

Biko Agozino And Justice for All

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Abstract

This paper takes its reader on the shared sociological journey of Virginia Tech professor Biko Agozino and University of Winnipeg graduate Joey Lywak. It outlines their by chance encounter and subsequent correspondence which has led to extensive benefits for both parties. A snapshot of Agozino's liberating sociology (academic activism) was sought out by Lywak for a class project. This request was received and fulfilled graciously. Subsequently, their joint efforts have produced an assignment that highlights both of their talents and expertise. Agozino's noble endeavours gain the recognition they deserve while Lywak is able to supplement this biographical tale with a number of concepts and theories, in this his final submitted work as an undergraduate.

Key words

Sociology, Sociologist, Liberation, Academic, Activism, Social, Justice, Moral Entrepreneurs, Critical, Research, Oppression, Race, Gender, Class, Democracy, Correspondence, Passion, Education

Introduction - The Continuum of Justice and Ethics

...it's better in fact to be guilty of manslaughter than of fraud about what is fair and just. - Plato (1960: 160)

With everything we read there are two avenues available for understanding. While we explicitly read the manifest content, we also make use of our own personal experiences to interpret what is latently confided in it as well. For instance, in the above mentioned quotation, Plato's wisdom can enlighten us because of not only its concrete meaning, but also due to any inferences one is able to make. Clearly, Plato is arguing that fraudulent injustices are more harmful than the most disastrous of recklessness abandon. With that said, one may contend that Plato's message is twofold as he is also suggesting there exists a barometer for determining the fair and just life. His statement doubles as a guide for setting the bare minimum of ethical essentials. That is, to coexist harmoniously with the rest of society you must be true to the doctrine which directs your moral compass. This supposes then that at opposite ends of a spectrum of justice we have conflicting ideologies. At one end lie those whose ethical rigour is displaced in favour of glutinous pleasures. These individuals resort to their innate animalistic tendencies when confronted with a predicament demanding principled analysis. Conversely, counter to them are those

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who are of the highest moral aptitude. What differentiates these moral entrepreneurs from their run of the mill counterparts is their desire to excel. Not only do they satisfy the requirement of displaying fair and just behaviour, but imbedded within them is the impetus to acknowledge and mend the devastating effects of social injustice abroad.

It is by way of the aforementioned interpretative perspective, navigated via the 'continuum of justice and ethics' that the task at hand will be approached and undertaken. This paper is constructed with a heavy reliance on the emails received from liberation sociologist Biko Agozino. By depending on such a medium however the possibility exists of mistakenly misconstruing the content. Nevertheless, if one is to situate these efforts in the context of actively investigating and engaging with Prof. Agozino, then possibly this is not a project requiring the regurgitation of one's achievements, but instead it is a joint collaboration which attempts to deduce the more pressing questions at hand. What one takes away from reading someone's work, marveling over their accomplishments, or reflecting on previous conversations had, is undeniably uniquely theirs. All too often people become hung up on the variations of understanding believing that one's intended outcome, or someone else's take is omnipotent. Just as in life, it will be argued that constructive dialogue is what you make of it. Right and wrong are not discernable in this setting and do not necessarily even exist because knowledge of any kind is truly the end goal. Thus, regardless of any assumptions, hopefully I will be able to demonstrate the depth of learning Biko Agozino has provided me and in addition you, the reader, will be able to determine for yourself which end of the spectrum he belongs.

The Passionate Liberator

The basic premise behind liberation sociology is to empower and free the oppressed through research which moves the world towards democracy and social justice. By uncovering the solutions to the problems that besiege the oppressed, liberation sociology looks to make a tangible contribution to the formulation of more humane social arrangements. Countless critical thinkers support the action of human beings in their own liberation and call for greater democratic access to all social science knowledge (Feagin & Vera, 2008). Biko Agozino is but one of these moral entrepreneurs.

If I was to describe Biko Agozino using one word, that word would be passionate. Agozino exudes passion in every sense of the term with everything he says and does. This passion is overflowing and highly infectious. As someone who was able to witness his enthusiasm first hand through email conversations, I must concede that his forthright nature was not only refreshing, but quite surprising as well. No matter how controversial his beliefs or arguments may be, no matter the minority position his stance on an issue may occupy, Agozino not only speaks his mind but defends it in earnest. The purpose behind the proceeding analysis then is to illuminate the magic behind Biko's efforts. While Agozino should be lauded for the initiatives he has led and continues to spearhead today (see discussion below), what should be equally heralded is his drive and determination to have his visions come to fruition.

