

Black Men, White Teachers, White Colleagues: An Autoethnographic Triangulate of Racial Profiling Interaction and Closure

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Abstract: Educationally, I use autoethnography as a method for teaching social work students to write self-narratives and to listen first to their own experiences, then to listen fully to their clients. Therefore, this qualitative, autobiographical article uses autoethnography to reconsider three decades of racially charged experiences, and how racial profiling affected me as a younger, and eventually older, Black male. Within the context of educating students of social work, this article examines three written self-narratives with reflexive responses as support, and it outlines how students can learn from this exercise.

Keywords: racial profiling, relationships, practice

Educating Social Work Students through Autoethnography: The Racial Profiling Experiences of a Black Man

In the early 1980s, I was a student at a Boston University. One fall evening, a classmate and I had arranged to meet at her apartment to go out to dinner. I was on my way to her apartment, walking slowly. People were coming home from work, so the sidewalk was busy. I was walking toward the entrance of a subway station. From a distance, I could see people flocking up the stairs and then fanning out as they headed in so many directions. As I approached the entrance to the subway station, I came upon a white female who was walking slower than me. I advanced, maneuvering to pass her on the right. Immediately, she noticed my presence and glanced back at me with a look that I can only describe as fearful. Then, she began to run! I instantly stopped in disbelief and shock. I felt numb, and for a few seconds I didn't comprehend what was happening. In my naiveté, I never thought that someone would simply fear me, would run from me just because I happened to be in close proximity. Within mere seconds that seemed like minutes, the white female stopped running and noticed that I had stopped walking. She turned and saw me staring at her in disbelief. In the distance, I could see what appeared to be shame on her face. She uttered a quiet apology and continued to walk.

My innocent wonder – not the incidents in this vignette – is what should be shocking to readers because I should have known better given the history of racism with Black males in the U.S. I

share this story of thirty years ago to say that nothing has changed for a Black male. Racial profiling at the most unconscious level is alive and well. I know this is a cynical statement, but this truth is undeniable when you are a Black male in America. I was stereotypically treated as if I were dangerous because I was both Black and a male. Sadly, my experience is not unusual. According to Ghandnoosh (2014), “White Americans overestimate the proportion of crime committed by people of color and associate people of color with criminality” (p. 3).

Such a view of criminality connected merely to a Black man's color leads to the painful reality that Black males continue to be vulnerable. Imagine walking into a store and being watched or followed simply because you fit the stereotypical and socially constructed profile of a person with a specific gender and race identification. Imagine walking down a street where a white female looks nervously at you and nearly sprints to her car, locking the door quickly even though you are yards away – all because (as with the woman walking to the subway in my vignette) she happened to see you, a Black man, approaching her direction. Imagine entering a clothing store where the employee greets everyone who entered after you with “Can I help you?” but offers you no greeting. These incidents are indications that you have been racially profiled. Racial profiling may be experienced as a humiliation or a personal attack that can be quite blatant or even subtle (and therefore deniable by the perpetrator). Such profiling is commonly directed toward a person – historically toward males – whose physical characteristics (usually racially based) are common of a marginalized group. I am able to offer this description distinctly from a Black man's perspective because I have been racially profiled; by

now, no longer a naive young man, I have had this kind of experience more times than I can count and certainly enough to recognize it when it occurs. I do not need to research a formal definition with scholarly citations to identify the clearly perceptible, instinctual, gut-clenching feelings that surge inside me when I have been profiled as a Black male. In this area, I know my subject firsthand.

Since the 2012 fatal shooting in Florida of Trayvon Martin, a young Black male, there have been multiple deaths of young Black males that have received national media attention. Their deaths and the tenor of media frenzy unfortunately verify that racial profiling is alive and well in this post-Civil Rights era of supposed harmony and equality for everyone even though, as Ghandnoosh (2014) said, “most White Americans no longer endorse traditional forms of prejudice associated with era of Jim Crow racism-overt beliefs about the biological inferiority of Blacks and support for segregation and discrimination” (p. 30). Those people who do – overtly or covertly – believe in white superiority are critically dangerous to people of color. The massacre of innocent church goers on June 17, 2015 by a racist young White man in Charleston, South Carolina showcases the harsh atrocity against Black people. In the traditional sense, the idea behind racial profiling is for law enforcement professionals to have a means to prevent crime or to identify perpetrators of crime. More realistically, racial profiling seems to have enabled law enforcement officers to use their power to target marginalized men of color with excessive force and violence in the name of maintaining order. It also enables everyday citizens to shy away from Blacks in public and private settings and it somehow seems to encourage mentally and morally ill people to target and kill Blacks and other people of color.

