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Op-Ed: Failing to Bend the Arc of the Moral Universe? Dr. King, Newton, Piaget, and Social Work

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Abstract

To achieve a more just universe, the momentum and historical forces of racism, sexism, heterosexism, privilege, etc. must be met with equal and opposite forces through policies, structures, and the courageous acts and voices of many. Dr. King's claim that "the moral universe bends toward justice" is joined with Newton's Laws of Motion where arcs only bend through external forces. Bending the arc necessitates a large membership, including social workers. Membership in a group confers advantages while simultaneously ushering in implicit biases against those outside of the group ultimately disadvantaging both groups. Educating tomorrow's social workers necessarily involves ingroup and outgroup membership, instructors and students. We argue well-meaning social work educators often act against Social Work's mission of producing a cadre of individuals who will pull the arc toward social and economic justice. Students in social work programs, eager to pull on the moral arc, are often criticized for being inexperienced and not further along in their "woke" development. Criticism may discourage students, thereby losing needed ingroup members. Students are canceled. Algebra, evolutionary theory, and cognitive development theories provide guidelines for unifying social work educators and students to promote Dr. King's vision.

Keywords: social work, social justice, education, student

Imagine a conversation between Dr. Martin Luther King and Sir Isaac Newton on the concepts of a moral universe and justice.

Dr. King: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Sir Newton: “While that may be true, justice will remain in a straight line unless compelled to change by the action of an external force.”

Dr. King: “People around the world are acting to bend the moral universe toward social justice.”

Sir Newton: “Yes, and for every one of their actions there is an equally strong reaction... so the path will be long because injustice has a long history with a mighty force.”

Dr. King: “Yes, the path will be long and unforgiving at times... but with heart, mental and physical resilience, and an unyielding pursuit toward social justice, people will achieve a more moral universe. The effort can be hastened through applying more force on the arc—wisdom is needed to recruit and retain individuals who can effectively apply this force.”

Can the bend rate toward a more moral universe and socially just society be achieved across the United States? Yes, though it is not guaranteed. During the past 50 years, the US has witnessed public and private stakeholders act in a manner whereby justice-oriented institutions, policies, practices, and norms have diminished acts of injustice against less privileged groups, thereby strengthening these groups’ capability and mobility and creating unity among and between diverse groups and institutions. However, in this same time-period, public and private stakeholders have also acted in a manner whereby injustice-oriented policies, practices and norms have re-emerged, thereby weakening less privileged groups, and creating division among and between diverse groups and institutions. Counter acting forces are at work. Policies, practices, and norms that favor the privileged have long held power that promotes injustice and these groups do not easily release their hold on power because of actual or perceived losses in advantage (Kendi, 2019). The US has not “arrived” at a more moral universe and socially just society, so relentless effort is needed to continue bending the arc. Surely, some will push the arc away from justice – requiring even more people to pull the arc toward social justice.

Those with privilege and power, unacknowledged or otherwise, may ask: Why is there a need to actively bend the arc toward a more moral universe and socially just society? Are we not already in the *Garden of Eden*? Evolutionary theory suggests we are not. Research by Harvard Professor Dr. Joshua Greene (2013) argues that social-evolutionary forces help explain the presence and growth of social injustice. Greene argues that individuals are first concerned with their own survival, then the survival of their family, and lastly with the survival of their tribe. Commitment to one’s tribe is of interest to our argument.

Commitment to one’s tribe promoted human survival, and therefore evolution, because membership in Tribe A who fought against Tribe B helped Tribe A become more collectively oriented but also presented Tribe B as an adversary. This tribal battle encouraged the notion of

dominance and subjugation. Collectivity, social coordination, and group membership promote survival. Individuals in Tribe A actively worked together against Tribe B, and it was the working together that helped humans in Tribe A evolve. Of course, gains in Tribe A were not benevolent for Tribe B. And, for Tribe B to survive they also needed to collaborate and work together. Over time implicit biases against other tribes evolved: in-group members are good, out-of-group members are dangerous and, therefore, bad. Given enough time, evolution has left us with institutions, policies, practices, and norms that implicitly, yet powerfully, promote separation. Equal and opposite reactions, two human tribal lines separating across space ... only coming together if there is a force that bends them toward a common humanity.

Committed to addressing and eliminating all forms of social injustice, social work educational programs in the US prepare undergraduate and graduate students to understand and recognize the extent to which institutional and cultural values and structures create privilege and power for some and oppress, marginalize, and alienate others. On an annual basis, social work educational programs in the US enroll thousands of undergraduate and graduate students. These students want to “help people” and bend the arc toward a more moral universe and socially just society. Often social justice novices, students pay tuition and make many sacrifices for an opportunity to bend the arc toward a more morally just universe. The students are not conscripted into the work, they volunteer. These inexperienced change agents present with limited knowledge and understanding of the needed tools for this endeavor.

