Privilege, solidarity and social justice struggles in South Africa: a view from Grahamstown

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Abstract
The last decade has seen a significant increase in the number and prominence of social movements in South Africa. Many of these movements are supported by relatively privileged individuals who are not themselves victims of the injustices the movements oppose. In this paper, I draw out some of the possibilities and limitations of the role of privileged individuals in supporting social movements struggling for social justice, looking particularly at the role of students in supporting such movements. The paper is based on research on the relationship between one such movement, the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM), and a student organisation, the Students for Social Justice (SSJ), both of which are based in Grahamstown, South Africa. While acknowledging that privileged supporters of such movements can play a constructive role in social justice struggles, I use the experiences of the UPM and SSJ to explore some of the tensions that are likely to emerge and that need to be addressed when the relatively privileged participate in popular struggles. In particular, I discuss the likely difficulties privileged supporters will experience in bridging social divides and in contributing meaningfully to the theorisation of popular struggles.

Introduction
My mother was a kitchen girl,
My father was a garden boy,
that’s why, that’s why I’m an activist,
I’m an activist, I’m an activist.
This song (and variants of it) is often sung at South African protests and at meetings of various organisations on the left in South Africa. One occasionally witnesses the song being energetically sung by people whose parents most certainly were not ‘kitchen girls’ or ‘garden boys’ – people whose commitment to leftist struggles is not borne out of their own personal experience of oppression, but is rather a consequence of an ideological conviction or an apparently altruistic desire to contribute towards struggles that are not their own.

As will be shown below, the role of such relatively privileged activists in left struggles has been the subject of some debate in recent writings on social movement politics in South Africa. While such writings have focused mostly on the role played by academics, lawyers and NGO workers in popular struggles, university students sometimes also play a role in such struggles although their involvement has received less attention in recent South African literature.

The paper examines the relationship between a group of students at Rhodes University who called themselves the Students for Social Justice (SSJ) and a local social movement, the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM). Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I highlight some of the complexities that emerge when relatively privileged South African university students attempt to stand in solidarity with struggles of those positioned less favourably in a situation of stark inequalities such as those which continue to prevail in post-apartheid South Africa. While the paper’s focus is on the role of university students in popular struggles, the findings of this research are also of relevance to broader concerns about the role of relatively privileged actors in popular struggles. The paper begins with a brief note on methodology, followed by a general discussion on social movements and solidarity. This is followed by a discussion of UPM and SSJ and their relationship, the goal being to use their experiences to make some more general claims about the role that university students – and other relatively privileged actors – can play in struggles for social justice.

A note on methodology
The paper is based on my own peripheral involvement in both the SSJ and the UPM and the ongoing conversations such involvement has raised, as well as on interviews and focus group discussions with members of both
groups. While some interviewees were willing to reveal their identities, others were not and so all comments made in interviews and focus group discussions have been kept anonymous. Quotes from participants are referenced below using numbers, with the first UPM interviewee being designated as UPM1, the first SSJ interviewee as SSJ1 and so on. Interviews were conducted in English and Xhosa and have been translated where necessary.1

Writing about social movements with which one has some involvement raises several challenges which should be briefly acknowledged before proceeding. Some might argue that involvement in the movement studied hampers one’s ability to fairly and objectively comment on it. However, David Croteau argues that it is mistaken to think that research on social movements is best done by relatively detached outsiders who regard members of social movements as ‘specimens for study’ rather than ‘partners for change’ (Croteau 2005:22). He argues that when scholars are involved in social movements, they are more likely to produce research that is relevant and useful to these movements. Similarly, Bevington and Dixon (2005:190) argue that engagement with social movements is likely to create greater incentives to produce accurate, useful research. This position is also supported by Dawson and Sinwell (2012a:177) who stress that pretending there is a ‘neat separation between theory and action’ will not produce better scholarship nor will it advance the causes of social movements. Rather, they argue, we should try to ‘reduce the gap between activists and academics’ (Dawson and Sinwell 2012a:186). However, in doing so, we also need to take heed of Bevington and Dixon’s warning that our research must not simply entail ‘uncritical adulation of a favo[u]red movement’ (Bevington and Dixon 2005:191). Thus, when researching social movements, those with some involvement with these movements have to tread a careful path which rejects the idea that there is ‘a binary between critical and sympathetic accounts’ and which avoids both the idealisation of social movements and criticism which is likely to destroy them (Dawson and Sinwell 2012b:10). In line with the authors mentioned above, this paper seeks to discuss the issues of privilege and solidarity in a way that may be of some practical use for those who are struggling with similar issues relating to the role of the relatively privileged in struggles for justice. It also aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates and work on solidarity and social movements, both in South Africa and beyond.
Social movements in post-apartheid South Africa

The questions motivating this paper relate to a broader set, about social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. There is an increasing body of literature discussing these social movements, and much deliberation on what they mean for South Africa’s future. Some commentators now describe South Africa as the ‘protest capital’ of the world because of the regularity of protest (see for example Alexander 2012). While many of these protests are organised by labour unions or are apparently spontaneous uprisings which have not been organised by any particular group, protests organised by social movements have also contributed to the high number of protests in recent years.