I write this article as an experienced social work professional and assistant professor at a prominent northeastern U.S. college. Although most often my students are White, from time to time there are a few males of color, especially Black males, in my classes. Whenever I share the story that opened this article, I immediately get “the look” from them. I do not need to finish; the incident is all too familiar to them. Unfortunately, they have been subjected to and are able to identify similar circumstances of racial profiling having occurred to them, which they

often share in class. Sadly, all too little has changed, generationally, from my time to theirs today, regarding racial profiling.

As a social work professor, one of my jobs is to teach students in the Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) and in the Masters of Social Work (MSW) programs about the social constructs that both unconsciously and consciously guide their life choices and perceptions of the humanity that surrounds them. Particularly regarding social class and race, these students need overtly educational opportunities to reflect on often unselfconscious beliefs learned in myriad ways as children in the U.S. They need poignant and powerful new experiences that encourage them to dig into notions of appearances and perceptions that cause them to presume that people *are* treated alike just because they know people *should be* treated equally. These new, often young, helpers-in-training benefit from the power of narrative – specifically of their teacher’s self-narratives. It prompts them to ask the unasked questions and to question the unquestioned perceptions that will interfere with their abilities to act as social work professionals. I use autoethnography to both harness my own conscious awareness of racial experiences, and as a tool for teaching social work students to recognize their own experiences in which they are either judged by their gender, race, or socioeconomic status, or have prejudged others. Before they work with clients who have their own history with prejudice, they need to become self-reflective. In this article, I describe how autoethnography can help in teaching new social workers to listen to themselves fully and then, with newly opened ears, to their clients.

The self-narratives that comprise this article are examples of the kind of autoethnographical work teachers can use to their students’ benefit in the helping professions. Equally important, the teacher’s act of self-search involved in autoethnography is a necessary first step toward being able to help students write their own autoethnographical self-narratives. Hence, the self-narratives in this article demonstrate a viable teaching process that may lead to self-knowledge and a compassionate ability to listen to clients. As written, these self-narratives articulate familiar themes from my past, rooted in my adolescence and carried into adulthood. In ways that reading a textbook cannot, they offer examples of stories that channel the interconnection of familiarity

surrounding blatant inequities and disrespect for my racial composition as a younger and then older Black man. I use these vignettes to sketch details that expose my experiences endured in connection with some white Americans. My self-narratives capture raw and pronounced incidences that generate embedded emotions and reactions, some of which were not fully uncovered until I wrote them down (despite orally sharing some of them with students over the years). The act of writing these self-narratives captured nuances in how I coped with and navigated through dark events with some white Americans in my life. Both this written act and the written artifact that can be shared with students offer potent ways to teach those in the helping professions about both their own and others' attitudes, which certainly will influence their work.

In this article, I examine autoethnography as an empowering and effective teaching tool that engages and educates people in the helping professions. Using the intimate details of my personal experiences as a Black male with memories of racial profiling that developmentally impacted me as a student and young professional, I offer my vulnerability to help students of social work reconsider racial profiling and how it may have influenced them in their own lives and actions – as well as how it may impact those people they assist as professional social workers. To meet these aims, I first explore autoethnography as a teaching method for offering actual information about racism, prejudice, and stereotyping encounters. I then use autoethnography to articulate that racial profiling is not exclusive to law enforcement and that these actions and behaviors can occur in other settings. Finally, I use it to provide student helping professionals with vivid examples of racial profiling intended to promote dialogue regarding the social injustices that affect to their clients who are members of a marginalized group. I end this piece with specific suggestions for how teachers might use autoethnography with their student social workers or other helping professionals.

Autoethnography

According to Wall (2006), “autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend

understanding about a societal phenomenon” (p. 1). Specifically, “autoethnography is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions” (Custer, 2014, p. 1). In basic terms, “as a form of ethnography, autoethnography overlaps art and science; it is part art or self and part ethno or culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 31).

