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My Truth, My Telling: Experiences of Black Women Principals in a Poetry-themed Workshop on Race and Gender

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My Truth, My Telling: Experiences of Black Women Principals
in a Poetry-themed Workshop on Race and Gender

By

Antonia J. Felix

This Dissertation is Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
the Educational Doctorate Degree
in Educational Leadership

Minnesota State University, Mankato
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Abstract

Teaching gaps reveal that students of color, who make up the majority of public school enrollees in the United States, do not receive instruction that provides them with the tools to achieve. Evidence of a link between principals and student achievement in the literature has cultivated an interest in improving principal leadership as a means of reversing persistent teaching gaps (National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). This study provides evidence of the systemic racism permeating public education as experienced by black women principals who are engaged in equity work to close teaching gaps in their schools.

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact and potential benefits of a poetry-themed workshop addressing experiences with race and gender for black women principals in two urban and one rural district in the Midwest. Informed by the field of poetry therapy, which utilizes poetry and other forms of expression—“language, symbol, and story” (Mazza, 2017, p. 139)—for self-development, emotional healing, and other therapeutic and educational aims, the study was comprised of two 90-minute workshop sessions held on two successive weeks, take-home writing assignments, and follow-up interviews.

The study affirmed that the participants perceived the poetry-themed workshop as an impactful experience that brought benefits to their lives and professional practice. The process of coming together to listen to and write poetry about race, discuss issues prompted by related questions from the facilitator, and write poetry about their racial experiences on their own impacted them in four ways by 1) validating their daily

experiences with race in their role as principal; 2) increasing their self-awareness; 3) becoming aware of the value of poetry for self-reflection; and 4) initiating new ideas and/or actions for their work in their schools. The related benefits derived from those impacts were 1) feeling comforted and less alienated through the validation that they are not alone in their experiences; 2) deepening their self-reflection on the racist encounters they experience as they lead for equity; 3) finding relief by processing an array of emotions that arise from racist encounters and that are often repressed; 4) and enriching their leadership practice with new actions and insights.

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My truths require that I say unconventional things in unconventional ways. . . . Speaking out takes practice. Silence ensures invisibility. Silence provides protection. Silence masks. (Montoya, 1995, p. 536)

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of the Problem

With the changing demographics of the United States, children of color have become the majority of students in our public schools—the number of white students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools fell from 58 percent to 49.5 percent between 2004 and 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). During the same period, Hispanic student enrollment increased from 19 to 25 percent, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 4 to 5 percent, and black student enrollment decreased from 17 to 16 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). As these populations change, schools have not been able to reduce the teaching gap. Between 1992 and 2015, the white-black teaching gap in reading for students at grade 12 increased from 24 to 30 points, and between 1990 and 2015, the 32-point gap in mathematics for students at grade 8 did not change (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). White-Hispanic teaching gaps have also persisted with little change except for a narrowing of the difference at grade 8 from 26 points to 21 points (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016).

I avoid using the problematic term “achievement gap” above because it indicts students of color as failures rather than identifies the public school system as flawed in its conception and delivery of knowledge and knowledge-making. The status-quo focus on the achievement gap rather than on the underlying inequity that defines social institutions such as education means that white standards of achievement will continue to create gaps and perpetuate the white privileged worldview, and education research will position itself squarely within the white privilege framework it seeks to remedy. The pervasive use of language that embodies white superiority through terms such as *achievement gap* that denote the exclusion of black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American knowledge and knowledge-making is related to Harris’ (1993) conception of *whiteness as property*, or the ways that “U.S. histories of slavery and genocide are continually inscribed into ‘racially contingent forms of property and rights,’ which are consistently animated by the right to exclude” (Aggarwal, 2016, p. 131). In education, whiteness as property explains why students of color are excluded from receiving equitable resources. Language, diction, imagery, dress, and narratives of students of color are often derided and excluded in public schools. In addition, contrary to Crenshaw’s (1991) adoption of upper-case “Black” and lower-case “white” to represent blacks as one ethnic and cultural group, I use “black” and “white” in lower case, since they both refer to people of a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These distinctions and the lively debate around them are significant points on the journey to equity.

The realities about the public education system's inability to successfully teach all students create an urgency for transforming schools into environments that sustain educational equity, the appropriate support each student needs. Research has shown a link between principal leadership and student achievement, supporting the current "widespread interest in improving leadership as a key to the successful implementation of large-scale reform" (National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). Although the nation's changing demographics have increased the demand for principals of color, only 10 percent of the nation's principals are black and 7 percent are Latino/a (Hill, Ottem & DeRoche, 2016). While the majority, 52 percent, of school principals are women, 78 percent of those women leaders are white, nearly 12 percent are black, and 7 percent are Latina (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Until these numbers begin to represent the percentage of students of color, all school leaders are challenged to identify and implement methods for building educational equity in their schools.

Increasing the number of black, Latino/a, Asian, and other school leaders of color and providing opportunities for them to support each other through shared experiences such as racial affinity groups may enhance their leadership and bring about improvements in how students of color are taught. Methods for developing racial consciousness, such as Pacific Educational Group's (PEG) courageous conversations protocol, seek to narrow teaching gaps by addressing systemic racism, which, PEG founder Singleton (2015) stated, is the "unexamined

and unchallenged system of racial biases and residual White advantage that persist in our institutions of learning” (p. 44). When institutional racism is addressed head-on, Singleton (2015) claimed, “dramatic results occur” (p. 44). Singleton (2015) contended that educators’ racial beliefs and attitudes are fundamental to successfully teaching all children, and that school leaders must have a passion for equity to have successful outcomes in schools with diverse populations. In addition to passion, leaders must be skilled in practices that transform “debilitating beliefs” (p. 85), such as engaging with others about one’s own personal racial experiences. Thirdly, leaders must persist in these practices, regardless of the consistent challenges. Principals committed to creating a school’s culture of equity that enhances learning for all students model multicultural activities, train teachers to create group conversations about race with students, engage in conversations about race with teachers to transform beliefs and practices, and “counsel” teachers who are unwilling to examine those beliefs to transfer to another school (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015, p. 833). Black women principals who meet together to validate each other’s experiences may benefit from a setting that frees them from resistance and makes them feel included and validated.

Women of color are doubly subverted by racial and gender bias in the workplace. Black women principals report experiencing this debilitating intersectionality and *racial microaggressions*, the daily racist assaults that are the norm in American society. These experiences include being scrutinized by

superiors and colleagues about how they dress, wear their hair, and conduct their personal lives (Reed, 2012, p. 51-52); being addressed as “bitch;” and routinely passed over for promotion (Witherspoon, 2009).

To answer the need for more strategies that provide safe and supportive places for sharing these experiences among this distinctive population of educational leaders, this study explored the impact of a race-themed poetry workshop on a group of black women principals. In addition to utilizing a theoretical lens consisting of critical race theory, feminist standpoint theory, and black feminist theory, the study was informed by the field of poetry therapy.

Critical race theory, which addresses the necessity of allowing voices of color to be heard in order to create counternarratives to the white power structure and its versions of history and reality, formed the basis of my research and methodology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The critical race theory tenet of counterstorytelling is “writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 159). Just as interviewing students of color about their racial experiences in predominantly white schools allowed them to “critically reflect upon their precarious positions” and “contradict the Othering process, and thus, challenge the privileged discourses” around them (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27), engaging black women principals in expressing their authentic experiences through poetry provided an opportunity for counterstorytelling. The theoretical framework also included the concept of intersectionality, which identifies issues related to the

layering of gender and race, and the fundamental critical race theory tenet that racism is ordinary in American life.

Feminist standpoint theory interrogates the power dynamics and societal values that subordinate women and gives voice to the distinct knowledge of women as they work in the roles assigned to them. These ideas provided a structure for my analysis of the participants' knowledge, allowing me to identify how issues of power and oppression were experienced through their racial and gender identities. The analysis also wove in perspectives from black feminist theory to better understand the unique legacy of oppression that black women leaders have endured, and how that legacy impacts their experiences of microaggressions and other racist assaults they encounter in their leadership roles.

Three core themes of black feminist theory were relevant to this examination: the intersectionality of race and gender; the process of creating self-defined images of black womanhood to replace denigrated images; and the belief in the importance of black women's activism as teachers and community leaders, among other roles (Collins, 2002). The first theme is addressed by the study design itself, which focuses on the experiences of black women in the recognition that the intersection of race and gender pose distinct challenges to women leaders. The theme of creating self-defined images reflects the workshop's goal of allowing women of color to express their experiences with denigrated labeling and process them through expressive writing and dialogue with their women colleagues in a safe environment. When listening to and writing poems about

identity, for example, women in the workshop were invited to define themselves in the fundamental manner that Audre Lorde (1984) described: “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (p. 45). The third theme is implicit in the purposeful sampling that selected black women principals committed to equity work in their schools, a commitment that can be described as a pro-active, activist stance toward their leadership roles.

Black feminist theory also points to the legacy of silencing that black women have experienced from the slavery era to the present day. This acknowledgement of silenced voices aligns with the critical race theory concept that voices of color have a critical impact on transforming knowledge about race. Other elements of black feminist theory, such as the lasting impact of the black patriarchy that became prominent in the civil rights era at the expense of women’s voices and participation (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2002) also aligned with the professional challenges experienced by black women principals in the study. Black women’s history of subjugation by both white and black men problematizes their leadership experiences. Analyzing these women leaders’ experiences through theoretical frameworks that critically intersect—feminist standpoint theory, black feminist theory, and critical race theory—provided a rich environment for understanding how racism impacts their professional lives.

The analysis and methodology of this study drew on poetry therapy, an expressive arts therapy for healing and self-development. Poetry therapy is not

limited to one literary form or to psychological/medical modalities, but is defined as “the use of language, symbol, and story in therapeutic, growth, educational, and community-building capacities (Mazza, 2017, p. 139). Since “poetry” limits the term at face value and “therapy” is strongly associated with psychotherapy and counseling, the field requires a broader term. At present, however, it continues to be labeled as such, with synonymous terms also carrying the “therapy” label, including “interactive bibliotherapy,” “literatherapy,” “reading therapy,” and “journal therapy.”

Activities associated with poetry therapy are ideally suited to the self-reflective nature of developing racial awareness. Using poetry to refine our understanding of what we feel is a healing process in which we “integrate the disparate, even fragmented parts” of our lives and “*feel* our lives rather than be numb” (Fox, 1997, p. 3). Research on expressive writing as a form of therapy has found that writing about a trauma or other emotionally charged event elicits a) cognitive changes due to being compelled to label and organize the event in new ways; b) emotional changes as the impact of the trauma is reduced due to *flooding*, or being exposed to the emotional situation for a prolonged period of time and thus becoming desensitized to it; c) freed-up long-term memory and reduced emotional arousal about the trauma, since the writer is thinking less about the event; and d) enhanced social relationships—over time, people who write about emotional upheavals laugh more, are more likely to talk about the traumatic

event, and expand their circle of friends (Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker, 2004).

Most of the research about poetry therapy has been conducted by psychologists, therapists, and other medical practitioners and focuses on how expressive writing provides a release of strong emotions that reduces anxiety, confusion, and internal conflict (Mazza, 2003). Scholars of poetry therapy trace its roots to ancient societies in which shamans chanted verses in healing ceremonies and to ancient Greece, where Apollo was the god of poetry as well as medicine and healing (Chavis, 2011). The evolution of the field came into contemporary practice in the mid-20th century with the work of figures such as Eli Grierfer, a poet, lawyer, and pharmacist who coined the term “poetry therapy,” developed a poetry therapy group in New York with a psychiatrist, and in 1963 wrote *Principles of Poetry Therapy* (Mazza, 2003, p. 6-7).

