

# Promoting Social Justice Attitudes in College Men: A Preliminary Investigation

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Pollack's (1998) research focusing on the development of young boys has provided a catalyst for further exploration into men's development. His work addresses common gendered assumptions made of young boys and men so that educators may better understand how to promote the self-authorship of masculinity rather than uncritically accepting hegemonic standards. In doing so, Pollack was able to uncover the stark differences between who boys want to be and who they are taught to be. He explained this dissonance by articulating that young boys and men are constrained by the Boy Code, which came to be due to the "thousand models of boyhood [which] have accumulated [over the years] and became melded into an all-purpose stereotype" (p. xxii). While the consequences may not be physically harmful, there are choices men must make about how to act or what to say which may indeed prove growth inhibiting and/or socially debilitating.

Gender role conflict, defined as the tension between who men truly are and who they feel they must be (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986), correlates with higher levels of anxiety and a decreased ability for intimacy (Sharpe & Heppner, 1991), negative attitudes toward seeking help (Good & Wood, 1995), low self-esteem (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995), and depression (Good & Mintz, 1994). Furthermore, such intrapersonal conflict challenges one's integrity in a deeply intimate and troubling way which may lead to repressing the subject of masculinity altogether.

Following these findings related to deleterious effects of the internal struggle with externally defined gender messages, research done by one of the authors (Davis, 2002) addresses the social construction of men's identity and focuses attention on strategies for promoting healthy masculine development within higher education. Davis found five themes related to how college men's identity is, in part, shaped by society: the importance of self-expression, which runs contrary to the popular conception of stoic men; the code of communication caveats, which involves styles and levels of communication that contrast with hegemonic femininity like one-on-one interaction with other men, non-verbal, and side-by-side communication; a fear of femininity, which, according to O'Neil et al. (1981, 1986) is at the heart of gender role conflict; confusion about and distancing from masculine standards; and, feeling a sense of challenge without support, leading men to feel left out or overlooked. These findings suggest that it is critical for educators to understand that one's identity is not just a function of internal processing, but is also shaped by the environment. Moreover, student affairs educators have a professional obligation to incorporate this understanding into their work with men rather than using the non-developmental "bad dog" approach (see Laker, 2003). The "bad dog" approach is not only inappropriate, but it has also failed in reaching and engaging men. Rather, the "bad dog" approach promotes a sense of defensiveness that shuts men down rather than encouraging them to express their thoughts and feelings in a positive manner. What we need is a more developmentally sound approach that meets men where they are and promotes social justice attitudes and actions.

The professional obligation of which the authors write mirrors the obligation student affairs educators have to use the current body of knowledge regarding any student population to enhance their work with the given population. Indeed, it can be agreed that this is one of the main benefits of developmental theory, and the theory that currently exists regarding men should be no different. Additionally, the need to promote social justice attitudes and actions among privileged populations is important not just in relation to creating a more just and equitable society for those who experience oppression. Privileged populations, in this case men, can benefit from recognizing that they are a part of a global society and, as such, cultural competence will become a skill set that will increase their productivity and enhance their lives. Furthermore, in an effort to gain a complete understanding of who one is and how one sees himself in relation to his environment, it is crucial that men begin to think deeply about populations beyond themselves as well as how privilege and oppression has influenced both their lives and the lives of others. As such, it becomes imperative to give thought to getting those who experience privilege to be fully engaged in promoting social justice. However, this call to action has not historically been heeded with the vigor necessary to make widespread change.

To this end, hooks (2004) stated that "After hundreds of years of anti-racist struggle, more than ever before non-white people are currently calling into attention the primary role white people must play in anti-racist struggle. The same is true in the struggle to eradicate sexism – men have a primary role to play" (p. 559). It is our experience however, (and this is consistent with the nature of privilege and oppression) that those with the most visible privilege (i.e., white men) are disproportionately underrepresented in efforts to end the ubiquitous oppression that marginalized groups face. This conundrum has left many wondering how best to promote social justice attitudes among a student population, in this case men, who may not fully comprehend the need for them to be intimately involved in the work itself.

### Method

Consistent with Davis's (2002) earlier research on college men, this study took on a constructivist approach. The decision to utilize this approach was guided by a number of theories, including Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. Participants were asked, for example, to self-identify the dimensions of their identity that were most salient for them. Furthermore, allowing participants to self-identify allowed them the opportunity to express themselves and provide contextual information behind their thoughts, which has been shown to be a central theme in previous studies (Davis, 2002).

