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A Grappling with power and privilege in the United States: One queer TESOL professional's autoethnographic inquiry

Lidiando con el poder y el privilegio en los Estados Unidos: la investigación autoetnográfica de un profesional queer de TESOL

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ABSTRACT
Previous research, including the author's own, has affirmed the presence of oppressive dynamics throughout the American education system, including adult English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs. Yet, addressing these dynamics in classroom instruction and program administration is relatively absent in preservice preparation programs and continuous professional development for educational professionals. Similarly, the vital importance for educators to reflect on these oppressive dynamics and explore how they might manifest within themselves and impact them professionally has also been identified. Inspired by Gerald (2022), the author embarked on an autoethnographic inquiry that focused on oppressive dynamics based on their prevalence in American society (racism and sexism) and their personal relevance (homo- and transphobia). Critical race and intersectionality theories were the conceptual frameworks used for this investigation, including the personal and professional impact on the author/research subject and their presence among participants in the research he has conducted. The goal was to scrutinize the context of instruction (i.e., American history, society, and culture), to share the author's reckoning with these dynamics, including power and privilege, and to prompt other educators to make similar introspective journeys. Limitations and areas for future study, including inquiries in other countries/contexts, were also discussed.

Keywords: autoethnography; oppressive dynamics; privilege; ESOL; critical reflection.

RESUMEN
Investigaciones anteriores, incluidas las del propio autor, han confirmado la presencia de dinámicas opresivas en todo el sistema educativo estadounidense, incluyendo los programas de inglés para adultos hablantes de otros idiomas (ESOL, por sus siglas en inglés). Sin embargo, abordar estas dinámicas en la instrucción en el aula y en la administración de programas está relativamente ausente en los programas de preparación previos al servicio y en el desarrollo profesional continuo para los profesionales de la educación. De manera similar, también se ha identificado la importancia vital de que los educadores reflexionen sobre estas dinámicas opresivas y exploren cómo pueden manifestarse dentro de ellos mismos y afectarlos profesionalmente. Inspirado por Gerald (2022), el autor se embarcó en una investigación autoetnográfica que se centró en las dinámicas opresivas basadas en su prevalencia en la sociedad estadounidense (racismo y sexismo) y su relevancia personal (homo y transfobia). Las teorías críticas de la raza y la interseccionalidad fueron los marcos conceptuales utilizados para esta investigación,

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incluyendo el impacto personal y profesional en el autor/sujeto de investigación y su presencia entre los participantes en la investigación que ha realizado. El objetivo era escudriñar el contexto de la instrucción (es decir, la historia, la sociedad y la cultura estadounidenses), compartir el ajuste de cuentas del autor con estas dinámicas, incluyendo el poder y el privilegio, y provocar que otros educadores realicen viajes introspectivos similares. También se discutieron las limitaciones y áreas para futuros estudios, incluyendo investigaciones en otros países/contextos.

Palabras clave: autoetnografía; dinámicas opresivas; privilegio; ESOL; reflexión crítica.

Introduction

For decades, human service professionals, including educators of adults, have been encouraged to reflect upon our practice, grapple with longstanding values and beliefs, and strive to become "reflective in action" (Schön, 1983), which means being proactive in addressing issues and dynamics that arise within ourselves and with our clients or students "in the moment." Many (Brookfield, 2017; Cranton, 1996; Farrell, 2012; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991) have argued that this self-reflection for educators should be initiated during our preservice preparation and nurtured and refined throughout our professional careers. Beyond competence in pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), which means cultivating the ability to present academic discipline or linguistic content in comprehendible ways to students, teaching context is equally crucial for educators to adjust instructional practices to meet the needs of our students most effectively (Grossman, 1990), including implementing culturally sustaining, trauma-responsive, and decolonized pedagogies (Gay, 2002; Gross; 2020; Guy, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Martin, et al., 2017; Paris and Alim, 2017). Since educational practices and policies, including instruction, are context-dependent, educators in the United States of America must also contend with the complex interplay of historical, societal, and social realities that have become systemic and institutionalized within educational settings. For example, oppressive dynamics, like racism, gender bias, and homophobia, are embedded in Pre-K through postsecondary education in the United States, including adult English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs and classrooms (Housel, 2022a, 2023).

