

# Allies Rising: Stepping Forward in a Time of White Nationalism

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**Abstract:** In the wake of rising white nationalism targeting immigrants, social workers and helping professionals must re-evaluate their professional identities and their daily practice. Today, we are met with a challenge that requires a new approach. This approach requires all helping professionals to actively tackle an ideology of white supremacy that has been ever present in the United States. Although many historically disenfranchised communities have been aware of and actively work against this ideology, I and other white helping professionals have been visibly absent to this reality and the fight against white supremacy for far too long.

This article outlines my personal and professional response to the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and his approach to immigration. This includes steps I have taken in my role of an aspiring ally, dedicated to becoming more involved in social justice efforts and the fight against the racist and nativist policies, practices and discourse in the United States.

**Keywords:** white nationalism, racism, anti-oppressive practice, immigration, white supremacy, Dreamers, nativism

In the fall of 2016, I embarked on my professional journey in the world of academia as an Assistant Professor and newly minted Ph.D.. Dedicated to teaching and researching about structural oppression and anti-oppressive practice, I hoped, and naively thought, that it was possible through much of my work related to immigration and the experience of unauthorized immigrants and their families would soon be obsolete.

My research and education have taught me that racism and nativism have been constants in U.S. immigration policy and practice throughout history and that this reality is unlikely to change without a significant paradigm shift in the United States. Yet, based on commentary within my political and social circles, and continued bi-partisan support for Dreamers, I was optimistic that immigration reform was on the horizon. I believed that this immigration reform would offer a pathway toward U.S. citizenship for the many unauthorized immigrants who have worked or been educated in the United States.

I had considered a number of political outcomes for the presidential election. In a podcast about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), I shared my fears of what might happen to DACA recipients if one of the republican presidential candidates were to win the presidency. I knew that it was possible that one of the candidates who had been overtly hostile to immigrants, Latino immigrants in particular, might win, but I truly believed it to be unlikely (links to podcasts: <http://www.insocialwork.org/episode.asp?ep=195> and <http://www.insocialwork.org/episode.asp?ep=196>).

What I did not see or consider were my blind spots (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). My privileged existence (being a white, college-educated, and native-born U.S. citizen) quickly filtered out what I had learned through my studies and research. My protected personal experience continued

to blind me from the realities of the racism, nativism, and other burdens that people of color and immigrants are forced to confront every day. This caused me to disregard U.S. history and the ways that historic racism and nativism continue their presence in U.S. society. I could not imagine that as a country, we could ever seriously consider a candidate who overtly degraded people of color, immigrants, the LGBT community, women, persons with disabilities, the poor and many other historically marginalized communities. I could not comprehend how such a candidate would stand a chance to win.

The night of the 2016 presidential election, as the votes came in, I became more and more uncertain of the outcome. I went to bed that night feeling sure that when I read the headlines in the morning, my current concern would feel like a silly, distant memory. The next morning, I woke to discover that Donald Trump, the candidate who ran a platform based on white supremacy and xenophobia had won. Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States by a majority of white U.S. citizens, both men and women.

### **The Aftermath**

The days following the election results, I received calls from K-12 education teacher colleagues who did not know how to support their students, particularly those in immigrant families who were now terrified that their family members would be deported. Over the next few weeks, I spoke with various teachers of color. They shared the increased burden they felt as students who did not trust their white teachers, came to them for support. Already dealing with the stresses of teaching preparation and serving the students in their own classrooms, teachers of color were further called on to provide support to terrified students.

I spoke with friends and colleagues who seriously contemplated leaving the country. One of these individuals actually left the country, knowing that they would not be safe under the new leadership and the increased overt racist nativism in the United States (Huber et al., 2008). I had previously mused that I too would consider leaving the United States if the what seemed to be increasingly overt racism, nativism, sexism, etc. continued. I did not want to be associated with this culture.

In reality however, the structure of the United States provides me with a blanket of security that many individuals and families I have worked with and continue to work with do not have. As a white, U.S. citizen, I benefit from much of the structural oppression that I fight against. It is part of my history and the history of the nation in which I was born and raised. Because of my white, U.S. citizen identities, I have received many unearned privileges that protect me from deportation, racial profiling and institutionalized racism. I know that ignoring or turning from the bigotry, hate, xenophobia, racism, etc. only further implicates me in the oppression of communities of color, immigrants, and other historically oppressed groups. Without engaging in and re-dedicating myself to the pursuit of equitable outcomes for all persons, I will only continue to contribute more to the problem than the solution.

As time has passed, social media has continued to provide an additional lens or filter to see the world. This lens has not eradicated the blinders I wear subsequent to my privileged identities,

but it has helped me to more clearly see the world in which we live.