At this point, it is worth clarifying what is meant by the term ‘social movement’. The term can be used in reference to quite a range of different social formations and is often quite loosely defined. For example, Ballard et al (2005:617) describe them as ‘politically and/or socially directed collectives, often involving multiple organisations or networks, focused on changing one or more elements of the social, political or economic system in which they are located’. In the South African context, the term is typically used to refer to organisations outside of formal party politics (but which may have some loose ties to one or more political parties), which have political agendas focused on issues relating to social justice and which claim to represent marginalised or oppressed groups — the poor, the unemployed, shack-dwellers, and the HIV-positive, for example. Furthermore, in South African academic and media discourse, the term is mainly used to refer to groups organising poor black South Africans, most often although not always in urban environments, and most often with the intention of placing pressure on the ANC government to pay greater attention to the poor who voted it into power. Some of the more prominent among such movements have been the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Landless Peoples Movement (LPM), Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), the Unemployed Peoples Movement (UPM), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). The above-listed movements have attracted significant attention in the media and academia, but these groups differ widely and some have splintered or disintegrated after only a few years of activity.5
Debating the role of the privileged in the struggles of the oppressed

Struggles for social justice are typically waged by those who are oppressed by a particular social order. However, such struggles also sometimes involve a small number of relatively privileged individuals who regard the prevailing social order – and the privilege they accrue within it – as unjust. Such individuals can be said to be demonstrating ‘out-group solidarity’ (Blum 2007) in that they are expressing solidarity around issues (such as unemployment, homelessness and poverty) that do not directly affect them. While the motivations of such individuals are likely to be varied and sometimes difficult to determine, they apparently support such struggles out of an ideological commitment to a particular vision of a future society, a desire to bring about a more just social order, or some similar motive, rather than out of a desire to improve their own lives or the lives of those in their immediate community.

The question of what role relatively privileged individuals can play in popular struggles has been a theme in a wide range of literature related to Marxist and other left politics. We need only think about debates about whether or not a ‘vanguard’ is needed to bring about the ‘right’ kind of consciousness in the oppressed and about what exactly is meant by Antonio Gramsci’s notion of an ‘organic intellectual’.6 The role of students in popular struggles has also been a subject of some discussion, especially in relation to student politics during the late 1960s (see for example Ross 2002, Sale 1973). These debates inform many of the current discussions on the role of actors from NGOs, universities and broader civil society in popular struggles, but the South African debates are strongly influenced by the particular South African context. It is to these debates that I will now turn and it is to these debates in particular that I will relate the UPM-SSJ example.

In South Africa, the role of such relatively privileged activists has long been the subject of discussion. For example, the role of whites, including white university students, was the subject of much debate within the Black Consciousness (BC) movement with its leader, Stephen Bantu Biko, famously declaring that ‘White liberals must leave blacks to take care of their own business’ (Biko 2004:23). Their presence within black organisations fighting for racial justice was, he argued, ‘irksome and of nuisance value’ (2004:23). Rather than trying to participate directly in black people’s struggles, Biko argued that white liberals’ contribution to achieving justice in South Africa was to be made ‘within their white society’ where they should focus on
dealing ‘with the real evil in our society – white racism’ (Biko 2004:23, 27). In relation to white university students, the BC movement’s South African Students Organisation (SASO) deliberately distanced themselves from white student organisations, even when these organisations tried to act in solidarity with them (see Macqueen 2013:379-80). Concerns were expressed about whites’ condescension towards black activists and about the way in which white participation in black struggles could end up distracting attention from the key issues (Macqueen 2013). Debates within and about the BC movement show how the possibility of white students standing in solidarity with black students (and more generally, of white people standing in solidarity with black people) to oppose apartheid was regarded with some degree of scepticism.

