Stories Deep Within: 
Narratives of Teachers of Color from Diasporic Settings

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Abstract
In this qualitative single-study investigation, racial and/or ethnic minority teachers (n=6) used personal stories to elucidate their experiences with social injustice that impact their teaching in rural schools. These counter-stories serve to disrupt orthodox conceptions of teachers of color, to center their work in their cultural positions, and to recognize the ways in which their experiences with oppression and resistance affect their teaching in rural settings.

Introduction

The range of contemporary critical theories suggests that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

Homi Bhabha

Educators of color teaching in small rural communities, isolated from major metropolises, experience challenges that are significantly different from their counterparts working in racially and/or ethnically diverse urban schools. Sleeter (2000) identified voicelessness as one of the challenges experienced. An intense feeling of professional and social isolation is equally problematic (Quirocho & Rios, 2000). The lack of adequate mentoring, a third challenge, is potentially debilitating. However, data suggest that the presence of teachers of color not only provides students of color with increased academic success, but also increases the academic performance of White students (Dee, 2004). Educators of color are likely to implement culturally responsive curricula, hence the noted academic success (Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey & Terrell, 2002). Culturally responsive curricula require the use of teaching resources and instructional strategies that support every learner culturally, socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Kambutu & Thompson, 2005). These and many other benefits offer compelling reasons for pursuing a diverse teaching workforce in rural communities. Data from the 2002 Rural School and Community Trust’s study showing that 17% of residents in rural communities are people of color provide additional impetus to explore the benefits and challenges experienced by teachers of color working in rural communities. In this qualitative single-study investigation,
selected educators of color from schools in Wyoming, a rural state in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States of America (U.S.) shared personal stories about their experiences as ethnic and/or racial minorities.

**Terminologies**

The researchers acknowledge the challenges to terminology when describing whole groups of persons. We also acknowledge that language is both dynamic and limiting. Nonetheless, we provide the following operational definitions for terms used in this study. The terms **people** or **teachers** or **educators** or **students of color** refer to persons who self-identify as coming from African-American, Latina/o-American, Asian-American, and/or Native-American heritage. **Race** is a “social construct that divides people artificially into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (particularly skin color), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation or history, ethnic classification, and/or the social, economic, and political needs of a society at a given period of time” (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007, Appendix 6B). **Racism** is “a system of advantage based on race and supported by institutional structures, policies and practices that create and sustain advantages for the dominant [W]hite group (at least in the U.S.) while systematically subordinating members of targeted racial groups” (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007, Appendix 6B). **Ethnicity** denotes a group of people with a common ancestral national origin who are likely to have common cultural practices (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). **Racial and ethnic identity** is understood as “an individual’s awareness and experience of being a member of a racial and ethnic group; the racial and ethnic categories that an individual chooses to describe himself or herself…” (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2007, Appendix 6B). **Culture** refers to “values; traditions; social and political relationships; and worldview created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common, geographic location, language, social class and/or religion” (Nieto, 2004, p. 436).

**Diasporic** means voluntary dispersal from one’s homeland in search of work (Cohen, 1997). We use **rural** to denote an area or place that is relatively undeveloped economically and isolated from a metropolis (Atkins, 2003). Small in size, a rural area is a relatively safe place with shared values, such as a strong sense of community, a conservative and traditional political orientation, and a slower, less pressurized way of life than an urban area (Atkins, 2003). Generally, rural communities build strong social networks that often place outsiders in confusing and frustrating positions. As a result, outsides are likely to live and work in rural communities, visibly, as if a “fly in the milk.”

**Oppression and resistance in stories/narratives**

We approached this project with a particular curiosity about the experiences of teachers of color working in rural communities. We came to realize, throughout the project, but most especially during the particular activity reported in this study that these teachers brought a particular epistemological lens rooted in a colonization (oppression) and decolonization (resistance and liberation) theoretical framework (Anzaldúa, 2001; Harro, 2000; Sandoval, 2000). We saw evidence of Bammer’s (1994) claim that people of color negotiate their identities somewhere between oppression and resistance. Thus, in our analysis, we were curious to uncover the kinds of oppressive experiences our participants shared (i.e., oppression in teaching,
challenges to collegiality, and questions to their identity), which might represent macro forms of institutional, societal, or ideological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). But we were equally interested in the ways in which the participants made sense of these experiences via the development of a consciousness-in-opposition (Sandoval, 2000). In particular, we wondered what the participants thought about these oppressive experiences and the ways in which their thinking was evidenced in various forms of resistance. Equally important to us were the ways in which participants’ thinking informed their praxis.