For without this passion his ideas would remain idle, dissolving in obscurity forevermore.

Passion is futile without a worthwhile purpose and strategic methods which hone its capabilities. For example, there exist countless instances of intense religious passion which produce tragic and fatal consequences. Although the efforts of said religious crusaders are devout in their subjective opinion, objectively speaking, their detrimental methods are highly scrutinized and denounced by the vast majority of outsiders. Thus, while their passion is genuine, its unbridled over exuberant nature overrides any possible utility that it may yield.

There is no doubt that Agozino is zealous. But what about his purpose and the methods he uses to preach his activism? In what follows, I intend to put to rest any possible reservations on this front. Agozino's boisterous passion is of the utmost value for society. It, without a doubt, has been harnessed in an efficient manner and is being displayed appropriately using widely condoned channels. The essential essence of Agozino's liberation endeavours revolve around what he terms a "race-class-gender articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation in societies structured in dominance" (Agozino, personal communication, October 29, 2013). A mouthful indeed, Agozino's primary area of expertise can be simplified as a race-class-gender construction paradigm. In other words, Biko is determined to rectify the oppressive position of those who have been relinquished to the bowels of society's stratification hierarchy because of the interaction and formulation of race, class and gender. In the eyes of Agozino, those with social and economic capital have used the various combinations of race, class and gender discrimination to promote and maintain their dominant Caucasian, bourgeoisie, masculine-hegemonic power and ideology. It is his mission to reverse the current order and control imbalance perpetuated by power elites by giving a voice to those in society who would otherwise be ignored.

The Journey

Before I divulge what makes Agozino worthy of my most sincere praise, I believe that some contextual information is called for. I begin with my search for a liberation sociologist to study which began with slight trepidation. After quickly deciding upon highlighting Biko's work, I came to realize that little existed on his contributions to oppression fighting. With not much else to go on, I decided to contact Agozino in hopes of resolving my predicament. Not only was my request met promptly, but great effort, thought and humility went into the detailed responses which followed. Evidently, his input was vastly beneficial for this paper. Equally as significant, however, were the added bonuses which came from our conversations. These, I believe, are a testament to the character of this man. Because of his commitment to my learning, despite little incentive to do so, I was able to gain valuable experiences I otherwise would not have. The PowerPoint presentation I created as a result of his efforts was full of content that captivated. In fact, due to its

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unique flavour, I was twice requested to present outside of class, once being in front of 100 introductory sociology students and once for a school wide student ideas symposium. Reflecting on both of these events, I find my experiences to have been immensely invaluable especially considering my recent graduation and my overall unfamiliarity with public speaking. I take away from these two occasions a better understanding of the nuances of such a task and greater confidence in my ability to repeat my performances with improved aptitude in the future. Again, such advancements in my own personal growth would not have been possible without the feverish contributions made by Professor Agozino.

The pedagogical gifts bestowed upon me by Biko Agozino do not begin and end with a couple of extracurricular presentations, as the content of the information he provided is just as significant. Two unique but intertwined lessons were received through his emails. First and foremost, there is what he has done and accomplished. Agozino's sheer breadth of undertakings is remarkable; especially considering what he divulged was probably only a portion of his actual resume. This breathes optimism into my own future outlook and what lies ahead, as I now know what is possible. With that said, a second, more implicit message was ascertained. At face value, the variations in his activism and volunteer work appeared to not mesh. It was not until I came to understand his background story that uniformity appeared. This realization undoubtedly led to a most unexpected yet logical of epiphanies. Historical context could not only irradiate the hollows of his narrative, but it could lend unprecedented substance to his now moving story. So while Agozino's empowering methods and initiatives are the crux of his liberating activism, the often unheard of truths give life to it all.