While diversity programs such as courageous conversations provide guidelines and practices for mixed-group discussions about race, racial affinity groups are also a beneficial activity in preparation for those wider discussions. The group of black women principals in my study could be identified as a racial affinity group that explored racial experiences through an expressive writing structure rather than dialogue alone. In racial affinity groups, also known as race-based caucuses, people of the same racial group meet to discuss racism, oppression, and privilege within their workplace or organization (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Participating in a racial affinity group allows members to gain mutual

support, build new relationships, discover they have a voice in bringing change to their organization, gain insights into their common experiences, and practice discussing difficult issues before joining a mixed group (Study Circles Resource Center, 2006). An example of the latter can be found in the chronology of activities in the Institute for Courageous Principal Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where racial affinity groups are conducted in advance of combined discussions about race and educational equity (Institute for Courageous Principal Leadership, 2017). While this type of educational leadership training program is based on research and expert experience in racial equity work, other organizations, such as government agencies and corporations with diversity programs, are not always based on such rigorous expertise. In research on social service agencies, Blitz & Kohl (2012) reported that racial affinity groups are rarely conducted and state that the literature on antiracism efforts in organizations reveals a pattern of downplaying the concept of white privilege, pulling toward colorblindness, and discouraging conversations about white identity (p. 482). Evidence of the reluctance to understand the importance of affinity groups—by white men who control organizations—came in July 2017 when Deloitte, the multinational accounting firm, announced that it was eliminating its affinity groups, which had been in existence for 25 years, and replacing them with “inclusion councils” (Green, 2017, n.p.). The company’s managing director for inclusion stated that “A lot of our leaders are still older white men, and they need to be part of the conversation” (Green, 2017, n.p.).

My motivation to create a poetry-themed workshop for a racially diverse group of women principals was based on 1) my belief that writing and discussing poetry about race is a logical extension of educational diversity work such as the courageous conversations protocol, and 2) my interest in applying the critical race theory tenets of counternarratives, intersectionality, and racism as ordinary in society to facilitate black women principals' reflection on racial microaggressions and other forms of racism. Such reflection may have both a psychologically empowering and emotionally satisfying effect that counteracts the anxiety produced by microaggressions: Microaggression studies about black men and women report the negative mental health impact of racial microaggressions, such as associations between these experiences and depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts (Liao, Weng, & West, 2016; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010; O'Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015).

While this study utilized elements of poetry therapy to analyze participants' descriptions of their experiences, the workshop in which the participants engaged was not designed to be therapeutic in the medical sense. As a writer and scholar versus a therapist, I guided discussions about the participants' responses to poetry and created writing prompts to initiate poetry writing. As a framework for analysis, poetry therapy provided insights into the themes that arose from the qualitative data in this study.

The workshop at the heart of this study involved reading poetry about race and race-gender intersectionality. Reading and writing poetry can potentially open

up a dialogue with the self and others about issues that are difficult to discuss directly. Both forms of dialogue point at poetry as a type of communication, a word that comes from the Latin, *communicare*, “to share.” Communicational criticism looks at the relationship between the writer and the reader as revealed in the type of dialogue created in the poem (Sell, Borch, & Lindgren, 2013). Some poems reflect a coercive nature in which the writer declares ideas that put the reader in the role of passive receiver, while another, more open approach “positively encourages readers to compare notes about the narrative from within their own life-worlds” (Sell, Borch, & Lindgren, 2013, p. 16). This type of writing “encourages readers to cooperate with the writer in building up a world” (p. 12). Reading, writing, and discussing poetry about race provides an opportunity to express diverse life-worlds and, through the process of integrating new perceptions, expand existing ones.

As potentially driving forces for equity in their schools, principals of all races are challenged to engage in conversations about race to dispel misconceptions and transform cultures of silence into environments of courageous truth telling. The safe space of the workshop was designed to help black women principals feel more open about expressing emotions and unafraid of “being labeled as oversensitive or too emotional” (Singleton, 2015, p. 27) when discussing race than they would in a setting that included white female principals. The workshop, therefore, situated discussions of race in the community setting hooks (1994) describes, in which every voice is valued. As a professor, hooks

(1994) heard students explain that their fear of being judged as intellectually inadequate by white students kept them silent in class. Some of her brilliant senior students of color felt that they were “less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply [did] not assert their subjectivity” (hooks, 1994, p. 40). One of her methods for overcoming this silencing was a required class activity to write brief passages during class and read them aloud. The poetry workshop for this study was designed to promote this community-building “subjectivity” of personal experience with race among black women principals.

Singleton’s (2015) courageous conversations protocol includes a writing component called the racial autobiography that invites focused self-reflection on a lifetime of racial experiences. Writing poetry to express racial experiences asks the educational leader to reflect on an even more emotional level. The condensed nature of poetry and the emotional charge of its imagery and metaphor make poetry a more intense form of language than the personal essay, journal, or other expressive form. A poem, as Robert Frost put it, “begins as a lump in the throat. . . . It finds the thought and the thought finds the word” (Mehta & Banerjee, n.d., para. 25). In terms of the relationship between the writer and the reader, Frost defined poetry as “the shortest emotional distance between two points” (Richardson, 1993, p. 696), and claimed, “If it is a wild tune, it is a poem” (Frost & Richardson, 2007 p. 131). Eighteenth-century poet Thomas Gray (1757) foreshadowed that sense in a verse that depicted poetry as “thoughts that breathe, words that burn.” Auden defined poetry as “the clear expression of mixed

feelings” (Sharpe, 2007, p. 92). Poetry breaks language from its ordinary function and startles, forcing us to listen. “Poetry is essence, density. . . . It is a density which shows the tip of an iceberg, the stew after hours of cooking” (Fuchs, 1998, p. 200). With the use of imagery and metaphor, poetry reaches into emotions and complex situations in ways that non-expressive writing may not.

Poetry, then, is a pathway for addressing an issue like race with all the discomfort and emotional truth a person feels free to put on the page. Listening, responding to, and writing poems about race without any rules about form or grammar (poetry, in its simplest definition, is writing in lines instead of sentences and paragraphs) invited the participants to let their silenced experiences sear into consciousness.

Expressing racist experiences, un-silencing them, has the potential to relieve some of the traumatic impact of daily racial assaults, and sharing expressive writing about these experiences may bring further relief by dissolving silenced feelings of isolation and injury. Ihanus (2005) points to this transformative potential:

Although you cannot change what has occurred, you can change its meaning for you and the way you handle what has occurred. . . . The silence surrounding traumatic experiences and the act of having witnessed them can be broken by exposing one symptomatic silence after another. One must not be silent about that which was once silenced. If we keep our stories stored only for ourselves, we will become imprisoned into the dead letters, into the permanent

impasses of imagination that breed pestilence. . . . The real belles lettres advance . . . and participate in relieving the traumata and conflicts that are accompanied by grief of loss, shame of humiliation, anger and rage at violence, fear of the enemies, and bitter memories of prejudice and injustice (p. 79).

The implication for school leaders is that bringing life to the “dead letters” of unexpressed emotions through writing poems may help them free the imagination for new ways to respond, subjectively or actively. Imagination is integral to imagining new possibilities as leaders look for ways to bring equity into their schools. Creative problem solving is fueled by the imagination, the realm of poetry, in which “words are a threshold into . . . the elusive imagination which lifts words into the freedom of uncensored realities” (Fuchs, 1998, p. 196). Playing and feeling with words in this study’s workshop invited participants to exercise the imagination that could help them picture new strategies and possibilities.

Poetry therapy research also suggests that reading and listening to poems that capture the same mood as the listener, such as a sad poem (which also offers hope) for working with a depressed patient, may alleviate feelings of alienation. This concept, called the “isoprinciple,” which originated in music therapy, seeks to induce feelings in the patient so that a rapport can be established and the patient’s feelings can be expressed (Luber, 1978).

Using the arts, such as filmmaking and music, to develop racial awareness, cultural empathy, or social justice in school leaders is a relatively new field

(Boske, 2009), and a literature search for peer-reviewed articles published in the past ten years uncovered only one study about utilizing poetry for this training. Mansfield, Sherman, and King (2013) used poetry in their educational leadership courses to help students understand “the potency of self-reflection; the importance of understanding heritage; the value of unpacking privilege and power; and the responsibility of recognizing and deactivating stereotypes in the process of reaching and teaching future leaders for social justice” (p. 13).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide a group of black women principals the opportunity to express their experiences with racism through listening to, writing, and sharing their responses to poetry. Two research questions were addressed in the study:

1. How does participation in a poetry-themed workshop about race and gender impact black women principals interested in understanding each other’s leadership challenges and successes?
2. Do black women principals perceive a benefit as school leaders in reflecting on and expressing emotional experiences related to race through writing poetry?

Significance of the Research

With limited research available on black women principals, more knowledge is needed about their experiences in encountering racism in their careers and their perceptions of gender-related behaviors of school systems that

also impede their efforts. This will provide a broader understanding of the needs of black women principals who seek to bring equity to their schools. The workshop activities of the group sessions and take-home assignments allowed the women to engage with the racial and gender-bias experiences they have endured as teachers and school leaders—experiences that have been silenced in the literature. As Witherspoon (2009) recognized, “Professional practice in educational leadership tends to silence certain narratives, regardless of what these narratives could teach us” (p. 665).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended that “the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the education system” (p. 58). By documenting the expression of women voices of color, this study inserted these critical voices into the academy, a practice that Montoya (1995) described as essential. Her analysis of Latinas in the legal system also applies to black women:

Personal accounts of humiliation, bias or deprivation told from within the academy may sound to some like whining or may be perceived as excessive involvement with the self rather than with the real needs of the Outsider communities. As I have argued, this view would be seriously wrong. Instead, linguistic diversity should be recognized as enhancing the dialogue within the academy by bringing in new voices and fresh perspectives (p. 538).

Delimitations and Limitations

This study utilized purposeful sampling to engage with a group of black women principals committed to building equity in their schools. As such, this

group represented a subset of black women principals. In addition, the sample was limited to black women principals who have served or currently work in two types of district: large urban and rural. The experiences of these leaders may differ from those serving in suburban districts, which limited the scope of understanding about the individual impact of poetry writing and discussion on black women principals.

Definition of Key Terms

Educational equity. An operational belief that enables educators to provide whatever level of support is needed to whichever students require it. In the classroom, this means providing each and every student with what each individually needs to learn and succeed (Singleton, 2015, p. 56). *Equity* is distinct from *equality*, in that equality assumes an equal playing field, which is not the case regarding the opportunities and experiences of people of color (paraphrased from Singleton, 2015, p. 56).

Microaggression. A statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority (English Oxford Living Dictionary, 2017).

Poetry therapy. The use of language, symbol, and story in therapeutic, growth, educational, and community-building capacities (Mazza, 2017, p. 139).

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

To understand how listening to and writing poetry can be a safe and potentially transformative method for black women principals to discuss their experiences with racial and gender bias, this review first examines the literature addressing the racial issues confronting women educational leaders of color. Second, I discuss the literature that addresses microaggressions in education more broadly, including the experiences of students and teachers. The next section reviews microaggressions research in the psychology and related fields that provide insights for educational settings, and this is followed by a discussion of the literature about educators who use poetry to give voice to students of color in the classroom. Finally, I review the use of poetry in training educational leaders about racial awareness. The latter area is directly aligned with my study and the poetry workshop at the core of it; however, as noted previously, only one study was found on this topic.

Racism Experienced by Women Principals of Color

Research on the racial assaults experienced by female K-12 school leaders are scant. Black women principals have reported being dismissed by white colleagues and not allowed to express their opinions during discussions, receiving criticism by superiors and colleagues about the way they dress and wear their hair, and being paid less than their male counterparts (Reed, 2012). Race, gender, and age intersected to undermine the respect black women principals receive, due to

the prevailing attitude that “while white maleness is implicitly interpreted as authority, black femaleness is not” (Peters, 2012, p. 33). Latina principals felt pressured to “act white” by dressing in a certain way and compelled to refrain from speaking Spanish in public because “you are always a billboard for your ethnic identity and . . . there is a burden that your entire ethnic group will be labeled” (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016, p. 9). Black women principals have been treated as gender tokens, which limited their identities to race-specific roles and allowed white colleagues to avoid issues of race (Moore, 2013), and black principals have had their authority questioned and experienced social isolation because of their race and gender (Peters, 2012).

