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# **Autobiography as Counter-Narrative: An Empirical Study of How Race Enters and Structures the Stories of Our Lives**

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**Abstract:** Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens through which to examine learning autobiography, and counter-storytelling as a method of CRT, this study offers a view of the world from the perspective of adult students' racialized experiences.

## **Introduction**

John Dewey said, "education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience...the actual life experience of an individual." (1938, p. 113) When adults come to education, they bring with them a lifetime of experiences. In an effort to examine experiences for learning that may have occurred, adult students may be asked to reflect upon their lives as learners.

Often in the form of a written narrative or learning autobiography, those reflections become the foundation as students explore life experiences for possible college creditable learning. As they begin their exploration, students may consider whether there exists a theoretical framework supporting the subject matter that might help them interpret or further understand what they may have learned. Focusing attention on the subject or content area of a learning experience, however, does not necessarily require consideration of the socio-cultural context in which the experience took place. As a result, recognized learning can be, at best, incomplete and at worst, inaccurate. Critical Race Theory places experience in both an historical and a socio-cultural context, and in so doing, allows us to shift our view of what is real from the dominant discourse and to listen to the counter-stories of the people whose experience lies outside of the majority. (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006)

### *Questions Guiding the Study:*

- How does racial group membership enter the narratives of our experience?
- How does racial group membership structure our experience?
- What are the implications when racial group membership structures our experience?

## **Critical Race Theory, Counter-Storytelling and Chronicles**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in the late 1970s as legal scholarship that examined how the law has been, and continues to be, complicit in upholding White supremacy. Critical race theorists deconstruct liberalism in order to explicate the ways in which concepts of liberalism such as the slow but steady road to change, colorblindness and neutrality do more to strengthen White supremacy than to dismantle it. Fundamental tenets of CRT include the notion that racism, rather than being unusual or an example of aberrant behavior, is actually "business as usual" in this country. Also fundamental is the CRT practice which includes speaking from the voice of the oppressed. Often, the voices are heard in the form of storytelling in which "writers analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render Blacks and other minorities one-down." (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000 p. xvii) And Interest Convergence, another tenet, suggests that Whites only support anti-racist causes when there is also benefit to Whites. (Bell, 2005)

When we were children, stories often began with the phrase, “Once upon a time...” Stories are about experience, an event occurring in a place in time, “a product of experience and imagination” (Bell, 1992, p. 13) Counter-stories, like stories, are also told from the perspective of the storyteller. How each of us interprets and makes meaning out of our experience is a function of our historical experience, fundamental values about the world and the belief systems upon which those values are based. Counter-stories can form as “a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns...their analysis can be a potential tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society.” (Bell, L. A. 2003, p. 4) When the storyteller is a member of an out-group, the story woven can challenge what is considered normal and just by the dominant group.

Derrick Bell introduced us to the use of stories as, perhaps, a more compelling means to revisit racial themes many have explored before. Rather than reporting, in an academic or legal fashion, fact reflecting life experience, Bell created stories, also known as chronicles, as “a product of experience and imagination” that offered an “allegorical perspective” on current conditions. (Bell, 1992, p. 12-13) Ladson-Billings suggested that chronicles are narratives constructed out of “historical, socio-cultural, and political realities of...people of color.” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. xi).

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

As a method of qualitative research, I used narrative inquiry as a means toward interpretation, meaning making and, ultimately, the understanding of experience. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) The data for this study first came from a collection of learning autobiographies written by adult students entering undergraduate study.

Upon initial and cursory review of the learning autobiographies, it became clear that African American adults born after the Civil Rights Movement would speak more implicitly about race than those before the Movement. And for White adult students born after civil rights, race would almost never enter their learning autobiographies. These adults’ narratives reflected our country’s colorblind ideology.

To create a coding scheme, I added to the study the autobiographies of well known personalities whom I thought would be likely to have explicitly addressed race in their personal narratives. Such personalities included Drs. John Hope Franklin, Maya Angelou and Angela Davis, Presidents Carter and Clinton and Senator Hillary Clinton. And as a means of comparison as well as the triangulation of data, I also added a selection of life histories, including my own, of masters and doctoral students in adult education, who had been asked to explore issues of race within their personal narratives. Drawing upon my findings, I created two chronicles, one of a White woman named Sylvia and the other of an African American woman named Kathy. While a compilation of more than two learning autobiographies, the experiences are actual experiences of women in the study. And to the extent possible, I used the words written by the women. These chronicles serve as an allegorical representation reflective of the data in the study.

