

Exploring Intersections of Race, Gender, Culture, and Power: Collaborative Autoethnography, Freire, and Model for Reform

**Shaquanah Robinson
University of Phoenix**

**Alyncia M. Bowen
Franklin University**

**James Lane
University of Phoenix**

In a time when the Critical Race Theory is being used as a weapon to eliminate educational learning by ratifying American history at a proliferated rate, this study illustrates the individual experiences of racial inequity across race, gender, culture, and power. This collaborative autoethnography is informed by the Critical Race Theory and Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Crenshaw observes about criticism of CRT, "It's not about a theory. ... It's about an effort to shut down all conversation about the sources and the reproduction of racial inequality" (2021, p. 7). Defending the application of CRT in American classrooms is beyond the scope of this study. This study illustrates that promotion of equality through having honest conversations about inequality.

Keywords: race, intersectionality, collaborative autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

BACKGROUND

"Race is a chimera - both a grotesque monster and a figment of our individual and collective imaginations. ... (It) is deeply woven into the nation's fabric in ways that make it nearly impossible to unravel without tearing the whole society asunder" (Ladson-Billings, 2020, 225, 227). Over the past decade, the fabric of American culture has become more frayed. Examples of White supremacist rhetoric and actions seem increasingly pronounced. Police killings of people of color have seemed to escalate. Cries that *Black Lives Matter* has renewed hostilities within the White supremacist hegemony grasping to control a systemically racist culture. Anderson describes these acts as examples of *White rage* (2017).

White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. ... Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively (p. 3).

Formal opposition was codified through the Trump administration's *1776 Report* (2021), a sweeping manifesto arguing a whitewashed American history curriculum and attacking social justice activism. The report claimed, "a dispositive rebuttal of reckless 're-education' attempts that seek to reframe American history around the idea that the United States is not an exceptional country but an evil one" (2021, p. 1). Hostility continued, with state legislatures and school boards across the country using similar dystopian rhetoric to errantly apply the banner of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to any curriculum designed to educate students about the impact of slavery (Sawchuk, 2021; Waxman, 2021). Crenshaw disputes the distortions, explaining, "Critical race theory just says, 'Let's pay attention to what has happened in this country, and how what has happened is continuing to create differential outcomes'" (2021, p. 6).

PURPOSE

We position our study within this caustic milieu, informed by Critical Race Theory and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, while applying the frame of intersectionality and method of collaborative critical autoethnography to interrogate our individual experiences of racial inequity across race, gender, culture, and power. Legislation and curricula are moving targets. Our purpose is more specific: understanding, contributing, and providing background and insight.

We apply collaborative critical autoethnography to seek understanding at the most basic levels: emotion, experience, and etiology. We explore and confront the intersections of race, gender, culture, and power to understand how our experiences have shaped our views of systemic racism. As educators, we offer this model as a structure to reimagine schooling and weave a stronger fabric of knowledge and understanding. We believe that through this model, educators could strengthen connections between learning and engagement within schools.

As both educators and citizens, it is incumbent on us to learn our individual and collective histories. Only then can we find understanding, progress, and peace.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: *How have racial microaggressions shaped our experiences and perceptions of embedded racism?*

RQ2: *How have the intersections of race, gender, culture, and power shaped our perceptions of embedded racism?*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two concepts inform our study. First is *Critical Race Theory*, purposed "to remind its readers how deeply issues of racial ideology and power continue to matter in American life. Questioning regnant visions of racial meaning and racial power, critical race theorists seek to fashion a set of tools and thinking about race that avoids the traps of racial thinking" (Crenshaw, et al., 1995, pp. xi-xii).

Next, we identify experiences as *microaggressions*, defined by Solórzano as "one form of systemic everyday racism that serves to keep those at the racial margins in their place ... layered assaults based on the race, gender, class ... of a person of color" (2020, p. 178). He explains, "The *micro* in *microaggressions* means *in the every day*. Racial microaggressions matter because they are symptoms of larger structural problems - racism and White supremacy" (p. 182).

We view our experiences through the frame of intersectionality. Crenshaw posits using intersectionality to "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1995, p. 358). Collins (2019) expands the metaphor, "shifting from seeing social phenomena as separate and distinct to seeing their interconnections as beneficial [in designing] action strategies for how to move forward, solving social problems and grappling with existing puzzles" (p. 34). Stovall (2020) observes, "As engaged researchers, because our lives are intersectional, our research should reflect said intersections" (p. 198).

METHODS

We submit that learning begins individually and then collectively. Jones, et al., explain that through autoethnography, “We interrogate what we think and believe and challenge our own assumptions, asking if we have penetrated as many layers of our defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires” (2013, p. 10). Autoethnography provides the power to interrogate personal experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, et al., 2011). Boylorn and Orbe “define autoethnography as cultural analysis through personal narrative” (2014, p. 17), highlighting the method as “a means to enhance existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege” (2014, p. 19). We have applied collaborative critical autoethnography as a medium for germinating insights into ourselves and our colleagues and charting a way forward for similar dialogic conversations in schools.