Broader Racial Microaggressions Research in Education

Research on day-to-day racist behaviors has addressed distinct types of microaggressions. Since 2007, the widely cited work of Sue et al. (2007) has informed research in the social and medical sciences, education, and other fields with his categorization of microaggressions into *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. These are further delineated in nine thematic subcategories of a) alien in one’s own land (being identified as foreign rather than American); b) ascription of intelligence; c) color blindness; d) criminality/assumption of criminal status; e) denial of individual racism; f) myth of meritocracy; g) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; h) second-class status; and i) environmental (systemic) (p. 275).

Studies of microaggressions in education addressed K-12 and college

students' experiences as well as those of both male and female K-12 leaders. Although these studies do not specifically focus on women principals of color, their findings are relevant to this overview of literature about principals' experiences with racism. In a study of Latino/a school leaders in the Pacific Northwest, 9 out of the 10 participants were targets of microinsults and overt racial comments such as being called "spic" and "running on Mexican time" made by other school administrators (Peterson & Vergara, 2016). Three studies about principal leadership programs addressed microaggressions and the additional stressors they create for aspiring black principals. McCray (2014) prescribed culturally relevant leadership, which includes the development of liberatory consciousness (reflecting on one's racism), as the way to address microaggressions perpetrated by white K-12 principals and teachers in urban school districts. Gooden and O'Doherty (2015) chronicled the effectiveness of raising awareness of privilege and its behaviors by assigning racial autobiographies to students in a principal leadership program, while observing that the program was "oftentimes suffocating to black students, who struggled to 'cope' with the microaggressions and the additional cognitive load of working against negative stereotypes in a dominant culture" (p. 242). Karanxha, Agosto, and Bellara (2014) pointed to previous research that stated that students of color in educational leadership programs lacked opportunities to discuss race and racism, experienced dehumanizing conditions, and achieved less in the program due to the impact of racial microaggressions.

Qualitative education research revealed nuanced expressions and responses to a variety of microaggressions students experienced. Black middle-class fathers and their sons in a diverse, predominantly black suburban high school reported microaggressions perpetrated by white teachers as “pejorative views of intelligence, assumptions of deviance, and differential treatment in school discipline” (Allen, 2012). Andrews (2012) described how black students in high school honors and college-prep classes were spotlighted or ignored because of their race (*racial spotlighting* and *racial ignoring*), and managed these microaggressions in a variety of ways. Their responses included being silent, challenging the perpetrator’s racialized assumptions, distancing, resignedly accepting, problem solving by asserting themselves into a conversation, seeking guidance and support, and expressing negative feelings to reduce tension and following with silence. Undocumented Latino/a and Asian students in the process of choosing a college faced specific types of microaggressions delivered primarily by well-intentioned institutional personnel: discriminatory financial aid policies, restricted college choice information, constrained life opportunities, denial of college opportunities, insensitive behaviors, insensitive college choice processes, narrowed college expectations, fear of coming out, and undocumented immigrant blindness (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016).

Black male high school students in the Hotchkins (2016) study described microaggressions termed as *monolithic targeting*, in which white teachers framed all black male students negatively and collectively. Students counteracted with

integrative mobility, creating alliances with other racialized students to build a supportive network and out-of-class learning environment, and *behavioral vacillation*, avoiding the reinforcement of stereotypes by adjusting their clothing choices and behavior in school. Middle-grade black male students in predominantly white schools (Henfield, 2011) were sent to detention for minor infractions (*assumptions of deviance*), stereotyped by white students as “rappers” and expected to excel in sports (*assumed universality of the black American experience*), and perceived an overabundance of white culture, such as students’ preferences for country music (*assumed superiority of white cultural values*). In a study focused on names, Kohli and Solórzano (2012) defined the mispronunciation of black, Latino/a, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and mixed race students’ names as a microaggression that can have a lasting negative impact.

In a case study about a black male kindergarten teacher, Bryan and Browder (2013) described the “ascription of incompetence” microaggression that a parent targeted to the teacher by questioning his efficacy, asking, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” (p. 151). Asian American women K-12 teachers experienced gendered and racial microaggressions, including expectations to be reserved and quiet and being assumed as foreigners rather than Americans (Sue et al.’s “alien in her own land” microaggression theme) (Endo, 2015).

Black Ph.D. graduates credited their success in countering microaggressions experienced in their degree program to having a mentor and developing support systems as safe places (Ballard & Cintrón, 2010). Black

women college students described gendered racial microaggressions classified by Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2016) as projected stereotypes (*expectation of the angry black woman*), silencing and marginalizing (*invisibility*), and assumptions made about style and beauty (*assumptions about aesthetics*). In an earlier article, the same researchers named the women's coping strategies as using one's voice as power, resisting Eurocentric standards, leaning on one's support network, becoming a black superwoman, and becoming desensitized and escaping (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt, 2012, p. 51).

Asian American and Latino/a college students felt a lack of belonging due to "uncomfortable stares" (Palmer and Maramba, 2015, p. 706), "insensitive comments or jokes" (p. 706), being stereotyped based on the model minority myth, and "being called racial epithets" (p. 716). College students of color also experienced racial slurs written in residence halls, study rooms, and elevators and reported segregated housing practices (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). Among college students experienced assumed inadequacy and *objectification*, a microinsult that made their culture and identities "completely invisible or treated as exoticized objects of inquiry" (Kwan, 2015, p. 31).

An online forum for opinions about discontinuing a university's Native American mascot contained seven themes of microaggressions aimed at Native Americans: advocating sociopolitical dominance, alleging oversensitivity, waging stereotype attacks, denying racism, employing the logics of elimination and replacement, expressing adoration, and conveying grief (Clark, Spanierman,

Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011). Jones and Galliher (2015) examined the daily microaggressions experienced by 98 percent of the 114 Native Americans ages 18 to 25 in their study. Twenty-one percent of the participants held undergraduate degrees and 10.5 percent had attended graduate school. The women became significantly more upset by four (out of seven) types of microaggression: ascription of intelligence (assumed less competent than whites), myth of meritocracy, denial of individual racism, and assumed universality of Native experience.

Black college professors felt unwelcomed and excluded by their white colleagues (*microinvalidations*) and were challenged about their competence and authority by white students (*microinsults*) (Pittman, 2012). Some black women leaders in higher education included spirituality as a resiliency and coping method in the face of daily microaggressions (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011). Black and Latino/a faculty experienced invisibility to colleagues, administration, and students, and were assumed as janitorial staff or athletes. (Orelus, 2013). According to DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby's (2016) study of black K-12 teachers and college professors, professors experienced more microaggressions in their less diverse campuses, suggesting that "additional education, higher incomes, and even marriage are not associated with experiencing fewer racial microaggressions" (p. 405). In a study of racial microaggressions directed at non-white college librarians, the librarians reported that the most prevalent racial microaggression they experienced was being treated differently than white

colleagues (Alabi, 2015).

The education literature also discussed the cumulative negative impact of racial microaggressions, or *racial battle fatigue* (RBF). Smith (2004) compared the development of RBF to military combat fatigue and described college faculty of color as “often on the front lines of race, in the cross-hair focus of racial backlash from uneasy white students semester after semester without appropriate protection and assistance” (p. 180).

Franklin, Smith, and Hung (2014) conducted a quantitative study of RBF in Latino/a college students that suggested that psychological RBF factors (frustration, heightened awareness of racism, irritability, mood changes, shock, disappointment, agitation) occurred most frequently, followed by physiological (muscle ache, back pain, sleep disturbances, joint pain) and behavior (loss of appetite, little or too much sleep, procrastination, neglecting responsibilities) responses.

Hotchkins and Dancy’s (2015) ethnography of black male college student leaders described their experiences with and responses to racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue. The students reported RBF stress reactions of anger, feelings of revenge, nervousness, discouragement, emotional detachment, growing hatred, questioning self-worth, employing escapism, memory loss, sudden depression, crying, and sleeplessness. Griffin, Ward, and Phillips (2014) used composite counterstorytelling to create a narration about racial microaggressions and racial battle fatigue based on interviews with black faculty

at a white university. The composite character described feeling isolated, unwelcome, ignored by white colleagues, insulted by white students who questioned his intellect and teaching ability, and deprived of mentoring opportunities, all of which made him “Othered” (p. 1364) in the academic community. Husband (2016) referred to research about racial battle fatigue and racial microaggressions experienced by black professionals (i.e., ignoring, avoiding eye contact, using offensive language and inappropriate jokes) to describe the stresses of black college student affairs leaders.

Related Microaggressions Research in Psychology and Counseling

Following the publication of Sue et al. (2007), qualitative and quantitative research “has increased exponentially” and identified “the types of, responses to, and consequences of racial microaggressions in a variety of settings with multiple racial and ethnic groups” (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014, p. 197). These varied settings and racial/ethnic foci appear in recent psychology and counseling research and provide relevant insight for explorations of racial microaggressions and educational leadership. Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto’s (2014) study of black women corporate leaders categorized their experiences of racial microaggressions as invisibility, exclusion, environmental, stereotyping of black women, and assumed universality of the black experience. The psychology literature has also identified examples of positive stereotyping, a well-intentioned microaggression that assigns a positive characteristic to a person based on her race/ethnicity (Lin, Menjívar, Ettekal, Simpkins, Gaskin, & Pesch, 2016). This

microaggression is also known as an *exceptionalizing stereotype*, since it singles out a positive exception to a racial group, and is discussed in research about Asian Americans and the myth of the “model minority” (Tran & Lee, 2014; Nadal, Wong, Sriken, Griffin, & Fujii-Doe, 2015; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013). Psychology and counseling microaggression research addressed the experiences of other groups such as multiracial Americans (Tran, Miyake, Martinez-Morales, & Csizmadia, 2016) and Filipinos (Nadal, Escobar, Prado, David, & Haynes, 2012).

As mentioned in the Introduction, studies have reported associations between microaggressions and depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation (Liao, Weng, & West, 2016; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow; O’Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015). The physiological impact of microaggressions as explored in the psychology literature included a study examining how black college undergraduate women’s experiences with microaggressions predicted depression and anxiousness and had detrimental effects on black women’s mental health (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2012). Research has also found that stressful discriminatory experiences at work raised the blood pressure of black men and women (Din-Dzietham, Nembhard, Collins, & Davis, 2004), a finding that may be related to the fact that African Americans have significantly higher rates of hypertension than whites and develop the condition at a younger age (Lackland, 2014). An increased frequency in these assaults was also associated with greater depressive symptoms that lead to other poor health

conditions (Earnshaw, Rosenthal, Carroll-Scott, Santilli, Gilstad-Hayden, & Ickovics, 2016).

The research in these varied fields indicate that racial assaults bring about both emotional and physiological distress.

Teachers' Use of Poetry to Include Voices of Color in the Classroom

Efforts to remedy the sociocultural mismatch between teachers and students in public school classrooms include the use of performance poetry, which gives voice to the routinely silenced and requires collective attention from an audience (Davis, 2014). Black and Hispanic high school students who wrote and performed word-slam poetry, which expresses personal stories, created a more empathetic school community and became more engaged in the rest of the English class curriculum (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2016). The teachers succeeded in confirming their belief that if their students could tell their stories through poetry and the faculty listened respectfully and acknowledged learning from them, the students would be more inclined to participate in reading and writing other types of texts. The authors' advice to other teachers is a declaration of the impact of allowing silenced voices of color to be heard: "Create a safe space in the classroom and listen to the children first: where they are coming from will help you determine where to lead them" (p. 492).

