

# Talking Back to Teacher Education and Other (So Called) Helping Professions

## Racialized Students Share their Experiences and We Listen

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Self-study research is not neutral; it elicits deep, critical self-reflection aimed at illumination and reframing (Dinkelman, 2003; Loughran, 2018, p. 1) that has “paradoxical” ramifications for individuals and collectives, the personal and interpersonal, private and public (Samaras & Freese, 2006). When we opted to be co-investigators and, student researchers on a study to understand the experiences of racialized students in helping professions (teacher education, nursing, and social work), self-study research did not feature in our plans. However, it surged forward as a tactical necessity after thoughtfully reviewing participants’ transcripts and acknowledging, that as racialized subjects, and educators, we were deeply implicated in the meanings of the data (Kumsa, et al., 2014). We heeded the data’s beckoning through a polyvocal self-study (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015; Thimm, et al., 2017).

Polyvocality aligns with the multidisciplinary research that informed this self-study (Novotna et al., 2018). It complements the multiple perspectives and nuances that characterize the settler society, geographic location of the research, the participants, researchers, the findings, and analytical tools and global world themes: difference, plurality, and the yet unknown. Thus, this self-study is about open-ended agency for self and others toward continuous transformation, engendering a just and inclusive world.

## Context

Through this polyvocal self-study, two racialized faculty (Barbara/Funke) from education and social work and Kalu and education major graduate student, used journaling (Makaiiau, et al., 2015; Stillman, et al., 2014; Tuyay et al., 2006) to capture our reactions to data from a larger study. The original study’s premise was understanding social analytics of institutionalized racism (Schick, 2002) in education, nursing, and social work faculties (referred to as helping professions in this paper) at a Canadian university. The initial study hypothesized that systemic racial inequities exist in universities and explored its manifestations in helping professions which purportedly value social justice and share a central objective of training professionals to engage marginalized populations, stigmatized by centuries of systematic racial hierarchies created by colonialism and slavery (Feagin, 2006; 2010, Feagin, 2013).

Helping professions claim to challenge marginalization, and to include pedagogies and practices that are cognizant of plural diversities in Canadian society through anti-oppressive/ decolonial curricula that promote equity (Appleton, 2011; Novotna et al. 2018, 2019). It is therefore fitting to explore how these noble values are experienced by racialized students within these ‘helping’ professions (Gair, 2017; Harris, 2018; Marom, 2019; Tullman, 1992; Novotna et al., 2018; Tsang, 1998).

In our smaller polyvocal self-study, three racialized members of the larger research team, impacted by the data we were expected to analyze came together to understand and shape our own praxis through a reflective self-study.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Two complementary theoretical frameworks guided the self-study. The first is Feagin's (2010, 2013) white racial frame because of its unique and robust power in rendering visible the ubiquitous tenacity of centuries-old fabric of white racial framing. According to Feagin, the white racial frame is foundational; tightly stitched in North American societies (Canada and America). This framework explicitly identifies white supremacy/white framing as systemic, so foundational to, and oppressive in its impact (Feagin, 2013). Deeply representing the very warp and weft of their construction, only formidable, explicit and unending anti-oppressive, and counter-framing actions can unravel the insidious frames (Feagin, 2013).

(Barbara): As a racialized educator and researcher, I adopted an intentional/deliberate/cautious approach to data collected from participants' candid storytelling as racialized students in helping profession programs at a mid-sized Canadian university. Wrapping myself around the data's sodden tapestry, it carried testimonies of agonies, torment, and bravery swaddled in the throes of abuse and lacerating assaults on human dignity, intelligence of the researched, and their agency for self, those they dream of serving, and the public good. Through data-shaped enlarged perspectives, I embraced the responsibility of bringing forward these stories in ways that would do them justice. They had entrusted the research team with their stories and had the right to expect they would be handled with deft humanity based on the ultimate goal of enacting change in the academy. I leaned into and embraced the opportunity offered by the data. It stirred my emotions, intellect and dreams powerfully. The participants deserved believability— tender answerability, and action from me, challenging me to find the constructs to honour the gushing forth of pained lips, hearts and bodies of the researched. I too am implicated in the stories of "racial inequalities and related patterns" (Feagin, 2010, p. 4). Essential to the self under study were my interpretations and reactions to the sacred data of the courageous students standing up to White supremacy so irrefutably "foundational" (Feagin, 2010, p. 5) to their domicile and the institutions where they study.

