what happened to Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and less about the effects on the communities directly effected, other communities across the U.S., as well as whether these incidents were suggestive of the need to develop policies or programs to address community needs. During this discussion, I also asked the students to ponder the usefulness of

fostering continued dialogue within the profession regarding discrimination and race, irrespective of our the study findings.

### **Student Team – The Impact of the Death of Freddie Gray on the Project**

Clinical social work often refers to the parallel process between the therapist and client. They are experiencing events together as the therapeutic process unfolds. Our practicum topic was a parallel process with events which we were only able to process once they became history. The semester of our practicum followed the culmination of well-publicized killings of unarmed black men including Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown without prosecution. The tragic murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore has been with us since April. However, the oppression and murder of people of color in the United States traces its history to this nation's founding. Sometimes it is easy to recognize this history and at times it is easy to forget until the next headline or protest.

It is with this context that we developed our practicum topic and it is within this process that our awakening to social justice research evolved. The focus of our practicum is social workers' participation against social inaction. We were wondering what predicts participation in social action. As a class, we were conducting exhaustive literature reviews and discussions on the topic of social work and social action. After several class sessions processing the topics of social action, social justice, empowerment and advocacy our class seemed to have moved to focus on social workers' role in advocacy. This seemed convenient since we had located scales to measure advocacy and empowerment and it was well represented in the literature. However, there was a growing unease about the distance that was developing between a practicum topic addressing social justice and one solely addressing advocacy. Our discussions led us to a moderated path of more general advocacy rather than social action in reaction to social injustice. However as individuals in our class voiced concerns about the social justice mission we originally agreed to in the beginning of the semester, we quickly adjusted our path and solidified our focus on social action.

After Freddie Gray's death, we wanted to find a way to act. What could we do to draw attention to such a sad but unfortunately frequent event? The parallel

process was unfolding, but we did not completely know it yet. Our campus was closed sporadically throughout the protests and rioting following Freddie Gray's death. Libraries were temporarily closed during finals as the sections of the city burned. Some of the students at the University had been attacked by rioters. *Should we be afraid, protest or volunteer in the community?*

Many in our class found ways to answer a call to social action not because we had to but *because we wanted to. This was not a survey. We had a moment when protests needed people to march and the communities needed people to stand in solidarity for peace and justice. Action was required.* Some in our class joined peaceful protests, others volunteered time in the clean up after the riots or in the public schools in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore where Freddie Gray lived. This was more than the burned CVS which was the focus of national news coverage. Baltimore has an opportunity to push reforms to increase justice in its under-resourced and disinvested communities. Structural change is hard but possible. This is a fight for bending the arch of justice at the time the arc seemed malleable. But which way it will bend is unclear.

After the rioting subsided, the National Guard took posts throughout campus. The last time this occurred in Baltimore was during the 1968 riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. This put our historical reflection and comparison on more concrete terms. The survey our practicum developed is due to be mailed out in late June of 2015. Our Professor prompted discussion about the impacts of historical events on surveys. We were able to process how the unrest in Baltimore could be viewed by our participants and how that may change their views on social action. Almost 50 years has passed since the previous major riot in Baltimore. Social justice and social action may be at the forefront of social workers' minds immediately following the events around Freddie Gray's death. Social workers may be ready to take action and participate in a survey. We also suggested that participation in social action may have increased in the past month. Immediately after the death of Freddie Gray the protests, brought multiple opportunities for people to participate in marches, civil disobedience and volunteerism.

The final practicum class of the Spring semester occurred on the same day that charges were announced by the state's attorney against six Baltimore City Police Officers in connection with Freddie Gray's death. Initially a sense of relief seemed to swell since this was one of the few cases when police officers were charged in the death of an unarmed black man. This relief turned into sadness as the details of the charges were discussed, bringing meaning to tragedy regardless of the officer's innocence or guilt. The death of Freddie Gray will change Baltimore in several ways but these ways may not be known for years. However, our practicum experience was changed when our topic of social action and social justice was taken out of the literature and put into practice. We all changed in the development of our study and also our own personal experience and perspectives on social justice. The challenges faced by people living in poverty in Baltimore were discussed on the local and national level if only for a brief time. The hope continues that black lives matter and all lives matter.

#### **Reflection on the Death of Freddie Gray as an International Student**

The death of Freddie Gray was an additional adjustment on top of the process of being new to the United States for the international student member of our team. She received many calls during the crisis from her family members and loved ones regarding her safety. While these safety concerns kept her out of the social protest marches, none the less she was moved by still being an eyewitness to the events via the continued television coverage and conversations with the other classmates.

At first glance, she saw the crisis as a manifestation of police brutality and Black Americans' anger toward it. Over time she noticed that the community reaction to Freddie Gray's death was not only about police brutality but also a manifestation of social injustice and inequality in the community. She also found a gleam of hope for changes within the community as evidenced by the clean up of the community by residents following by the riot. She thought that the *efforts for restoring the community outweighed the devastation of the riot.* As an international student she reflected that *the community seems to be ready to make changes. But the community needs someone who could help them speak out and move forward.* Finally, she thought that social workers should have an

opportunity to think about their role as agents of social change as well as social action.