At times, instructors teaching courses that emphasize diversity, power, privilege, oppression, and marginalization, remark that students resist their efforts toward promoting social justice and express concern that students are not interested or open to change. Recognizing this, instructors may use anger, blame, criticism, or impatience against the developing students—again, social justice novices and volunteers. Students may then say, “well, I’ve never personally hurt anyone” or, “I have no slave owners in my family tree” or, “I have a friend, even a best friend who is X” or, “I have no x-isms, I’m more evolved than that.” The instructor might counter, “It’s not my job to educate you on an obvious injustice” or, “You have no right to try to belong to my group or co-op my pain” or, “you will never understand and cannot understand because of your positionality.” Other instructors may be comfortable having students remain uninformed and uncomfortable and pass the burden of educating the student onto their colleague(s). These instructors suggest that to take the time to educate someone so naïve is too daunting and not worth the effort. In response to this, students may feel personally attacked and experience feelings of anger, shame, fear, or guilt. Believing that developing students lack the ability to digest the nuances and complexities of these issues, instructors inadvertently discourage many developing students from continuing in social justice efforts, resulting in a loss of potential allies committed to bending the arc toward a more moral universe and socially just society.

From the instructor’s perspective, statements such as, “well, I’ve never personally hurt anyone” or, “I have no slave owners in my family tree” or, “I have a friend, even a best friend who is X” or, “I have no x-isms, I’m more evolved than that” may carry threat because such statements suggest an over-inflated self-confidence regarding cultural awareness, reinforcing a tribal divide. The student is now showing classic symptoms of defending the status quo as if the students were from the opposite tribe—trying to uphold systems of oppression. Is the student

well-intended but misguided or is the student an actual adversary? Discovering the difference can impact the number of students who continue with the campaign of bending the arc of justice. If instructors become adversaries to students, the student will see the instructor as a member of the “other” tribe (one that is judgmental, insensitive, and unhelpful). An unwillingness to persevere through the process with a student could lead to the loss of a potential allies. More advanced students will warn younger students of the dangers of these courses while professors will likely complain about students who are not interested in joining their side. Evolutionary-like tribalism has reproduced—both sides looking out for their own because discovery of an enemy was, thousands of years ago, an evolutionary advantage. Tragic, Shakespearean tribalism reaches into today with the Capulets and Montagues at war.

What has happened? Students who are paying hefty costs to become social workers and social work instructors who *have paid* hefty costs to become instructors should be members of the same tribe—a tribe who wants more social justice. Why not be more inviting to students? Seemingly sincere, well-intended students find themselves criticized for not waking up enough—they are not sufficiently woke or trusted *during* their academic training. They are “cancelled.” This seems like a lost opportunity for the two tribes to blend and fuse their energies to fight for justice.

What might be some motives for *not* more patiently inviting and supporting students’ development into forces who can effectively tug on the moral arc? Maybe students seem like they are simply jumping on the “bandwagon” in an insincere way which should not be trusted. Maybe students are positioning themselves for more press and distrust runs high for disingenuous people given the magnitude of the problem. Maybe students have legitimately not paid the price of entrance and come with arrogance, a lack of humility, or low skill in speaking the language and honoring the traditions and historic pain of the tribe they wish to join. Or, maybe students come with a history—they have membership in an opposite tribe—a tribe that has systematically inflicted pain to those in the tribe they now wish to join. Suspicion certainly abounds. The term “turncoat” feels universally negative—strange given that the turning may suggest moving toward a more just tribe. The challenge of joining individuals to a common purpose of bending the moral arc toward social justice has not yet been fully realized.

Let’s turn to algebra as a possible guide for understanding the dynamics between instructors and students in attempting to bend the arc. The following equation represents an inverse relationship: $A = \frac{B}{C}$

This is an inverse relationship because when C goes up, A goes down. Where:

- A = The product: Social justice actions that help bend the arc toward a more moral universe.
- B = The numerator: forces that support A, such as:
 - vision of justice
 - motivation and commitment to justice
 - knowledge and skill in enacting laws, dialoguing with friends, families, etc.
 - cultural humility
 - social justice humility

- knowledge of historical trauma
- skills in communicating respectfully
- empathy
- respect
- compassion
- humanistic mindsets
- laws and systems enforcing justice
- training in managing implicit biases
- confidence in lending one's voice to the cause
- resources: time, energy, money, space, collaborators, mentors
- etc.
- C = the denominator: forces that undermine A, such as:
 - fear
 - shame
 - white fragility
 - defensiveness
 - cultural arrogance
 - cultural supremacy
 - white supremacy
 - social justice arrogance
 - etc.