Black high school students in special education classes who engaged in poetry writing experienced "a deeply meaningful recognition and expression of multiple identities that include race, gender, age, class, and location" (Bacon,

2011, p. 1). The English teacher, motivated to uncover their muted voices, admired the “beauty, power, and courage of their words” and “their imagination and expression” (p. 13).

A professor used her own poetry about her lived experience as a black woman in classes for education majors to address the problem that “many public school educators have a limited if not skewed understanding of the daily situatedness of individuals and groups of city schoolchildren” (Davis, 2014, p. 422). Student feedback indicated that using poetry as pedagogy for future teachers “can lessen the uneasiness that sometimes accompanies teacher candidates who are incognizant of genuine diversity” (p. 423). Teaching with poetry also spurred the professor to reflect on the context of her role as a black teacher educator. A black assistant professor at a primarily white college described poetry writing as his path for finding “the voice to critically challenge the documented historical, racial and cultural stereotypes that exist about people of color” (Ingram, 2003, p. 223).

Poetry Writing to Develop Racial Awareness in Education Leaders

The sole study about using poetry to foster courageous dialogues about race among principals, male or female, or other educational leaders described the experiences in an educational leadership program committed to preparing leaders to translate social justice learning into practice (Mansfield, Sherman, & King, 2013). In the first semester of the program, poetry writing was used to engage students in emotional self-reflection about race and privilege. A diverse cohort of

students explored their personal and leadership identities through “I Am From” poems that challenged them to overcome their discomfort over self-reflection and exploring issues of race. The themes uncovered in the content analysis included an awareness of the hardships of oneself or others, a strong sense of professional duty, and an understanding of heritage, all of which led the students to describe the poetry exercises as a tool they deeply appreciated and respected. After the poetry exercises were completed, the students were instructed to utilize their new self-understanding to “guide their efforts to get to know students, teachers, and parents in their school communities” (p. 21). The authors concluded that the impact of poetry writing “facilitated important student dialogue concerning the relationship between individual past experiences and current leadership practices” and produced significant “aha” moments about their ability to transform their leadership practice (p. 21-22).

Closely related to the approach of Mansfeld et al (2013) was Boske’s (2009) artmaking approach to teaching educational leaders for social justice. A racially and gender-diverse group of teachers and aspiring principals who created short films to explore the challenge of creating culturally responsive curriculums reported transformative impacts that would inform their leadership. Participants of color found new confidence in their aspirations as leaders for social justice, and white participants noted that their preconceived notions about race, class, immigration status, and language were “challenged from one moment to the next” and left their eyes “wide open” (p. 219). After the study, two white, middle class

educators who described themselves as “transformed” and called to be agents of change resigned from their suburban schools and accepted positions in inner-city schools, and four other participants applied for positions as assistant principals in urban schools (p. 219). By working as artist filmmakers, participants developed a new sense of self that allowed them to perceive and illustrate how schools perpetuate oppressive practices.

Summary

Research in psychology, counseling, and education indicated that students, teachers, and principals of color endure racial assaults on a daily basis. These experiences are associated with stress, anxiety, and depression, and perpetuate racism as ordinary in American life and in American institutions. In classrooms in which teachers seek to counter racism and white-dominant curriculum content and well as bridge cultural divides between students and between students and themselves, poetry positions silenced voices front and center. Students discover their own identities through writing and unlock the mysteries of the racially diverse identities around them through listening. Educational leadership programs that immerse current and future school leaders in artmaking and poetry provide experiences that integrate emotion and deep reflection with concrete products of the new perspectives the students develop. As these expanded perceptions take root in practice, school leaders proactively transform the culture of their schools.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the experiences of a small group of black women principals in a poetry-themed workshop on race and gender. By analyzing the themes that evolved from the participants' poetry and transcripts of workshop discussions, participants' reflection journals, and interviews, the study addressed two research questions:

1. How does participation in a poetry-themed workshop about race and gender impact black women principals interested in understanding each other's leadership challenges and successes?
2. Do black women principals perceive a benefit as school leaders in reflecting on and expressing emotional experiences related to race through writing and discussing poetry?

Research Model

The qualitative approach was appropriate for my study since this method “focuses on people behaving in natural settings [versus artificial settings, such as laboratories] and describing their world in their own words” (Cozby & Bates, 2015, p. 118). Qualitative research seeks to provide rich descriptions of a small number of participants, in contrast to the aim of quantitative research to suggest trends indicated by a large amount of data (Woodwell, 2014). I chose a phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry, which “describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants [and]

culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). With its focus on lived experiences around a particular phenomenon, in this case participation in a poetry-themed workshop, phenomenology serves the goal of my research: to understand how a group of black women principals were impacted by the workshop.

A critical element of feminist research is that it generates research that is *for* women rather than *about* women (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 213). My study encompassed both, in that the workshop was designed as a space *for* black women school leaders to reflect on and discuss their experiences with race and gender and at the same time answered the need for research *about* the lived experiences of black women principals. Since feminism is concerned with “action and social change” (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 221), feminist research moves knowledge building along paths toward emancipation rather than toward the dominant power structure. The constancy of teaching gaps suggests that the methods of the dominant group are ineffective, and new approaches by racially and gender-diverse groups may achieve better results. Feminist standpoint approach “does not imply that all women share a single position or perspective; but rather insists on the importance of following out the implications of women’s (and others’) various locations in socially organized activities” (Devault, 2004, p. 228). As school leaders, the black women principals in my study work in a system

in which white women and men dominate in the role of principal and white males dominate in the top leadership position of superintendent.

A feminist standpoint approach also addresses the fact that all women's voices are subjugated: in mixed gender situations, "women are less listened to than men and less likely to be credited for the things they say in groups; they are interrupted more often than men; the topics they introduce into conversations are less often taken up by others; and they do more work than men to keep conversations going" (Devault, 2004, p. 229). Using poetry to articulate experiences with race aligns with a feminist goal of giving women linguistic options other than those steeped in male dominance (e.g. the inability of words like "public" and "private" to describe the porous boundaries of women's experience). "The lack of fit between women's lives and the words available for talking about experience present real difficulties for ordinary women's self-expression in their everyday lives" (Devault, 2004, p. 228). Writing poetry invites women of color to explore language beyond the everyday, such as through the use of metaphor or writing a series of lines that start with the same phrase ("When I use my real voice . . ."). While "language is often inadequate for women" (Devault, 2004, p. 246), poetry cuts through the standard limitations of language and frees the writer to describe experience through images, figures of speech, and depictions of sensory awareness like touch and smell.

The data gathered from the women through their poetry, workshop discussions, poetry journals, and interviews was a response to the critical race

theory concept that minorities possess a certain expertise about race and speak in a unique voice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The data also responded to critical race theory's assertion that the "truth" of minorities' stories counters the objective truth that the dominant group considers the only legitimate truth. That objective truth does not exist, in fact, but is simply "a social construct created to suit the purposes of the dominant group" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 104). Similarly, a feminist standpoint theory perspective considered these narratives essential to understanding a woman's standpoint, which also differs from the objective truth sought by the white male dominant group. Discussing the roles of women sociologists, Sprague and Kobryniewicz (2004) contend that the way female sociologists create knowledge is constrained by the male-dominated culture of letting disembodied theoretical abstractions dominate: "women transverse the divide between this ephemeral world and the actual world of human practices, attending to these men's inevitable material needs" (p. 81). Just as these authors see the need for a woman's standpoint to transform their field's practices "away from its role of supporting the relations of ruling" (p. 82), educational research requires a black women school leader's standpoint to wrest the field away from the color blindness and other racist elements of the dominant group in order to improve learning outcomes for all children. The narratives in this study matter. Knowledge that challenges "notions of Black and female inferiority is unlikely to be generated from within a white-male-controlled academic community" (Collins, 1991, p. 203).

Subjects

Participants in this study were seven black women principals, five of whom currently served as principals, one who served as a principal before becoming an assistant professor in an educational leadership doctoral program in a university in the Upper Midwest, and one who served as both a principal and a superintendent before becoming an assistant professor at the same institution. Each of the principals had undergone special training in equity leadership practices, integrated equity policies into their schools, or both. This purposive sampling increased the potential for a high level of engagement and self-reflection in regard to racial and gender-bias experiences. By pursuing additional training and/or including racial equity in their school leadership, these participants had expressed a commitment to examining race as a critical issue in education, and that commitment suggested that they would understand the potential benefit of further examining this issue in a new setting.

Participation was requested through an email invitation (Appendix A) that included a consent form (Appendix B) attachment that provided an overview of the study and step-by-step process of the workshop. Email addresses were in the public domain on the principals' school websites.

Data Collection Procedures

Four types of narratives were collected in this study: 1) transcriptions of audio tapes from the workshop sessions; 2) poetry written by the participants; 3) participants' journal entries; and 4) transcripts of semi-structured interviews.

Reflecting on the workshop and on the between-sessions poetry-writing assignment in the journey allowed the women to remain engaged in the process over the two-week period. Journals were provided by the researcher during the first session and contain instructions taped to the inside cover that followed Seibold's (2000) suggestion of keeping the directions simple and non-threatening so that participants will be less reluctant to reflect on these highly personal issues.

This text read as follows:

- a) Spend five minutes or so reflecting on the first workshop in this journal: how was the experience for you?
- b) Civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw wrote, "Black women continue to be judged by who they are, not by what they do." Over the next week, write a poem about an experience in which you were judged by who you are rather than on what you do. You do not need to use rhymes or any special form, just write in lines instead of paragraphs.

The one-hour interviews conducted within 7 to 10 days of the last session were semi-structured, allowing me the freedom to follow up on some responses for additional insights. The interviews provided the largest quantity of analyzable text, in keeping with the nature of qualitative data collection, in which, "interviewing subjects is the foremost method involved in this research tradition . . . [of] attempting to understand the world through the varied ways individuals

perceive reality” (Woodwell, 2014, p. 65). The plan for each workshop session is included as Appendix C and interview questions are inserted as Appendix D.

Researcher Bias

As a white female pursuing doctoral work in a white-majority university, I am aware of my vulnerability to listening, analyzing, and writing through a white-dominant bias. Understanding that white privilege is a largely unconscious attitude due to the racist foundations of my culture, I acknowledged that this may impact my analysis of this study. Therefore, I addressed this bias in three ways. First, choosing a theoretical framework of critical race theory and feminist standpoint theory kept me focused on my inherent capacity for bias as I conducted the workshop and developed this study. Next, I recognized my positionality as a literary scholar, educator, poet, and writer who has been taught in a system that values white, Western voices over others and accepts academic expertise and standing as a form of domination. In that awareness, I refrained from any interaction outside facilitating discussion and giving writing prompts in order to free participants’ voices.

To further limit the impact of my identity as a white woman of privilege, I engaged a black woman writer to co-facilitate the workshop. I did not voice my perspective in the workshop, and the minimal remarks voiced by the co-facilitator were not included in the analysis.

In a feminist research approach, the strident subject/object split of traditional research is replaced by an interest in the action of self-development

(Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 221), in this case my deeper understanding of my white privilege. In feminist research, “space is provided for the researcher to change oneself through the co-construction of knowledge” (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2004, p. 221). The workshop experience deepened my understanding of my white privilege, particularly in the context of learning how racism is ordinary in our public schools. The participants’ stories of the microaggressions and other racial assaults they experience every day, as well as their descriptions of how the racism in their school environment affects them as human beings, turned critical race theory into a dynamic, living fact for me.