To confront the above dilemma, we needed to understand a consciousness-in-opposition that was sensitive to the role of “place” (Sandoval, 2000). That is, we had to consider what was possible in “this place” characterized by a limited number of people of color with whom to commiserate, this place where the need to control one’s emotions (especially anger) was essential, and this place where oppression (social, political, historical, and physical) might play out in unique ways.

Sandoval (2000) described the various forms of critical consciousness that map onto a typography of consciousness-in-opposition. That is, we needed to acknowledge not only “consciousness in its subordinated and resistant yet appropriated version…but in its more effective, persistent, and self-conscious oppositional manifestations” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 43). Different forms of consciousness-in-opposition offer pathways which are used to “juggle, transgress, differ, buy and sell ideologies in a system of production and exchange bent on ensuring survival” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 29). According to Sandoval, the following forms of consciousness-in-opposition are possible: 1) the human-rights, 2) the revolutionary, 3) the separatist, and 4) the supremacist.

We suspect that the social, cultural, and political conditions in the small rural communities where the participants in this study live and work constrain them from pursuing a revolutionary form of consciousness-in-opposition (their small numbers prevent them from a total remaking of their communities), a separatist form of consciousness-in-opposition (where they may already feel isolated; further isolation has very little value), or a supremacist form of consciousness-in-opposition (the idea that their differences are better than the differences of those from the dominant class). Rather, people of color in rural communities are likely to employ a human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition with its focus on acceptance of others for their very humanness and on looking beyond physical differences and appreciating others’ humanity, which makes them deserving of legitimate and earned power. A human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition seeks integration, a critical strategy in places such as rural Wyoming where people of color are isolated from the dominant race and/or ethnic group(s).

Important for this study, then, is the role of “place” not only as a geographic construct, but as a social construct as well. We cannot underestimate the power of context in socializing individuals into a particular kind of thinking, feeling, and acting. The roles of “place” and “displacement” (diaspora) are pivotal to this study. A central feature of life within the diaspora is experiencing the dual practices of selective accommodation and resistance to the host community. Thus, diaspora is, not just a term defining movement across cultural borders, but also includes the “political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford, 1994, p. 308).
Isolation within community often marks the diasporic experience for racial and/or ethnic minorities in rural locations (Chávez, 2005). In these locations within the U.S., racial and/or ethnic minority groups live just outside of town, in specific areas within the larger community or in enclaves of specific housing developments, sometimes out of economic necessity and sometimes out of choice. Isolation is also social as when local community groups keep, purposefully but more frequently inadvertently, ethnic and/or racial minorities out of community events (for example, by not availing a language translator, not providing transportation, or not having child-care assistance). With respect to isolation, Chávez notes that the message is often understood as marginalization, which positions people of color as the “Other,” excluded from the dominant culture (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Bammer (1994) contends that diaspora and displacement, then, serve as a metaphor for “outsiderness and alienation” (p. xi).

To be sure, there is the potential for a positive outcome of the diasporic experience. It asks the newcomer and the host community to call upon, refine, and/or develop a variety of skills in areas of cultural competence, problem-solving, language learning, social and political negotiation, accommodation and resistance, and resilience. It demands resourcefulness, imagination, hope, and persistence. Perhaps these are the very skills that sustain teachers of color teaching and living in small rural communities.

The Value of Stories/Narratives

We decided to garner participants’ stories about the development of critical racial and/or ethnic awareness, for it is that “narrative [that] is viewed as only a means to an end—the end of domination” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 62). Narratives are genres that organize presentations into story formats (Schwandt, 2001). They are a “basic form of social life, mode of knowing and mode of communication” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 1). We focused on teachers’ personal stories because they provide a culturally appropriate epistemological framework consistent with oral cultural traditions. For example, narratives are consistent with the Latin-American genre of spiritual testimonios whose overt intention is the raising of a critical consciousness (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1998).

