

# Epilogue

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## **Civility Matters: Humanizing Each Other's Stories in the Higher Education Workplace**

When our global world collided in 2020 due to the double pandemic (Addo, 2020; Starks, 2021) about COVID-19 and racial unrests, higher education institutions like P-12 schools in the United States faced uncertainties about the impending impact of these crises. In addition, global protests for racial justice following the brutal murders of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and escalation of racial discrimination against noncitizens and people of color in many places around the world (Addo, 2020; Starks, 2021) depicted a collective rage about social injustices that plague our society. This collective rage is reminiscent of Fannie Lou Hamer's (1964) declaration in her fight for equal rights, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." So, the world was transfixed by the unrest and as the aunt of nine nephews who range in age from 13 to 26 years old, I carry the fear like so many others, society's perpetual devalue of their humanity and dignity. The increasing racial discrimination despite progress on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) gave rise to scrutiny on human relations in the higher education workplace.

Across the nation, higher education institutions are still contending with the impact of COVID-19 and the challenges exacerbated by it. The pandemic brought disruption such as grief, financial difficulties, and changes to daily lives. It also revealed the systemic effects of oppression on health (Garcia, 2022), rising need for work-life balance (Kirby et al., 2023), and mental health and general well-being support (Kirby et al., 2023). The collection of chapters in this edited book draws attention to the unpredictable changes in higher education workplaces and the people who were, are, or wish to be there (Hays-Thomas, 2022). It also brings to the forefront the need for civility in efforts to dismantle systemic barriers that continue to permeate our higher education workplace. The chapters also chronicle through conceptual and empirical work the complexities of creating and nurturing a diverse and inclusive workplace in higher education. While raising critical issues, they

offer an optimism about a progress toward racial equity and inclusion which in many ways are encapsulated by engaging in civility with each other.

The role of civility in doing social justice work (Arao & Clemens, 2013) challenges those who are committed to this mission to turn the mirror inward. To what extent are we “walking” the talk of social justice through our interactions with others? Is civility at the core of how we practice care, compassion, and community with each other? Espousing about (in)justices necessitates responsibilities to ourselves and one another. In support of this, Museus (2020) asserts “I am not promoting civility at the expense of social justice. The existing instability created by the social movements of the current moment present us with great opportunities for change, and this is a time for people at the margins to be bold and speak up against injustice.” (p. 146)

I have been contemplating this issue, and it was amplified by the double pandemic and the implications for education. Interrogating how we promote access, diversity, and equity is premised on bringing sustainable change in our higher education workplace. With the amplified protest movement have come deeper calls for systemic change, from policy to ideology to everyday practice. Teaching and leading for social justice can be an alienating experience in the current educational climate. According to Chang (2020), “collectively the pandemic has made systemic injustices more apparent, connected groups of people that perhaps were not as connected before, and spurred them on to activism, often through their own self-education (p. 31).” Yet, the ways in which many outside, within, and across historically oppressed communities engage with each other and collectively advocate for social justice merit further consideration. In particular, this informs our work in higher education.

Moving toward solidarity in social justice advocacy places emphasis on the need to humanize each other’s stories. The work of social justice advocacy as Congressman John Lewis voiced is “good trouble.” Yet, it is emotionally, mentally, and physically taxing (Chang, 2020; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). Often, this is derived from doing passionate work that consumes who we are. In minoritized communities, it is a heavy lift to fight for your humanity but also others. The distinctions among cultural and ethnic groups and even within similar groups too often result in the “us vs. them” paradigm. My concern is how that permeates our academic spaces in higher education settings. The “us vs. them” paradigm underscores how uninformed, haphazard, and impulsive attacks in the name of justice can fuel competition within and among scholars, educators, leaders in our educational communities and spaces. This shifts energy away from more fruitful conversations about how we can support each other as we engage in the demanding work of social justice advocacy.

Educators and leaders, in and outside higher education, constitute a powerful force who can work together for educational liberation. It is finding spaces where we can join in solidarity to raise our voices and act for social

justice. Yet, there is a proliferation of waging impulsive personal attacks on each other without understanding the context and ideas of those being criticized. These distractions diminish the persistence of social justice work. When we “refocus our attention on what is truly important about the virtue of civility itself, a shared and constructive commitment to a joint political enterprise, namely, the cause of achieving a just society (Richardson, 2021, p. 7),” ultimately, we are able to construct the collectiveness that is needed for this work.

Learning to practice grace and kindness to others is acceptance of others’ miss-failings. Social justice advocacy is compassionate work but can be derailed by the “us vs. them” paradigm. Viray and Nash (2014) assert that

...the single greatest roadblock to successful advocacy work of all kinds, whether one is an advocate or an activist is what they call, *advocacy*. The *advocate* is “someone who tries to change minds through anger, righteous indignation, guilt, gossiping, and moral outrage ... *advocacy* often results in silencing those who think, feel, and act differently for whatever reasons ... *advocates* too often run the risk of creating enemies, not allies, to the cause.” (p. 24)

Our profession is what we do (i.e., habit of hand; habit of mind). But our compassion (i.e., habit of heart) is who we are as an individual. In order to practice compassion, you have to allow oneself to be vulnerable. With equal tenacity, through compassion, we ought to strive for justice for all. In this period in our lives, we need to reclaim our humanity. What kind of world do we want to help create? The connections or relationships we develop are a bridge of understanding and respect between us and others.

Doing social justice work is heavy lifting and needs a broad coalition to achieve the transformative change we seek in all aspects of our society. While the double pandemic has deepened the burdens of minoritized communities, it has also afforded opportunities to see shared struggles across communities, do research on why things are the way they are, and connect and mobilize with one another through a period of great isolation and alienation. Out of these opportunities, it seems clear that our analyses, methodologies, and pedagogies should challenge false binaries and other essentializations of race and society.

In closing, the calls for civility may suggest an effort to stifle people’s outrage over injustice or hate. Instead, it is to be more inclusive. It is to bring more people’s voices into social justice discourses. We have far to go to deliver on the promise of equal rights and justice for all throughout every fabric of our society – home, school, and work. There is an urgency to advance freedom and human rights worldwide. The urgency must center on creating deeper expertise about eradicating inequities and the constant

renewal of learning, unlearning, and relearning so history does repeat itself. Let's keep civility in sight as we engage in social justice work without causing harm to each other. Practicing civility is essential to engaging social justice and creating spaces for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It begins with self. How do we use our positions and platforms to influence and support one another?

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