Data Analysis

My analysis followed Creswell’s (2014) linear, bottom-to-top process that began with collecting the raw data (poetry, transcripts of workshop session discussion and interviews, and journal entries), reading through the data, and coding, or “organizing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (p. 197-198). I hand-coded the data to become more deeply engaged with the material. Finally, I identified themes and interpreted them through my theoretical framework.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This study examined the perceived impact and benefits of a poetry-based workshop on race and gender for a group of black women principals. Each participant affirmed that the workshop made an impact and provided benefits for them as school leaders for equity. The study consisted of two 90-minute workshop sessions in which the participants listened to and wrote poetry and engaged in discussion led by prepared questions; take-home writing assignments; and follow-up interviews. The group was comprised of seven current and former black women principals and assistant principals from two urban districts and one rural district in a Midwest state. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The women ranged from 33 to 58 years of age and had an average of 10 years of teaching experience and 7 years of principal/assistant principal experience. One participant subsequently served five years as a deputy superintendent and four years as a superintendent in an urban district. Table 1 identifies the locale and racial composition of the participants' schools.

Table 1

Participants by School Locale and Racial Composition

| | Urban, Majority Black, Asian, Latino | Rural, Majority White |
|--------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Principals (<i>n</i> = 5) | | |
| Elementary | 3 | 1 |
| Middle | 1 | 0 |
| Secondary | 0 | 0 |
| Assistant Principals (<i>n</i> = 2) | | |
| Elementary | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 1 | 0 |
| Secondary | 1 | 0 |

This chapter presents the results of the study as obtained by an analysis of transcripts from the workshop sessions and interviews and poems written by the participants. The findings are organized into 1) the participants' perceived impact; 2) participants' perceived benefits of taking part in the study; 3) a set of themes derived from the principals' experiences with race in their schools; and 4) selected examples of specific experiences they shared in the discussions and interviews. The rich data allowed me to explore the women's experiences with race and gender through two tenets of critical race theory, which make up the third section of the findings, and the fourth section contains examples of their experiences

classified into three types of assaults: racial stereotyping, microaggressions, and avoidance. The organization of my findings is presented in Table 2. Finally, a brief summary closes the chapter.

Table 2

Organization of Study Findings

Addressing the Research Questions:

—Question 1 Regarding Participants' Perceived Impact:

- Connected with others through validation of experiences
- Enhanced self-awareness
- Discovered value of poetry writing for self-reflection
- Motivated new leadership practices

—Question 2 Regarding Participants' Perceived Benefits:

- Validated experiences
 - Deepened self-awareness
 - Processed repressed emotions
 - Enriched leadership practice
-

Themes of Racist Experiences in Principal Leadership: Critical Race Theory:

—Racism is ordinary

—Interest convergence

Examples of Racist Encounters:

—Mysogynoir: The angry black woman

—Microaggressions:

- Second-class citizen
- Ascription of intelligence
- Assumption of criminality

—General racist behavior: Avoidance

Impact of the Workshop

The first research question of this study asked, “How does participation in a poetry-based workshop about race and gender impact black women principals interested in understanding each other’s leadership challenges and successes?” An analysis of the discussions, interviews, and participants’ writing generated four categories of impact. The participants perceived that the workshop:

- Provided an opportunity to experience connectedness with other black women principals through the validation of their common struggles as leaders of color working to build equity in their schools.
- Enhanced self-awareness about their experiences with race.
- Created an awareness of the value of poetry writing for deep self-reflection.
- Ignited new leadership actions.

Perceived Benefits

In response to the second research question, “Do black women principals perceive a benefit as school leaders in reflecting upon and expressing emotional

experiences related to race through writing and discussing poetry?” the study yielded four themes related to the four types of impact. Participants perceived that the workshop activities with poetry validated their experiences, deepened their self-awareness, allowed them to process repressed emotions, and enriched their leadership practice.

Validated experiences. Throughout the group discussions, participants remarked that listening to each other’s experiences provided the “comfort” of validating their daily experiences with race and gender. This beneficial awareness that they were not alone and that others understood the depth and consistency of their struggles as black women principals also came up in each participant’s interview.

Deepened self-awareness. Each of the participants commented on the value of self-reflection in navigating their way through leading for equity. Comparing their poetry to that of others in the group made Quinn and Gigi aware that they were holding back. Quinn recognized that she has learned to tailor her expressions, and was initially angry at herself for carrying that into her writing. Gigi also felt that she held back, yet believed that writing poetry helped her ground her feelings around racial experiences. “It moved it from ‘I believe’ or ‘I think’ to ‘I know.’” She called that process cathartic, in that an issue no longer had power over her after she wrote it down.

Tani said that reflection “should be a huge piece of what we do,” and that writing one of the poems transformed her attitude around a harmful comment that

a biracial male administrator had made to her. The man told her, “Before anything, remember that you have four strikes against you. You’re a female, you are black, you speak with an accent, and you’re an immigrant.” Tani’s poem relayed how the painful “four strikes” that were supposedly working against her are no longer painful labels, but instead “stripes” that testify to her success. Faye found it “powerful to have some time to be reflective,” which she felt enhanced her self-awareness in ways that can improve her ability to be strategic to practices around race. After receiving additional feedback about her poems from some of her friends and colleagues, Barbara felt that she uncovered a new dimension of her voice that is worth developing.

For Megan and Joyce, the writing revealed how far they have come in their responses to everyday racism. “It showed me that I’m further along than I thought; writing it and then reading it out loud, I don’t hear the hurt and anger in there that was there maybe a year ago,” Megan said. Joyce said that her poem addressed to someone who had harmed her revealed how much she has processed that pain—her emotional response has calmed down, making the person’s cruel words “quieter now.”

Megan remarked that self-reflection relates to one’s self-concept, which is “huge” in leadership because a principal’s personality impacts the school climate. “It’s not a hippy-dippy, groovy waste of time thing,” she said. “Two buildings can feel very, very different based on who’s putting their flavor on it and who’s carrying around many bags of crap. It’s a big deal.” Megan’s perspective summed

up the core benefit of self-reflection: “I think we need to be very self-aware, because if you’re not self-aware, you’re not going to be other-people aware.”

Processing of repressed emotions. During the workshop discussions and interviews, the women described feelings of release and relief that came about from talking about and writing poetry. For Joyce, the writing allowed her to deal with emotions rather than “stuff them away.” Megan remarked about the more focused emotional processing that occurred for her: “To sit down and actually do this makes me stop, take a beat and really crystallize some of my thoughts instead of just have this wash of familiar emotions.” Gigi stated that writing poetry helped her “relieve some of the emotional stress that leads to physical stress that can lead to health issues.”

These findings align with the literature in the field of poetry therapy, as noted in Chapter I, that reading, listening to, or writing poetry may relieve the anxiety that results from being the target of racial microaggressions (Liao, Weng, & West, 2016; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow; O’Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015). As poetry therapist John Fox (1997) explains, the effectiveness of working with poetry involves the emotional nature of this expressive art form: “The page, touched with our poem, becomes a place for painful feelings to be held, explored and transformed” (p. 3). A list of the emotion-identifying words in the participants’ poetry, shown in Table 3, affirms that the poem topics ignited focused reflections on emotional states.

Table 3

Emotions Expressed in Participants' Poetry, Discussions, and Interviews

| Positive | Negative | |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------|
| Belonging | Anger | Hurt |
| Compassion | Bewilderment | Inferiority |
| Freedom | Concern | Inhibition |
| Gratitude | Confusion | Regretfulness |
| Inspiration | Dejectedness | Rejection |
| Kinship | Despair | Sadness |
| Pride | Disappointment | Self-doubt |
| Relief | Discomfort | Shock |
| Security | Disheartedness | Suppression |
| Self-confidence | Exasperation | Tiredness |
| Validation | Fear | Uncertainty |
| Wishfulness | Humiliation | |

Another examination of participants' word choices reveals the significant difference between the number of specific and vivid verbs, modifiers, and nouns used in their discussions and interviews and those they selected in their poetry. The lists in Table 4, inserted as Appendix E, provide a simple visual of this difference, and a selection of participants' poetry is found in Appendix F.

Enriched leadership practice. Four of the participants described ways that the workshop gave them new ideas and practices for their work. Joyce remarked that the workshop experience “made me stop and think how you share the positives with other people. And that’s what I’ve taken time to do a lot more, so that’s been really valuable.” The workshop prompted Barbara to suggest that her black teachers form an affinity group, and she felt that the workshop broadened her communications skills by teaching her “new angles for entering a conversation.” Megan believed that a poetry group would be a valuable option for teachers’ professional development that would allow them to see “what stuff is splashing over into your classroom.” Finally, Tani felt that the validation that came with knowing others are going through the same struggles gave her “the courage” to her keep up her equity work, despite the daily battles.

Themes of Racist Experiences in Principal Leadership

A thematic overview of participants’ encounters with racism in their schools is presented in this study to address the critical race theory concept that people of color have a better standing to speak about racial encounters than white observers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 104). One purpose of this study was to conduct a workshop that would create a space for these positioned voices to speak and be documented. This thematic section is also guided by the critical race theory and black feminist theory concepts that voices of color are necessary to challenge the dominant culture’s discourses about race.

After delineating four classifications encompassing many of the participants' experiences with race, another layer of analysis inserted those areas into two fundamental tenets of critical race theory: racism is ordinary and interest convergence.

Racism is ordinary. Delgado & Stefancic (2012) defined racism in the United States as “ordinary, normal, and embedded in society” (p. 15). The stories shared by the black women principals in this study give evidence to this everyday racism. The following *constant, consistent* school-environment phenomena culled from the workshop discussions and follow-up interviews illustrate how systemic racism plays out in the participants' schools:

- Common behaviors of white teachers: 1) claiming that students of color don't learn (an example of the microaggression “ascription of intelligence”: a belief that, in general, people of color are not as intelligent as whites); 2) blaming the principal for their discomfort around race and white fragility instead of recognizing their bias (avoidance and denial of race issues; and 3) fearing students of color (“assumption of criminality,” a microaggression that assumes people of color are deviant and dangerous). Megan observed, “They're afraid of the kids and that's when things turn and become all rigid, and if you think kids don't pick up on that, you're crazy.”
- Black women principles must constantly prove themselves legitimate and capable of the job to white teachers, staff, and administrators. As

Quinn remarked, “It gets so tiring because you feel like you’re only as good as the last interaction. You’re only as good as your last conversation.”

Interest convergence. Two additional themes uncovered from participants’ experiences illustrate the nature of interest convergence, the critical race theory concept that “the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interest to do so” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 177). The women in this study described situations and encounters that reveal white teachers’ and staff members’ lack of interest or engagement in equity work based on, as the principals perceive it, their inability to see a “benefit” for them in such work:

- Racial equity work in schools is risky because it invites additional confrontations and challenges in a racist environment.

These conflicts arise when principals attempt equity work for which white teachers and/or staff do not see a benefit. According to Quinn, “That’s what we live every day. As long as my good benefits you, or a decision I make benefits you, it’s all good and gravy. It’s when we say no, even when you can justify the reasons for no, that we get all this other stuff.”

- Black women principals feel like they are the only ones in the building who care about students of color.

The participants discussed the fact that many white teachers do not understand race and bring their racist behaviors and unconscious biases into the classroom. Their lack of understanding prevents them from finding any benefit for themselves in the principal's coaching or equity work, resulting in the persistence of classroom neglect of students of color.

Examples of Racist Encounters

To further present voices of color in the spirit of the critical race theory and black feminist theory concepts described in the previous section, the following selected experiences describe events the participants have experienced.