Sakhela Buhlungu’s (2006a) discussion of the role of white trade union officials in black trade unions during the 1970s provides another South African example of the difficulties that emerge when relatively privileged individuals try to act in solidarity with popular struggles against social injustice. Almost all of these white trade union officials were university educated and came from middle-class backgrounds. Their interest in trade unionism did not stem from their reaction to their own material conditions, but from their intellectual engagement with left-wing ideas. They were, as Buhlungu (2006a:435) puts it, ‘rebels without a cause of their own’. According to Buhlungu, while white trade union officials played quite an influential role in these black trade unions, they did not for the most part manage effectively to bridge the social distance between themselves and the black members of such unions. Furthermore, the white officials performed ‘strategic and intellectual functions’ (Buhlungu, 2006a:437) within these unions, while the black officials were left to do the more mundane work, leading to a problematic division of labour which accorded young, often naïve and inexperienced white officials disproportionate power because of the skills and access they had acquired as university graduates in a context where most black people were denied university education. While Buhlungu (2006a:447) acknowledges that the white officials made many valuable contributions to trade union politics, he argues that they ‘never fully transcended their history and heritage’.

Buhlungu and Biko’s discussions, while very different, both reveal some of the limitations of the involvement of those privileged by an unjust system in struggles to dismantle that system. Both suggest that the relatively privileged are not able to fully understand and fully contribute to the
struggles of the oppressed. While Buhlungu does not go so far as to suggest that they should in fact not even participate actively in such struggles, both he and Biko suggest that the role of such individuals is not obviously and always to be desired.

The contemporary South African context is very different from the South Africa discussed by Buhlungu and Biko, principally because whereas popular struggles in the past were focused on bringing down the racist apartheid regimes, popular struggles today have a far less clear target and are less specifically focused on struggles for racial justice. Also, in the post-apartheid context, broadening intra-racial inequality has meant that the privileged activists who choose to get involved in struggles that are not their own, are often black. However, the kinds of tensions discussed by Buhlungu and Biko also emerge in contemporary struggles as witnessed by some of the writing on, and from, contemporary social movements. For example, Siwisa describes the divisions between the leaders and ‘ordinary’ members of the organisation the Concerned Citizens Forum (CCF). While the leaders were mainly ‘leftist university educated intellectuals’ (Siwisa 2008:933), most of the organisation’s activists in the area of operation (Mpumalanga township in Durban) were unemployed young people with little formal education. According to Siwisa’s informants, these young activists resented the way in which the leaders of the organisation expected them to ‘organize troops’ to support causes about which the ordinary members knew very little (Siwisa 2008:932). Pithouse (2007:6) makes similar claims about the way in which some civil society organisations have treated Abahlali baseMjondolo, commenting that they were routinely ‘instructed to attend, and thereby legitimate, meetings planned by email, held in a language and jargon most don’t understand, with agendas over which they have no influence and in places which are difficult for the poor to access’. Both Siwisa and Pithouse suggest that relatively privileged activists can and do use popular movements to advance their own political ends (see also Gibson 2006b:15-16, Gibson et al 2009, and Mngxitama 2006).

Similarly, Mkhize (2013) raises concerns about ‘the way so much community participation was orchestrated to appear like authentic grassroots groundswell from the townships’. She relates such concerns to the broader issue of ‘radical chic’ and ‘faux radicalism’: young, privileged activists, she argues, want to appear ‘cool’ through their participation in popular struggles, but their participation is orientated more towards ‘glossy pictures and media profiling’ than towards actually addressing oppression and deprivation in
any profound and sustained way. Concerns similar to Mkhize’s are raised by Walsh (2008a:279) who warns that privileged activists must guard against becoming ‘oppression tourists’ who seek validation through their proximity to the suffering of others.

Both Siwisa and Mkhize suggest that privileged activists gain more from their involvement in popular struggles than those with whom they are supposedly demonstrating solidarity. Supporting this view, Xaba (cited in Walsh 2008b:255) bemoans the fact that ‘academics flourish out of the despondency of the destitute’ and Hlongwa (2007) sarcastically comments that ‘some rich people can get rich from our work and others can get rich having conferences about having more conferences about our suffering’.

Part of the problem might lie in the fact that privileged activists are often drawn to popular struggles out of an ideological commitment and thus want to see their ideological commitment endorsed by the popular struggles they join. Sinwell (2011) raises this issue when he argues that educated left-wing activists are sometimes too quick to assume that popular movements endorse the ideologies favoured by the educated activists. According to Sinwell (2011:67), actions like illegally connecting to electricity or occupying houses or land are sometimes ‘dressed up, or passed off, as revolutionary’ and related to anti-neoliberal sentiments even though those who perform these actions do not necessarily understand them in this way. There is often, he argues, ‘a sharp disjuncture between ideologies manufactured by intellectuals and the worldviews that the working class and poor possess’ (Sinwell, 2011:62).