(Kalu): As a current student, the research participants' experiences of racialization deeply resonated with mine. Thus, my participation in this self-study reflects my desire to (1) acknowledge overt and covert manifestations of systemic racism described by the students because I have lived them (2) reflect on my own practices as a student that abets systemic racism, and (3) make suggestions for graduate students, instructors, faculty members and administrators to disrupt existing oppressive systems. We arrived at this self-study as a way of contributing to social justice.

(Funke): We did not set out to revel in introspection, nonetheless, as a Black educator and co-investigator in a research on racialized students' experiences, I find myself triggered and implicated in their stories when juxtaposed with the background of institutional neoliberal rhetoric, thus unwrapping values of democratic pedagogies. In a

previous study I co-authored with other Black researchers (Kumsa, et al., 2014), we recognized intersections of race and inequity, and realized warily that regardless of our social location compared to the youth participants, “their story is ours also, we feel it in our bones” (p. 5). This self-study therefore provided an opportunity for us as a subset of the larger team to reflect, dialogue and interrogate our motivations, values and triggers. As trusted critical friends (Samaras, 2011; Schuck & Russell, 2005), to one another, we helped to punctuate individual complacencies/complicities, but it was also validating, empowering and even therapeutic for me as a social worker. I have experienced and regularly come face-to-face with the sheer agony faced by Black and brown bodies in the academy but the shroud of neoliberalism’s performance of the professional social worker, dignified academic and grateful subservient black woman mien makes verbalization difficult (Oba, 2017).

## **Methodology**

This qualitative, ethnographic self-study (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011) focused on dialogic meaning-making (Freire, 1970) and used our responses (feelings, thoughts) to a larger study as data. Talking back to each other as trusted critical friends (Bullock & Sator, 2018) we modeled the relational, reflective, and reflexive use of qualitative research methods, complementary to our purposes (Mackenzie et al., 2013).

### ***Data Collection***

A dialogue journal (Stillman, et al., 2014) was used to encode our reflections about data from the larger study. The journal entries “authentic communication” emerge “out of and foment relationships” (Stillman, et al., 2014, p. 147) between us as researchers. The responsive, reflective and sociable place (Sinha & Beck, 2014) for knowledge production and social interaction (Vygotsy, 1978; Samaras & Freese, 2006) where we informed each other about what was most compelling in the data collected from racialized students in the helping professions - our sites of teaching and co-learning. Additionally, dialogue journals drew us closer to the data in which we cloaked ourselves, finding safe, open spaces for exploring our subjectivities vis-à-vis data, empowerment, and agency in imagining reparative frames for social justice in our faculties and beyond.

### ***Analysis***

Beyond the formal meetings of the larger research team, we met informally as fellow insiders, and as deployers of independent constructive lens to explore complex institutional racism and injustice. Influenced by Samaras (2011), Samaras and Freese (2006) and Kovach (2009), data analysis was iterative and dialogic (Freire, 1970; Sullivan, 2012). The data was repeatedly, critically examined, distilling significant revelations based on our purposes and methods (Sandelowski, 1998; Wolcott, 1990, 1994). Using triadic responses in our dialogue journals, this polyvocal self-study by three Black researchers enabled us to interrogate, validate and support each other’s reflections and insights as insider/outsider critical friends (Samaras, 2011), offering critical perspectives to the data analysis through the use of memos (Birks, et al., 2008). Our triangulated meaning-making facilitated by zoom meetings and email memos revealed intersectionalities as well as uniqueness in our experiences, illuminating and demanding action from us. The examples we share as two faculty members and one doctoral student contribute to trustworthiness, weaving together the individual story threads to re-

story our experiences and in turn reshape our departments and institutions.

## **Responding to the Data**

### ***Barbara's Response***

Early in Suzanne's transcript, she draws attention to perceived overt racialization by instructors/supervisors, responsible for guiding and scaffolding her professional entry into the nursing profession. Alluding to her racialization, she stated, "It's not even coming from students...[it] is like negative comments from professor(s) based on your very different characteristics like skin colour, you know my hair colour and texture" (Suzanne, p. 33: 07:33). Suzanne's analysis of her stigmatization based on her physical characteristics is closely aligned with the first of Feagin's (2010, 2013) components of the deeply-rooted anti-black framing routinely deployed by whites in North America which is, "to have distinctive color, hair, and lips" (Feagin, p. 56). This white disgust for the black body as Feagin telescopes is part of "elite white commentaries [that] focus on emotion-laden stereotypes and images of black [North] Americans dating back to early colonialism, institutionalization of slavery and its rationalizing racial hierarchies" (Feagin, 2010, p. 56).