Misogynoir: The angry black woman. In films, television, and literature, popular culture has perpetuated the stereotype of the angry black woman, which casts black women as “uniquely and irrationally angry” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 88). Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey (2010) coined the term *misogynoir* to “describe the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual & popular culture” (n.p.). In her analyses of the “racist sexist tropes” within hip hop culture (propagated by black male artists who have internalized the misogynoir of the white culture), Bailey (2013) created this vocabulary for “the specific violence of representational imagery depicting Black women” (p. 341). More general vocabulary about racial assaults on black women, whether coming from whites or blacks, such as *racial stereotypes*, can now be replaced with this more specific term that addresses the distinct cultural attacks on

black women. Three participants in the study described their encounters with the “angry black woman” form of misogynoir:

During a meeting with a white woman teacher, in which Quinn leaned in and listened intently, another white woman teacher viewed them and misinterpreted Quinn’s focus as anger at the teacher. She told the teacher who had had the meeting, “Wow, Principal XX was really laying into you. What’s going on?” In the interview for this study, Quinn said, “They are so highly sensitive about what my face looks like.”

Gigi’s encounters with the stereotype included being labeled as “intimidating” and “vindictive.” When Tani began a new principalship, a group of white teachers rallied members of the community to protest, claiming that she was “super strict” and racist because she “fired a lot of whites.” They feared her, she said: “They were all scared; they were all afraid.”

Second-class citizen. This microaggression treats people as if they should not hold positions of status and are lesser beings because of their race. In the first example, Tani walked in to an administrative meeting in her school district and was ignored by the all-white group. “I said good morning, and not one soul lifted her head to respond. I said it a second and third time, and no one responded to me. I can’t believe that I was that invisible.” At the beginning of a new principalship, Tani was told that she did not have the appropriate skills or experience for the position. “I met a lot of resistance—‘Oh, you don’t’ know Montessori enough to

run the school.' None of the principals before me had Montessori experience," she said, "but they used that on me."

Faye's story involved a survey that arrived for her and the white male on her administrative team. A white member of her staff suggested to others that they only give the survey to the white male. "We work collaboratively as a team, but they just wanted to single me out," she said. She shared another instance in which some white teachers demeaned her status by calling her by her first name in front of students. "When I came into a classroom, they would say, 'Oh, Miss Faye is here,'" and I know they wouldn't do that with the other administrators," she said.

Ascription of intelligence. A microaggression that perceives whites as more intelligent than people of color, sometimes stated as a surprise over a behavior or accomplishment that reflect a person of color's intelligence. At school functions, Megan always encountered a demeaning type of introduction and air of disbelief that she was a doctor. "Being introduced," she said, "it was Dr. So-and-So and Dr. So-and-So and . . . Megan. Then someone would see my nametag, and say, "Oh, you're a doctor?"

Barbara and other participants said that they hear "You're so articulate!" all the time. "Articulate," Gigi said, "as opposed to what? A bumbling idiot?"

Assumption of criminality. A microaggression in which person of color is presumed to be dangerous, deviant, or criminal on the basis of their race. When Barbara recognized a black male student (among others) for his achievements at a school celebration, a white teacher came to her in tears because she had not

recognized either of her daughters. “The boy was on his way to a correctional facility and that may have been the only time he was ever recognized for the excellence he has shown in some ways,” Barbara said. “She wanted other kids to be celebrated, not our deviant, horrible black males. Now she wants to bring up all these things about how horrible he is and get them on his record. She wants to take him down, and he isn’t even in the school anymore.” Barbara remarked that this was just the most recent example of white fragility, a response that is commonplace in her experience as a black principal. DiAngelo (2018) defined white fragility, a term she created, as white people’s perception that any connection made between them and racism is an affront to their morality and therefore unsettling to the point of intolerable. “The mere suggestion that being white had meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses . . . such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation (p. 2).

Assumption of criminality also came up in a comment from Faye during the group discussion. A white male teacher in Faye’s school expressed the attitude that the majority black student enrollment was too deviant to attract people to the positions at the school. The teacher told her that some teachers and staffers wanted to get her fired, adding, “But what they don’t understand is that nobody else will come in here and do this.”

In a personal life example, when Tani was door-knocking as a campaigner in her community, she approached a house and heard from inside, “If you go one

more step, I'm going to shoot you." As a double whammy, the white staffers in the campaign office downplayed and dismissed the threat. "I am not going door knocking again," she said. "It could be the difference between life and death for me."

Avoidance of race issues. When a classroom visit revealed that two black boys were separated from the rest of the students in the seating arrangement, Quinn met with the teacher to explain why her methods had to change. To Quinn's disappointment, the teacher chose to transfer to another school rather than engage in coaching. "I believe in holding tight and going through the process with people," Quinn said. "That was just the start of a process for her."

Joyce is the only female and person of color among the teachers and staff in her building, and when she brings up equity issues, she is "always treated like the crazy person," she said. "People think they should just pat you on the head and make you go sit in the corner until that feeling passes."

Summary

This study found affirmative outcomes to the two research questions about the impact and potential benefits of a poetry-based workshop on race for black women principals. The analysis showed that the participants identified four impacts: a validation of their common struggles, heightened self-awareness about their experiences, an understanding of poetry as a method for deep self-reflection, and inspiration for new leadership practices. Relatedly, they felt that the workshop benefited them by providing comfort through a validation of their

experiences, deepening their self-reflection, helping them process the emotions that arise from the challenges of their work, and enhancing their practice in new, specific ways. The findings also described participants' experiences as examples of two fundamental tenets of critical race theory, racism is ordinary and interest convergence. The last set of findings listed several examples of the women's experience with race on the job. The next chapter discusses the study as a whole and expands on its meaning and potential significance in the field of educational leadership.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Teaching gaps reveal that students of color, who make up the majority of public school enrollees in the United States, do not receive instruction that provides them with the tools to achieve. Evidence of a link between principals and student achievement in the literature has cultivated an interest in improving principal leadership as a means of reversing persistent teaching gaps (National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). This study provides evidence of the systemic racism permeating public education as experienced by black women principals who are engaged in equity work to close teaching gaps in their schools.

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact and potential benefits of a poetry-themed workshop addressing experiences with race and gender for black women principals in two urban and one rural district in the Midwest. Informed by the field of poetry therapy, which utilizes poetry and other forms of expression—“language, symbol, and story” (Mazza, 2017, p. 139)—for self-development, emotional healing, and other therapeutic and educational aims, the study was comprised of two 90-minute workshop sessions held on two successive weeks, take-home writing assignments, and follow-up interviews. Purposeful sampling for black women principals engaged in developing their equity practices in their schools resulted in a group of seven women ages 33 to 58. Their combined experience consisted of an average of 10 years of teaching and 7

years in the role of assistant principal/principal. The hand-coding process of data obtained from transcripts and participants' poetry followed Creswell's (2014) system for qualitative data analysis. In addition to poetry therapy, the study was framed around the concepts of critical race theory, feminist standpoint theory, and black feminist theory.

The study affirmed that the participants perceived the poetry-themed workshop as an impactful experience that brought benefits to their lives and professional practice. The process of coming together to listen to and write poetry about race, discuss issues prompted by related questions from the facilitator, and write poetry about their racial experiences on their own impacted them in four ways by 1) validating their daily experiences with race in their role as principal; 2) increasing their self-awareness; 3) becoming aware of the value of poetry for self-reflection; and 4) initiating new ideas and/or actions for their work in their schools. The related benefits derived from those impacts were 1) feeling comforted and less alienated through the validation that they are not alone in their experiences; 2) deepening their self-reflection on the racist encounters they experience as they lead for equity; 3) finding relief by processing an array of emotions that arise from racist encounters and that are often repressed; 4) and enriching their leadership practice with new actions and insights.

Relationship to Prior Research

The literature about the experiences of black women principals is scant: the research completed for the literature review in Chapter II uncovered only four

published studies (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Moore, 2013; Peters, 2012; Reed, 2012). While poetry therapy is an established field, the majority of the work has been conducted by researchers in psychology and psychiatry (Heimes, 2011). A search for studies that utilized poetry therapy with educational leaders to address issues of race found one such study by Mansfield, Sherman, and King (2013). Their project did not involve leaders in a school setting per se, but instead examined the researchers' project to use poetry in teaching about social justice in their Ed.D. program in educational leadership.

Theoretical Implications

Poetry therapy. The participants' word choices in their poetry reflected a journey into the emotional pain of their experiences with race as evidenced by the expansive number of vivid, specific verbs, modifiers, and nouns used in their writings in contrast to the number of equally rich choices in their spoken vocabulary during the workshop (see Tables 2 and 3). They described the emotional release of plumbing those depths in comments about "relief of stress" and feeling "relieved," which aligns with poetry writing's ability to relieve the trauma that comes with the "bitter memories of prejudice and injustice" (Ihanus, 2005, p. 79).

The participants' remarks about the sense of kinship and sisterhood that developed from listening to and writing poetry in the group was evidence that an emotional resonance had built a rapport among them. This concept of poetry therapy, the isoprinciple, reflects the power of poetry to form connections and

also applies to the connection between the emotion in the poem and the reader's mood. As Chavis (2011) explained, "troubled readers usually experience great relief when they encounter a poem that captures so well the tenor of their emotional state" (p. 42). Faye made the observation that while the group's sense of sisterhood was a positive outcome, the shared emotions and experiences also had a negative side in making her realize that "*we're all struggling*, which is a horrible thing." The women validated Fuch's (1998) observations about poetry as the threshold of imagination (p. 196) when they described the writing process as a refreshing opportunity to be creative and use their imaginations, which opened doors for considering new ways to bring their insights into their practice.

The women's most-cited impact and benefit of the workshop, taking time to self-reflect on their experiences with race by writing poetry, gets to the heart of the goal of poetry therapy. Writing poetry offers opportunities for growth and healing, Chavis (2011) states, by creating a way to "safely express heartfelt emotions, dilemmas and desires" and, in general, "fully realize the self" and "find relief from suffering due to loss, trauma or the shame of a dark secret" (154-155). Workshop participant Tani's story about the transformative process of writing a poem about a painful racial assault, in which she turned the "strikes" against her into "stripes" of victory and courage, is an ideal example of Chavis' (2011) statement that writing poetry can lead to the discovery of "a new, illuminating way to view a past (often painful) memory, situation or relationship" (p. 155).

Feminist theories. Considering the role that systemic racism plays in institutions like public education, a feminist standpoint theory approach to black women principals' experiences is concerned with the roles that gender and power play in the school environment. An interesting finding in this study is the bewilderment of two participants over whether the resistance to their leadership was due to gender, race, or their role as principal. Barbara, who is biracial, became a principal after teaching for five years and working as an educational consultant for eight years and school improvement specialist for seven years. Not until she became a middle school principal did she encounter the pushback and resistance to her work that allies contended was due to her race. Two years into her position, she is still ambivalent about the cause of her treatment during the school's "natural fight against change." "Whether it's true or not, I don't know," she said. Quinn continuously asks herself why she faces resistance: "I always go through the question—is it because I'm black? Is it because I'm female? Is it because of the role itself of principal?" Even the black feminist perception of race-gender intersectionality, which describes the oppression of women on two fronts, does not provide a solid explanation for them.

Black feminist theory also helps us understand the treatment of white avoidance and denial of racism as a form of silencing. Barbara described the common situation of white teachers or staff making a biased, offensive comment or observation and then denying that they "meant it that way." "That's what black people hear—that's your perception; that wasn't what I meant to do," she said."

In their efforts to deny Barbara's lived experience as a woman of color, her staff exhibited color blindness—a refusal to acknowledge race—and silenced her, ignoring her existence as a racial being, another method of oppression in the legacy of black women's experience.

Tani's story of a verbal assault by a black male administrator, which became the subject of one of her poems, reflects the subjugation of black women by both white and black men, a legacy that is one of the concerns of black feminist theory.