The European conquest of the Western Hemisphere, particularly in the United States of America, and its accompanying genocide of indigenous peoples, its chattel slavery of Africans, and its subjugation of Asian, Pacific Islander, and Latinx peoples have fueled European and American economies for centuries. Many (Gerald, 2022; Kendi, 2019; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Roy, 2018) have argued that the United States has never adequately acknowledged nor reckoned with this racialized past. These longstanding acts of violence and oppression, often called domestic terrorism, are perhaps best exemplified by the barbarism inherent in the lynching, mass shootings, and police brutality and murders that continue to plague our white supremist society in the 21st century. Gerald (2022) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have posited that racism, capitalism, and property ownership are interconnected. Similar assertions could easily apply to other intersecting oppressive dynamics, like sexism, xenophobia, and homo- and transphobia, that also intentionally marginalize groups of people from economic opportunity, social mobility, and generational wealth. Thus, defining, regulating, and owning property have been central features of power dynamics, including oppression and subjugation, in the United States. Related to education, intellectual "property" and literacy have also been leveraged as tools of subjugation and disenfranchisement. For example, teaching a slave to read was illegal and inequities in educational funding between predominantly white school districts and those populated with minoritized children remains true to this day. For Lawrence (1987), most oppression does not seem like oppression to the perpetrator or the people who enjoy privileged positions in a society. Ultimately, dominant

groups (e.g., white, male, cis-gender, heterosexual, propertied/monied) rationalize and justify their privilege by constructing narratives that require little, if any, self-examination, or behavioral change (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Although I am addressing dynamics unique to the United States, social hierarchies and oppressive dynamics unfortunately exist in all countries and cultures in the world.

Kendi (2019), Roy (2018), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have argued that struggling with and confronting oppressive dynamics and power and privilege is crucial if this cycle of oppression, subjugation, and domination is ever going to change. As my own research has attested (Housel, 2022a, 2023), every educational professional must make a commitment to this painful process of personal introspection if we ever hope that authentic and lasting individual and societal learning and transformation can occur (Roy, 2018). Inspired by the autoethnographic and narrative technique employed by Gerald (2022), I will "practice what I preach" by becoming the "research subject" of this autoethnographic inquiry. I will confront and grapple with the oppressive dynamics I have encountered in my life and work, including the power and privilege I have enjoyed within American society, as well as share what has been revealed by participants in my previous research studies.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this autoethnographic inquiry:

1) How have I personally experienced and internalized the oppressive dynamics under study as they are manifest in the United States?

2) To what degree have I witnessed or experienced the oppressive dynamics under study in work settings in the United States?

3) What have participants in my previous research shared about experiencing the oppressive dynamics under study?

Conceptual Framework

Aligned with Housel (2023), critical race and intersectionality theories were the conceptual frameworks for this study. Critical race theory (CRT) initially investigated the impact of laws inspired by the Civil Rights movement (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), encompassing a "radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms" (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Over time, CRT has expanded beyond explorations of race and racism to include the examination of other oppressive dynamics, like gender bias and homophobia, within American society and its legal system. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT into Pre-K through 12 educational settings in the United States to investigate the institutionalized racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) children while Closson (2010) supported its use in adult education as well. Ladson-Billings (1998) then advocated for instructors, largely white, to grapple with the oppressive beliefs imbedded in their internalized sense of power and privilege prior to working with BIPOC students.

As an outgrowth of CRT, intersectionality investigates how "intersecting power relations" and oppressive dynamics are "interrelated" and "mutually shape one another" in ways that create "intersecting conditions of subordination" (La Barbera, 2013, 189) or multiple dimensions of disempowerment (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, in working with adult, emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs) in the United States or elsewhere, any overarching anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia that may have been internalized can be exacerbated

by racism, linguicism, and gender oppression, which might be further complicated by homophobia and classism. These interrelated dynamics can have a synergistic impact that could further oppress and disempower the immigrant students that I work with in adult ESOL programs or thwart my ability to be an effective and transformative educator. Consequently, CRT and intersectionality theories were appropriate lenses through which to begin this self-assessment of my own internalized oppressive dynamics, as well as my power and privilege, in the context of my current work in adult ESOL classrooms and programs in the United States.