Relatedly, Feagin (2010) states, "Africans and African [North] Americans "were early viewed in colonial laws and in other ways as the personal property of European American. Their large-scale enslavement was rationalized as .... ordinary colonial commerce. European American lawyers, judges, and other high officials did much to create this dehumanized framing of African [North] Americans (p. 47) and set the tone and the practices that would be picked up by the larger society, and which remain very much part of the racial frame today. Significantly, the hegemonic worldview that powerfully marked the lives of Blacks and Indigenous North Americans, is foundational to the expansive colonial project in North America, with deep roots and tentacles that still needle their way into the contemporary racial schema.

Suzanne's injuries from derogation of her physical characteristics through racist behavior by personnel associated with the nursing program, shocks and hurts her. I empathize and am outraged by the anti-black performance of white supremacy reported by Suzanne; however, truthfully, this example is commonplace in North America. Feagin (2010) opined that "from the beginning of this country [U.S. and also Canada], European Americans have merged cultural, moral, and physical factors in their minds, both for themselves and for outgroups they have routinely subordinated" (p. 41).

Another example of the Suzanne's dehumanization lends credence to the fourth aspect of Feagin's (2010) anti-black framing emanating from more than four hundred years of the white racial frame: "an emotion-laden stereotype" that says, to be black is "to have a disagreeable smell" (p. 56). Suzanne describes entering a patient's room to offer care, only to have the clinical instructor launch a racial tirade by saying, "...I'm smelly, that I have the body odour. I was like, what you mean...because I wake up about five if my clinical start at seven and I shower daily. I said, "What do you mean?" Like I didn't smell" (p. 11. Line 37:28). After reading this segment of the transcript, my heart cried for Suzanne, for myself, and for Blacks and others confined to the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder built by white racial frame (Feagin, 2010),... And, I weep as I write this.

To escape such a tormented emotional and moral state, I take solace in the lines indicating Suzanne's "black resistance: anti-racist counter-frames, and home-culture frames" (Feagin, 2010, p. 158). She

stated, "I [think] that kind of affected my bedside exam [;] I think that is the purpose [of] doing that. I think it needs to stop" (Line 39:23).

This is evidence of black resistance first because, Suzanne's self-talk challenged her dehumanizer by asking: "what do you mean?", then she detailed her daily personal hygiene routines, and categorically stated her own truths: she "didn't smell." Next, she uses prior knowledge—her home culture frame, —her racial consciousness/power to acknowledge its impact ("that kind of affected my beside exam") and swiftly pinpoints the oppressor's motive:-- hindering her from passing the clinical component of her program, thereby keeping her in abjection, at the end of the chain of being (Feagin, 2010). Suzanne understands all too well and resists the cloaking of such stories.

Suzanne also reported egregious affront to the ebony Black skin wrapped around her body.

There was [a] time in the hospital, I| was going to make a patient's bed. So, I went to grab the linen to make the bed and the clinical instructor said, "Oh, you have got that contaminated. Yeah, it is not supposed to touch your uniform. So I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Oh well, it has touched your uniform, now it is dirty." I said, "No it's not dirty because this is not...It is not steril[ized] clothes; [it] is not steril[sized]; it's just clean.... You are not using the sheet for surgery. You are using this on the bed" (Suzanne, Line 36:48, p. 10).

And then she threatened to fail me...Because the sheets touched my uniform. that you feel isolated...that maybe you can make a mistake" (Line 36:48, p. 10).

### ***Funke's Story***

The data tore apart the fabrics of my complicity as a black academic. "There is no escaping from anti-black racism is there or is it just that I go looking for it? I asked my critical friends and we discussed deeply, clarifying our calling, and purpose as educators. As a social worker sworn to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all humans and the pursuit of social justice (CASWE (Canadian Association of Social Workers) code of ethics, 2005), confronting anti-black racism and other isms is just good social work. The rip in the drapes covering injustice and oppression is a gaping hole that dainty threads of denial could not lace together. It was not that I was fixated on race; social work values and the rhetoric of democratic education demands it. Participant voices challenge us to live up to high ideals of our respective professions, weaving tales of exploitation and exorbitant international student tuition fees wasted, good grades rendered futile by dream aborting gatekeepers who banished their black bodies as contaminants of Canadian purity. "I was delisted in the final practicum because my hand touched the patient's bedding and my preceptor said I had contaminated them". Suzanne's jarring words threatened to rend my heart even if not my garment. To carry on the motions of analyzing and writing without first making meaning of the tangled web that thrust this young woman into the abyss of suicidal ideation is to attempt to use a bloodied pen to sew finery which cannot my bleeding-heart bind.

