

# A Social Worker's Reflections on Power, Privilege, and Oppression

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The pursuit of social justice is a core social work value (NASW, 2007). Social workers promote social justice by engaging in activities that promote equality of opportunity, challenge injustice, and advance social change, particularly on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed populations. This is easier said than done. Oppression and systems of power are extremely complex, multifaceted, and saturate our individual psyche and external environment. As social workers committed to social justice, how do we challenge and change these systems of power? How do we find a standpoint from which to act? Paulo Freire (1970) stated that a commitment to social justice requires a moral and ethical attitude toward equality and a belief in the capacity of people as agents who can transform their world. Furthermore, he stated that to create social change and to promote social justice, we must begin this process with ourselves—through a self-reflective process that examines the contradictions between our espoused values and our lived experience. We must believe that all people, both from dominant and targeted groups, have a critical role in dismantling oppression and generating a vision for a socially just future. For if only people from oppressed groups take on this responsibility, there is little hope that we will ever achieve our vision.

As a social worker and an academic who identifies strongly with the profession of social work, I take these words of Freire and other scholars of social justice seriously. In 2001, I had the honor of participating in a presidential plenary panel at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Conference. As part of this plenary, I presented an introduction that provided a reflection of who I am and how my social identities are affected by the dynamics of oppression and privilege. The speech was published later that year in *Advances in Social Work* (Spencer, 2001), and every year since I have taken the opportunity to further reflect on who I am at that particular mo-

ment in time. A lot has happened in the past seven years, and as my social identities have evolved and my understanding of them becomes increasingly complex, I find the need to contemplate again on the question, “Who am I?”

My interests in issues of oppression, power, and privilege began with my own experiences as a person of color who has experienced racism. I identify primarily as Native Hawaiian, but I also identify as mixed race. As a person of color, I am often placed in a position in which I must process the disrespect I perceive or the assumptions that others make of me. For example, I know what it is like to be grabbed by the arm at a campus restaurant on my way to the restroom and be asked to bring people their drinks. I also know what it is like to seek the support of a friend following this incident and be told, “That could have happened to anyone.” The most painful thing about racism is its invalidation, even more so than the incident itself. I hope for reconciliation, but I recall that reconciliation requires “truth.” We are just beginning to learn about the truth of racism in this country and, thus, are still far from reconciliation.

Among people of color, however, I have the privilege of light skin. I know this privilege has allowed me to be more trusted, accepted, and easily assimilated within the dominant culture. I have also been educated by the dominant culture and taught to think like the mainstream. I know how to speak “properly.” Growing up as a Native Hawaiian educated in Hawaii under the U.S. educational system, I never heard the word “colonization.” The spirituality of my ancestors was taught to me as mythology. Although I know there is much in my culture that I have lost, I still reap great benefits from my assimilation, including my ability to pursue higher education and ultimately my current employment at the University of Michigan. I was made palatable to the dominant culture.

My education has moved me from my status as a child growing up in an impoverished neighborhood in Honolulu to a middle-class professional living in Ann Arbor. I have the privilege of selecting the “right” neighborhood with the “right” schools so that my children will have the best chance in life. I remember the shame I felt about where I lived as a child and the shame of using food stamps and what people would think about me if I did not buy the cheapest brands. Today, I know what it is like to spend the equivalent of another family’s weekly, or even monthly, grocery budget on one meal. Also, I have the means to buy fair trade goods and consider whether the clothing I am buying was made in sweatshops, but ironically I do not consider this on a regular basis or when it is not convenient.

As a man, I benefit from the objectification and subordination of women. I have been witness to the conversations of men who assess women by their body parts. I do not have to worry about whether I need to leave the office before it gets too dark or walk through the alley that is a short cut to the parking garage where my car is parked. One evening after work, as I was walking to this garage with a female colleague, I found it entirely inconvenient that she did not want to walk down the alley, the short cut. It did not occur to me that women have been sexually assaulted in this alley. I have the privilege of not needing to know this information. As a man of color, I often feel like I do not possess the same privileges of maleness as white men. However, that evening in the alley, I realized the privilege of assuming physical safety.