Narratives challenge existing perspectives and provide an alternative worldview (Coles, 1989). They show how complex, ironic, ambiguous, and fateful life can be (Richardson, 1990). In doing so, we not only learn about the chameleon nature of oppression but also illuminate the effort(s) by the marginalized to struggle toward a humanizing pedagogy (Kanpol, 1992). Stories work against essentializing the experience of the “Other,” since they create space to learn about the multiplicity of subject positions in a society by highlighting the political dimensions of teaching and learning, as well as raising questions about what society really believes about equality, justice, and liberty (Shor, 1987). The use of narratives, however, is not without its critics (Simon, 1999). Delgado-Bernal (2002) asserts that at the core of the challenges associated with narratives is an epistemological debate about objectivity versus subjectivity. We acknowledge the identified problems, but narratives have the potential to offer an alternative to “Eurocentric epistemological orientation” (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 120).

Methodology
This qualitative single-study investigation developed in three phases. Phase one identified 13 teachers of color from rural school districts across Wyoming that were willing to participate. In phase two, the researchers invited eight (8) teachers whose ethnic and/or racial identities were important elements in their work (based on an initial questionnaire) to participate in the study. This phase involved interviews, observations of participants while teaching, and post-lesson discussions, followed by an invitation to a focus-group interview. Phase three (focus-group) offered the first opportunity for the researchers and participants (n= 6) to gather as a group. Activities for the 8 hour focus-group session included formally structured group interviews, storytelling, completing questionnaires, and responding to each others’ thoughts and reactions. Only data from phase three (focus-group weekend [stories]) are presented in this article (see Castañeda, Kambutu and Rios, 2006, for a more detailed overview of the complete study).

**Story Collection**

During the story-telling session, the researchers asked participants to share a personal story about a moment or event when they came to know themselves as belonging to an ethnic and/or racial minority. The researchers allowed participants approximately 30 minutes to think, reflect, and respond orally to the following questions (as adapted from Wallace, 1996): 1) When and where did the event happen? 2) Who was involved in the event? 3) What were important preceding events? 4) Why is this event important to you? 5) What did you learn from the event? and, 6) How has this event impacted you as a teacher today? The shared stories were videotaped and transcribed. Data were analyzed qualitatively following an emergent, grounded research approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, because the researchers hoped to achieve a greater authenticity in representing these narratives, they worked collaboratively, attending to the historical/social/cultural contexts embedded in the following two questions: a) What is the narrative saying at face value, and b) How is the narrative saying it? (Czarniawska, 2004).

Data showed that five (5) participants told stories about incidences that occurred in rural settings. The researchers, however, included the sixth story about experiences in an urban setting because it still influenced this teacher’s current work in a small rural community (Table 1 provides an overview of participants’ demographics; pseudonyms are used). Several themes emerged, and the researchers juxtaposed and melded them into the following three categories: a) Awakening to difference, 2) Surfing the cultural divide, and 3) Countering oppression. An analysis of these themes along with pertinent stories revealed the meaning of social injustices hidden deep within each storyteller’s identity. These hidden meanings continue to influence participant’s social and professional activities in rural settings in different ways.

**Findings**

*Awakening to difference: Lessons about race and/or ethnic identities*

All six stories evidenced different levels of ethnic and/or racial awareness perhaps because these identities are learned. That is, people have different experiences with race and/or ethnic identity in terms of its development, as well as the ways in which it is contested. Harro (2000) describes the differences in lived experiences (socialization) and in disrupting oppression (liberation) as crucial in determining levels of awareness about racial and/or ethnic identity. This reality was present in different stories. For example, although the prompt during the story-telling session asked the participants to share a story of a moment when they became aware of
themselves as racial and/or ethnic minority, all the participants told stories about their experiences with race-and/or ethnicity-based prejudice and discrimination. Some storytellers considered experiences with racial and ethnic prejudice as individual acts, while others were able to place these experiences in larger social and political contexts.