Other commentators writing about the role of privileged activists in popular struggles draw attention to the ways in which such activists sometimes dismiss and undermine the knowledge of the poor. In a pamphlet produced by the Church Land Programme, participants in a workshop decried the way in which ‘the powerful, including also some of the NGOs, are always denying and undermining the knowledge of the people. It has become necessary for them to do this and to insist that it is only they who have the real truth, the right analysis, the correct politics’ (Figlan et al 2009, also Gibson et al 2009). Activists working in social movements have also raised unhappiness about the way in which some relatively privileged civil society activists seem incapable of recognising the ability of poor people to exercise political agency (see Nsibande and Zikode 2010, Payn 2011, Pithouse 2007:6, UPM 2012).
The recent literature, above, does not focus specifically on the role of university students in popular struggles, but the concerns raised by these commentators about the ways in which educated, relatively privileged activists can end up undermining the struggles they seek to support is certainly of relevance to the case of the SSJ students’ involvement with the UPM. These students, like many relatively privileged activists, were drawn to the UPM out of an interest in and commitment to certain left-wing ideas and practices, rather than because they shared the UPM’s experiences. I now turn to the SSJ and UPM to discuss the various difficulties that arose in the attempt by the SSJ students to stand in solidarity with the UPM.

The UPM and SSJ

Before discussing the relationships between the UPM and SSJ, it is necessary briefly to introduce the two organisations. The Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM) was formed in Grahamstown in August 2009 as a result of concerns about high unemployment there and dissatisfaction with the local government’s response to this situation. Grahamstown, with a population of around 70,000, is situated in the Makana municipal region of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. While the Eastern Cape is one of the poorest of South Africa’s provinces, Grahamstown’s educational and legal community supports an influential middle class living on the west side of town, whose wealth contrasts sharply with the poverty of those in the eastern ‘township’, where unemployment and poverty levels are extremely high (see Pillay 2012).

The UPM was formed in 2009 by a small group of residents of Grahamstown’s ‘township’ who were concerned with high unemployment in Grahamstown and dissatisfied with the local government’s response to the situation. Some of those involved in the UPM, most notably its first chairperson Ayanda Kota, had previous activism experience and existing networks which they brought to the UPM and which allowed it to quite quickly establish ties with other local activists, local NGOs and academics at Rhodes University. For example, UPM members brought networks related to Azapo and to local football into the organisation. They also attended public lectures held at the university where they met with academics. The UPM gained media attention, particularly in Grahamstown, but also nationally, through organising local protests against the Makana municipality. The media attention given to UPM peaked in 2011 when Ayanda Kota, then UPM chairperson, was declared ‘2011 Newsmaker of the Year’ by the local newspaper Grocott’s Mail. In the same year, the UPM featured in a national
news programme, *Cutting Edge*. In addition, the national weekly newspaper, *Mail&Guardian*, and the online news source *Ground Up* have run articles written by Ayanda Kota.  

Over and above organising protests and demonstrations, the UPM convened public meetings, issued media statements, met with various communities, participated in public debates, and built linkages with similar organisations. The UPM positioned itself through its public statements as a left-wing, anti-capitalist organisation that insisted on independence from all existing political party structures. It should be noted, however, that there is much diversity within the UPM (and indeed in other similar social movements) with regard to ideology. Some members declare themselves to be socialists while others make little use of any ‘left-wing’ jargon to speak about their conditions. Also, while the UPM has avoided affiliating with any political party, some members were or continue to be active in political party structures, most notably those of the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) and the Congress of the People (COPE). What holds the organisation together is a critical stance towards the local municipality and the ANC government, rather than a particular over-arching ideological position shared by all.

The UPM has no membership database and so it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the size of the UPM and the characteristics of its members. My impression from attending several UPM events is that the organisation is very diverse in terms of the characteristics of its members and that the size of its supporters fluctuates continually. While all members live in the Grahamstown townships, members include young and old, men and women, and people without formal education as well as those with some tertiary education. The movement includes a few committed members who dedicate some time every week to UPM activities, as well as those who are best characterised as supporters rather than active members of UPM, but who will attend major events or participate in UPM-organised protests.

The students who formed the SSJ first became aware of the UPM’s existence early in 2011. In February 2011 three members of the UPM executive, Ayanda Kota, Xola Mali and Nombulelo Yami, as well as a UPM supporter, Ntombentsha Budaza, were arrested after a protest march which took place in Phaphamani, a poorly developed area on the periphery of Grahamstown. Ayanda Kota subsequently attended a Rhodes University event where he spoke about the UPM and about the circumstances that led up to the arrest of these four activists. Some of the students attending this
event were motivated by this discussion to form an organisation which would be committed to fighting for social justice in Grahamstown. Further discussions among these students led to the subsequent formation of the Students for Social Justice (SSJ). However, in addition to wanting to stand in solidarity with the UPM, the students who formed SSJ were also motivated by a desire to form a campus organisation which would deal directly with political issues, but which would be independent of political party structures. They wanted to engage with the broader Grahamstown community and more generally with socio-political issues in a way that differed from existing student societies and from the official university-run community engagement programme which the SSJ founders felt was insufficiently political.