The premise of “autoethnography is to use self as the subject of investigation” (Chang, 2008, p. 62). Therefore, the rationale to use autoethnography as an investigative tool is that it provides a wide lens of self-awareness that leads a person to uncover and to understand the meanings of social phenomena. Denzin, as cited in Furman (2015), explained: “Researchers’ capacity to use their own humanity to connect with the humanity of others is essential; increasing our own capacity for emotional depth and insight is certainly a prerequisite to our producing research of emotional depth and sophistication” (p. 103). Researchers who engage in autoethnographic research strip away those prerequisite, evocative layers before experiencing both positive and negative emotions that might challenge their internal selves and, similarly, those positive and negative experiences related to self. This work can lead the autoethnographic researcher to rehash the evocative experiences. Rehashing, in turn, can enable the autoethnographic researcher to raise to conscious levels those experiences, which may empower them to become experienced storytellers of their own lives. According to Custer (2014), “Not only does an individual have to face their own pain, often times they are exposed to the pain and anguish of other people who have experienced similar circumstances” (p. 1). As an experienced storyteller around a particular experience, the autoethnographic researcher offers the self through self-disclosure by sharing their evocative experiences with others who have dealt with or who are dealing with similar experiences. Custer (2014) stated that “autoethnography by its very nature is engagement of self” (p. 4). Self-disclosure as a mode of therapeutic treatment is a way for a reader of the autoethnographer’s work to connect and navigate his or her own evocative challenges and to not feel alone. To this end, autoethnography becomes not only a research tool, but an educational one as well.

Wall (2006) discussed the necessity to conduct reflexivity as part of the autoethnographic process,

finding it beneficial to “step back” from the process and reflect on the “presence, standpoint, integrity, or characteristic” (p. 3) that might be influential to the autoethnographic writing. Such reflexive thinking can be usefully conducted through writing. Autoethnography, therefore, often engages writing about one’s emotions, which is something social work teachers typically do not ask of students despite a “strong connection between writing and the healing of emotional wounds” (Foehr, 2000, p. 340). Such personal writing can help people to engage their past and their fears in positive, courageous ways that enable a transformative reframing of lived experience (p. 350). Therefore, autoethnography is a potent teaching tool, but it certainly is not without its dangers; those who educate helping professionals through such writing should be aware of how sharing their vulnerabilities may encourage similar openness in their students, who must learn to protect themselves even while offering up their own stories. Indeed, those students who practice such self-revelation also require deeply respectful responsiveness from their teachers. Mindful modeling of how to work with such self-expression is necessary. Custer (2014) stated: “Writing and telling a story about oneself can open old wounds, but also manifests the energy needed to heal them completely” (p. 9). The thoughtful educator will guide students carefully and with deep respect for their vulnerability when using autoethnography to teach. This method of self-revelation for teaching purposes can help to situate the classroom as a safe, if ideologically and emotionally challenging, setting.

From my personal, authorial perspective, finding the courage to use autoethnography was excruciatingly hard. It required me to revisit a period in my life as a younger – and eventually older – Black man that I would have preferred to suppress. However, the chronicle of these self-narratives with their supportive reflections have provided the opportunity to step outside the common teaching box of exploring textbook materials and from the traditional research modes to offer helping profession students real opportunities to learn and use accepting communication strategies. Furthermore – and equally important – the telling of these stories has enabled me to use my experiences and sense of self in a qualitative, empathic, and purposeful condition to heal wounds about racial hurtfulness that have affected me deeply, while bringing closure to those

past episodes through storytelling. It was personally important to me to address these wounded feelings as they held the potential to negatively influence my work with students as well as my professional social work interactions with, for example, white teachers. Autoethnography and self-narrative, therefore, have powerful educational potential for current and future helping professionals.

Finally, autoethnography as a teaching method provides educators the opportunity to reflect on significant periods in their lives. In my case, it offered an opportunity to examine significant instances of racial discord that influenced my thinking about the world. In fact, the self-narratives presented in this article have become a platform for architecting my racial identity as a Black man, which transmits to my students. Each self-narrative has a specific message that resonates with racial profiling and discord. They transition from one to the other, resonating with consistent themes and patterns that magnify crucial incidents in my racial development and awareness as a person of color. By offering reflexive responses after each self-narrative, I model for students that such stories can breathe as a portrait of endurance about oneself.