Carolina had little experience with racial and/or ethnic injustice. Perhaps her fair skin color and her parents’ white-collar economic standing put her in a position of acceptance by the dominant culture. Thus, she enjoyed the many privileges and power usually reserved for members of the dominant race. At age 38, however, she participated in an activity assigned by her professor that forced her to think about the meaning of oppression and privilege as is evident in her story below.

**Carolina**

_I’ve stated before that I’ve never been discriminated against. I’ve been around people who were like me. I was accepted and welcomed, but I had a different experience in a college course that really was eye-opening. The professor lined us up and then asked questions such as: If your parents graduated from high school, take two steps forward; and we did. If your parents had a college degree, take two more steps forward; and I did. The next question was, ‘If you were from a single-parent family, take four steps back.’ So I was way up there, and there were people way back. The next question was, ‘If you are a minority go to where you started.’ And I went back to where I started. Even my peer who had been raised by a mother who didn’t go to high school, no dad, was on welfare, and other variables against her was now ahead of me. That was such a visual picture for me. I was almost in tears. What made it worse was that all my friends in my class felt just as bad as I did. I was the only one in the back where I started. It was a very telling exercise. I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I asked myself, ‘Is this the way people really see me? Is this where I am – at the back of the line? Is this the way people see this group of people that I am a part of? Is this the way my life has gone?’ That is not me! That’s not the way I’ve been treated! That’s not what I think people think of me! But, it forced me to ask if this is what they think of this group I’m a part of... my ethnic group and culture. I think that’s what makes me feel so bad. The impact to me as a teacher is basically, I will never make anyone feel this way in my classroom. Ever!_

To Carolina, this episode awakened her to think critically about issues of racial and ethnic differences. She learned how social relations in the U.S. placed people of different racial and/or ethnic groups on different sides of the divide (i.e., privileged and unprivileged). In her mind, albeit erroneous, Carolina existed in a place of power and privilege. Although she believed strongly in the notion that humans have equal experiences, struggles, and challenges, Carolina learned that racial and ethnic issues in the U.S. have the potential to complicate human equality.

Victor reacted similarly, but he also considered the deeper meaning of racial and ethnic prejudice. According to Victor, such injustice contributes to the state of powerlessness that is evident among the dominated groups. When social injustice is the norm, the oppressed are silenced, unconsciously accepting oppression rather than agitating for change. Victor’s story
shows the ways in which the stories he heard, told in public spaces, enabled him to comprehend the complexities of racial and/or ethnic identities.

**Victor**

*During my first year on campus I joined a minority student organization. Being around a Latino population is an experience I did not have until I came to the university. The students nominated me for the office of vice-president.... The president was from a small town, as well. As president and vice-president, we interacted with different people in different meetings. This was just wonderful. It was just great to talk about minority issues and experiences. I grew up on welfare. And trying to get out of this type of mini-culture by meeting other people was wonderful.*

Although proud of his racial and ethnic identity, Victor entered college with very little awareness of the ways in which ethnic prejudice was a shared injustice. Hearing stories from other college students within his ethnic group and from different cultural groups (moving from private to public) affirmed that his experiences as a Chicano were not at all personal and isolated, but rather, shared social experiences. Meanwhile, Sabrina’s story showed a sudden (and high) level of racial and/or ethnic awareness.

**Sabrina**

*My brother and I went to a junior high school where we were the only two Black faces... Seventh grade is a repulsive time for any female. I remember being on the baseball field and I said something, then a girl who came from a wealthy family said, ‘Oh, she’s so loud!’ And I remember thinking what I had said was not loud, but I also knew that what she was saying was attached to blackness, although I had never heard it before. My response was when I was near her to be quiet. Then later we were in a biology class and I said something and she looked at me and said, ‘You really think you’re something, don’t you?’ I was so stunned and I remember hesitating and saying, ‘Yes!’ It was as though I had slapped her, just by responding yes. I became silent, but she revealed in me a pride I didn’t know. I learned that, since her observation was so incorrect, I was either a remarkable actress or I was being perceived with something not based on reality, period! So, I concluded how dare somebody look at me and think they know me. It’s a point of identity that I have kept since.*

Perhaps because of her experiences with racial antagonism, Sabrina learned at an early age about her identity as a person of Black heritage.