### **Instructor – Impact of the Freddie Gray Incident on the Project**

By the week of Freddie Gray's death, our study took on a whole new meaning. *It was no longer just about studying an issue from the comforts our campus, it was about protecting a community that we lived in. Whether we liked it or not the community brought the action right to us.* Administratively, we were at the point in the design of the instrument where we were ready to obtain IRB approval before conducting the study. However, since our campus was along the route where protesters marched from West Baltimore to city hall, this took on a whole new meaning. In real time, the community activities evolved from community protests over police brutality; to street protests over injustices and community mobilization to preserve our city following a night of riots. During this period, there were moments when the students could not come to class as we all became affected directly or indirectly by the situation.

*We were no longer just social work researchers developing a study that looked at factors related with social workers' engagement in social action against social justice. We were social workers placed into real time action in tandem with others all around the city to honor all those who were involved, to provide support and healing for those in need and to develop a social justice action plan.*

As we met after the week of the riot, like everyone around town, the events were heavy on all our hearts. From my personal experience, *the last thing I wanted to see again was city neighborhoods turned into war zones, like the neighborhood where I grew up, filled with garbage, abandoned lots, and rat filled tenements and large housing projects.* Aside from my own first hand experiences in growing up in El Barrio, *I also knew that there were many places in Baltimore that have not changed since the 1960s riots. They were passed over by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Empowerment Zone Initiative" of the early 1990s, untouched by the real estate boom of the 2000s and overlooked the Obama Administration's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding that*

*came to Baltimore City in 2009.* So while I breathed a sigh of relief as the city mobilized to intervene in the affected communities, I knew in my heart there was much work to be done if we really want to heal from the death of Freddie Gray and the ensuing riots.

It was this energy that permeated the air for all of us as we meet again to move the project along. My read of some of the discussion was that we had reflected on the fact members of the team were in different places on a continuum ranging from staying away from the protests out of concern for their safety, to rendering social support and crisis intervention in the community, or advocating for structural change in the city. It was within this context that I came back to the conceptual issues for the course and noted that there may be some methodological artifacts that we cannot control, but may affect the responses to the survey questions, since some of our sample will come from respondents in the state of Maryland.

### **Student Team Concluding Reflections**

The next phase of our study (June 2015 through December, 2015) is to collect and analyze our survey data. Our team will be writing several papers about the findings, which we will use to reflect on contemporary issues. As social workers, our professional code of ethics compels us to engage in social and political action to increase equality in society. We are expected to advocate for improved social conditions and for the elimination of exploitation and discrimination (NASW Code of Ethics, 2012). Unfortunately, many of us focus on helping clients at an individual level and do not emphasize systems-level change (O'Brien, 2010). This narrow focus likely comes from a genuine desire to do what is best for a client in any given circumstance. This means, however, social workers are frequently disengaged from macro activism that could make lasting changes in individuals' lives. One team member reflected on her experience working with adolescents who were pregnant. Helping them identify sources of material goods and providing therapy services to help them cope with previous trauma comforted the girls but did little to prevent future youth from being in the same circumstances (e.g. influenced by systemic sexism and racism). The reasons some social workers are not engaged in activism are likely very varied and difficult to overcome.

We hope our work will draw attention to the barriers and predictors of social work activism. Events during the past several months in Sanford, Ferguson, and Baltimore, and throughout the country, have shown many Americans are invested in social activism. We hope our research will find social workers are playing an active role in these events. Once we are knowledgeable about ways to encourage social workers to participate, we can use the data in practical ways to minimize these barriers and empower social workers to fulfill their responsibility to social justice principles in all levels of society. Working on our project while surrounded by civil unrest has been a difficult but eye-opening experience. We have not all been participated in activism in the past. The events of the past year have brought to the forefront a need for more social workers to champion justice issues, and many of us feel a renewed energy to actively engage with our neighboring communities.

### **Instructors' Concluding Reflections – Restorative Social Justice as a Lived Experience**

Looking back on it all, I felt honored to practice what Paulo Friere speaks to in terms of Praxis-reflective action. As the protest movement evolved, the community used to describe it changed, reflecting more inclusive involvement in the process. The words used to describe it changed from *riot* and *protest* to *uprising* and an *awakening*.

It's now being called *an awakening* because we are feeling that the responses that are being taken are different than that of Ferguson – more reflective of the civil rights movement. There is a renewed discussion locally and nationally, not just about police safety, but that of Black on Black Homicide, given that the statistics on Black homicides (USDHHS, 1985; FBI, 2015). Coincidentally the broader issue of Black homicides was one of the themes that was highlighted at on April 27th, 2015 at the 30th anniversary commemoration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Heckler Report on Black and Minority Health (called the Heckler Report). The Heckler Report was the seminal report that used national data to identify health inequities encountered by Blacks and other minorities. The report noted that the problem of disproportionate Black homicide was a public health problem, requiring communitywide intervention. In

the spirit of that call to action a cross-section of the community, churches, government and academics are working together to see what they can do to prevent what happened in Baltimore from happening in other cities.

As we move forward, I expect that this experience will continue to stay with us on so many levels. On the practice level, we all were put into action to use the social work principles we were trained in. However, that was merely an artifact of the whole city becoming involved with an issue that is tied out our future. On the research level, I expect that this incident will give our research project its own urgency and relevance as it will help us learn more about social workers readiness to engage in social change – to do as opposed to just talk about.

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