Three Autoethnographic Stories

These three narratives capture the memories of racial discord that began in my adolescence. Prior to attending high school, I did not experience noticeable racial disharmony in the primary grades. After experiencing the incidences that these self-narratives describe, however, I learned to internalize racism and prejudice. That was until the acts of telling them to students and then of writing about them allowed me to share painful encounters. This held them up for young social work students to consider and allowed me to begin to heal. The power of self-reflection about my racial experiences has led to closure of some unforgotten wounds. But healing through autoethnography does not come cheaply, which is something educators in the helping professions need to remember. Indeed, the traumatic process of writing the self-narratives stirred up anger, frustration and sadness for me. There were times when I needed to walk away from the computer for hours or even a day to allow myself to sit with the rawness and emotionally charged feelings surrounding a painful period in my life. However, the act of writing both the self-narratives

and the reflexive responses was therapeutic, allowing me to finally tell my story about race and racism without needing to suppress or hold back the emotions linked to each narrative. According to DeSalvo (1999): “The therapeutic process of writing goes something like this: we receive a shock or a blow or experience a trauma in our lives. In exploring it, examining it, and putting it into words, we stop seeing it as a random, unexplained event” (p. 43). Telling my stories has finally given me a voice to speak for others who have had similar experiences so that they do not feel alone or unrecognized by societal behavior with a marginalized group. My students can learn from these honest struggles because they will see the human behind them in our classroom discussions, which is a process that mere textbook work can sterilize and render impotent.

The Poem

As a young Black male born in the early 1960s who attended school in the last years of that decade and in the 1970s, I was guarded in my interactions with some white Americans, especially teachers. Socially speaking, my approach derived from being a child of the Civil Rights era in the U.S. when protests and campaigns advocated equality for Black Americans. In my family, I was raised to know myself as Black and as needing not to perpetuate stereotypes. My older siblings – all three of whom became helping professionals with significant higher education – were my mentors. My sister earned an MSW and eventually established a successful, private clinical practice in which she helped many people before her death from breast cancer in 1998. One of my brothers earned a Ph.D. in social welfare policy while his twin earned a law degree. They taught me how to carry myself, to build high self-expectations, and to say “I can do this” to myself and to a world that sought to limit my future because of my skin color. My parents, too, extended a great deal of freedom to explore and expose myself to racial differences, although they did so with caution and concern. Whenever I ventured out, my mother would say, “Remember that you are Black first.” Her message was to be proud of my racial heritage, to let no one sway me way from being proud, and to always be aware of those persons who would judge me without any clear purpose, reason, or just cause. This aphorism became a ritual, signifying for me

what it meant to be Black in America and how such a statement can carry a burden.

One challenging experience stands out from my junior year of high school. The English Department hosted a school poetry contest. I do not remember the particulars, but students who entered the contest were expected to write a short poem and submit their writing to a six-person judging panel, all of whom happened to be white English teachers.

Having worked hard on my own poem, I remember nervously entering the school and walking to the third floor where the English department was located to submit it. I stood in line behind three white students as they presented their poems. When my turn came, the judge, who was a white female teacher, practically snatched my poem from my hands and read it intensely. My nervousness and fear escalated as I became intimidated and puzzled by her action, which clearly was different from what I had witnessed with the other three students.

After reading the poem, she looked hard at me and accused me of plagiarizing. I was shocked and didn’t know what to say or do. But, with as much composure as I could muster in the face of this accusation, I defended my writing while holding back tears of fear and anger. I explained that I had written the poem without assistance. Refusing to listen and aggressively handing back my poem, she walked away.

This teacher’s behavior, and how it differed between me and the white students who had been in line before me, suggested that she may have been racially motivated by societal stereotypes about young Black males and their presumed inability to be as successful scholastically as white students might be. I internalized her behavior as a negative illustration of how some white teachers viewed young Black male students.

I have never spoken to family or friends about this poetry contest incident. I remember trying to suppress and detach myself from it. However, I experienced shame even though I did nothing wrong. Unfortunately, the incident has left me feeling insecure about my writing, which makes this self-narrative approach to teaching all the more challenging (and suggests even more the freeing nature of autoethnography).

In all honesty, my reflexive responsive to this self-narrative about the poem took a while to write. I realized that the incident left me feeling strongly vulnerable and insecure about my ability to write. Even today, despite having earned an Ed.D. and being a scholar in the process of publishing, I question whether I am good enough to write scholarly pieces. I question whether my writing will be of importance and useful to the academic community, even for those who share my scholarly interests. I question how my peers, mainly those who are white, will receive my writing. I am afraid of being judged and have been made to feel incompetent by others, especially some white individuals, regarding my writing. I think this questioning leads me to procrastinate with writing at times, which is not a helpful scholarly behavior. However, as DeSalvo (1999) said, “I didn’t know that if you want to write and don’t because you didn’t feel worthy enough or able enough, not writing will eventually begin to erase who you are” (p. 31). I do not want to be erased or invisible.