The connections made between the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of one's identity made by Kegan (1982) and Baxter Magolda (1992) provided the lens through which the data was analyzed. While the personal nature of the stories told by male participants uncovered both the inter- and intrapersonal dimensions of the promotion of social justice attitudes, it was paramount to the researchers to also examine how each participant made meaning of their experiences. This theoretical component allowed investigators to better understand why the participants were thinking and feeling a certain way. Through the constructivist narrative inquiry used by the researchers, participants were asked to reflect on and respond to questions regarding their personal histories as well as how they made meaning of the experiences they shared.

The study also used a phenomenological approach insofar as phenomenology is based on the premise that reality consists of what is perceived and known by human consciousness. Thus, all of what is understood about the reality in which we find ourselves is rooted in the meaning ascribed (or not ascribed) to objects and events. As each individual has a unique way of making meaning, so too does each individual construct a unique reality of the world (Merriam, 1997).

### Participants

Participants in this study were eight (8) men ranging in ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic background, and religion. Most participants were identified as expressing social justice attitudes or demonstrating social justice behaviors, while a few others were chosen via purposeful sampling as exemplar cases or men who were extremely positive role models in their expression and demonstration of social justice attitudes and behavior. All participants were enrolled as either an undergraduate or graduate student at one comprehensive midsize public institution in the Midwest. Additionally, all participants were involved in leadership positions on campus.

### Procedure

In similar fashion to Davis's (2002) study of college men, participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Participants were identified based on recommendations of student affairs educators who work directly with students. All individuals who referred students were asked to identify students who held attitudes related to or acting in ways consistent with social justice allies as defined by Broido (2000).

A series of two individual interviews were conducted with each participant by two male investigators and two additional graduate students (both women). After the individual interviews, all participants were brought together for a focus group interview led by the authors of this study. Each researcher was skilled at conducting interviews and trained in microcounseling. Interviewers also had substantial knowledge of gender-related developmental issues and men's issues, specifically.

### Results

Five themes emerged from the data: the importance of close personal experiences with privilege and oppression as well as the impact that had on the participants current understanding of social justice; the importance of having positive male role models; a strong connection between the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive development of the participants with their prevailing commitment to social justice attitudes and actions; the apparent tension between personal integrity and group acceptance in relation to the open expression and/or demonstration of social justice attitudes and actions; and altruistic motives as a developmental hurdle in that some participants shared that they engaged in social justice work because they felt bad for others who experienced oppression. These thoughts reinforced an attitude that social justice work was a burden they carried as privileged individuals.

### Discussion

The finding that these men needed to have at least one close personal experience with issues surrounding privilege and oppression suggests the importance of engaging men in a context where the status quo is challenged. Men who experience privilege on a number of different levels (i.e., white, heterosexual, affluent, able-bodied men) may be particularly at risk for avoiding encounters which promote learning, development and subsequent social justice attitudes and actions.

Furthermore, Reason and Broido (2005) contend "the work of social justice is too important to ignore or abandon because of the precariousness of the ally identity" (p. 88). As such, it is important to help men find an entry point into discussions about privilege and oppression that speaks to their personal experiences, regardless of how trivial such a starting point may seem. This being said, it is also important to maintain the integrity of social justice work in a way that does not lead to oversimplifying the task at hand. Therefore, as men of privilege begin to make meaning of the experiences they have had personally, it seems appropriate to provide them more global examples with which they do not have personal connections (i.e., discussions of systemic and institutional oppression) as a means of helping them articulate the overall breadth of and need for engaging in social justice work.

The finding that participants sought other males after whom they could model their behavior was to be expected. However, the challenge inherent in finding positive role models for college men is generational in that men's development and social justice work cannot be focused solely on a specific age demographic. It is, quite simply, imperative that all men working in higher education live in ways that are bound by an overall sense of integrity and commitment to the cause of confronting privilege and eradicating oppression. In doing this, it is far easier to see how others from various generations may be influenced by, and may chose to accept and participate in, social justice attitudes and actions.

Consistent with Davis's (2002) study on male gender role conflict, this study makes clear the salience of gender role conflict on the promotion of social justice attitudes and actions among college men. On a number of occasions during interviews, participants expressed a hesitation for speaking out in a public setting, for fear of how others may construe such behavior. Such a desire for group acceptance went as far as dictating the classes one participant took, as he, a white male, felt uncomfortable taking an African-American Studies course for fear that he would be seen as patronizing black and African-American students in his taking the course.