The students who participated in the SSJ were almost all humanities or social science students. Most had some contact with the Department of Political and International Studies, a department where, particularly through the teaching of Richard Pithouse, they had been conscientised about social movement politics in South Africa. The students of SSJ were thus not representative of the student body as a whole. Aside from their common areas of study, they were a fairly diverse group in terms of their race and class background, although my impression on witnessing the activities of this very fluid organisation which had no formal membership, was that white middle-class students formed the majority of the group.

During 2011 the SSJ was very active, although it was a relatively small number of students who were consistently active throughout the year. The students kicked off by putting forward an independent candidate for election in the May 2011 municipal elections. The candidate was not successful in winning the ward in which the university is based, but the campaign helped publicise the SSJ. During the rest of 2011, the students organised regular meetings, used social media to share ideas and post notices, attended UPM meetings, set up social events where students from Rhodes University could meet and socialise with UPM members, joined the UPM in protest marches, participated in the organisation of a small local ‘Occupy’ event in the city centre, and attended national meetings organised by the umbrella left movement, the Democratic Left Front.

After this very active period, the SSJ gradually declined during 2012. Some of its active members had finished their studies and left the University, some felt exhausted and decided to dedicate more time to their studies, while others felt disillusioned with the original goals and values of the organisation and so drifted away. Commenting on the decline of the organisation, some
of the key members attributed it to their decision at the outset not to elect an executive committee and to run in a very informal, non-hierarchical way. While they had felt that such a way of organising was in line with their values, they later realised that the downside was that it was very difficult to assign clear roles and to get things done efficiently. Others commented that because they had worked so closely with the UPM, they were also negatively affected by what they felt were its organisational difficulties. The situation at the time of writing is that the UPM remains active and has a fairly stable (although small) group of active members and a continued presence in Grahamstown and to some extent nationally. The SSJ, however, has been basically defunct since 2012 although there have been occasional attempts to revive it, and several of the students who were active in SSJ have continued their association with UPM on an individual basis.

Building solidarity across social divides

While attempts at building solidarity sometimes appear to entail bringing only those who have something in common together (think about slogans such as ‘Workers of the World Unite’); any attempt at building solidarity is likely to involve attempts to bridge social divides, even when those joining together apparently have much in common. This is even more the case where those attempting to work in solidarity together come from different backgrounds.

This was very evident to members of the SSJ who wanted to build a relationship with the UPM partly out of a desire to overcome these social divides. Reflecting on their attempt to work with the UPM, the students spoke about wanting to ‘rethink [their] space and kind of experiment with what had been and what could be’ (SSJ7 2012). They sought to build bridges between themselves as privileged students living on or near campus (which is located in the extreme west of Grahamstown), and the members of the UPM who live in the township (which is to the east). The UPM and SSJ organised social events together as one way to try to bridge these divides and to get the students out of the ‘bubble’ they felt they were living in. However, members of SSJ expressed disillusionment about their attempts to bridge these divides. The students spoke of travelling to the township for events, expecting to meet with large crowds of people, but finding only a small number of people who were not always keen to speak to them and who sometimes seemed suspicious of their intentions. They also spoke of a time they went along to a funeral at the urging of UPM members., While they were
able to contribute to the funeral by assisting the women prepare a meal, they noted that they hardly exchanged a word with these women during that process. While the inability of many SSJ members to speak the local language, Xhosa, did make bridging social divides difficult, the students stressed that the problem was not just a language barrier. Rather, even Xhosa-speaking students felt that they had little in common with most UPM members, making social interaction awkward.

UPM members, on the other hand, seemed somewhat more optimistic about the extent to which their collaboration with the SSJ had resulted in the bridging of social divides. One UPM member commented that she felt that the students, despite not all being able to communicate effectively with some UPM members as a result of language barriers, understood their problems: ‘In the past, white and black people could not work together. Now, with democracy, a person is the same as other people. We can engage with white people and educated people and understand each other’ (UPM2 2012). However, another UPM member was less positive, noting that ‘Students will always be students; people from the community will always be people from the community’, commenting that at times he felt that the students wanted to emphasise their differences: ‘they want us to feel that, ja [yes], they are the students’, in a way that made him feel awkward and disrespected (UPM3 2012).

It should be noted that these divides were not simply around race or language. While the inability of most white SSJ members to speak Xhosa, did make bridging social divides difficult, a black Xhosa-speaking SSJ member stressed that it was not just a language or racial barrier: she commented on how inept her attempts to ‘connect’ with older UPM members were: ‘Well, I was like “Molo mama, kunjani” [Hello, mother, how are you?], you know, formalities. There was nothing else to say so I went back to my friends ... It was so awkward’ (SSJ3 2012). Another black SSJ member commented that ‘by being in Rhodes University, even if you are black, you are also white in the township. You are called “umlungu” [white person]’ (SSJ6 2012).

