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Mitsunori Misawa
University of Memphis

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Social Justice Narrative Inquiry: A Queer Crit Perspective

Mitsunori Misawa, Ph.D.
University of Memphis

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Abstract: Social justice narrative inquiry is an important research methodology in social justice research, especially for when examining the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation. This paper intends to: 1) conceptualize how social justice narrative inquiry contributes to knowledge production in the field of adult education in terms of positionality and its influence on the web of power dynamics; 2) theorize social justice narrative inquiries for social justice education and social justice research; and 3) demonstrate how a queer crit perspective (a queer perspective under Critical Race Theory) can be used in social justice narrative inquiry.

Narratives and stories are pivotal elements in our everyday lives. We tell some sorts of narratives and stories each day in various settings (Riessman, 2008). For example, we use narratives and stories to express our ideas to people around us. We also use narratives and stories to conceptualize our own daily experiences in terms of our positionalities (Johnson-Bailey, 2004), and we also use our narratives to develop connection with the other people. Narratives and stories confront us daily and are interspersed through society; however, not all of us realize our own usage of narratives and stories.

Our narratives and stories contain important parts of our life histories because we locate ourselves in a narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The narrative environment contains various parts of our lives and “may be as informal as the sequential context of a casual conversation or as formal as a court hearing” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 123). In addition, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) stated, “Regardless of the setting, if the work of story construction deals with the *hows* of narrative reality, its environments offer preferences that propose the *whats* of the matter” (p. 123).

Because we find ourselves in a narrative environment as Gubrium and Holstein (2009) described it, narratives and stories appear to be important elements in our daily lives. Recognized historically, narratives have been used in passing on traditions from one generation to another (Pinnergar & Daynes, 2007). For example, there are many unique folklores and oral histories in different cultures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2007). Folklore and oral histories implicitly or explicitly symbolize and present historical events that happened in a specific unit of society and depict local voices about the local culture.

While not folklore or oral history, narratives and stories are also used in contemporary education (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Stories are used in educational settings as a pedagogical tool, such as for icebreaking activities, discussions, and introductory activities because we know that our learners have something to tell us in terms of their life experiences that relate to what we are teaching and because we know that stories attract people's attention and

allow groups to make a connection to each other in the group (Apps, 1991; Brookfield, 2006). In educational practice, we narrate our stories of our life experiences with others. Educators also use stories to describe concepts and theories in formal educational settings and to establish connections between themselves and their students in formal, informal, and nonformal educational settings. In that sense, educators in higher and adult education tend to use narratives and stories to develop learning environments that are welcoming and inclusive for their learners.

Social Justice Narratives and Narrative Learning

Narratives and stories are utilized in our everyday practice as educators. For instance, we promote reciprocal learning and experiential learning using a narrative approach (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). We implicitly and explicitly use narratives and stories to communicate our course materials with our students. And in adult education classrooms in higher education, we often tell our life stories to help our students connect with the content we deliver. Stories that are told by us are thus utilized by our students as learning materials.

Rossiter (1999) talked about how a narrative approach could be applied to adult education. For instance, she focused on adult development and stated that “a narrative approach to development looks at the stories nature of development and considers story as metaphor for human life” (p. 59). Furthermore, Rossiter describes the narrative approach as:

a way of thinking about human development draws from the intellectual traditions of various disciplines include literary theory, cognitive psychology, theology, and philosophy. The application of narrative to matters of development and learning is an emerging, evolving area of inquiry, and thus, a rich variety of views are under discussion. (1999, p. 59)

Rossiter (1999) provided five perspectives in the narrative approach to development: a) Narrative knowing is based on constructivism; b) The narrative is a central structure in human meaning making; c) Temporality and narratives are integrally related; d) The narrative is historical; and d) Individual and cultural narratives are interrelated (p. 59). In sum, according to Rossiter (1999), the utilization of the narrative approach nourishes adult development because it is a ubiquitous and holistic approach to examining adulthood in society.

Narratives and stories are also utilized in contemporary higher and adult education as andragogical and pedagogical tools for teaching and learning. Johnson-Bailey (2004) spoke about how narratives could be utilized in both educational and research settings. She discussed that it is important to understand the power dynamics between a narrator and listener when narratives are utilized. For example, in a social justice research context using narrative inquiry, researchers should understand the power dynamics whether they are insiders or outsiders during their research (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

Social Justice Narrative Inquiries

Narrative inquiry has also been utilized in social sciences research to collect stories that relate to people’s experiences in society. With narrative inquiry, stories are major source of data for

researchers' studying a particular populations' experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Chase (2011) described the narrative as:

a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of action and events over time. (p. 421)

Chase (2005, 2011) also stated that narrative inquires in the field of qualitative research have a close relationship with social justice studies and continue to be a part of social justice.

Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, and Bowles (2010) stated that "social justice seems confined to either theoretical discussions of social justice or descriptions of adult education programs that use social justice as one of their guiding principles" (p. 339). Social justice emphasizes equality, and it focuses on one's voice (usually a voice from a marginalized population) and pursues social equality (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010). Although there are billions of stories that are told by people each day, those stories are often heard only by small parts of the population. Usually, privileged voices and their grand narratives, created by majorities, are the ones that are most frequently heard (Flowers, 2010). However, though they may be lost to the majority of people, there are many narratives that are being told by minorities and populations which are underprivileged due to their race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Unheard voices created by minorities such as People of Color and gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) people are most of the time discarded or dismissed by the society at large (Misawa, 2007). "How can their unheard narratives be heard?" is an important and critical question to ask in adult education when people talk about issues of social justice because in adult education, "adult educators must seek and include disparate and marginalized voices, including the stories, contributions, and histories of the 'others' who often are omitted from our texts" (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010, p. 340).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory assumes that racism is a normal aspect of our life in the American society and argues that race matters for all race whether White or non-White. Critical Race Theory emerged from that and was developed through critical legal studies in the late 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Misawa, 2010). According to Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), there are six elements to Critical Race Theory.

1. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life;
2. Critical Race Theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy;
3. Critical Race Theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law;
4. Critical Race Theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and [their] communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary and eclectic; and

6. Critical Race Theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p. 6)

Critical Race Theory has been both emancipatory and critical of education for People of Color since its establishment. In the early years, Critical Race Theory stayed within the field of critical legal studies, but it gained a lot of attention by scholars of color in later years, particularly the work by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) where they introduced it to education.

Ladson-Billings (1998, 2000, 2003) herself talked about how Critical Race Theory applies to education and social science qualitative research. She emphasized that education should consider the students, curriculum, and environments with regard to race and that those aspects ought to be analyzed critically. Critical Race Theory provides an opportunity for researchers to conduct research which is centered upon race to produce new perspectives for academia where such perspectives have been neglected even though knowledge, perspectives, and scholarship of People of Color have existed there for a long time. Critical Race Theory gives researchers an opportunity to disseminate their knowledge about unheard and marginalized voices obtained from non-White racial populations (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Queer Crit

A queer crit perspective can be considered a micro-theoretical perspective of Critical Race Theory (Crotty, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000) that contains social justice components for race and sexual orientation (Misawa, 2010). A queer crit perspective emerged from critical legal scholars who were not only interested in racial perspectives in social justice but also in racial justice for sexual minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Misawa, 2010; Valdes, 1995). In other words, a queer crit perspective was born from Critical Race Theory to pursue human rights and social justice for People of Color who are sexual minorities by focusing on the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation.

There are six components in the queer crit perspective: 1) the centrality of the intersection of race and racism with sexual orientation and homophobia; 2) the challenge to mainstream ideologies; 3) confrontations with ahistoricism; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; 5) multidisciplinary aspects; and 6) the social justice perspective (Misawa, 2010, pp. 192-195). These six components of the queer crit perspective could be utilized in educational settings to help educators and practitioners in adult, higher and continuing education foster diversity among students and create inclusive learning environments where race and sexual orientation are equally appreciated along with other sociocultural identities (Misawa, 2010).

Social Justice Narrative Inquiry: A Queer Crit Perspective

When researchers try to practice and implement social justice regarding the intersection of race and sexual orientation, it is important to address a queer crit perspective in their research methodologies. According to Crotty (1998), a methodology is a plan of actions and implementations for a research project. It is important for researchers to understand what epistemological orientation they are using to guide the theoretical perspectives in their research,

what types of research plans they can come up with from the theoretical perspectives, and how they can pursue the research data by various data collection strategies.

Researchers who pursue social justice through their research in qualitative research, particularly narrative inquiry need a deep understanding of how narratives are treated in their research. Chase (2011) stated, “Narrative researchers highlight what we can learn about anything—by maintaining a focus on narrated lives” (p. 421). When scholars conduct narrative research on the intersection of the racial and sexual justice using a queer crit perspective, they need to know what considerations they will need to take into account when dealing with such an intersection. Social justice narrative inquiries in particular need to take into account the six components of the queer crit perspective as listed above.

The first component of the queer crit perspective, *the centrality of the intersection of race and racism with sexual orientation and homophobia*, focuses on the controversial sociocultural identities such as race and sexual orientation (Misawa, 2007). There, the voices of the sexual minorities of color becomes important and can be used to address the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation. Collected narratives of sexual minorities of color could present how they deal with their experiences of racism and heterosexism or homophobia and illustrate how race and sexual orientation are intertwined in their lives (Misawa, 2010). Such narratives of the experiences sexual minorities of color become significant when a queer crit researcher explores and investigates intersectionality because such narratives can show the complicated nature of the intersection of race and sexual orientation in society. For example, the narratives might focus on how race and sexual orientation influence the daily lives of a person in school or at a workplace. The role of the queer crit researcher is then to clearly depict his or her research participants’ experiences vividly to give them a voice. So, a queer crit perspective in social justice narrative inquiry provides researchers with a data analysis method and a way to look into intersectionality.