**Surfing the cultural divide: Understanding racial and/or ethnic tensions**

All six stories documented awareness of the omnipresent tensions between racial and/or ethnic minorities and members of the dominant group. These tensions are amplified in shared spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. However, there is the hope that integration could enhance cultural understanding. When people of different races and ethnicities know each other authentically and genuinely, they are able to freely cross the cultural divide, which is an invisible entity, yet very real in terms of the socialization and allocation of societal power and privilege. Crossing the cultural divide is likely to lessen existing racial and ethnic prejudices. The following excerpts show the varied ways in which different storytellers were
conscious of crossing the cultural divide. But in doing so, they often encountered people on the “other side” who were less than welcoming. These three stories include the role of adults, usually parents, in propagating racial and/or ethnic prejudice.

**Helena**

_I was a 16 year old Hispanic dating a White boy. His mother hated me for this without even knowing me. She hated me until the day she died without speaking one word to me, without knowing anything other than seeing what I was. It was horrible. My father was just as upset. We were crossing the cultural barrier to inter-date. He did not want me to ever date White people. ‘You stay within your own race. It’s all right to speak to them, but you don’t let them get close to you.’ Although my father compromised, which was very difficult for him, the boy’s mother never did. It was a traumatic, eye-opening experience! To think, it was your first love, and it was complicated by all the pressure of crossing the racial and cultural barriers. I didn’t know at the time whether he wanted to date me because I was different (nobody ever came out and said I’m better than you racially, but there was an undercurrent that you just didn’t date White people), but as time went on, he just wanted to get to know me. We had a lot in common. I admire him for withstanding the abuse. So, what did I learn? You can’t be put in a mold. Although his parents were very prejudicial, he still went outside the box. He started me on a road that made me feel equal. Pity for his mother! Because she never knew the son she had._

For Helena, surfing the cultural divide was deeply personal. This process made her aware of existing racial and/or ethnic differences. From her perspective, racial and ethnic prejudices are learned through intense coercion either implicitly or explicitly. Meanwhile, Joslyn’s story reveals the critical role parents and the general community play in teaching children prejudicial practices.

**Joslyn**

_I was a substitute teacher and I recall one day, just out of nowhere, this kid, young boy, on the other side of the classroom asked me, ‘You like watermelon?’ I said, ‘Well yes, but not more than anybody else.’ It was getting close to Thanksgiving. He continued, ‘Do you have fried chicken at Thanksgiving?’ I replied, ‘No.’ The boy insisted, ‘Do you eat Cornish game hens and wild rice stuffing?’ I just cut him off right there. I don’t know what his experiences were, but he was trying to see whether I was like other Black people, i.e., whether we eat fried chicken all the time? No. We like other foods too. There are a lot of misconceptions that children learn from their parents. Just through generations, misconceptions proliferate. I don’t always know how to counteract this. I can’t ask where did you learn this, from your parents? I wanted to say, ‘You little twit! I’m a real person, I’m a human being, and I have blood. I like a variety of foods, I don’t go out in vacant lots and pick up cut greens.’ But there are a lot of old misperceptions. It’s difficult to try to replace them or counteract what their parents told them._

Joslyn encountered obstacles to crossing the racial and/or ethnic divide that included ignorance about cultures, misunderstanding, and a lack of motivation or reason for the dominant group to learn about “Other” cultures. Once again, strong socialization from parents and the general society played a pivotal role in teaching cultural prejudice.
Les’s story, however, illustrates that children are not necessarily committed to adults’ loyalty to cultural practices. Aboud and Doyle (1996) assert this notion as presented in the Social Reflection Theory that purports that children’s behavior is not necessarily influenced by their parents. Rather, children are more likely than adults to freely cross the racial and/or ethnic divide, to accept “Other” cultures, and to refuse to be contained in a cultural box.