While there were difficulties in establishing open, friendly and meaningful relationships between members of the UPM and SSJ, it should be noted that the power dynamics that emerged did not, it seems, simply embody the stereotype of the powerful middle-class activist who is able to manipulate the poorer people with whom he or she is supposedly acting in solidarity. In the case of the SSJ and UPM, power dynamics were complicated by the fact that while SSJ students wielded some power through having access to
resources and the social status of students at an elite university, SSJ members were younger than most UPM members and some felt that this made it very difficult for them to challenge UPM members. For example, one student made reference to the way that respect for elders is strongly emphasised in many South African cultures, noting that she felt at times that people within UPM placed particular pressure upon her as a black South African with a similar cultural background to most UPM members, because they knew she would feel uncomfortable refusing to do what someone older than her asked her to do (UPM3 2012). Several of the students described doing things they were not completely comfortable doing or providing resources they felt they could not really spare, because of pressure from UPM members. For example, one student spoke of being ‘dragged into philanthropic projects’ and being continually expected to contribute financially to various activities. Another spoke about being shouted at by a member of a broader umbrella organisation, with which UPM was working, for being unwilling to participate in a particular event (UPM1 and UPM3 2012). Their experiences suggest that we should guard against assuming that power dynamics in such attempts at solidarity always straightforwardly favour the privileged supporter.

The difficulties described above contributed to the rather rapid decline of the SSJ in 2012. When UPM and SSJ members were asked to reflect on some of the reasons for the decline in their collaboration, some members of both organisations felt that the SSJ might have endured for longer, and been better able to act in solidarity with the UPM, if they had created a stronger separate organisation, more distinct from the UPM, rather than focusing on supporting and working with the UPM. One student commented: ‘If we really wanted to change things, then we should have focused on changing the mind-sets of students’ (SSJ1 2012). The students discussed how it might have been more helpful to spend more energy on shifting the mind-sets of their fellow students rather than participating directly in the UPM’s activities. Similarly, a UPM member suggested that it would be best if the students had organised more autonomously and had their own clear, separate agenda: ‘As soon as they say “how can we help them?”’, these problems continue, because once the UPM goes down, they go down’ (UPM6 2012). Rather, he suggested, the students should ‘make their [own] contribution to the struggle’, rather than just ‘reduc[ing] it to helping these poor people’.

While no one suggested that the SSJ students had no legitimate role to play alongside the UPM, as discussed above, members of both the SSJ and
UPM felt that the SSJ may have been able to work more effectively if they had focused more on trying to change people in their ‘own’ society (eg, fellow university students), rather than focusing on ‘helping’ the UPM. While this argument is somewhat similar to the one made by Biko (2004) when recommending that white liberals work within white society rather than trying to join black struggles, the position being put forward is a little different. Firstly, unlike Biko’s point, the suggestion that the students should have concentrated more on working among other students was not about race – indeed, the UPM has in various ways welcomed the involvement of white people in their organisation. But, like Biko, both the UPM and the SSJ recognised that the students may have been able better to contribute to broader struggles for social justice through activism in their own spheres of influence, rather than through a focus on ‘helping’ the UPM. The students might have been more effective if their emphasis had been on exposing fellow students to ideas about social justice, thereby helping shift the attitudes of future policy makers, business leaders and other people of influence. Had their focus been more on their own social context, they might have done important complementary work that could have indirectly contributed to popular struggles.

While this might have been more effective, the creation of SSJ was partly a result of the students’ desire to ‘break out’ of their bubble of privilege and interact with those in the broader Grahamstown community and their dissatisfaction with other opportunities available to them which supposedly offered contact with the rest of the town. As discussed earlier, they felt that the university’s formal community engagement programme was inadequate – indeed, according to the SSJ students it offered only ‘band aids to the many social injustices in Grahamstown’ (SSJ2 2012, SSJ5 2012). They had not wanted to remain focused on their own side of town nor had they wanted their contact with the rest of Grahamstown to be focused on charitable outreach. However, reflecting on their activities, some SSJ members felt that they had ended up being just one more node of charity in a town filled with charitable organisations. For example, one student reflected very cynically on the UPM and SSJ’s participation in a Grahamstown Occupy event which took place in the city centre in October 2011. The SSJ students had hoped that the Occupy event would be an opportunity for them to strengthen their relationship with the UPM and build relationships with other likeminded people. The students decided to contribute to making the event a success by bringing large pots of soup for those occupying the city centre. However,
one student was unhappy about the fact that she felt that many poorer people, all of whom were black, had only attended the event in order to get some soup. She commented that ‘At some point I found myself behind a table pouring soup into cups and there was a row of black people [lining up to get soup] and a bunch of white students [handing it out] …’ (SSJ1 2012). This was exactly the kind of relationship the SSJ students had wanted to avoid – they wanted to be working alongside people to achieve the common goal of a more equitable and just social order, not to be dispensers of charity.