I also benefit from identifying along the male–female gender binary. I present very much as a man. No one ever has to wonder what pronoun to use with me. I also do not have to worry that if my fingernails or hair get too long that someone will realize I am not the gender I present. I do not need to bind my chest so tight I cannot breathe. The thought that someone would want to beat me, rape me, or kill me because of my gender identity and expression has never crossed my mind. No one will call the police if they see me in the men’s restroom. I feel this privilege intensely when I attend Transgender Day of Remembrance and read the name on the card that is given to me. It is the name of a transgendered individual who was killed this past year. I shed tears and recommit to the understanding of transgender issues, but in my everyday life I rarely think about my gender.

More often than not though, I do think about my sexual orientation or at least how I present myself as a heterosexual individual. I own one pink shirt, the one my children laugh about. I like to sing and enjoy musicals, but I am thoughtful about who I share this information with. Growing up, the worst thing in the world someone could call me was “gay.” Among my male friends, those were fighting words. Today, I am aware of the violence that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) population face on a daily basis. I deplore this and actively work as an ally. However, I still think twice before I pull out that pink shirt.

This past fall, I recall standing on the sidelines at my son’s football game and hearing fathers refer to boys as “pussies” when they were not as aggressive as they should be. I should have said something, but I did not. I wanted to fit in with these men. I did not want them to call me “gay.” I wanted to keep every drop of privilege that comes with being a heterosexual man. I chuckled a little, but with this chuckle, I perpetuated the discrimination of the GLB population and condoned the violence they experience. I did not need to say anything—just chuckle—because oppression does not require me to actively discriminate to perpetuate it; it just requires that I do nothing to stop it.

As an able-bodied person, I do not have to take into consideration the time it will take me to find an accessible entrance and figure out how I will be able to get to where I need to go. The snow along the sidewalk from the neighbors who did not shovel before leaving for work is a minor inconvenience. I have never had to ask for accommodations, for extra time to finish an exam, for large print, or for real-time captioning. I know the privilege of people assuming that I have full cognitive capacity based only on my physical appearance. As a person of color, though, I can relate to being gawked at and stared at by people who are not used to seeing “my kind.” However, I can typically find places where I can blend in or where my difference is seen as an asset.

As a person who was raised as Christian and currently identifies as agnostic, I have the privilege of enjoying religious holidays associated with Christianity and know that no one will expect me to work on these days. No one wonders if I am associated with terrorists because of my beliefs or feels nervous if I am on the same plane with them. When I encounter carolers it does not offend me. In fact, I stop to listen. No one thinks I am from a

cult, that I am going to cast evil spells, or calls me a hippie because of my spirituality. However, I do know what it is like for a child to throw paint on my child's new shirt in art class because he said he does not believe in God. But, these experiences are somewhat rare, and the times I have benefited from my Christian upbringing are countless.

As a social worker, I strive to be an ally. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) defined an *ally* as an individual from an agent group who rejects the dominant ideology and takes action out of a belief that eliminating oppression will benefit both agents and targets of oppression. These authors describe several different characteristics of an ally, including taking responsibility for one's own learning, acknowledging unearned privilege, and being willing to be confronted, to consider change, and to commit to action. The authors also describe allies as those who are willing to take risks and try new behaviors, despite their fear. In my years of striving to be an effective ally, I am struck by the amount of courage that this activity takes. Furthermore, the authors state that allies must be willing to make mistakes, learn, and try again. Allyship requires tremendous humility. It means never being truly culturally competent, but rather, recognizing that the pursuit of critical consciousness is a lifelong process. My reflection as a social worker continues, for I am still a work in progress, and I would like to encourage my fellow social workers to also continue with such reflection. **SW**

## REFERENCES

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