Les

I must have been 12 or 13 years old when one of my best friends and I were walking, and he just looked at me and said, ‘You know, my dad didn’t really like you when we first met?’ His dad didn’t really like me or my family because we are Japanese, but he didn’t really have a choice because my friend and I were on the same baseball team. The one thing I learned was I am different. It’s not so much my friends were seeing me as different; rather, their parents saw me as such. So, now when I teach, I don’t worry about the kids. It’s the parents I have to keep an eye on. I always send home a letter at the beginning of the year to explain my background. I’m Japanese. I went to a university, played sports and grew up in a small town. This gives people the idea I’m an educated person who understands issues in my home state. There are those parents out there judging me already. So, I want to make people aware of whom I am.

Les shows a desire to cross the racial and/or ethnic cultural divide. He wants the dominant group to accept his identity. He believes that acceptance of his identity could lead to privileges that are essential for survival in his small rural community. Les seems to believe that the answer rests in finding points of mutual connectedness rather than deconstructing the assimilationist mindset that is part of his experiences in rural settings. Assimilation spurs members of subordinate racial and/or ethnic groups to lose traditional characteristics by “adopting the behaviors, values, beliefs and the lifestyles of the dominant culture” (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995, p. 199).

Countering oppression: Lived experiences and responsibilities

All six stories demonstrate the ways in which oppression is made manifest. Marginalized groups are often silenced by the pain, dissonance, and powerlessness associated with oppression. A constant struggle against the dominant group’s desire to have the marginalized conform is an added burden, but the oppressed have to seek liberation using every strategy possible. Victor felt successful in navigating different cultural contexts by identifying with a variety of social-justice movements. His story illuminates successful experience at forming alliances and reaching across cultural differences.

I’m also part of a culture awareness group that takes minority kids down to the university to talk about how important college is. I tell kids, ‘If you want change, you need to be at the college to get educated, to be professional, because if you’re not, it’s hard to change things.’ Kids need a minority teacher to talk to about certain issues. Unless you are a minority and you’ve been discriminated against, you really don’t understand the issues. So, I want to be there for those kids. My long-term goal is to get my own room where kids can come to me with anything.

Although a college education allowed Victor numerous opportunities for cultural awakening, he apparently was not fully aware about the complex nature of racial and/or ethnic prejudice. This is
evident in the fact that Victor still did not have an office, a room of his own so he could establish himself. He appeared convinced that this was simply how life is and, therefore, acquiring his own room is a long-term goal. Victor’s reaction might be reasonable, but covert racism and ethnic prejudice could be at work as well.

After experiencing marginalization for a long time, we wonder if Victor has “normalized” his marginalization. People who are constantly exposed to injustice are likely to consider those experiences standard or normal. This coping strategy incapacitates the mental, emotional, and motivational focus (Seligman, 2006). Clay (1986) suggests that the longer a person is in such a condition, the stronger the perception of normality, a condition commonly exhibited by chronically abused people. Victor’s awakening could cause a shift from normalizing experiences with social injustice to agitating for change.

Meanwhile, Sabrina believes strongly that “Others” will never understand what it means to be a person of color. She therefore takes the following principled approach to cause change:

*I’m real torn with the notion that I have to educate the oppressor. I’m becoming more and more uncomfortable with that passive acceptance. It is always a responsibility of the oppressed to show that we are like this or that. I’m clearly willing to teach the oppressor because I teach, but I’m not willing to accept that this is my function in life. This is my choice. I teach because I choose to teach, and if you care to learn from me, good! I’ll bend over backward to help you get what you need from me, but in the final analysis, if you do not, that comes from you.*

Sabrina imbrues her role as an educator with willingness to help the dominant social group understand how racism impacts everyone. This allows her to flip the individual-responsibility ideology into a resistance (Sandoval, 2000). Sabrina is convinced that progress towards eradicating racism and ethnic prejudice will come when the dominant group is genuinely interested, committed, and participating fully in the process. Although ending all forms of race- and/or ethnic-based discrimination is truly a shared responsibility, Sabrina suggests that the dominant group has a heavier responsibility to end social injustice because it has the social power to do so. The oppressed must, however, continue to agitate vigorously to end all forms of social injustice.