### **Two Chronicles**

Sylvia:

*I was born in 1957. Getting my driver’s license at 16, I felt the dream of freedom. Having been educated in a girls’ parochial school, I had been raised to understand trust and responsibility. Growing up, my mom was home raising us kids. In our house, dinner*

*time discussions turned into debates and during those, my mother would run to the bookshelves to look something up in order to prove her point.*

*While my friends were planning for high school graduation and to begin college the following fall, I decided to drop out of high school and plan my wedding. I wouldn't need to finish school because I was going to be married. I was not terribly interested in education and no one was really encouraging me to get a college degree.*

*Three years later, having worked as an accounts payable clerk since we got married, I was pregnant and my husband and I were looking for a home in the suburbs. I realized that I wanted to do more than just be at home with the kids, so I decided to start a business from my home. Other than my accounts payable job, I had no real business experience, but going back to my experience growing up, I did my research and looked for answers to questions. I worked very hard and my business took off.*

*Over the next few years, we had two more children, my business continued to grow, we sold our first house and moved to a larger house in the same suburb and then we filed for divorce. I knew that I had to hold it all together. I sold my business and took on a full-time corporate job. There was more security than in running my own business and I still made a good salary, but now I had insurance and benefits as well. My kids and I were able to stay in the house and we even took a couple of nice vacations over the next few years. While I was alone, I was taking care of my family and giving them the good life they deserved.*

*Then one day I received the most terrifying news ever. I had cancer and was told that I really had only a very short time to live, possibly only months. After the shock wore down some, I began to do research on the disease, treatments and cure rates. My research took me to Mayo Clinic, where my team of doctors helped to save my life.*

*My life radically changed from that experience. I had some time to consider the decisions I had made along the way, what I had completed and what I had not completed. My children were now well on their way to completing their educations and I would no longer need to be the primary financial support for them. I decided to enroll in the local community college and began pursuing the education I had walked away from so many years ago.*

*I've done my research, again, and I think that with a solid foundation in liberal arts I'll have what I need to be admitted into a social work program and the opportunity to begin another chapter in my life.*

Kathy:

*I was born in 1954 in Chicago. Both my parents were born and raised in Indiana, and both came from families with eight children. They met, fell in love and had eight children of their own. Their coming together was the start of a strong, proud and loving African American family. My father worked at least two jobs to support all of us and still we had very little money. I remember always wishing for more space and privacy and for some of my own toys.*

*Working hard and getting a good education were two of my parents' most important lessons. I remember learning to read before entering kindergarten and how my older sisters and brothers would read to me every day when I was little. I'm still a very avid reader. I'll read everything and anything, that's just how I learn. Coming from a strong African American family, I was taught never to give up. As far back as I can remember, I dreamed of becoming a criminal lawyer.*

*We moved into a neighborhood on Chicago's south side that was mixed. There were Polish and Italian and Hispanics. We were the only Negroes (that's what we were called back then), but the schools were better and that was all that was important to my parents. I can still remember the names the White kids called us when we first got there. For the first year, they would fight with my brothers and call my sisters and me names. Then, after about a year, we started to get along.*

*Then bussing began. Black children were being bussed to neighborhoods like ours and the Whites who lived here were not accepting them graciously. I was confused. After all, we were Black children attending the mostly White school. Later I learned that while we had been accepted, they didn't want any more Blacks to attend their school. I guess accepting us allowed them to feel as though they weren't really racist, but then when other Blacks wanted to send their children to our school, it was too much for them. Those were difficult years for us. We had become friends with the White kids in the neighborhood, and as a result were not really accepted by the Black kids being bussed in.*

*I graduated from high school in 1972. I was the first in my family to graduate from high school. It was a proud moment for us all, especially my parents. I would be the first to go to college. I was accepted into the university and was getting ready to move away from home when I found out that I was expecting my first child. My parents were very disappointed, but I was determined to raise this child well.*

*When my beautiful child was born, I was ready to go back to school. It would not be the university, however, because I needed to make a living. I went to secretarial school instead. When my daughter was about two months old, she became very ill. I made many trips to the emergency room, but no one knew what was wrong with her. The doctors kept telling me that I was not feeding her correctly. They insisted that I take her home and try different remedies. I think because I was a teenager that I wasn't taken seriously. After a long and exhausting weekend, I took her back to the clinic on Monday morning. The nurse took a look at my daughter and immediately took her from me and rushed her upstairs to the pediatrics ward of the hospital. Finally, they came out and said that she was severely dehydrated and would need to stay in the hospital. They told me that had I waited another 24 hours, my daughter would have died. But, my daughter survived and she became a healthy baby from that point on.*