When Oppression and Passion Collide

Biko Agozino describes himself as "a liberation sociologist who privileges a critical Africana-centered scholar-activist paradigm" (Agozino, personal communication, October 29, 2013). Although most liberation sociologists attempt to empathize with the oppressed, Biko's unique set of circumstances have lent him a more native perspective. Due to the prior adverse conditions he overcame, fighting for the underprivileged has become a personal vendetta for this man. It all began as a child when he experienced firsthand the Nigerian Civil War and the slaying of some three million civilians. Primarily because of this experience, Agozino has always known that he himself is one of the oppressed. As he so eloquently puts it, "I am not directly suffering with any particular group of oppressed; we are all interconnected in the sense that injustice to one is injustice to all" (B. Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013). Furthermore, knowing this about him helps one appraise his continued fight against violence and for increased democratic means of settling disputes. It also puts into perspective his care free demeanour after being rejected by various academic and intellectual institutions. For instance, one of his most highly regarded academic pieces, *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System: Towards the Decolonisation of Victimization* (Agozino, 1997) was rejected numerous times before eventually being picked up by Ashgate Publisher who recognized his potential to head a new interdisciplinary research series in ethnic, gender and class

relations. Essentially, given his tumultuous past it is no wonder that patience, a fresh perspective, resolve and fortitude are key staples of Biko's repertoire.

I believe that, above all else, Biko Agozino is a promoter of increased educational means for everyone as it is only through our continued learning that we as a society have any chance of evolving and quashing oppression before it starts. My chief reason for arguing this, is his contention that "all his work is play" through his promotion of the acronym L.I.F.E.; 'learning is fun essentially' (Agozino, personal communication, October 16, 2013). Agozino's debut assisting the constant struggle for the dissemination of educational resources began as a graduate student in Scotland where he was president of the African society and part of a committee that raised scholarship funds for South African students to come to Edinburgh University. It continued on in Liverpool where he ran literacy workshops for the children of Somali refugees by adapting fairy tales as pantomimes for them to rehearse and perform. Literacy remained of key importance for Agozino as he went on to become the Director of Administration for the Directorate for Literacy which ran free literacy classes for members of the public in Nigeria (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013). Again, education is the backbone of any society and the most impactful place to begin, if one is to reduce the oppression felt by those being overlooked and forgotten.

Another focus of Agozino's advocacy is centered on race discrimination in the criminal justice process. Upon arriving in the United States in 1999 as an Associate Professor in Criminology, Agozino immediately made a written submission to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's Public Hearing on Race and Sex Discrimination in the judicial process. His focus was on juvenile death penalty (as five out of the six juveniles on death row were black). He is thrilled to announce that a few years later the US Supreme Court finally ruled that juvenile death penalty was unconstitutional. It is his belief that, in at least some small part, his contribution brought this to fruition. Similarly, the country of Gambia announced a plan for the mass execution of 37 people on death row in 2012 and Agozino sent officials reports of his co-authored research on executions, crime and homicide in Trinidad and Tobago. His examination of the death row dynamic demonstrated that the death penalty does not deter crime and that it was imposed on Africans by European colonizers who have since abolished it in their own countries. Yet again, he is pleased to report that Gambia suspended the mass execution, in part because of his public sociology. Finally, Agozino was one of the hundred sociologists to endorse amendment 64 in Colorado for the legalization of marijuana (as a result of the racial discrepancies the law brought forth) despite the forewarning that those who endorsed the campaign were risking their professional credibility. He is delighted to disclose that the amendment passed and that he hopes his advocacy dating back to his freshman essay comparing the effects of alcohol and marijuana, to his doctoral dissertation on Black Women and the Criminal Justice System, to the press release that he drafted

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for the African Criminology and Justice Association 'Against the War on African Americans', contributed to the outcome and announcements of changes to the prosecution of small drug possession offences by the Obama administration (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013).

Along with education, class and race discrimination, Agozino is also committed to bettering the lives of those who endure the toils of sexist bigotry. One of his most renowned pieces of academia, *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System: Towards the Decolonisation of Victimization*, analyzes the oppressive class, race and gender relations beset upon this group. This book argues that black women are marginalized in both society and criminology as they are poorly represented among advantageous social status positions while being overrepresented within correctional institutions of contemporary times (Agozino, 1997). Long before his dissertation on black women in the criminal justice system, Agozino was a member of the advocacy group, Women in Nigeria, which allowed men to join in the struggle for strengthening women's rights (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013).