**Discussion**

As we read these stories, affirmation is evident of the critical role narratives play in helping people to access experiences and thoughts hidden deep in their identities. Because these hidden experiences have the potential to shape people’s daily activities, they need to be moved from unconscious to conscious levels. Such a step creates space for informed understanding of self in relation to societal structures. Although these stories called for a snapshot of a particular moment, when participants developed a consciousness about themselves racially and/or ethnically, we heard various experiences and reflections. As expected, a human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition (Sandoval, 2000) was evident, perhaps because we asked the participants to share a moment or event when they came to recognize themselves as belonging to a racial and/or ethnic minority. One member, Sabrina, seemed to evidence a supremacist form of
consciousness-in-opposition in the idea that her differences are better than the differences of those from the dominant class. Nonetheless, other educators preferred a human-rights consciousness-in-opposition. While urging others to look beyond physical differences, these teachers asserted their humanness perhaps because life in rural settings would tolerate only this form of consciousness-in-opposition.

As a group, the participants recognized that racial and/or ethnic prejudice is a learned phenomenon with a distinctly chameleon-like attribute that is rarely explicit and overt. It is also clear that skin color plays an important role in how one experiences racial prejudice and ethnic discrimination in the U.S. For example, Sabrina and Joslyn, the two African-American participants, shared the most overt examples of racism and prejudice. Their stories demonstrate that one way to foster the development of an informed racial and/or ethnic identity is by understanding that personal experiences are not personal at all. Rather, they are based on societal and institutional biases. Victor’s learning about the stories of others who also experienced prejudice helped him to move oppression from the private/personal to the public/collective levels.

Evident to us in the participants’ stories is the idea that racism and discrimination is painful, and the sting of this pain readily comes to mind even after many years. The significance cannot be overstated that all the participants directed their responses to the story-telling prompt toward recounting stories of being “Othered.” Beyond the pain, these experiences create a dissonance in how one thinks about herself/himself. Also evident is a sense of feeling overwhelmed: feeling as if there is little that can be done to counter the hegemonic ideal and actions detailed in these stories. Part of that hegemonic ideal is a message that if teachers of color would just either conform or assimilate, social injustice would dissipate. Even with cultural assimilation, however, one must confront social-structural forces that create dissonance in their lives (consider Carolina being told to go back to the beginning of the line).

In our reading of these narratives, we also sensed that these teachers, who have developed a strong human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition, have come to see the role that social power plays in these experiences with oppression. Thus, there is recognition that being in a position of power and authority is helpful in challenging racial and/or ethnic injustice. This implies that those from the dominant groups are most responsible for changing ideologies, structures, and relationships that serve to marginalize, since they have the most social power. Generally, however, the participants acknowledged their responsibility to educate the dominant group with respect to issues of oppression and liberation.

These teachers of color described their role in eradicating racial and/or ethnic injustice. Perhaps because of the participants’ strong support of a human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition, they realized that they had some shared responsibility toward this desired end. People of color, from these teachers’ perspectives, must challenge racism and ethnic prejudice on both cognitive and affective levels. These teachers are also cultural workers. That is, they not only use their racial and/or ethnic backgrounds to teach, but they also use them to touch the very core of humanness (i.e., how we feel about others and ourselves). Perhaps it is best to describe the role these teachers saw for themselves as causing cognitive dissonance about what and who people of color are in order to counter those especially pernicious socio-cultural constructs held
about people of color in society. Indeed, their very presence, legitimated by their role as teachers, is an act of resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), but they are also dedicated to spurring an affective awakening in those from the dominant racial and/or ethnic groups.

More specifically, Carolina vowed to avoid any actions that serve to humiliate students because of their racial and/or ethnic heritage. Les spoke of the importance of identifying similarities in the context of difference. Joslyn urged a continual affirmation of self even when faced with a student’s race- and/or ethnic-based questions. Victor focused on the power of maintaining and building both intra-cultural and cross-cultural alliances. Helena worked to communicate how prejudice and discrimination keep people distant—and harm all in the process. Finally, Sabrina advocated pushing the responsibility for dealing with racial and/or ethnic-based injustice on those with the greatest social power.