After watching a video of slam poet Mwende "FreeQuency" Katwiwa perform "Dear White People," two participants talked about their learned tendency to be cautious and restrained when witnessing a racial issue, being the target of a racial assault, or interacting in any situation. Megan said, "I'm so cautious of making sure I'm not the angry black woman," and Joyce added, "I always walk cautiously because I never know how I'll be treated by people." This admission of living in fear and/or anxiety speaks to bell hooks' (2009) observation that "living in racial apartheid . . . [created] . . . a fear rooted in unresolved trauma" (p. 56). Some participants were surprised and frustrated to discover that their learned restraint even showed up in their writing, in which they felt their poems were more muted than those of other participants. The workshop provided a space for the women to explore these behaviors and derive comfort in hearing that others behaved the same way. Black feminist thought acknowledges

that such “safe discourse” is vital to black women’s ability to resist and challenge racism. To Collins (2002), in fact, it is a necessity:

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within that social space where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance. (p. 95)

Issues of gender and power are also relevant to the concept of white fragility. Since 77 percent of public school teachers are women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), the racial assaults and resistance to equity work experienced by black women principals as described in this study suggest that the majority of these challenges come from white women. The latest public school data states that 7 percent of teachers are black and 9 percent are Latino, and since the data does not delineate race/ethnicity in the gender tables, we can surmise that less than 7 percent of women teachers are black and less than 9 percent are Latina, thereby making white women the majority of teachers in our schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The gendered nature of white fragility in public education thus creates two dimensions of white oppression inflicted upon black women principals: the rejections inherent in teachers’ behavior and the fact that most of these rejections and other responses of white fragility come from women. This creates another intersectionality relevant to the racism experienced specifically by black women principals and calls for research about the gendered nature of white fragility in public education.

Critical race theory. Two fundamental tenets of critical race theory, racism is ordinary and interest convergence, provided a framework for analyzing the microaggressions and other assaults described by the women in this study. As education leaders, their consistent race-related encounters illuminate the concept that racism is the normal, ordinary state of affairs in society. Ascription of intelligence, the microaggression that treats people of color as inferior in intelligence to whites, was illustrated in the frequently cited teachers' claim that students of color can't learn. The principals' buildings were also the scene of the microaggression called assumption of criminality, which assumes people of color are deviant and dangerous. This assumption was evident in the commonplace reality that white teachers were afraid of black students. Racism is ordinary was also illustrated in the principals' constant need to prove themselves legitimately skilled and capable of serving in their role.

The critical race theory concept of interest convergence, in which whites will only engage in or tolerate advances in social justice when those advances converge with a benefit for themselves, illustrated two themes found in the study. First, white teachers and staff who do not see a benefit in equity work resist black women school leaders' programs for change, creating a "risky" environment for these principals. To push for change is to invite more confrontation. Second, the lack of engagement around equity work and consequent status-quo neglect of students of color makes black women principals feel like they are the only ones in their schools who care about the students of color. Until white educators perceive

a benefit in the equity work of their black women principals, their interests will not converge, and white resistance to this work—and the teaching gaps that result—will continue.

This study also incorporated the critical race theory concept of counternarratives in both its design and content. Constructed to focus on black women principals' voices as presented in their poetry and during workshop discussions, the study served as a platform upon which black women principals could express their lived experiences as school leaders. Their words are counternarratives to the dominant narrative about principal leadership, which, like the majority of all educational leadership scholarship, is written from a white perspective.

Implications for Practice

The benefits of the poetry-themed workshops reported by the principals in this study suggest that a poetry-themed affinity group may be a productive option for professional development and equity programs in schools. The workshop can be designed for male leaders of color as well as white leaders in the form of a program for exploring white privilege and bias. Without expanding their consciousness of race, white school leaders are more prone to a host of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism in their schools and the assessed learning differences that result from it. Since teacher and staff resistance to equity work was a common observation among the principals in this study, a poetry-themed affinity group for white teachers, led by a white facilitator, may be

an effective step in beginning to transform the attitudes beneath that resistance. These attitudes and behaviors include a reliance on biases and assumptions; deficit thinking, a focus on what students of color cannot do based on the assumption of white cultural superiority (McCray & Beachum, 2014); color-blindness, which deliberately ignores race-based differences in the belief that if race is not noticed, people cannot act in a racist manner (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012); and refusal to acknowledge the realities of inequity in their schools (Miller & Martin, 2014).

These attitudes and behaviors are developed in DiAngelo's (2011) work on white fragility. As whites continue to act defensively when challenged about their white superiority rather than acknowledge and explore their white privilege, they perpetuate institutionalized racism. This study suggests that professional development methods such as a poetry workshop designed to help white teachers, principals, and other school leaders, both women and men, identify their white privilege and how that impacts their teaching or leadership could be a critical step in countering white fragility. As DiAngelo (2011) explains:

Whites who position themselves as liberal often opt to protect what they perceive as their moral reputations, rather than recognize or change their participation in systems of inequity and domination. In so responding, whites invoke the power to choose when, how, and how much to address or challenge racism. . . . When confronted with a challenge to white racial codes, many white liberals use the speech of self-defense [and] this

discourse enables defenders to protect their moral character against what they perceive as accusation and attack while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability. Focusing on restoring their moral standing through these tactics, whites are able to avoid the question of white privilege. . . . *Those who lead whites in discussions of race may find the discourse of self-defense familiar. Via this discourse, whites position themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, attacked, and being used as “punching bag[s]” [emphasis added].* (p. 64)

White teachers’ behaviors reported by the black women principals in this study are clearly represented in DiAngelo’s (2011) descriptions above, revealing the need for effective methods of professional development in education that focus on race.

The emotional nature of equity work lends itself to poetry writing, which is a direct route to self-reflection and, as participants in this study found, fosters imagination, creativity, and new ideas for practice. Directing participants to write without any concerns about poetic form or grammar creates a non-threatening space for openness and emotional authenticity. This reflective practice can provide emotional relief and deeper insights into school leaders’, teachers’, and staff’s evolving responses to racism.

Limitations

Scheduling constraints limited the workshop to two sessions held one week apart. A longer series of seven weeks, which Mazza (1999) formatted for

his work with mildly depressed college students, would have given participants an opportunity to make the writing process a regular part of their routine. As such, the expanded time frame would increase the possibility that participants would observe changes in their anxiety levels and leadership practices as a result of the work. [It is worth noting that the participants' desire to continue to meet after the second workshop in this study points to the level of positive benefit they derived from the process.]

A broader representation of school districts, including suburban, would have brought a richer variation of principal experience to the group. Finally, the fact that the researcher/facilitator is white may have impacted the women's level of comfort in speaking openly about issues of race. In one interview, the participant noted her own discomfort in listening to the video of a slam poetry performance that targeted whites and admitted that she thought about the facilitator's possible discomfort during the performance.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study invites further exploration of the use of poetry as a tool for school leaders to address issues of race. First, a longer poetry-themed workshop, scheduled over a period of at least seven weeks, would provide deeper insights into the impacts and benefits as described in this study. Second, poetry-themed workshops designed for white female and white male school leaders should be conducted to explore the method's impact on expanding self-awareness and grappling with white privilege and bias.

Summary and Conclusion

The combined stressors of school leadership responsibilities and racial attacks make the job of principal uniquely challenging for black women. With little time for self-reflection in the wake of painful exchanges or other race-based experiences, the black women principals in this study found relief in sharing and writing about how race impacts their work. Since racism is a relentless, daily assault, these school leaders felt that self-reflection is a critical part of their work that helps them try to make sense of the resistance they face when advocating for all children. Writing poetry, with its potential for emotional processing that may bring about an alleviation of stress, appeared to be a beneficial form of self-reflection for these leaders and may be equally beneficial for school leaders of color of any gender who confront the same formidable, compounded challenges.

The intimate, deep-diving nature of poetry lends itself to dealing with issues of race that inflict emotional harm, harm that is easily repressed in an effort to forge ahead with the tasks of the principalship. An excerpt from Margaret Walker's "For My People" (1937) is a fitting testament to these principals' courage and resiliency:

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in
the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies. . . .

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second

generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth.

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If you would like to participate, please review and sign the attached Informed Consent form and email it to antonia.felix@mnsu.edu. If you have any questions about what's involved, please email or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or contact Dr. Melissa Krull at xxx-xxx-xxxx / melissa.krull@mnsu.edu.

Thank you very much for considering to be a part of this first-of-its-kind group and study.

Best regards,

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

TITLE OF STUDY

My Truth, My Telling: Experiences of Black Women Principals in a Poetry-themed Workshop on Race and Gender

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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STUDENT INVESTIGATOR/FACILITATOR

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to understand how a group of black women principals/assistant principals (current and former) perceive the impact of participating in a racial affinity group designed as a poetry-based workshop on race and gender.

STUDY PROCEDURES

The three-hour workshop will be split into two 1.5-hour sessions over two consecutive weeks. During each 1.5-hour session, you will:

1. Read or watch a video performance of one or two poems or other narratives about black women's experiences with racism and/or gender bias.
2. Share your responses about the poem through discussion guided by the facilitator.
3. Write two poems based on prompts from the facilitator. There will be no "rules" of form, language, grammar, rhyming, or any other aspect of poetry writing: the only element of poetry required is to write lines instead of paragraphs.
4. Read your poems aloud on a volunteer basis to foster discussion.
5. In the week between session 1 and 2 you will write one more poem, as guided by the facilitator, and reflect on the poetry reading and writing experience in a journal provided by the facilitator. This **take-home writing** will take about 20 minutes of your time.
6. After the last session, the facilitator will schedule a **one-hour interview** with you to take place within the next seven to ten days.

The total time commitment will be 4 hours and 20 minutes.

The sessions will take place on two Tuesdays, May 1 and May 8, 2018, from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.

The workshop will be conducted on the Edina campus of Minnesota State University, Mankato: 7700 France Ave. So., 5th floor, Edina, MN, 55435.

Each workshop session will be audiotaped with a digital recorder and the transcripts used as data for the study. Your poetry and journal entries will also be used as data (you will be asked to make copies of your journal pages and submit them during the last session). All discussions and writings will be kept confidential outside the sessions—confidentiality will be ensured through the processes listed in the Confidentiality section below. Audio recordings will be erased by deleting the digital files from the recording device and computer used to create transcripts of the digital files within three years of the completion of the study.

RISKS

As in any self-reflective activity about race, the possibility of discomfort in expressing experiences and perceptions about race is a possibility. While the facilitator will make every effort to create a space that feels safe for sharing, you may decline to share writing or engage in discussion and may terminate your

involvement at any time.

BENEFITS

Few opportunities exist for black women educational leaders to come together to reflect on and share their experiences with race and gender bias. By reflecting through the process of poetry writing, which allows one to explore with more emotional freedom than in other types of writing, participants may give voice to silenced thoughts and feelings about racist and sexist experiences. By sharing poetry with each other, participants may discover common experiences and gain a broader perspective of each other's lives, resulting in new bonds of support. This study will also add to the very limited body of knowledge about black women principals as they experience issues of race and gender in their professional lives.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your writing and discussions will be kept confidential beyond the group sessions. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file in the personal possession of the researcher. The faculty principal investigator will only have access to these coded/anonymous materials during meetings with the researcher. After the researcher completes the study and her degree program at Mankato State University, Mankato, in July 2018, these materials will remain in her possession, stored in a locked file in her personal possession, for three years, for her use in writing about the study beyond her dissertation in a scholarly journal or other professional publishing venue.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about this study, contact the workshop facilitator, Antonia Felix, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or antonia.felix@mnsu.edu. You may also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Melissa Krull, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or melissa.krull@mnsu.edu. If you have questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Minnesota State University Institutional Review Board, at (507) 389-5102 or irb@mnsu.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to take part in this study and sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You are also under no obligation to complete the brief at-home writing assignments. The decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your withdrawal will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits and your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form at the first workshop session. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

By checking here, I state that I am at least 18 years of age.

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

IRBNet ID: 1175427

APPENDIX C

Poetry-themed Workshop Plans

Session I

1. **Watch Poetic Moment perform “New Teachers”:**

PM is a slam poetry champion and teacher in California.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0mHLnwRzxE>

2. **Discussion Q (Antonia):** What does it feel like to know that there are teachers in your school who don’t believe in some of your students?