Obfuscating social and educational injustice throws naked my own black body, in the oppressive tapestry, and daring me to confront the dark underside of the beautifully embroidered academy.

As critical friends (Samaras, 2011), we could not but attend to the web of emotions plaguing not just the participants' but also ourselves.

## ***Kalu's Reflection***

Racial microaggression is a covert manifestation of anti- Blackness and anti-black racism. Davis (1989) sees microaggression as "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (p. 1576). I bear witness to these microaggressions in my own experiences. The participants interlaced a pattern of microaggressions that implicates racio-linguistics (Flores & Rosa 2015). Suzanne for example recalls her professor's comments thus:

I always keep a journal, so I remember a particular time in my second year. So I took a course, a pharmacology course. So I wrote a paper. And I did extremely well, I got an eighty, I think. Yeah. But the comment, on the paper was very ... not appropriate. Where I still have the paper in my collection. So, the instructor basically says you have done a good job. Your paper was really good you know you are going to be a good nurse, but you would have gotten a better mark if English was your first language (Line 10:40, p. 3).

I felt disenchanted when Suzanne mentioned that she was keeping journals of her experiences at the hands of racist instructors. For her to start to keep record of several examples indicates they were not isolated, therefore warranting documentation.

Similarly, Claire, narrated how 'White students trivialize Indigenous perspectives:

I guess what micro aggression does is that you wouldn't necessarily notice it unless you are watching it. There are having a situation that I have to be the one telling people about that, that I have to be the one that have to catch people on that, that could be hard too because I know that I am recognizing it and have to think about other people not just myself. Like for instance, when I was in one of my education courses ehm, I brought to one of the presenters that they have to think about Indigenous perspectives ehm... So, it is often challenging [;] you having to be the one because you are the one recognizing the microaggression and you are the one to live with the experience (Para. 5, p. 5).

However, subtle, these microaggressions wove a discernible pattern recognized by racialized students. Their shared experiences, and extant literature on this topic ignited my consciousness as a racialized student to acknowledge it. We can only stop racial microaggression when we recognize its manifestation (Pierce, 1974) cited in (Solorzano, 2010). Solorzano rightly opined "Indeed, we know very little about by whom, where, and how these microaggressions are initiated and responded to. Without careful documentation and analysis, these racial and gender microaggressions can easily be ignored or downplayed" (p. 132).

We were all impressed by the resilience these students displayed in naming and resisting racism. Drawing strength from their courage inspired me to reflect on my experiences as a racialized student and to question injustice, however, subtly it manifests (Ellsworth (1992).

## Outcomes of the Polyvocal Self-Study

We did not begin our self-study believing that we were complicit in enacting oppression on our students and smugly placed ourselves outside of that responsibility—not seeing that although we are Black faculty, in white-dominated spaces/places and institutions founded on oppression and marked by colonialism, we too are implicated in its enactment and eradication. As Rupra (2010) underscores, “[o]ppression becomes embedded into the systems and institutions in society. Ourselves like our organizations are not free from perpetuating this oppression, despite our efforts to create safe and inclusive spaces (p. 31).

Anti/counter-oppressive praxis (Freire, 1970) is not solely up to Whites, in helping profession programs, they inhere black faculty also. We are not innocent or neutral—we have agency; and here, we return to Feagin (2010, 2013)—a white scholar that *both* whites and people of colour are likely to heed. The former, because Feagin a white/insider/social scientist telling them about themselves, and the former, because he is one of a small group who with searing honesty, examines the ways in which Whiteness works, re-inscribing the omnipresence of white supremacy and inequality in the United States [and Canada], (Feagin, 2013, 201-202). Feagin’s framework explicitly identifies white racism/racial framing as systemic, so foundational to, and oppressive in its “results” on non-whites in *American and Canadian societies* (Feagin, 2013, p. 200)—that it represents, the warp and weft of their construction. Consequently, only formidable, explicit, and unending anti-oppressive, counter-framing can enact its unravelling.

Concomitantly, Feagin (2013) is also a white scholar whose theory gives recognition to the role Blacks, Native/Indigenous Americans/Canadians and Asians, play in contesting “persisting system of oppression, including its racial hierarchy and rationalizing frame” (p. 203-204).