In rereading this self-narrative, I remind myself of thoughts – fears? – about not being likely to win the contest because I am Black. I thought then, *Why am I even bothering?* I think that my nervousness about entering the poetry contest was not so much about the contest itself but more about the reception from the judging panel. Although I do not recall having experienced difficulties before this contest entry, it was well-known in my high school that many Black students (male and female) were excluded by some white English teachers for Advanced Placement courses in English and other subjects, even if they were academically proficient. At some point, I had begun to notice that there always seemed to be some type of excuse regarding Black students’ incapability to succeed academically. In fact, that English teachers thought that way was a standard rumor throughout the school, so I remember wondering *Who am I to think that they will greet me with fairness?* It felt like a self-fulfilling prophecy when the judge accused me of plagiarizing my poem. Indeed, I wondered how I possibly could have persuaded a white teacher that I actually had written my own poem when she perpetuated the racial indignities and stereotypical thinking and beliefs that young Black males were incapable of being academically successful.

In Tatum’s (2003) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? – And Other Conversations about Race*, the author did not simply examine why some Black high school students sit together in the cafeteria, but why other marginalized groups from different racial origins including whites create this culture for themselves. She writes: “As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the question of identity, asking ‘Who am I? Who can I be?’ in a way they have not done before. For Black youth, asking ‘Who am I?’ includes thinking about ‘Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?’” (pp. 52-53). Tatum implied that similar racial group membership offers unity, solidarity, safety, and security because of familiarity. “Stepping out of the box,” as I tried to do by entering the poetry contest, reveals my perhaps unconscious hope of assimilating into another racial group; indeed, the attempt altered my sense of unity and solidarity within my Black group. As I abandoned some of the familiarity with my own racial group, I simultaneously doubted my ability and questioned my identity and right to be in the contest because I was Black – the white teacher’s response to me notwithstanding.

Black students at my high school seemed to be shunted into three categories: *academically able*, *somewhat skillful*, and *limited*. Many Black students were in the somewhat skillful group and very few were considered academically able based upon the perceptions mainly by some white teachers. *Academically excellent* was not even possible, it seemed. Unfortunately, when one constantly hears inadequacies about oneself, one eventually begins to doubt one’s potential. The subliminal messages made me feel insecure and vulnerable, which translated into my insecurity about writing. However, I persevered despite these harmful messages. It is amazing how one incident from one’s past can trigger unpleasantness, ongoing pain and self-doubt.

My Colleagues – Them Against Me

As an adult, I worked for eight years in several school systems as a school social worker/guidance counselor in northeastern Massachusetts. In that context, I observed and experienced white teachers’ negative attitudes, interactions, and avoidance when dealing with their Black male students. In my professional role, an unwritten, unacknowledged – yet clearly expected – duty was added to my job. The duty was

managing the academic and behavioral challenges of Black male students and intervening in their relationships with white teachers. It was a strange and unspoken responsibility that some of my white teacher colleagues assumed I should take on. In cases where their discomfort or lack of awareness surfaced when confronted with racial differences, the need for my racial physical presence was obvious. The message was clear: I was the go-to Black person who would be expected to address, solve, and – I dare say – fix issues of racial disharmony when it came to conflicting and challenging interactions between a Black male student and a white teacher.

Not surprisingly, I found some white teachers' attitudes and behaviors blatantly insulting and racist in that they were observably uncomfortable when interacting with Black male students. Seemingly because of their discomfort, white teachers approached me to intervene regarding an academic performance and behavioral concern that they or other educators of any race should have been able to handle. In these cases, I typically had little to no previous contact with the Black male students before the request. The white teachers said such things of the students as: "Why is he not getting it?" or "Why don't you talk to him? I don't think he likes me." "He seems to be so angry." and "He should not be in this class. He should be in one of the lower-level math (or English) classes."

For some white teachers, the line of demarcation and their relationships with Black male students clearly was characterized by intolerance and resistance. Simply and without reservation, the line was drawn among some white teachers who demonstrated a controlled, segregated nature and intolerance for Black male students by not providing a nurturing classroom environment.