Of particular interest is a finding from the research study that suggests a source of men's motives for engaging in social justice attitudes and actions is simultaneously connected to a developmental hurdle. Participants discussed taking on social justice work out of a sense of guilt or sadness for those who have experienced oppression. This initial finding could provide some insight into whether guilt is a necessary part of the privileged identity process or a barrier to integrity and a sustained commitment to the overarching goals of social justice work. It is clearly not surprising that those holding privileged identities would experience such feelings of guilt and/or sorrow. As the notion of guilt influencing privilege identity development is new, the authors plan to investigate this aspect of the research more fully in order to better articulate how this could impact the work of student affairs educators and social justice educators. This being said, the task turns to how one can

deal with such feelings in an effective and proactive way, thus allowing the individual to engage in social justice attitudes and actions in a way that is fully consistent with the goals of such work, identified by Reason and Davis (2005) "in terms that combine both distributive and procedural justice toward a goal of full and equal participation for all groups, where resources are equitably distributed and everyone is physically and psychologically safe (Bell, 1997; Broido, 2000)" (p. 7).

Finally, it was evident that participants sometimes did not have the words to articulate what social justice meant or how to go about putting such values into practice. This illustrates that the cultural context in which those of privilege live affords them the option of not confronting the inequity or oppression present. A significant challenge, then, for those working to promote social justice attitudes and actions among college men is that fundamental concepts need to be initially defined and language carefully clarified. This would have the effect of putting privilege and oppression on the radar screen for men as well as provide the appropriate language and beginning tools to explore the issues further.

### Implications for Student Affairs

Results of this study suggest that student affairs educators need to work on providing contexts through which men can enter into dialogues regarding social justice attitudes and actions that are congruent with their personal experiences. Implicit in this is the need for student affairs educators to build their own awareness and skills surrounding social justice work. Without being cognizant of the importance of this work as professionals, entering into such conversations with students would devolve into an inauthentic and unproductive endeavor. In a similar manner in which we need to help our students, in this specific case our male students, grapple with issues of social justice, so must we as student affairs educators be role models and take the responsibility to do so ourselves. Being active in social justice causes, speaking out against oppression, and being comfortable with the ambiguity and struggles inherent in addressing personal privilege are a number of ways in which we can begin to become invested in social justice work.

In addition to the work student affairs educators must do in confronting privilege, oppression, and a commitment to social justice work on a personal level, the findings of this study also suggest that serious thought be given to how we address the social aspect of the collegiate experience. While it is one thing to work with men on an individual basis until we feel they understand our messages, the socialization process by which they gain most of their cues on what are acceptable attitudes and behavior occur within peer groups. The sometimes negative messages sent via other students hold much more power in the sense that social capital is a main determinant of who is accepted versus who remains an outsider. With this in mind, it is imperative that student affairs educators identify creative approaches to working with groups of men in an attempt to create social networks where traditional standards of masculinity are questioned and social justice attitudes and actions are embraced. Targeting men to attend open discussions focusing on issues of social justice, encouraging fraternities to discuss issues of social justice as a chapter, or having resident assistants (RAs) lead floor discussions on social justice are three possible options in beginning to address how we can work with groups in realizing the goal of developing social justice attitudes and actions.

Student affairs educators should also work with college men to identify solid reasons for engaging in social justice work. It is simply not enough to allow men to participate in social justice actions without them comprehending why such actions are important and necessary. Asking men to

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reflect on why social justice work is imperative, how they feel about the work, and what they and others stand to gain from their investment are just three ways of promoting a higher complexity of thinking about social justice attitudes and actions, thereby potentially increasing their desire for continued involvement.

It is similarly important for student affairs educators to find ways in which to recognize and appreciate the efforts men make regarding the development and promotion of social justice attitudes and actions. All too often, we become mired in reacting to the negative behaviors within our individual areas that we neglect to applaud the good work some men are doing. By reinforcing positive efforts, we can begin to build an ethos of social justice within our male student population, which could potentially have a snowball effect based on the dynamics of social capital and what is seen as accepted behavior in some social circles. Creating energy and enthusiasm around social justice work could go a long way in getting student buy-in from those experiencing privilege (i.e., men) that is needed to propel this work to the next level.

### Conclusion

This brief represents initial findings that will likely be further clarified as data continues to be analyzed. A full description of the findings and discussion of this research may be available from authors in the summer of 2007. For a more comprehensive discussion of how to work developmentally with men see Davis & Laker (2004).

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