The reality is that I live in a time where Nazi flags, which symbolize the death, destruction and genocide of many marginalized communities, are flown at rallies in the United States. I live in a time where I am witness to the unjust death of people of color at the hands of white police officers. I live in a time where immigrants, who are part of the social fabric of this nation, are demonized by the president of the United States. I live in a time of INJUSTICE, in a time where many overt forms of oppression and discrimination have surfaced in much subtler, but equally harmful ways (Brooks & Newborn, 1994; Solorzano, 1997). I live in a time where many of the older, more overt forms of oppression and discrimination have resurfaced. I live in a time where the challenges confronting us must be addressed.

In the wake of rising white nationalism, the president of the United States and his administration have demonized immigrants, particularly Mexican immigrants (Dawsey, 2018; Fang, 2015). Calls for the continued militarization of the border and the policing, detention and deportation of immigrants persist, despite consistent evidence that these draconian policies and practices only worked to increase the very things they reportedly sought to eradicate: crime, injury, death at the border, as well as the number of unauthorized immigrants settling permanently in the United States (Cornelius, 2007; Massey & Capoferro, 2008; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Despite the evidence showing counterproductive returns, the administration yet again has chosen a path of negative returns.

Most recently, the administration called to rescind Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a program that was designed to increase productivity by providing temporary relief from deportation plus 2-year renewable work permits for a select group of immigrants that came to the United States as children (USCIS, 2017a; USCIS, 2017b). In addition, the decision to terminate the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for immigrants from El Salvador was made just days before Donald Trump allegedly asked, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” (Dawsey, 2018; USCIS, 2018).

As a white U.S. citizen, brought up and educated in a racist nativist system (Huber et al., 2008), it is easy to deny the racist nativist history of the United States and the blatant racist nativism present in public and political discourse, policies and practices. Correspondingly, it is equally easy for me to deny the benefits I receive based on these historical and contemporary oppressive policies and practices. However, the choice to deny this means that I am actively consenting to racism, nativism and a white supremacist nation that oppresses all people of color. As a social worker, this does not fit my value system.

A reality in the United States is that the dominant white group continues to vote white government officials into power. Throughout history and today, these public officials are responsible for creating the laws, policies, practices and structures that benefit themselves and those like them at the expense of communities that have been historically disenfranchised (Harris, 1993). Because of this history and my identity as a white, U.S. citizen, and social worker, it is my responsibility to be a leader and actively address the white supremacist and racist nativist policies and practices of our nation.

The white dominant community is responsible for creating and maintaining the white supremacist systems in the United States. Since this is what we have built, it is our responsibility to undo. White individuals, including myself, can no longer leave it to communities of color and other historically disenfranchised communities to address these issues on their own. As a social worker, I am called to address any and all injustices when and where I see them. I am called to and must stand up to racism, sexism, heterosexism, nativism, classism, environmental injustices and all types of oppression.

### **Now What?**

Participation is where we as allies can make a significant impact. While a huge variety of options to participate exist, focusing on where we excel (which might entail putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations) is how we can participate effectively. For me, this means actively participating in forums that need the research, practice experience and voice of social work academics.

This past fall I participated in a two-part podcast entitled, *Why DACA? Why Now?* This podcast was an opportunity to reach a wider audience and share information about DACA, including what it is, how rescinding DACA will negatively impact our community and nation, common myths and associated truths, and implications for social workers. The podcasts may be accessed at: <http://www.insocialwork.org/episode.asp?ep=226> and <http://www.insocialwork.org/episode.asp?ep=228>.

Speaking publicly within a recorded medium has rarely been in my comfort zone. With the uncertainties that our communities now face, comfort is exactly what brought us to this place. My professional focus is on research, advocacy and instruction; speaking publicly is exactly where I need to contribute and where I can contribute most effectively. Following the recording of these podcasts, audiences appeared to be genuinely interested in learning more. I was told that in just the first few weeks of availability, the podcasts were accessed more than double the average rate. Only time will tell if the listeners take to heart what was said, make changes and become actively involved in activism and advocacy. What is certain however, is that as an advocate and aspiring ally, I cannot take a “one and done” approach to check off my participation boxes. Instead, I have to make an ongoing commitment to social justice engagement and advocacy.

With this in mind, I have opened up to participating in speaking engagements. Recently I joined a local panel discussion about DACA entitled *DACA 101*. This was another opportunity to share information about DACA as well as suggestions about how to be an ally. Although, this type of speaking engagement does not draw crowds of thousands or make local, state or national headlines, it is a way to engage, advocate and live my commitment. Even if the crowd is small, if one person is impacted and takes a more humane or compassionate stance when it comes to immigration, then I have been successful.