Writing about these experiences is causing me to wonder aloud why some white teachers are reluctant to interact with Black males in their classrooms. As educators, we are expected to assist all students equally and fairly regardless of their racial background. Obviously, to believe that this expectation was indeed fulfilled reflects my naiveté. Yet, being a Black male should not designate me to service all Black male students, whether I know them or not. Being a Black male certainly did not provide

me the ability to understand all Black males' experiences and challenges. How arrogant it is to assume such things.

Writing the first responsive narrative exhibited my fears, anxiousness and vulnerability as a younger Black male. However, writing this second self-narrative and its reflexive responsive from the perspective of being an older Black man has led me to feel anger and disillusionment toward some of my white colleagues. I realized that I had allowed my years of education and training as a school social worker to be taken for granted and minimized by some of my white coworkers, enabling them to successfully characterize me as the go-to Black colleague. Their characterization was an act of disservice and disrespect to me both as a professional and as a person. My racial identification seemed more important to some of my white colleagues than my skills as a school social worker/guidance counselor.

How dare my white colleagues think that they could dismiss their need to step up to the plate – frankly, to do their jobs – to support all students, especially young Black males? How dare my white colleagues think that they could shift their responsibilities to me, a Black man, just because I have the same racial identification as the student, so that they could avoid dealing with their discomfort? How dare my white colleagues pretend that race and cultural differences do not exist among us as educational professionals as they clearly acted out their avoidance to interact with students racially and culturally different from themselves? How dare my white colleagues allow what I can only characterize as their white privilege to manipulate and cause dissension in their teacher-student relationships, duties, and responsibilities as teachers by not treating young Black males with equity and respect?

Although at the time of these incidents I was angry and astonished by my white colleagues' lack of sensitivity and disservice to a particular group of students, intellectually I knew that I had the power to push back on their requests to become the go-to Black person in the building; I knew I could have empowered them to assume ownership as educators and to serve all students, not just a select few based upon their choice of comfort versus discomfort. However, my vulnerability got the better of my cognitive ability and therefore I allowed myself to be used for what I believed to be the preservation of the

Black male students. In other words, I did not want the Black male students to become the victims of potentially harsh and discriminatory behavior. It was obvious by the tone of some of my white colleagues' voices and their prejudicial and embedded attitudes that the Black male students might not have gotten a fair chance. In some respects, I felt like I needed to take on the responsibility to prevent disservice to the Black male students even if it meant suppressing my own raw emotions. I felt like I had a duty, even though it was not fair, to enable my white colleagues' to not establish a relationship with young Black males. I felt I could not allow these students to have the same detrimental experiences in school with some white teachers as I had as a young school-aged Black male.

Our students depend on their teachers to direct, guide, support and mentor them in their educational journey. How heartbreaking for some students, especially students of color, when this reality is shattered and the student-teacher relationship is tarnished based solely upon the color of the students' skin.

Being a Black Male and the Nature of Public Education

This third self-narrative depicts and considers my attempt to become a freshman at the high school, a college preparatory school, to which I referred in my first self-narrative. The school's guidance counselor, a tall white man, came to visit my eighth grade parochial grammar school class to meet prospective students. He identified himself as the guidance counselor for the incoming freshman class.

When I met with him, I noticed that he had my academic folder on the table and was reviewing the contents. As I sat across from him, I remember looking at his face and hearing his tone, which seemed to express uncertainty. He would look up at me over his brown eye-glass frames, periodically frowning in an authoritarian manner. His behavior made me feel uncomfortable and unsettled.

Although my city had four high schools from which students could choose, since the sixth grade I had dreamed of attending this particular high school. Whenever I would drive by, I would secretly say, "This is where I am going." However, during this

interview I wondered whether my dream would be shattered in a twenty-minute conversation because of the counselor's uncertainty about me. I recall being the only male of color in the group of prospective students from my grammar school. Most of my male friends of color went to the city's trade high school.

What was the guidance counselor's apparent hesitation about? What did it mean that he kept peering over his glasses that way? Was his reaction based upon my academic ability? Was it that I might not be a good fit? Or, was there a problem with my racial identification? Despite all of the worries brought about by this counselor's attitude, the good news is that I was accepted to the high school.