The reflections of the UPM and SSJ confirm that bringing together people from very different backgrounds to work together towards common goals is not easy at all. As with the white trade union officials discussed by Buhlungu (2006a), it is not clear that the students managed to work in unison with the members of UPM in a way that successfully negotiated the differences between the backgrounds of the students and UPM members. However, it is also clear that the cleavages making such acts of solidarity difficult today do not always follow neat racial lines; with the emergence of greater social mobility for black South Africans in the post-apartheid era, the existing class differences within black South African communities have widened and changed and some black SSJ members felt more comfortable with their fellow white students than they did with most UPM members.

To summarise, the experiences of the SSJ and the UPM reveal some of the difficulties that emerge when university students try to step outside their bubble of relative privilege and involve themselves in popular struggles. In particular, the reflections of both the UPM and SSJ suggest that it may have been best not to focus all their energies on trying to cross the divides between the university and the rest of the town (although this is necessary), but to rather also dedicate time to thinking carefully about how to do complementary work within different sectors with the students focusing, perhaps, a little more on working to change the mind-sets of young, middle-class people while also working alongside the UPM to further their struggle to provide a platform for the unemployed and marginalised. However, a more positive finding is that it seems that some of the problematic power relationships that often emerge when relatively well-off, educated people get involved in popular struggles (and which were discussed earlier in reference to the work of Siwisa 2008 and Pithouse 2007) were mitigated somewhat by the youth of the university students. The students’ complaints about being pressured into doing things they did not want to do suggest that they were often unable to impose their preferences upon the UPM. It may
be that there is a greater potential for the establishment of fairly egalitarian relationships between popular movements and their privileged supporters when those privileged supporters are young and inexperienced as were the students in SSJ.

**Students’ contributions to theorising popular struggles**

It seems, on first consideration, that one of the key roles for educated elites to play in struggles for social justice is the role of providing the intellectual resources for poorer, less educated people to better understand their situation. Furthermore, through relating people’s particular struggles to broader overarching theoretical and ideological frameworks, educated elites could presumably assist social movements in thinking through how best to work towards emancipation. In the case of SSJ, because most of the students had a humanities or social science background, they could arguably contribute to helping relate the UPM’s struggles to broader debates on topics such as neoliberalism, social justice, democracy and development.

While this might seem to be an appropriate role that the relatively privileged (or, at least, the more educated among the privileged) can play in popular struggles, there has been much debate about this role within South African social movements, some of which has been touched upon in the previous section. As mentioned there, some social movement activists have been treated in a patronising manner by middle-class intellectuals who seem to think the poor are stupid and unable to theorise about their own situation (see AbM 2010, Nsibande and Zikode 2010).

UPM and SSJ members displayed some degree of ambivalence about the role that the SSJ members, with their university education and access to educational resources, could and should play in theorising the struggle. When interviewed about their relationship with the UPM, SSJ members typically defended the view that the popular movements ought not to be led and dictated to by relatively privileged elites, emphasising that in being involved with the UPM they did not want to act like ‘some sort of a vanguard’ (SSJ5 2012) and criticising the way in which some left academics seem to assume a leadership role in intellectualising popular struggles. Nevertheless, an SSJ member commented that the students had not always managed in practice to live out these ideals. He comments: ‘We did not quite eradicate that mentality of seeing us as superior and seeing themselves as inferior to us … because of our intellectual understanding of the position that they are in, we tend to sometimes go overboard in explaining’ (SSJ6 2012).
UPM members expressed similar ambivalence about the way in which students should use their intellectual abilities and education in the service of popular struggles. Some UPM members stressed that students could play an important role in helping community members better understand their conditions. One UPM member described the most important role he saw for the students in supporting UPM as the provision of information lacked by the community. He comments: ‘if we are fighting for toilets, it is just for toilets and we don’t have any further information about what is going on. Everything goes back to information. [The students] must be eager to share information and everything that they have learnt’ (UPM3 2012). Similarly, another UPM member stressed that because the students are ‘very smart theoretically’, they could use their knowledge to build consciousness among less educated community members (UPM6 2012).