Another such emphasis of Agozino's work is on, what I will term, 'the political', although numerous other labels could apply. I begin with the book that introduced me to Agozino, *Counter Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason* which outlines the criminological perspectives of nonwhites. In it, he calls for the conscious effort of western criminologists to adopt new approaches which pay attention to the cries of the oppressed. Furthermore, he warns of the ills (imperialist domination) that the vast majority of criminological academia has and will continue to perpetuate (Agozino, 2003). Agozino is also a founding member of the Centre for Democracy and Development which promoted and advertised across West Africa. In Trinidad and Tobago Agozino was often on the radio, television, in the pages of the newspapers as well as in schools and in the community advocating for greater freedom for the people (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013). Moreover, he was an activist against military rule in Nigeria which is summarized in his co-authored monograph *Nigeria: Democratizing a Militarized Civil Society* (Agozino & Idem, 2001). Effectively, his contributions to sociology are continually arguing for the reduction of state control and for the expansion of democracy. Currently, he is the Chair of the Social Policy Committee of the Association of Black Sociologists where he continues to seek support for his liberating ideas (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013).

Sociology and the Oppressed – A Match Made in Inequality?

It is near impossible to pigeonhole Agozino's influences on society. His beliefs are so vast and his fervor is endless. Commenting on the relationship between the liberation sociologist and the oppressed, Agozino responded in the following fashion:

I see it slightly differently, that radical sociologists benefit from identification with the oppressed because the sharpened awareness improves their

sociological imagination. So it is not simply a question of what sociology can do for the oppressed but what the oppressed can do for sociology. No sociologist who has committed to the struggle against oppression has ever suffered obscurity compared to those sociological ostriches that bury their heads in the sands of data thereby disappearing in footnotes [forever] (Agozino, personal communication, October 5, 2013).

What makes Agozino so worthy of anyone's praise is that while his views are often unique and possibly in the minority, they are still logical and grounded in verifiable evidence. His refreshing perspectives on justice, oppression, race, gender, class and politics not only inform but empower as well. Agozino is visibly a leader and pioneer in his scholarly work and with the communities he so chooses to partner with.

Momentarily returning to the above block quotation, I would like to make mention of his stance. When critiquing the dynamic of the stereotypical sociologist-subject relationship, an unmistakably real power imbalance exists. Since the researcher oversees the direction of the research, they also control the fate of those who they study. But what if a viable alternative exists? What if it does not have to be this way? This is in part what Agozino is proposing. Those who are the focus of sociology and liberation sociology should be looked at as entering a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties have an equal stake in the outcome for the other side. The sociologist is seeking self-actualization while the study subjects wish to be freed from the restricted confines of their oppression. If each stakeholder receives their desired outcome, the relationship flourishes and strengthens going forward. This quite possibly leads to further research and more concrete change for the disadvantaged group. I contend that it is only once academics realize what Biko has already pointed out that true liberation can subsist. If those we study are being treated as unequal's that are to be manipulated and fit into one's agenda then does someone have to commit themselves to liberating the oppressed from sociology as well? It is a very fine line which some walk in the pursuit of social science research, and quite possibly sociology's overstepping of boundaries is at the root of many social problems. Can contaminated research truly liberate? If I was to make an educated guess I would speculate the answer is a resounding no.

Throughout their academic careers, students read countless academic articles and books on numerous subject matters. The nature of postsecondary education, as is with most education, requires stringent absorption. However, if there is one thing that I would like you, the reader, to take away from my paper, it is, that everyone has their story to tell, which can often do more than just inform, i.e. set you up for L.I.F.E and I thank you for listening to a portion of Biko and I's.

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Afterword – Residual Benefits

The rippling effect of our correspondences and this subsequent paper has culminated in additional recognition for both Agozino and I. As it turns out, this assignment was received favourably by my Sociology Professor, Kimberley Ducey, at the University of Winnipeg. She in turn recommended it to the lead author of her upcoming book *Liberation Sociology: 3rd Edition*, Joe R. Feagin. As a result of this endorsement, Biko's work and a section of this paper will be featured in the new edition. Furthermore, Biko has already begun to receive additional accolades for his efforts as Feagin noted Agozino in a plenary speech at a recent Southern Sociological Association meeting. Being a man of great benevolence, Biko has reciprocated my support and acknowledgement providing me with this platform to receive my own recognition. It is with this that I would like to send my many thanks to Biko Agozino for his immense generosity and to Kimberley Ducey for her unwavering support. They have gone above and beyond the call of duty and for this I am markedly appreciative of them both .

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