In addition, Freire proposed a dialogic that we believe is similar to ours. He explains,

When an individual is presented with a coded existential situation, he tends to split that situation. The coded situation, which previously had been only diffusely apprehended, begins to acquire meaning as the thought flows back to it from the various dimensions (2000, p.85).

DATA SOURCES

As collaborative critical autoethnographers, we are both participants and researchers (Ellis, 2009; Chang, 2008; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Shaquanah and Alyncia are Black women. Shaquanah, in her late thirties, is a middle school curriculum specialist and teacher trainer. Alyncia, in her early fifties, is a college dean. Jim, a white male in his late sixties, is a retired principal and doctoral instructor. Our work together spans projects and years. Our data include written narratives and transcribed and remembered conversations. As we have shared our experiences, we understand more about each other and ourselves.

RESULTS

Jim

My first memories came when I was young. My mother and I are standing by two water fountains in the Winn Dixie. I want to get a drink and go to one of the fountains. My mother stops and directs me to the adjacent fountain. Nearby are two restroom doors. One is scuffed. That one is for “Colored.”

In the ninth grade, we had one Black kid. His name was JT, and he was a celebrity. During that time my grandmother would ask periodically, “Jimmy, do you have any in your classes?” She meant Black kids, of course.

In grad school I took a seminar studying African American writers. The professor was Black. He told a story that when he was applying to colleges after high school, he was denied admission to the University of Florida (UF) because he was Black. He was vindicated when years later when he graduated from UF with a PhD.

Shaquanah

A few years ago, my school district moved towards an innovative curriculum model that required restructuring and created additional supervisory positions. One position listed specific requirements that I met. Only two applied for the job—a White male and me. We both had the same degree and the same amount of experience. I was not called for an interview, and he was offered the job.

Another time, I applied for one of eight curriculum specialist positions. Although I was well qualified, I was not interviewed. White women filled all eight positions.

My son’s father died in a car accident. Wearing a seatbelt could have saved his life. Since then, I never moved my vehicle without ensuring everyone is wearing a seatbelt. Recently I was pulled over by a

sheriff. My son was with me, crying, “Momma, should I start recording? Are you gonna get shot?” I knew I had not broken any laws, but my heart was pounding. The officer asked for license and registration. I asked why I was being stopped. He said, “Is there any reason you did not have on a seatbelt?” I explained why I never leave my driveway without wearing a seatbelt. I think he sensed the frustration in my voice and panic in my son’s eyes. I asked if it was okay for me to reach in my glove box to retrieve my registration and was told to have a good day.

As a mother, I don’t have the privilege of just imagining atrocities that plague society. I must live through those experiences and try to teach my son strategies that will just get him home alive.

Alyncia

One experience that impacted my education was when my tenth grade English teacher charged me with plagiarism because “you people do not write like that.” That was one of my first experiences of direct racism. Even though I was in an honors English class, I was accused of not writing the essay. I had to fight for the correct grade by engaging the vice principal, who was a Black woman. The teacher finally corrected my grade because she could not prove that I plagiarized. Since then, I’ve always felt compelled to prove my worth in writing.

Several years later when I submitted my thesis, my chair remarked, “You are an excellent writer.” I cried. The harsh words and accusations of my English teacher had scarred my self-perception. I wish she were alive today so that I could thank her for her racist acts. They made me a better academician.

In another experience, I had just bought a new luxury car. While driving my grandmother to get ice cream I was stopped. The police officer told me the car was reported stolen. Even after demonstrating it was not stolen I was harassed. That memory has stayed with me.

These brief vignettes span race, gender, culture, and power. For Jim, they provide insights into a world he has never known. Shaquanah and Alyncia provide a chance for their voices to be heard.

SIGNIFICANCE

Crenshaw observes about criticism of CRT, “It’s not about a theory. ... It’s about an effort to shut down all conversation about the sources and the reproduction of racial inequality” (2021, p. 7). Defending the application of CRT in American classrooms is beyond the scope of this study. We do, however, believe the comments of Crenshaw and others support our argument for continued intersectional conversations about race: “(CRT) is more patriotic than those opposed to it because we believe in the 13th and the 14th and the 15th Amendments. We believe in the promises of equality. And we know we can’t get there if we can’t confront and talk honestly about inequality” (2021, p. 7).

We believe collaborative critical conversations, while at first uncomfortable, can serve as models to generate deeper understanding of individual and collective histories. We suggest starting with small voluntary groups. As teachers engage in reflective dialectics, we hope they will feel more comfortable expanding to conversations with other colleagues and, eventually, with their students. We join Dixson, et al. (2020) in seeking “to engage color and culture to acquire more knowledge and insight that would enable us to better teach each student” (p. 9).