However, the same UPM member also stressed that when students and other privileged activists seek to be involved in the struggles of poorer people, they need to assist in theorising these struggles in a way that builds upon the practical and immediate experiences of the people. He insists that there ‘is no standard bible that must be orthodox’, but that theorisation of people’s conditions must start from those conditions rather than starting from a particular theory or ideology (UPM6 2012). While he stated that educated people can and should help the poor to better understand their situation, he also emphasised that the use of left-wing jargon can be inappropriate: ‘how do you go to someone who is in the umkhuku [shack] and say “capital is the enemy”? They will ask “Who is this fellow capital?”’ (UPM6 2012). Driving the point home, he insists: ‘You [academics] might theorise about the World Bank, but you must also realise how do I go to where I stay and start shouting about the IMF? I mean that would be ridiculous. I will be talking to myself or I will be talking down to people …. You [can] help in infusing class consciousness in a practical manner, meaning you integrate it into what you are currently doing … without imposing it’ (UPM6 2012). This point is also brought out in a recent interview with Ayanda Kota (Kota 2014b), in which he warns against ‘experts’ coming to social movements ‘with a messiah complex like they have all the answers’. UPM members do not want to be told how to solve their problems, although they are open to hearing about and debating theories about how best to achieve social justice.

It seems from the various comments made above that UPM members felt that university students and academics could use their education and
intellectual abilities in providing information to those involved in popular struggles and in sharing with them perspectives from theoretical debates on the left, factual information they may not have at their disposal, and educational resources the UPM members may not be able to access. However, the reflections of UPM and SSJ members suggest that this sharing of information and ideas should be done in a way that involves openness to learning from the perspectives of the poor and avoids dogmatism and didacticism.

Conclusion
While the relationship between SSJ and UPM has its own unique features, many of the challenges the two organisations faced in working together are similar to those faced in other instances where relatively privileged individuals seek involvement in social justice struggles, both in South Africa and elsewhere. In radically unequal societies the privileged can bring necessary resources, networks, information and awareness into popular struggles and thus their involvement in popular struggles may be helpful. However, careful attention is required to ensure that privileged participants in popular struggles do not re-inscribe their privilege within such struggles. University students are fairly well-positioned to assist in sharing information and resources with those involved in popular struggles and their youth and inexperience may prevent them from illegitimately assuming a position of authority within such struggles, but as with other collaborations between people across social divides, there are significant differences that need to be carefully negotiated. The experiences of the UPM and SSJ suggest that the social divides separating middle-class supporters of such movements and the movements’ ‘ordinary’ members cannot be completely bridged and that attempts to work in solidarity need to be premised on an acknowledgement and management of persisting differences of perspective. Also, it may be that while educated, relatively privileged supporters of such movements can and should use their education and their educational resources to further such struggles, they ought to guard against too easily assuming roles of intellectual leadership which are deaf to the concrete experiences of the poor and their own attempts to theorise their conditions.

Notes
1. I thank Mbali Baduza for her transcription and translation of interviews.
2. See for example edited volumes by Gibson (2006a), Ballard et al (2006), Beinart and Dawson (2010), and Dawson and Sinwell (2012b).

3. For a discussion of several case studies of such protests, see Von Holdt et al (2011).

4. That said, it is important to note that many of these movements have goals beyond simply pressuring the ANC government to deliver on its promises. See Pithouse (2011) for a critique of the notion that these movements are striving simply to improve ‘service delivery’.


6. On the role of intellectuals and other elites in guiding the development of a revolutionary consciousness, see classic texts such as those by Lukács (1971) and Lenin (1929). On the idea of an organic intellectual, see Gramsci (1996).

7. The ‘township’ or ‘location’ as it is sometimes referred to in Grahamstown actually consists of several distinct areas, some, like Fingo Village, with a long history, while others, like the various parts of the Joza township, are relatively new. That said, because these townships are all joined together and all on the east side of town, they are often referred to collectively as ‘the township’ or ‘the location’.


10. Their motivations for organising in this way and the problems that arose as a consequence were also experienced by the Occupy movements which took place at much the same time – see commentary on leadership structures (or the lack thereof) in Occupy by Calhoun (2013:35-37) and Taylor (2013:744).

11. The UPM now has three branches: one in Grahamstown, one in Durban and one in Bloemfontein. The three branches work independently, but do try to meet up and co-operate on a fairly regular (more than twice a year) basis.

12. This has been stressed to me personally several times by more than one UPM member. It is also evident in a statement available at http://abahlali.org/?s=september+national+imbizo. This statement responds to criticisms of the UPM made by Andile Mngxitama of the September National Imbizo (and more recently a key member of the newly formed Economic Freedom Fighters).

13. For more on the involvement of SSJ and UPM in the Occupy event, see Fogel (2011), Gabb (2011) and UPM (2011).
References