This philosophy translates into my daily interactions in my personal and professional life. As a human being and a social justice advocate, I am a work in progress. I am not perfect, but I am

committed to staying engaged, growing, and doing better. One aspect of this is recognizing that the words we use have power. When dehumanizing language is used in a formal or informal conversation with a friend, family member, colleague, acquaintance, or stranger, I address it, always working to do this from a compassionate space so that I can more effectively create a dialogue that will result in positive change. Conversely, if I make a mistake and use a dehumanizing term and am given feedback, I do my best to listen, to be present, and bare witness as I develop an anti-racist white identity (Tochluk, 2007).

One example of dehumanizing language often heard in political and public discourse is the term illegal immigrant. When this term is used in a conversation, I address it. A more appropriate term is either undocumented or unauthorized immigrant. These terms do not reduce a person's humanity to legal or illegal. After all, I have committed traffic violations and have never been labeled as an illegal American.

In addition, within the immigration debate, there is often discussion of who is a good immigrant and who is not. This false binary is harmful and negatively impacts immigrants and our community. It also hurts opportunities for coalition building across communities.

I recognize that rarely are minds changed instantly. I also recognize I might not always be successful. However, these conversations continue to help me refine the way I respond to racism and nativism, and allow me to plant more seeds of awareness including within myself. After all, it is only where seeds are planted that trees can grow.

### **Self-Reflection**

When I talk about racism or nativism, my words might not be as eloquent as I would like. I make mistakes. I hurt others. When I do, I strive to recognize and own up to them, and then change. The reality is that I, like everybody, make assumptions and generalizations. Given the level of racist and nativist messages and stereotypes I hear every day on the radio, television, in the media and in personal conversations, I am bound to be impacted. As an aspiring ally, I must work hard not to internalize these messages. In addition, I must work hard to recognize these biases so that I do not act in discriminatory or harmful ways because of them. The reality is that we all have to work hard and be dedicated to unlearn the racism and nativism that surrounds us (Boutte & Jackson, 2014).

Remembering that everyone makes mistakes helps me to be compassionate with myself when I unintentionally hurt someone based on the blind spots caused by my privileged identities (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). However, as an aspiring ally, it is also my responsibility to practice critical self-reflection when I make a mistake so that I can change (Heron, 2005). For instance, I might ask myself:

- What caused me to make that assumption?
- Where did I get this thought or idea?
- What are the potential racist or nativist undertones of what I have said?

This practice is difficult, but it is a critical component of becoming an ally. After realizing I have made a mistake, it is my responsibility to make amends, modify my behavior and continue to actively reflect. This is not an easy task. It is exhausting. However, paraphrasing what a white colleague once said to me: “If we are exhausted by becoming more aware of and trying to change our behavior, how much more exhausted are all the individuals that are negatively impacted by it [microaggressions and other harms]?”

My privileged identities give me space to breathe, to take a break and to get away from the racism, nativism and hate that divides our communities. Not all individuals have the same space or the opportunity to take a break. The reality is that as a white, U.S.-born citizen, I am not a target of the racism and nativism that pervades the United States. When I feel overwhelmed or feel like giving up, these are the thoughts that cause me to re-dedicate myself to social justice work and start again.

Building awareness matters; silence is little more than subtle approval. Silence on issues related to racism, nativism and other forms of oppression is not an option (Boutte & Jackson, 2014). White American feminism has historically and continues to silence and marginalize women of color (Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 2003). White American feminism continues to dismiss the way that people differently experience the world and oppression based on their intersecting identities. Therefore, it is especially important that I as a white American, I as a feminist, and I as an aspiring ally actively recognize each individual’s intersecting identities. I must intentionally and actively practice cultural humility and advocate behind or beside communities that take an inclusive approach in advocacy (Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Chavez, 2012).

### **Final Thoughts and Recommendations**

This narrative has given me the opportunity to reflect on what I have done and also what I have not. I have much room for growth and am committed to becoming more active in my daily personal and professional life so that one day I can say that I am part of the solution to the racism and nativism endemic to U.S. society, not just part of the problem.

I would like to conclude this article with a few additional suggestions I shared at the DACA 101 panel mentioned previously. These are steps that can be taken to support immigrants, including unauthorized immigrants and immigrants protected through DACA and TPS. These are steps that I, as an aspiring ally, am working to incorporate into my practice as I have found them to yield positive results. I hope that they will be useful to the readers who are interested in becoming part of the solution to the injustice faced by so many. What I urge all aspiring allies to remember is that there is a range of participation, from nothing to everything. I encourage aspiring allies to start from any area where they can personally excel, whether that means enabling a forum for stronger voices to be heard, to leading discussion for others to hear your voice, or becoming active in groups that will hold you accountable and lead by example. It takes ongoing and active participation to lead to change.