Let's tie a few ideas together. Imagine the following scenario:

- 1) Students (e.g., college students, training attendees) attend a training on a subject such as cultural awareness, diversity, dynamics of oppression, etc.
- 2) Students want to be helpers in bending the arc. They are excited rookies with mixed amounts of enthusiasm or skill in the "B" and "C" positions.
- 3) Students are relatively naïve—they simply are not aware of their implicit biases nor are versed in the broad and deep literature on issues of diversity, cultural oppression, supremacy, etc. Further, they may, due to their privilege, have not personally experienced the pain, trauma, and loss that comes from systematic, baked-in 'isms' [read: racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, genderism, immigration, etc.).

Using the formula above, we want "students" [read: all humans] to have high numbers in the numerator ("B"), the forces that support social justice actions so that they can help bend the arc. However, what if the instructor (e.g., college professor, training director) reacts strongly to the student's naiveté (#3 above)? The instructor might implicitly or explicitly activate forces in denominator ("C") thus undermining social justice actions ("A" or the product) among willing allies interested in bending the arc. Notice what happens in the popular media when people come out in support of the Black Lives Movement—often, such support is summarily shot down and criticized—the cancel culture. Students and instructors have become, strangely, members of opposite tribes.

Normalizing is a clinical effort designed to let clients know that their experience is to be expected, thereby reducing shame, and promoting continued engagement with the topic. Grief is

normal in response to loss. Anger is normal in response to injustice. Anxiety is normal in response to threat. Implicit bias is normal when we are exposed to unfamiliar groups. It is natural, not moral. Morality, from our perspective, begins when a person is aware that implicit biases exist and that these biases have the potential of hurting others. Acceptance, versus denial, is often considered to be an early and necessary step toward change. So, if students can accept they have implicit biases and adopt humility toward cultural variation and social justice, then they (We, I) are much more likely to ‘uptake’ factors listed in the “B” position of the formula because “C” forces are not activated. Now, the student and the instructor belong to the same tribe ... the tribe that is committed to bending the arc toward a more moral universe and socially just society. The enemy is implicit bias and the painful injustices which follow; students and instructors are not enemies. Once we are aware of and accepting of discrimination that hurts members of the human tribe, the moral imperative is to take actions to promote justice.

Dr. Greene (2013), citing the work of Daniel Kahneman, argues that evolutionary impulses that helped humans survive thousands of years ago represent Type 1 thinking (automatic and instinctual) and are no longer adaptive for modern times. The world has become too small and interconnected. Type 2 thinking is needed for continued progress—maybe even averting disaster? Type 2 thinking both requires force and is a force that can help bend the arc toward social justice. Type 2 thinking involves deliberate, intentional, and systematic logic. Overcoming the feeling that the other tribes are bad will require active engagement in Type 2 thinking. Is learning to pull on the arc of social justice different? Type 2 thinking might help both tribes—instructors and students. Social workers endorse the adage “Start where the client is.” Well, we all start with implicit biases where the in-group is favored over the out-group. Implicit bias is a natural evolutionary output, just like diversity in genotype and phenotype. Said differently, to simply have an implicit bias is not *always* about morality. If simply holding an implicit bias against the “outgroup” is presented as a moral failure to the new student, the student may well feel attacked or shameful – possibly driving them away. Maybe there is a different way to help the student see that they have a bias and commit to eliminating or managing the bias.

Famed child developmental research, Jean Piaget might suggest we look at assimilation and accommodation as guides to moving forward. Learning or development necessarily involves trial and error. The student is actively trying to learn and will naturally make mistakes. Think of a child who learns what a cat is, an animal with four legs and a tail. The child then sees an actual dog, complete with four legs and a tail, but calls it a cat. The parents might giggle and then gently instruct the child so that the little one gradually begins to learn the rules about what makes a cat a cat and a dog a dog. Shaming, criticizing and name-calling would certainly be counter indicated. Making a mistake about learning for a child does not, at this stage of development, seem to be an issue of morality. Similarly, adults attempting to learn another language will certainly make mistakes—yes, the adult students should do their homework, and they will still make mistakes. The response to these mistakes from the instructor will have a strong impact on the students’ motivation to continue learning. Gentle, firm encouragement toward development will go much further than punishing and shaming. There needs to be tribal alliances which effectively combines the strengths of group members. Solutions are often found through multiple lenses and experiences. Both sides can come to the table and create a space for dialogue and discussion. There is power in listening to the personal stories and experiences of each other. Change is possible and it begins with each of us.

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