Regarding the role of Blacks, Feagin writes that “one important step is for whites and others to understand well the black anti-racist counter-frame” (2013, p. 204-205) that displays “strong analysis and critique of white oppression; an aggressive countering of anti-black framing; and a positive assertion of the humanity of all people and their right to read freedom and justice. Each dimension challenges aspects of the white frame” (p. 205). Our goal, therefore, is to act on our findings by doing as Feagin (2013) suggests when he states,

Educators and others desiring to break down the white racial frame might start such an effort with workshops dealing centrally with important aspects of the black anti-racist frame, perhaps with some focus on important black thinkers and activists over the centuries. ....[Assertively teaching the experience-based understandings of anti-racist counter-frames can challenge the dominant white frame and have a destabilizing effect on the dominance of that frame ...Such workshops are only a first step .....in an array of societal settings, that include assessing racist issues.... and digging even deeper into aspects of systemic racism (p. 205).

This “black anti-racist counter-frame” aligns with Native American (e.g., Brayboy, 2006; Grande, 2006) and Asian-American counter-frames (Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2018) and language-based critical theories (e.g., Rosa & Flores, 2017). A poignant outcome of our self-study is the responsibility to use this space to validate the pain of racialized students and ourselves. We must create the spaces of solidarity and they must not be pathologized or held suspect. This study

beseches us to scale-up consciousness-raising /ongoing de-framing/counter-framing “workshops” for preceptors, clinicians, teachers who supervise our student placements to reduce such racial degradation Suzanne faced from her nurse preceptor”.

In view of the students’ trauma, arts-based approaches such as Readers theatre (Flynn, 2004) are indicated because of multiple benefits—enabling the: unburdening of sorrow/ unveiling critical incidents, and dialogic. Participants collaborate in small groups to discuss, write, rehearse and deconstruct their scripts orally. We recommend that students write scripts based on their lived experiences of racial and intersectional (e.g., ability/ies, gender, language, sexualities) oppression in courses and in practicums, and perform them wearing culturally-relevant identity- affirming textiles (Akinbileje, 2014) to enact racialized story-telling advanced by critical race theory (Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Howard & Navarro, 2016). We advocate this to promote cultural appreciation and normalize inclusive “institutional practices”, and justice for all in the helping professions (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

We recommend arts-based creative expressions - oral storytelling/ painting/ dance, music/drama, and writing to liberate torments, triumphs, and yearnings of “the other” in self- proclaimed helping professions. Deployed sensitively, art demystifies, disrupts, connects, and generates pro-social, harm-reducing inter-group interactions.

Overall, these key outcomes of our self-study align with McNeil’s (2010; McNeil & Pete 2014), that implicated the racially oppressed in the dismantling of injustice and, reverberates a key recommendation from others (Johnston-Parsons, Young & Thomas, 2007) that “students of colour be given a separate space to talk with each other and with those are teaching them” (p. 67). Also, this self-study echoes Smith’s (2013), argument that the principal beneficiaries of white power in colonial institutions must engage in racial de-framing to engender the multiracial democracy and power-sharing (Feagin, 2013) advocated by this study’s racialized participants.

## **Conclusion**

Institutions of learning and teaching in societies that espouse human rights, liberty, and justice are responsible for positively representing all groups to counter racism’s myths. We decry the absenting of multicultural knowledge/art/symbolisms/policies/practices and tapestries, that racialized students and faculty can experience as anti-oppressive not just what is celebrated in discourses and mission statements/Curricula that do not actually challenge systemic racism. We need deliberate/ purposeful threading of differing identities to forge more just/equitable/plural society living/studying, and working well together.

This polyvocal study makes important contributions to educator practices by illustrating interlocking traumatizing threads connecting Black students and academics. The pursuit of white- defined success may obscure but cannot mask racism, however subtle. Racism, though stitched together by myths, remains pervasive. As researchers jolted into consciousness through advocacy for racialized students, we see the need for resources and spaces of solidarity where Black students and academics can enjoy the benefits this polyvocal self-study enabled our triad for healing, mutual empowerment, collective resilience and resistance encapsulated in Freire, 1970’s pedagogy of the oppressed.

\*All the names of the research participants used in this paper are pseudonyms.

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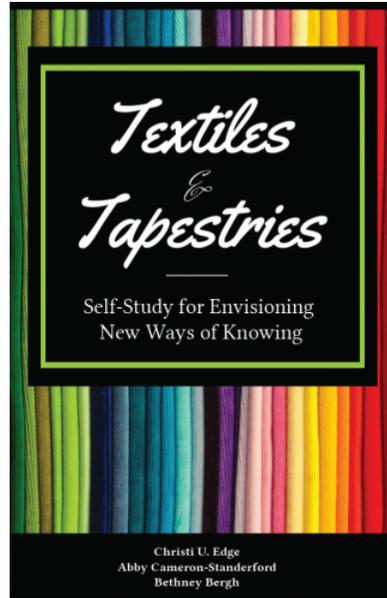
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