*Call and write your representatives.*

Calling and writing is among one of the strongest methods to tangibly show support.

Government officials are responsible for drafting and voting on laws and policies that have wide and sweeping implications for everyone living in the United States. While emails are easy, they are just as easily discarded. In contacting your representative, specifically voice your support for legislation that provides a pathway to legal permanent status and U.S. citizenship to immigrants. Equally important, voice your displeasure for any legislation that includes policy or practice that separates families (e.g., increased ICE raids, private immigrant detention centers, the increased militarization at the border, etc.) or has been linked to increased crime, injury, or death at our border (e.g., border wall). For instance, there is a bi-partisan bill, the DREAM Act, that is currently being re-introduced. This same bill has been introduced for over a decade, but has never been implemented. To get such a bill passed, it is imperative to show your support. When closing your letter or phone call, indicate how support for your view (e.g., a clean DREAM Act) is necessary to earn your vote. If possible, schedule a weekly phone call so that your message of inclusion and equality stays fresh in the mind of your representative. Some helpful links to connect with your representatives include:

- <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>
- [https://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm](https://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm)
- <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>

*Know your rights and immigrants' rights.*

If the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials were to come to your place of work, your home, or other places and spaces, know your rights and the rights of unauthorized immigrants. Talk to your employer, the administration, and legal department about how to handle a situation when you are confronted with an official from ICE to ensure that all unauthorized immigrants are protected to the full extent that they can be. The ACLU has posted a simple guide here: <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights>.

*Protect privacy.*

Listen to immigrants and the different perspective shared by immigrants. However, if an individual shares her or his status, keep this information confidential. Be understanding. Listen. Under no circumstances should you ever document a person's status in email or any other format. This is especially important for helping professionals. In case notes, emails, or other forms of documentation, NEVER write down or document an individual's unauthorized immigrant status.

*Know where to send friends, colleagues, or clients who are in need of support.*

Research pro-immigrant organizations, reputable immigration lawyers, culturally responsive counseling services and referral resources, and other supportive services that will maintain confidentiality and treat immigrants and family members of immigrants with dignity and respect. If these services do not exist in your area, actively advocate for increased supports and access to resources for the immigrant community.

*Learn your own history.*

Familiarize yourself with your own history and the history of the U.S. (Boutte & Jackson, 2014).  
• Do your own research to understand how racism and nativism are codified in policies and

practices and how it is normalized in our organizations and in the larger society.

Remember, it is not the responsibility of individuals from marginalized groups “to teach” us as allies (Tochluk, 2007). All too often, those who embody privileged identities do not do the work themselves. Those with privilege often leave the hard work to those who are oppressed by the dominant U.S. society. To be an ally, you have to be willing to do the hard work. Do your own research and then be open to listening to the perspectives of the groups you are learning about (Boutte & Jackson, 2014). It is your responsibility to gather reliable information. When doing so, make sure that the literature you read includes the voices of the community and history you are researching.

*Know your role.*

Actively address the white supremacist and nativist policies and practices of our nation, like the decision to rescind DACA and TPS. It is necessary to speak directly to aspiring white anti-racist allies. In order for anyone in the white community to truly be an ally, we must first focus on ourselves and our roles in creating the divisive and inhumane environment in our organizations, in our local community, in our state, and in our nation. It is important to remember that the dominant white group is responsible for continuing to vote white government officials into power. These same voters and the government officials voted into office are ultimately responsible for creating the laws, policies, practices and structures that benefit themselves and those like them (meaning white people) at the expense of communities that have been historically disenfranchised.

As allies, we can no longer leave it to communities of color and other historically disenfranchised communities to address injustices on their own. The white dominant community is responsible for creating and maintaining the white supremacist systems in the United States. So, it is our responsibility to dismantle it. However, do not overshadow communities of color and other historically disenfranchised groups who have been doing this work both now and throughout history (Boutte & Jackson, 2014). Be supportive and step up when you need to. Also, because of this history and our white identities, it is our responsibility to take a cue from work already being done within communities of color, to support agencies and organizations that represent historically disenfranchised groups and that are dedicated to anti-racist and anti-oppressive work.

*Acknowledge the truth about the world we live in and then work to change it for the better.*

We live in a dangerous time. We have not made the kind of progress in civil rights that most of us would hope for or believe that we have. In this spirit of the social work code of ethics and values, we must take the attack on immigrants (e.g., DACA & TPS) as an opportunity to confront our nation’s racist nativist history and contemporary racist nativism (Huber et al., 2008). We must confront the reality that faces our clients, colleagues, friends and family members. If we do not acknowledge and actively address the white supremacy our nation was built on, it will continue to pervade every aspect of our lives.



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