Morrison asks, “How does one become a racist? Since no one is born a racist, one learns othering, not by lecture or instruction, but by example” (2017, p. 6). Only when cloth is worn bare is its essence most clear. It can then be rewoven, new threads built on old, creating a stronger, more vibrant weave. That is our hope for our schools and our country.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, C. (2017). *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bochner, A.P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.
- Boylorn, R.M., & Orbe, M.P. (Eds.). (2014). *Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life*. Left Coast Press.
- Brennan Center for Justice. (2021, June 17). *Voting laws roundup: May 2021: Update*. Retrieved from <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-may-2021>
- Butcher, J. (2021, July 12). *Critical Race Theory: Legislation tracker*. Retrieved from <https://datavisualizations.heritage.org/education/critical-race-theory-legislation-tracker/>
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Citizens for Renewing America. (n.d.). *Critical Race Theory*. Retrieved July 18, 2021, from https://citizensrenewingamerica.com/issue_topic/critical-race-theory/
- Collins, P.H. (2009). *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Duke University Press.
- Contreras, R. (2021, June 20). *Educators face fines, harassment over critical race theory*. Axios. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/teachers-harassment-fines-critical-race-theory-f0e6e7b2-d7cd-44f3-a30a-14f3acce5175.html>
- Crenshaw, K. (2021, May 22). *CNN Newsroom*. Retrieved from <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2105/22/cnr.04.html>
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New York Press.
- Crowley, M. (2021, January 18). Trump's "1776 Report" defends America's founding on the basis of slavery and blasts progressivism. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/18/us/trump-1776-commission-report.html>
- Denzin, N.K. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography* (2nd Ed.). SAGE.
- DeRienzo, M. (2020, October 28). *Analysis: New and age-old voter suppression tactics at the heart of the 2020 power struggle*. Center for Public Integrity. Retrieved from <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/elections/ballotboxbarriers/analysis-voter-suppression-never-went-away-tactics-changed/>
- DuBose, R. (2021). Voter suppression: A recent phenomenon or an American legacy? *University of Baltimore Law Review*, 50, 246–286.
- Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 50th anniversary edition*. (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury.
- Gabriel, T., & Goldstein, D. (2021, June 1). Disputing racism's reach, Republicans rattle American schools. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/us/politics/critical-race-theory.html>
- Heritage Foundation. (n.d.). *Join the fight for America's future: Our country depends on it!* Retrieved July 18, 2021, from <https://www.heritage.org/>
- Jones, S.J., Adams, T.E., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Left Coast Press.
- Morrison, T. (2017). *The origin of others*. Harvard University Press.
- National Urban League. (2021, June 17). *The fight against racially motivated voter suppression continues*. National Urban League. Retrieved from <https://nul.org/news/fight-against-racially-motivated-voter-suppression-continues>
- Proposed Priorities – American history and civics education, 86 FR 20348. (proposed April 19, 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/04/19/2021-08068/proposed-priorities-american-history-and-civics-education#footnote-3-p20349>
- Sawchuk, S. (2021). What is Critical Race Theory, and why is it under attack? *Education Week*, 40(34), 4–5.

- Shuster, K. (2018, January 31). *Teaching hard history: American slavery*. Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/20180131/teaching-hard-history#summary>
- Silverstein, J. (2020, October 16). On recent criticism of The 1619 Project: A response from our editor. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/magazine/criticism-1619-project.html>
- Stovall, D.O. (2020). Talking old soldiers: Research, education, intersectionality, and Critical Race Praxis in the “End Times”. In A.D. Dixson, G.J. Ladson-Billings, C.E. Suarez, W.T. Trent, & J.D. Anderson (Eds.), *Condition or process: Researching race in education* (pp. 189–204). American Educational Research Association.
- The New York Times Magazine. (2019, December 20). *The 1619 Project*. Retrieved on July 18, 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>
- The White House. (2021, January 18). *1776 Commission takes historic and scholarly step to restore understanding of the greatness of the American founding*. Retrieved from https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/1776-commission-takes-historic-scholarly-step-restore-understanding-greatness-american-founding/?utm_source=link
- The White House. (2021, January). *The 1776 Report: The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission*. Retrieved from <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>
- Voting Rights Lab. (2021, June). *A tale of two democracies: How the 2021 wave of state voting laws create a new American fault line*. Retrieved from <https://votingrightslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Voting-Rights-Lab-A-Tale-of-Two-Democracies.pdf>
- Waxman, O. (2021, June 24). Critical Race Theory is simply the latest bogeyman: Inside the fight over what kids learn about America’s history. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/6075193/critical-race-theory-debate/>
- West, C. (1995). Forward. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New York Press.