During my freshman year, that uncertainty and the guidance counselor's apparent reluctance to admit me resurfaced. Since he was the freshman guidance counselor, throughout my freshman year he periodically checked in to see how I was doing. However, his check-ins were not as supportive as they seemed to be purposeful. He had a mission, which appeared to be to prove that I was not college material. Even though I was accepted to the high school, the acceptance felt like a set up for failure, which certainly would support and perpetuate his perception of me a young Black male student who could not sustain the academic rigor of a college preparatory high school.

His actions included consistently overtly stating that I should transfer to the local trade high school. He expressed that because I was an "uncertain" candidate for college, gaining some type of trade would secure skills to prepare myself for employment. The rumor around school, which was supported by my own experience, was that he campaigned to remove students, specifically Black males who did not "cut the mustard" academically.

Before I graduated – I did graduate, of course, and then attended Boston University – I secretly learned both from some teachers of color and white teachers that he had been identified as a racist who habitually targeted young Black males. There was validation in having this information based upon my previous concerns that my racial identification might be a factor in his uncertainty about me, but it wasn't comforting to learn how close I had come to being manipulated by his racism.

This was a difficult self-narrative to write. With each rekindled memory, I experienced the resurfacing of this school authority's abhorrent behavior – a man who was expected to treat everyone the same regardless of differences. Can you imagine being a student given an exciting opportunity to achieve something that you have always wanted and, unbeknownst to you, there is an individual waiting for you to fail, plotting to remove you? Learning about such a person can damage one's self-esteem and leave deep emotional scars.

In truth, I lived a sheltered life growing up. My mother was extremely protective and watched almost my every move. Although she referred to me as her "city child," I was not out of her sight for any extended period of time. It was not until I went away to college that this over-protectiveness stopped. Because I was born and raised in a major city, I think I should have been sophisticated about people's behaviors and intentions, but I was not. As a sheltered last child and, in particular, having attended a parochial school during my earliest years, I grew up believing that my peers and the adults in my life had good intentions. I did not see them as mean-spirited people. Although I knew that evil existed within some people (e.g., murderers, rapist, and child molesters), I did not ever expect to encounter anyone whose extreme behavior and intent were purposely planned to be hurtful or emotionally abusive.

Now, I am not saying that the guidance counselor was an evil person. That would be incredibly harsh of me, but his actions and thinking could be characterized as detrimental toward me. In the beginning of the pre-acceptance interview, I believed that he had good intentions and my best interests at heart. However, during the interview process, his body language and his behavior of staring at me over his eye glass frames belied that assumption. I quickly learned not to trust him. In another ritual aphorism, my mother would say to me: "Not everyone is good! You think everyone is good. It is not so."

The previous two self-narratives had their basis in people's ignorant behavior and lack of self-awareness. In writing this vignette, I realized that the guidance counselor also demonstrated

ignorant behavior and tendencies. However, the guidance counselor later developed a strategic, calculating plan to disempower me and others like me. Why? Were his personal prejudices so strong that he had to minimize us first as human beings and second, as students? Were we a threat to him? If so, how? We were young Black males striving for an education in a college preparatory high school. We were young Black males who wanted to be successful and make our mark in the world. We were young Black males who wanted our families to be proud of us. We were young Black males who wanted to make a difference as examples and mentors for other young Black males. As I type, I choke up on these words and I wonder why someone might want so badly to stand in our way. Basically, what was he getting out of his behavior?

In the Broadway play and later movie *Sweet Charity*, the main character Charity sings "If My Friends Could See Me Now." In light of this guidance counselor's narrow-minded view and harmful shunting of Black students toward the trade schools, I would change the song's title to "If He Could See Me Now," and I would go back to that high school and let him and others who knew me then see me now. Unfortunately, the high school is gone. The building structure remains but has been made into condominiums. Besides, I graduated from high school 34 years ago. Most of the educators are retired or dead. Regardless, I know who I am. I know who I have become. I know my successes and accomplishments since entering and graduating from high school. As my deceased mother and sister so often said to me: "Once you get it, no one can take it away from you. It is yours to keep, and you have worked every bit as hard as anyone else!"

