

Silence Is Not an Option

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Abstract: Teaching about oppression from a position of privilege can be a challenging task. However, many social work educators come from multiple positions of privilege and must be able to teach about and serve as allies to social justice movements. The following narrative reflects my attempts to engage in this work with humility using my mistakes as catalysts for learning.

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As a white, opposite sex partnered, able bodied, middle class, agnostic woman, I have consistently struggled to find my place in teaching and advocating against systemic oppression. In most of my cultural identity positions, I have and do experience significant privilege. In those where I have encountered oppression, my support network and multiple positions of privilege have mitigated my oppressive experiences.

Perhaps my easiest road when it comes to systems of oppression is to remain silent and defer to others. This option is easy to justify on the surface, as someone who experiences a great deal of privilege across my cultural identity positions, I have no business leading a movement or talking about the *experience* of oppression. If I do speak up in this way, I might well do harm to those dealing with the daily insults and injustices of our oppressive society. I know I have done so in the past.

Of course, *choosing* to be silent is quite the privilege. So many are silent not by choice, but by systemic oppressive design. For them the dangers of speaking out are not related to simple fears of mistakes but the fear of retribution, of consequences tangible and even potentially lethal. As someone who well understands the existence of systemic oppression, my silence marks complicity. If I choose not to speak, I am tacitly complicit. I am resting comfortably in my privilege. I am also losing opportunities to learn from mistakes I make and to use those mistakes to educate others.

The truth is I *can* speak to first person experience – my first person experience of privilege. I can speak to being oblivious about the systems of oppression as they consistently operated in my favor. I can speak to the process of learning of their existence and my ignorance of them. I can expose the mistakes I made in my learning process and my struggle to

find my role in pushing for change. In fact, I have found the more vulnerable and open to criticism I am, the more effective a teacher I am for my students and campus community.

I often use personal anecdotes in class and in public talks to illustrate these points. When I was in my masters program, I was crushed from all sides by the reality of my ignorance, privilege and the guilt of being complicit in the system of oppression. I was a classic case of someone learning about her own privilege and desperately wanting absolution for it. And isn't that the ultimate privilege? To finally understand the reality of systemic oppression and make it about my own need for a clear conscience.

During this period, I went to visit some relatives with whom I had a fundamental disagreement about American Indian mascots. I did speak up, using every argument I could to make my points about their harm. By the end of weekend I was exhausted and totally ineffective. I returned to campus and headed straight to see one of my American Indian faculty members. I told her all about my weekend, my exhaustion and my frustrated failure. Then I sat back and waited for my empathy and praise. Instead, my professor replied, with unflinching kindness but firmness, "Susie, this is what we deal with everyday."

I tell this story to try to normalize making mistakes and underscore what is to be learned from them. I tell it with hope other people of privilege will not burden those dealing with oppression in the same way. My professor, who I know has had this conversation with countless other White students, gave me the greatest gift that day – humility. She also put me permanently on the hook for speaking up now that I understood the system of oppression exists. I am not allowed to give up because it is hard or people do not listen. I am not allowed to give up if I cannot find the right words or approach. She also underscored the importance of

constantly learning and acknowledging the privilege that allows me to speak. She made clear I had to be open to criticism if I was to continue moving forward, learning and bringing others with me. She taught me I would always walk a fine line of being sure to speak my truth and the truth I see in the system without ever supposing to speak for or to the actual lived experiences of those dealing with oppression.

I teach at a predominantly white, protestant, middle and upper class liberal arts college. I chose this school as I hoped such a context provided an ideal place for me to teach antioppressive social work practice. I try to serve as ally, advocate and sounding board to both students dealing with systemic oppression (in addition to finding them mentors from within their own communities) and students grappling with the reality of their own privilege, being particularly helpful to the large numbers of the latter category my school serves. I hope I have been and will be the one to support and challenge those making key mistakes while grappling with their own privilege rather than them burdening those experiencing oppression as I did.