**Conclusion**

Story-telling is a mode of communication that helps people to access experiences and thoughts hidden deep within their identities. From the stories shared, for example, participants made meaning of various experiences with social injustices, hidden deep within each storyteller’s identity, but impacted their social and professional activities in rural settings. Evidently, due to isolation from major metropolises with diverse cultural populations, teachers of color in rural Wyoming experienced unique problems such as intense feeling of professional and social isolation. Problematic also is omnipresent tensions between racial and/or ethnic minorities and members of the dominant group. These tensions are amplified in shared spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Nonetheless, because the presence of teachers of color increases the academic performance of all students, these educators of color continue to teach in rural settings. However, they need to develop coping strategies such as a strong sense of self-awareness and ethnic identity. They must refuse to be defined by existing prejudicial racial and ethnic notions. This critical ingredient in the struggle against racism and ethnic prejudice, identity disorientation, frustration, and strong feelings of powerlessness cannot be underestimated for its value in “recentering the self depending upon the kind of oppression encountered” (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996, p. 5). To be successful, teachers of color in isolated, rural, and/or diasporic settings need space to discuss remedies for their cultural and professional challenges. Indeed, it is what the participants have incorporated into their professional demeanor and action that gives their stories pedagogical significance. By choosing to teach in rural, diasporic settings, and by adopting a strong human-rights form of consciousness-in-opposition, however, these teachers of color are promoting social integration in barricade-reducing ways in relation to their students, colleagues, administrators, and parents.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, although narratives are likely to provide valuable data, personal stories do not represent common experiences and are difficult to analyze (Simon, 1999). Second, researchers’ biases could easily interfere with objective analysis of stories, perhaps altering the intended meaning altogether (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Third, although aware of participants’ specific racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, the researchers did not perform pertinent analysis. We also did not examine the effects of different types of rural settings on participants’ responses. Finally, the small number (n=6) of participants, drawn from a
single rural state in the U.S. is not likely to provide general information. Nevertheless, this study provides an initial picture about the challenges teachers of color experience in small rural communities. Due to the challenges encountered, these educators have adopted a “Pedagogy of Survival.” Consequently, the participants have modified their own views and behaviors, and are working against normalizing the marginalization of people of color, a commitment that is informed further by the fact that all chose to teach in isolated, rural, and/or diasporic settings to break down barriers to social justice.
References


Table 1

Participant profiles (n=6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Teaching Assignment</th>
<th>Story Setting</th>
<th>Story Foci</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>Female/Latina</td>
<td>English/Middle School</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Cross-Cultural Simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Female/Latina</td>
<td>Spanish/High School</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Inter-Racial Dating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Female/African American</td>
<td>Science/Alternative High School</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Students’ Prejudicial Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les</td>
<td>Male/Japanese American</td>
<td>Math/Middle and High School</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Proving Credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Male/Latino</td>
<td>Social Studies &amp; ESL/Middle School</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Awareness of Normalizing Prejudice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Female/African American</td>
<td>English/High School</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Confronting Racism and Oppression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Footnotes

1 We acknowledge this description as an orthodox conception and, as such, does not represent all rural settings; each is unique with its own “culture” which is dynamic and multifaceted. We acknowledge that some rural settings in the U.S. have (historically and contemporarily) large numbers of ethnic and/or racial minorities: African Americans in the south, Latinos in the Southwest, and Native Americans on reservations. Thus, we argue that one can live in a rural community that is not characterized as diasporic. However, given the locations where our participants live and work, they often find themselves as either the sole person or member of a significantly small racial and/or ethnic group in their locations. Thus, our participants’ reflect life in the diaspora.

ii As three faculty who are under-represented in the academy (one African and two Latina/o-Americans), we acknowledge our own “positionality,” rooted as it is in our own experiences with oppression and struggles for liberation as an influence on the theoretical lenses we bring to this research project.

iii Sandoval uses the word “typography: (no “typology”) deliberately to demonstrate how the consciousness-in-opposition that is employed is sensitive to place.

iv To preserve integrity and tone, each story is presented with as few edits (mostly for space) as possible.

v To be explored fully in a future study enriched with actual classroom and school setting observations of these teachers of color.