Using Autoethnography as an Educational Tool for Helping Professionals

Everyone has a story, which is both a cliché and a true statement. The art of storytelling – or of autoethnography in this case – captures one's ideology through emotions and how he or she constructs and navigates life. Autoethnographic learning, which is an interactive sharing of knowledge and experience through storytelling, empowers one to become comfortable with the self and the other. This process is especially powerful with helping professional trainees who will spend their professional lives interacting with people who may have had emotionally challenging lives. Because autoethnography can add a captivating

angle to courses beyond using textbooks alone, it allows the person who is writing the self-narrative to connect socially and emotionally with both the self and with others. For helping professionals-in-training, autoethnography as a learning process also can change how students connect socially and emotionally with clients who are vulnerable and who may be members of a marginalized group.

In examining Erikson's (1963, 1968) Stages of Psychosocial Development, educators recognize that his theories relate to and are measured by how social and emotional occurrences affect people throughout their human development, and the ways by which they navigate those experiences. Helping professionals-in-training need to learn that their individualized human experiences propel them to react, confront, manage, and navigate through socially related human development experiences. This cause-and-effect behavior is unavoidable and natural. Those human development experiences can be challenging and difficult to embrace. However, when educators help their students to embrace those experiences, the new cohort of helping professionals may be better able to share their stories with others whose voices may have been silenced because of shame. In using autoethnography to share our stories with students, we model for them how to confront and contemplate their own painful pasts and how they can do the same for their future clients. This sharing process allows us to enhance a person's personal growth and may help to erase harmful, stigmatizing pain and shame. The process of helping students get to know themselves will transfer into their work with clients who are socially different from themselves.

Here is how I use autoethnography with BSW and MSW students. I begin within the first two class meetings with the explicit instruction that to get to know their clients, they must first know themselves. This is my opening for sharing that autoethnography can be critical to teaching and learning. Throughout the course, especially within those first two weeks, I offer lectures, discussions, and full-class and small-group exercises that enhance their self-exploration and knowledge. To encourage them to take a chance in sharing stories about which they felt vulnerable, I model by using my own autoethnography to establish within the classroom a

safe environment where students can be comfortable. By sharing stories, we connect our vulnerability with that future and current clients.

The fields of social sciences traditionally examine human conditions through social relationships. The autoethnographic method uses the traditions of social science to capture the essence of one's personal experience (past or present) through storytelling. This research method demonstrates how intimately those experiences can reshape a person's human condition in the development of future social interactions and relationships. For educational purposes, one first uses autoethnography to self-reflect as I did with my stories. This self-reflection provides the writer with a "gatekeeper" mechanism as a reminder of the past and a prod to move into the future without resentment or animosity. In an educational setting, through periodic autoethnographic writing assignments throughout a semester, I as the instructor can offer these lessons overtly and can lead the students to inductive discussions about themselves. I share with social work students that autoethnographic lessons and writings will continuously allow them to become sensitive to their own experiences. At the same time, while establishing this internal connection for themselves, they will become sensitive to the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and groups. I also share that such sensitivity can be a double-edged sword in that I have become hyper-vigilant of my surroundings when issues of racial profiling occur. Being hyper-vigilant offers a protective shield, yet it does not provide me with a sense of safety; rather, it helps me to stay merely a few steps ahead of being subject to or becoming a product of the unjust racial profiling interactions that occur among some white Americans toward Black males in our country today.

When I stand before my students and have a discussion about race and racism, and the impact it has made on my social development, the classroom's silence is profound. The students' faces often appear stiff with disbelief. I can immediately tell that they want to ask questions, but they naturally are very cautious in doing so – really, there are so few appropriate and safe opportunities to raise such questions and receive honest, frank responses. The floodgate of questions does not open until I break the silence by saying "What do you think about what I said?" I purposely strive to share my own personal stories about race and racism to my students so that

they will use their own stories and become conscious in their preparation as helping professionals to expect similar if not other stories surrounding this subject. The sharing of my experiences enables them to feel safer to share their own stories and make parallel connections among me, themselves, and other clients that they will serve.

Through autoethnography, I use storytelling to teach my students to ask the necessary questions with open minds, but also I teach them to ask respectfully and to really listen to the answers. Many years ago, I tell them, I worked with an older Black woman. She often said to me:

I don't mind a person asking me a question about my race. Asking a question is a good thing. In some respects you want to get to know me and perhaps we can share similar stories. I do mind people making assumptions about me and my race. Making an assumption hurts; asking a question is more permissible, and I get the chance to answer or not.

Autoethnography for educating students in the helping professions is one way to teach them to ask the important questions and then to sit back and listen – first to themselves and then to others.

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