Initial Reflection Paper

College Student Affairs 507A

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Social justice is a term that has recently become more of a focus in my life. It is prevalent in both my academic and professional environments. Due to this recent focus regarding social justice, the readings assigned helped shed light on several issues that I originally did not perceive to be social justice related. These issues included dominant groups acting in ways to maintain their power and status in society, the use of different types of institutions to discriminate against target groups, and the notion of what I had affectionately known as driving while black being defined as a pretext stop. Prior to this semester my knowledge of what social justice entailed was little. I knew it was a topic that needed to be explored and that it involved the injustices people faced on a daily basis. After completing the readings I have finally begun to understand, if even on a microscopic level, what people mean when they refer to themselves as a social justice advocate.

An overarching theme that presented itself both blatantly and inadvertently in the reading was the notion that the agent or dominant group acted in ways that either consciously or unconsciously sustained an oppressive atmosphere which is the status quo of society. One specific form of this oppression is the discrimination that happens in different intuitions that exist in our society. As a staff member in the institution of higher education I acknowledge that this system is designed to encourage those who have the financial means to attend colleges and universities to do so. The dominant group, the children of families that have the wealth to send their offspring to Ivy League institutions or establishments that have a strong reputation, unconsciously reinforce this oppressive system because providing access to the tools their students need to be successful it will inevitably lead to these children becoming the dominant group for yet another generation hence successfully sustaining the status quo. Although it is understood that community colleges serve more people in a specific community and provide a
quality education as well, I would challenge any notion that stated students if given the
opportunity to attend an Ivy League institution for the same rate as a community college that
they would choose the community college as being false. I acknowledge that I maintain no clear
evidence leading to my assertion, however I believe that students in society would agree that the
alumni base at an Ivy League institution is more likely to present jobs that will lead to more
economic prosperity rather than the jobs from alumnus connections of a community college.

The theme of the dominant group acting in ways to maintain the oppressive status quo
based on the readings is prevalent in all aspects of society. An example from my own experience
is from an interaction with several white police officers who worked for the New York Police
Department. I remember walking to the movie theater with several friends. I remembered I
forgot something from inside my mothers’ apartment and after running back from retrieving the
item I remember catching up with my friends and noticing a car slowly drive by us. A few
seconds later several white police officers piled out from the car and demanded that my friends
and I turn around, assume the position, and place our hands behinds our heads. We had been
stopped because apparently a store had been robbed several blocks ahead and the only
description that the police had of the suspects was a group of Black males. I had never really
thought about the concept of being a target from an agent group but while reading and writing
this paper this situation suddenly came back to me. Although there was some justification for
stopping my friends and I, considering we were in a group and we were Black males, the
demographics for that neighborhood were comprised of people from primarily Black and Latino
backgrounds. It would not be uncommon for a group of Black males to walk around together
either intentionally or accidentally.
As I reflect back on this situation I realize that this was possibly the moment in which I decided that the systems and institutions that existed in society were either corrupt or wrong. Although I was unsure how to fix it I knew that there was something wrong. The readings helped flesh out some of the feelings that I experienced that day by articulating the notion of my master status. In the eyes of the police officers it did not matter whether I was part of the upper class, affluent, educated, or even a significant figure in the community, the only identity that mattered was the color of my skin. On that day I experienced all three forms of oppression. The institution of state on my group of friends and I oppressed us by wrongfully labeling us. Interpersonal oppression because I began to despise the people in my neighborhood who committed the crime, if one had actually been perpetrated. Lastly, my internalized oppression as I became infuriated with myself for being in that situation and not remembering the skills that had been taught to me to protect myself from a dominant group like the New York Police Department.

After completing the readings this personal experience exemplifies the way that the dominant group acts in a way to maintain the status quo of society. When the detectives stopped us and advised us to assume the position, it was presumed that because of the ethnicity we all understood their terminology, which sadly to say was accurate. We had all either experienced or heard of other peoples experiences that permitted us to know what the term assume the position stood for. Reflecting back on the situation it is interesting to contemplate the two perspectives that onlookers might have taken. The first perspective was that another group of Black males had done something wrong and were being justly punished. This perspective would be held by the members of the community who felt the police were there to protect and serve. The second perspective was that another group of Black males had been stopped for doing absolutely nothing
wrong. This second perspective would be held by those who have either experienced this form of oppression or watched it happen too often. The second perspective proves to be the most interesting because even though people may have perceived that what was happening was uncalled for nobody spoke out to stop the police from continuing, thus disempowering the individuals who felt this way. By deciding not to intervene and question the status quo they reinforced it. It was alluded to in the readings that because situations in which obvious incidents of oppression and discrimination occur policies are created in attempts to help alleviate their frequent occurrence. My contention is that although having policies in place will punish the individuals who commit these acts it does not change the mindset of the individual who committed the acts.

Change needs to happen not at the political level but at the societal level. Policies created by those who have the power are only superficial attempts to alleviate issues and problems that dwell much deeper in the roots of what society is built upon. The readings helped shed tremendous light onto the notion of social justice because I find myself questioning the basic level of intervention that certain institutions in society take as being merely for the benefit of the dominant group. I am now pondering where I am in my individual social justice journey to help attend to issues that exist in society. I understand the need for change but I find myself nervous when thinking about the responsibility may entail. The task for me will be to constantly evaluate and challenge myself to question the status quo. I believe that at the end of this semester I will have a better understanding what social justice work entails and will be able to explain the need for our society to adapt to a social justice model and I will be able to articulate the reasons why it would be more effective than the institution of oppression that exists today.