3. **Discussion Q (Erin):** Have you ever felt that there are teachers in your school who don’t believe in you because you’re black? What does that feel like?

4. **Stem-poem Group Activity: (Antonia)**

Say something about your *real* voice by finishing this line . . . “When I use my real voice . . .”

5. **Writing Prompt:**

Write a poem of any length, no rules or rhymes necessary, about a time when you weren’t able to use your real voice.

6. **Sharing and Discussion of Poems**

Poetry-themed Workshop Plans

Session II

1. **Watch Mwende Katwiwa “FreeQuency” perform “Dear White People”:**

A Kenya-born poet who lives in New Orleans.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTIihYVAmRQ>

2. **Writing (Antonia):** Toward the end, she repeats “We are angry, and raw, and tired.”

Write your own “Dear White Person” letter as a poem directed at someone at your school: Dear White Teacher/Principal/Secretary, etc. Start it with, “I am _____, and _____, and _____.”

No rules: don’t worry about the length of the lines or punctuation. Just write what you would honestly like to say to that person.

3. **Share the poems with the group. Ask for responses.**

4. Hand out the “The New Therapist” (excerpt) by Claudia Rankine.

Antonia reads the poem aloud.

5. **Discussion Q: (Erin)**

Have you had a similar experience? Or, as a black woman, have you ever been told or been made to feel that you don’t belong?

6. **Writing Prompt (Antonia):**

Write another brief “prose poem” paragraph to complete “The New Therapist” story.

7. **Sharing and Discussion of Poems**

8. **Antonia Reads Aloud: “Black Boys Play the Classics” by Toi Derricotte**

Hand out poem to everyone.

9. **Discussion Q (Antonia): Thinking about the racist attitude in** Answer B in the poem: Has anyone ever expressed this toward you, shown surprise at something you've done because they don't expect that from a black woman?

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

1. Did you hear anything from your fellow principals in the workshop that was similar to your own experiences or feelings? If yes, how does it feel to know that others understand your experiences that deeply?
2. Did the listening or writing teach you anything about yourself that you did not know?
3. What was challenging for you in the workshop, including the between-session writing?
4. Did the listening or writing about these emotional issues have a benefit for you as a school leader?
5. Did the workshop experience have any other impact on your leadership?

APPENDIX E

Table 4

Vocabulary Richness: Comparison of Word Choices Between Participants' Spoken Content and Poetry

| | Participants' Spoken Word Choices During Workshop Discussion and Interviews | Participants' Written Word Choices in Their Poetry | |
|-----------|---|--|--------------|
| Verbs | Cuts deep | Attain | Put asunder |
| | Rise above | Beat | Revisiting |
| | Snatched up | Discounted | Sabotage |
| | Walked cautiously | Discredit | Scorn |
| | | Dominating | Scuff |
| | | Failed | Shackled |
| | | Fallen | Shhhh |
| | | Falter | Shut up |
| Modifiers | | Flip | Soar |
| | Arduous | Apologetic | Discounted |
| | Bottled up | Backbiting | Disheartened |
| | Crazy | Backhanded | Dismissive |
| | Criminal | Bewildered | Empowered |
| | Disheartening | Brilliant | Exhausted |
| Ludicrous | Defensive | Fabulous | |

Table 4, continued

Vocabulary Richness: Comparison of Word Choices Between Participants' Spoken Content and Poetry

| Participants' Spoken Word Choices During Workshop Discussion and Interviews | | Participants' Written Word Choices in Their Poetry | |
|---|------------|--|----------------|
| Modifiers, cont. | Offputting | Fierce | Tough |
| | Raw | Invisible | Trending |
| | Weirdest | Perturbed | Unapproachable |
| | | Precious | Uniquely |
| | | Quieter | Visionary |
| | | Safe-to-talk-about | Wearry |
| | | Stunned | Worn |
| | | Targeted | |
| Nouns | Anomaly | Arrogance | Dreams |
| | Despair | Benefit of the | Essence |
| | Docility | doubt | Hopelessness |
| | | Blackness | Hopes |
| | | Confrontation | Ignorance |
| | | Cultural whatever | Insecurity |
| | | Cut downs | Interaction |
| | | Discomfort | Junk |

Table 4, continued

Vocabulary Richness: Comparison of Word Choices Between Participants' Spoken Content and Poetry

| Participants' Spoken Word Choices During Workshop Discussion and Interviews | Participants' Written Word Choices in Their Poetry | |
|---|--|--------------|
| Nouns, cont. | Masked | Tactics |
| | Platitudes | Togetherness |
| | Mental models | Toxicity |
| | Mental ward | Transparency |
| | Put downs | Undercurrent |
| | Self-talk | Unity |
| | Superiority | Venom |

APPENDIX F

Selected Workshop Participants' Poetry

Stem Poem

Each participant finished the line aloud (and one participant added another line):]

“When I Use My Real Voice”

When I use my real voice . . .

. . . I feel like I gain confidence and my voice becomes louder.

. . . I feel empowered. I feel honest, and I feel true to myself.

. . . I am most comfortable.

. . . I'm continually impressed at what I hear.

. . . I am sincere, passionate, and truthful.

. . . I feel relieved. I really feel like I can soar, and I feel like I've accomplished something.

. . . I experience relief.

. . . I feel fierce.

Writing Prompt: An Experience in Which You

Were Not Able to Use Your Real Voice

[Some participants chose to instead write poems in their journals about an experience in which they felt they were judged or made to feel they did not belong]

“We Weren’t Expecting You”

It’s a bit of a surprise to those
who may first meet me
My Scandinavian last name
may give you a different thought.

When we meet I might hear
We weren’t expecting you.

When people see me they might
have ideas about me. When
they hear me speak, they
might say, ‘We weren’t expecting
you—you are so articulate!’

A backhanded compliment
meaning “You talk good for a
black girl.”

When people read my vitae they
think “We weren’t expecting you”
which means that they are a
bit surprised or doubtful about
my qualifications and experience.

Just who *were* you expecting?

[Untitled]

You're no good!

I will succeed and bring you with me

You're too dark!

I want more for you than for myself

You're too white!

You're too fat!

You'll never be hired!

You should change your major!

You're not good enough!

You don't belong!

Remarks running through my head.

Making me second-guess myself.

Planting obstacles.

Put downs, cut downs.

You can't become I will

Work ethic and character

Opportunities

Service to others

The words still don't leave

Words are quieter

“For Me, They are Stripes!”

You look at me and wonder

Why is she here, I wonder

You get some answers, and still you ponder

You then steal my thunder

And you know that it is a blunder

You get what you want hereunder

And put me asunder

I look and I smile

For this too shall pass

You try to break my bile

And said that my class

Will not take me a mile

For before any success

My **strikes** will precede

And I look you in the eye

And say they are stripes!!

You argue without redress

And I insist they are **Stripes!!!**

[Untitled:]

What You See . . . What You Refuse to See

You only see my “good” when it benefits YOU!

I’m only as “good” as my last interaction with YOU!

What you see/feel about me . . .

uncomfortable

targeted,

fear,

anger,

unapproachable,

sneaky,

confrontation only to name a few.

These you keep and refuse to see/feel:

Kindness, empathy, caring, visionary,

intelligence, transparency, reflective

practices, benefit of the doubt only name a few.

You judge me to keep yourself on top.

You don’t realize you’ve already fallen

That’s what you refuse to see.

Writing Prompt: “Dear White Person”

“Dear White Friend”

I am tired and hurt and sorry.

Tired of trying to make you see
and recognize my Blackness.

Hurt that something about which

I am so proud and hold as
essential to my being—my
race—is so scary for you
to talk about.

I am sorry that I’ve thrown
my pearls before swine and
tried to share my deep and
precious truths with one who
has no intention of allowing
space for discomfort—my bad.

I’ve learned, though. We’ll continue
to share recipes and other
things that are on your safe-
to-talk-about list. By
knowing me you may eat better
but you won’t live better.

“Dear White Teacher”

I am surprised and perturbed and bewildered. You say you are here for the kids yet you scorn and fear them.

You said you care enough to work in the inner-city

Yet you escape to your world and exclude them in your universe

You said you respect their culture

Yet you scuff and make fun of their names

You said the future belongs to them

Yet you build a barrier to their access and opportunity

You said they are the essence of your mission

Yet you plan lessons that limit their potential and set them up for failure

Really, white teacher?

What’s truly the plan?

“Dear White Teacher”

Dear white teacher

I am proud and brilliant and on a mission.

How come every time we sit down

to have a conversation about students

black students

you either get defensive and flip the script

with your butts and your

yeah wells and your negativity and

your hopelessness. Stop bringing

us down with your veil of

pulling us up.

Dear white “equity” leader

Stop pretending you’re the smartest

person in the room with

all the answers for how to

“save” our school and make it

“safe” cause your solutions look

a lot like the prisons our schools

are designed to fill. Just shut up

a little and listen. Shhhh.

Dear white teacher

How about you start focusing on the growth

and well-being of the students

who have been historically

marginalized, shackled, beat

kicked out and set aside and stop

dominating the conversation

with gender, sexuality and again

for God's sake, safety.

What the fuck?

Dear white teacher

Our black children

are proud, brilliant, warriors they

have hopes and dreams that they

will attain despite your

masked platitudes and talk of

equity and cultural whatever

the trending phrase of the day is.

Shhhh white teacher

Listen

Really listen

“Safety?” Our

children have never felt “safe”

so if you are truly concerned

listen maybe you’ll learn something

because we are proud, brilliant

and on a mission

“Dear White Colleague”

Dear White Colleague,
I am educated and
intelligent and licensed.

I am tired of being
discounted by your
insecurity.

I am sick of you
looking down on me
telling me that I’m
only here due to my
race.

I am disheartened
by your arrogance and mean spirit.

Please know that your
words and actions only
make me stronger.

Your desire to discredit
me has failed AGAIN!

Only I will decide when I will walk away,
not you.

I turn your negative words
into passion for my work.

I turn your disdain
into power.

I will not falter because
you don’t like me.

I don’t need your
acceptance. I don’t
serve you!

“Dear White Teacher”

I am so exhausted
by your tactics and backbiting
strategies to keep me down

I’m tired of you trying to weigh
me down and painting negative
pictures to others about me.

I’m offended by the lying
smile you shadow over me
each day in passing

You thinking your worries
are more important than
mine or anyone else’s

I feel sorry for you for I am
a fabulous person to know and
let be herself in her skin. You must
tire thinking about me all
the time trying to sabotage my
walk—my talk

I’m not going anywhere

Writing Prompt: Create an Ending for the Excerpt from Claudia Rankine's Poem,

"The New Therapist"

[In Rankine's prose poem she describes a black client coming to her white therapist's door for the first time. When the therapist opens the door, she "yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?"]

[Untitled Ending for "The New Therapist"]

So sorry you say. So sorry for what? For your assumptions, your biases, your blatant racism? So sorry, so sorry, for what? 400 years of hatred, enslavement, genocide, incarceration, discrimination, segregation? What are you sorry for?

My people we simply walk through spaced looking for searching for asking for the same things you are. Kindness and possibilities. Safety and love. Empathy and understanding. But you keep barking in our faces seeing something that just isn't there.

Stop saying sorry. Start saying welcome. We want you here. Can I help you. I'm so glad you came.

[Untitled Ending for “The New Therapist”]

I’m looking at this therapist and I have a decision to make. Do I walk in to interrupt or give her a chance to help me?

Decision

Think about it . . . I walk in?

This woman wasn’t expecting someone that looked like me.

I walk in?

She knew me from the mental models in her head—media, family, ignorance

I walk in?

Before I utter my first words she believed I came to do harm

I walk in?

For therapy?

For me . . . or for her?

I'm not paying her to be her therapist.

Decision

No, thank you I'll pass