*I began to work at an optical shop not far from my apartment. My priority became raising my child and seeing that she received the education she would need to build a decent life. When my daughter went to pre-school, I volunteered whenever it was possible. The more I volunteered, the more I realized that I wanted to work with young children.*

*One day a teacher in the toddler room asked me if I would be interested in working in her room for a couple of hours a day. That day changed my life. The following spring I worked full time and attended school part time. I was determined to move forward and achieve my AAS Degree in Education. And when my daughter graduated from kindergarten, I received my degree. I became a head teacher with my own pre-school classroom.*

*With the support of my family all along the way, I have continued to pursue my dream of an education. Now that my daughter is in elementary school and I have a good job, I plan to start again to achieve my goal of becoming a lawyer. And I want to purchase a home for my daughter. Having a child at a young age did not change my*

*goals or aspirations to be any different than before. I will achieve them as I stay focused and know where I want to go in life.*

**Findings: Selected Themes Racial Self-Identity, Experience with Racism or Privilege, Value of Education, the American Dream**

Although similar in many ways, the story and counter-story of Sylvia and Kathy have some notable differences that can be attributed to race. By the third sentence, Kathy has identified herself as someone coming from a strong African American family. She experienced racism during her school years, and as a result of her parents' wish for her to be well educated, experienced being an outsider in both groups.

Like almost all the White undergraduate students in the study, Sylvia made no reference to racial group membership, privilege, experiences with racism or the value of education. She suggested that learning was important in her home but made no mention of the importance of formal education. Sylvia focused upon issues related to the American Dream. In referring to dropping out of high school to plan her wedding, she seemed to have taken her education, including the option to attend college, for granted. Sylvia's focus was on buying a home in the suburbs and building an at-home business because she "wanted to do more than just be at home with the kids." When Sylvia became gravely ill, she looked for medical care at the hospital that is considered to give the highest level of care for the most severe illnesses and was helped such that she could plan for a future. Her tone suggested the general availability of that level of medical care to those willing to do the necessary research.

Although both women were focused upon taking care of their children, their expectations for what privileges their children could and should receive were very different. Sylvia believed her children should be able to live in a house and take good vacations – to have the "good life they deserve." Her expectations did not seem to be recognition of privilege, although her attitude did reflect a sense of entitlement. Upon regaining her health, Sylvia's long-term goal shifted to one of self-fulfillment, to study social work. Kathy was focused on raising her child and "seeing that she received the education she would need to build a decent life." Kathy's long term goal remained to become an attorney and purchase a home for her daughter.

**Discussion: A CRT Analysis. Racism is Endemic, Interest Convergence and Unnoticed Privilege; Pride in Heritage and Colorblindness; Critique of White Experience as Normal**

When Kathy's family moved to the mixed neighborhood as the only Blacks, they had to tolerate a year of name-calling and fighting before they were accepted. And when the Whites, ultimately, accepted Kathy's family, that acceptance allowed them to avoid feeling compelled to accept other Blacks – at least not without a fight. The White majority used their acceptance of Kathy's Black family as an opportunity to keep out other Blacks.

When Kathy's baby became ill, the child was near death before Kathy was able to get appropriate medical care. She assumed the lack of response to have been a result of her young age. On the other hand, when Sylvia became gravely ill, she researched the best possible medical care and then got the care.

Kathy is proud of her heritage. Her focus is on creating educational opportunities and a decent life for her child. Sylvia does not appear to be aware that she has a race. She never mentions race nor does she mention heritage. She has an attitude of colorblindness; opportunities are available if pursued. Her focus is on creating the good life.

What Sylvia accomplished represented what was possible – normal. There’s nothing about her story that explicitly suggested a racialized experience. Sylvia didn’t knowingly take advantage of white privilege although when her experience is juxtaposed with Kathy’s experience, especially with respect to health care, it is clear that Sylvia benefited from that privilege. And it is equally clear that Kathy’s experience in the hospital with her sick infant was not particularly unusual. Kathy’s experiences represented a challenge to the notion of White experience as normal.

### **Conclusion**

This study used Critical Race Theory to identify racialized experience in the learning autobiographies of adult learners, as an opportunity to theorize race in the learning experiences of adults and, hopefully, as a means to begin a sustainable dialogue about race.

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