I was asked this last spring to be part of a series of talks on campus about the events in Ferguson, MO all leading to a visit from Rev. Al Sharpton. I struggled with what to say and how to have the platform without suggesting it was my platform to dictate. Ultimately, I approached the talk like I do teaching this content in the classroom. I titled the talk, "Understanding Privilege Through Multiple Identities" to both make my position clear (speaking largely as someone experiencing privilege) and underscore the need to look at these issues with intersectionality constantly in mind. I began by describing how our system of oppression operates with racism as my example but also exposing the other "isms," e.g. ableism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, xenophobia, transgender oppression. I explained how most of us have cultural identity positions for which we experience oppression and those from which we have privilege. However, these experiences of privilege and oppression are contextually different and many people deal with multiple layers of oppression or privilege.

I also acknowledge in such lectures the limits of my experience. I underscore my ability to describe

systems of oppression but still not ever being able to fully understand what it is to be oppressed by that system. I detail the difference between the privileges of my experience juxtaposed with the first person narratives of those who deal with oppression. In the case of my Ferguson talk, I did so by exposing the privilege of my role as an aunt compared with the experience of an uncle and person of color as described below.

Last Christmas, I was present when my nephews, also White, received pellet guns as a gift from their parents. The guns looked like machine guns of some kind and one came with a handgun. One of the children liked to strap on the machine gun and then use the handgun in "quick draw" situations. I have never been a fan of toy guns in general for all the obvious reasons. However, in the wake of Tamir Rice's death, I found it profoundly hard to watch these guns be unwrapped, revealed over and then used.

I was even more struck by the very few cautions that went with the guns. Basically, no shooting in the house, no shooting your brother, no pointing them at people. No limits around where to use them – e.g. not in the front yard or park where a passing police officer might mistake them for the real thing.

I juxtaposed this story by showing a powerful and emotional spoken word narrative, "cuz he's black" by Dr. Javon Johnson from the 2013 National Poetry Slam. I encourage the reader to pause to view this piece and take caution as I (from my position of privilege) have selected what parts to highlight here. Dr. Johnson talks about his interactions with his own nephew regarding the police. He talks about walking that line between not wanting his nephew to approach the world from a position of fear but knowing there are good reasons to fear police interaction. Dr. Johnson says, "Black boys, in this country, cannot afford to play cops and robbers if we are always considered the latter. We don't have the luxuries of playing war if we are already in one." He goes on to say, "Where I am from, routine traffic stops are more like minefields where any wrong move can very well mean your life. And how do I look my nephew in his apple face and tell him to be strong when we both know black boys who are murdered everyday simply for standing up for themselves." He has all kinds of words of wisdom for his nephew but not just about who to be as a person, but how he must interact to be safe in the world. "I

take him by the hand, I say be strong. I say be smart. Be kind, and polite. Know your laws. Be aware of how quickly your hands move to pocket for wallet or ID, be more aware of how quickly the officer's hand moves to holster, for gun. Be black. Be a boy and have fun, because this world will force you to become a man far more quickly than you'll ever have the need to." And finally, "And it scares me to know, he is getting ready for a war, I cannot prepare him for" (Button Poetry, 2013).

Clearly this is a very different discussion than I had with my nephews that day. I simply asked them not to point their guns at me. I had none of these above described fears or need to critically decide how to raise them to be strong confident young men but also walk the streets safely. I had the privilege of simply passing judgment on the morality of the gift rather than the guns implications for the sanctity of my nephews' lives.

When using these anecdotes, I tie them back to the larger systems of oppression operating in them. I

move between the system and its real world implications on our lives. I make clear we are all part of this system but that it need not define us – we can work for change. As someone with considerable privilege, it can still be quite tricky navigating the waters of social justice issues. I must resolve being a consistent voice on campus while not trying to lead any movement for which I am involved as ally rather than member. I still make mistakes. I am quite sure I made some in writing this narrative. I am also sure the alternative – silence – cannot be an option.

References

Button Poetry. (2013, August, 20). *Javon Johnson 'cuz he's black' (NPS 2013)* (video file). Retrieved from:
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