The second component of the queer crit perspective, *the challenge to mainstream ideologies*, addresses how the intersection of race and sexual orientation confronts the conventional cultural and traditional thoughts of the non-White and/or heterosexuals about race and sexual orientation in the United States. In an educational setting, for instance, the queer crit perspective provides an opportunity for a queer crit researcher to examine how instructions, curriculum, and programs have traditionally included little more than the perspectives of the White male heterosexuals (Misawa, 2010). In order to challenge such a normality that is imposed by majorities, it is important for a queer crit researcher to deconstruct the underlying ideology. In such a case, narratives of the sexual minorities of color would become important data sources and provide the researcher with first hand experiences of the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation on which to challenge the conventional ideology on its treatment of race and sexual orientation.

The third component of the queer crit perspective in social justice narrative inquiry is *the confrontation with ahistoricism*. It examines how the grand narratives have been constructed and disseminated through culture, media, and education. The social justice narrative inquiry examines the reasons why some narratives have not been heard as grand narratives. One of the important considerations in the queer crit perspective is that researchers need to be able to understand historical and contextual backgrounds of sexual minorities of color so that they can

fight against racism and homophobia or heterosexism. So, the social justice narrative inquiry from a queer crit perspective provides an opportunity to discuss how sexual minorities of color are treated in U.S. society while creating a space from which to examine how traditional notions of race and sexual orientation have sustained their pervasive dominant position.

The fourth component of the queer crit perspective in social justice narrative inquiry is *the centrality of experiential knowledge from narratives*. In narrative inquiry, life histories and stories from the participants are important (Chase, 2011). The same concept applies to queer crit social justice narrative inquiry because it seeks to value the life experiences of LGBTQ people of color. All collected narratives from sexual minorities of color will be based on their experiences, including their experiential knowledge. Personal narratives are generally utilized as the main sources of data for narrative inquiries containing extensive experiential knowledge and subjective knowledge belonging to the participants (Polkinghorne, 2007). In the same way, it is important for the queer crit social justice narrative researcher to obtain the experiential knowledge of the LGBTQ of color in their narrative inquiry.

The fifth component of the queer crit social justice narrative inquiry, *multidisciplinary aspects*, requires multiple voices from marginalized populations in different academic fields. Social justice narrative inquiry seeks a variety of narratives from diverse fields in academia, workplaces, and communities that will allow researchers to unify stories from sexual minorities of color. A narrative from a sexual minority of color itself will not typically have strong visibility already because it will usually have gone unheard by the majority of the society. However, collective narratives from sexual minorities can help make these individual voices be heard. Social justice narrative inquiry gathers unheard individual voices and forms them into an empowered collective voice to broadcast to society.

The sixth component of queer crit social justice narrative inquiry is *the social justice perspective*. Critical Race Theory strives to eliminate racial oppression as part of its broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A queer crit perspective in social justice narrative inquiry would also focus on combating social injustice based on race and sexual orientation. In particular, it would seek social justice for people who have multiple minority perspectives in their identities and positionalities (Misawa, 2010). Therefore, this component is one of the ultimate and significant parts of the queer crit social justice narrative inquiry. It integrates all of the components of queer crit in social justice narrative inquiry to pursue social justice for sexual minorities of color.

Implications for Social Justice Narrative Inquiry in Higher and Adult Education

Each person creates his or her own narratives throughout his or her life. Higher and adult education strives to promote social justice and diversity by developing and offering academic programs and community-based educational opportunities for diverse populations, and by creating inclusive environments for both educators and students to ensure optimal educational experiences (Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowels, 2010). Social justice practice, in turn, often requires collaborations that make use of various narratives from diverse people (Chase, 2011). Those narratives can in turn be shaped into a source of power in the pursuit of social justice for minorities and the underprivileged in higher and adult education classrooms.

Social justice narrative inquiry provides us with opportunities to examine both individual and collective voices of certain populations (e.g., gay male faculty of color) so that scholars are able to connect their practices with social justice research. This form of narrative inquiry is one of the methods we can use to understand differences among people and to allow us to practice social justice. It also gives us the possibility of being able to reduce and eliminate bullying from our society. Scholars and researchers in higher and adult education stand to benefit from it along with educators and learners as they seek to collect the narratives of marginalized populations and practice social justice narrative inquiry.

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