Methodology

The justification of autoethnography as the methodological framework for this study is discussed below. Similarly, as the lone participant in the study, a more detailed statement of my positionality seemed warranted.

Methodological Framework

Hayano (1979) is generally credited with originating the term *autoethnography* to describe when anthropologists (and subsequently other social scientists, including educational researchers) study their own cultures and contexts. For Poulos (2021, pp. 4-5), autoethnography is a qualitative research method that "attempts to recenter the researcher's experience as vital…to the research process." In autoethnographic inquiry, the researcher studies their "own experiences" and "the flow of thoughts and meanings that [they] have in their immediate situation" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 636), which, for pioneers in the field, Ellis and Bochner (2000), ultimately requires displaying "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Fundamentally, autoethnographers "seek to flesh out the lived, embodied experiences of the researcher inhabiting human social-cultural spaces" (Poulos, 2021, p. 10) where scrutinizing the historical, sociological, and political aspects of the culture ultimately demands confronting oneself. In this study, I conducted what Hager (2022, p. 71) might call a "self-reflective investigation of [my] experience within a particular societal context" and "interrogated that experience relative to specific societal norms" or what Adams et al. (2021) called the "macro" problems of institutionalized and systemic oppression endemic in the United States, including white supremacy.

In most qualitative research, the *etic* (outsider's) perspective provides a critical degree of "distance" and "detachment" from the research participants and allows for "higher" levels of "conceptual analysis and abstraction" (Patton, 2015, p. 101). For decades, critics have argued that the *emic* (insider) viewpoint can blur the indispensable distinction between research and "literary writing" or prompt "rampant subjectivism" (Crotty, 1998, p. 48). Others (e.g., Richardson, 2000), on the other hand, have viewed the emic position as an authentic interweaving of the human, creative, and critical elements of research. Given the vulnerability and potential discomfort inherent in grappling with internalized power, privilege, and oppression (Roy, 2018), including the rigor required for an unwavering, lifelong commitment to such critical introspection (Kendi, 2019), autoethnography, coupled with CRT and intersectionality theory, proved the most fitting methodological approach and conceptual lenses for this study.

Participant

For an autoethnographic inquiry, the usual positionality statement common in qualitative research needs to be expanded. As the author/research subject, I will write in the first person and defy customary conventions by not capitalizing white as a race throughout this manuscript. I was born, raised, and have lived my entire life in the United States, but I have had the good fortune of extensive international travel. I grew up in an overwhelmingly white and segregated suburb in the Midwest, with a handful of families of color. In 1986, I moved to a large metropolitan area in the Northeast for graduate school and have lived in that highly diverse and cosmopolitan environment ever since. I self-identify as a 62-year-old, white, gay, middle-class, cis-male who is free of known learning dis/abilities or challenges. Since my social work training and journey as an anti-racist/pro-feminist/multicultural activist began decades ago, I have remained on a lifelong quest of unpacking my multiple areas of privilege. I have been a licensed social worker for 35 years and have worked within the field of adult literacy, primarily with adult EBLs in postsecondary settings, as an instructor, counselor, and administrator for 23 years. My extensive work with immigrants to the United States, my international travel, my continued friendships with people around the world, and my unique professional journey have all informed the perspectives shared in the findings of this study.

Findings

Although I could have investigated all the oppressive dynamics manifest in American society, I chose to focus on those that, in my opinion, are most pernicious (e.g., racism and sexism) and most personally relevant (e.g., homo- and transphobia).

Race and Racism

Although intersectionality typically conveys the synergistic effects when one is confronted with multiple oppressive dynamics simultaneously, particularly their cumulative adverse impacts on the lives and functioning of oppressed peoples (Crenshaw, 1991; La Barbera, 2013), I would argue that dynamics of power and privilege when compounded have the opposite impact and yield heightened access to power, privilege, and needed resources. My realities as a white, middle-class, cis-male triple my advantage in a society whose foundation is white supremacy, thus inherently racist, and that discriminates against and oppresses women, those with "non-traditional" or "unconventional" gender expression, and the poor and economically dispossessed regardless of race or gender. I am largely the default for whom enhanced access is granted in the United States, with few, if any, obstacles that others typically encounter.

Personal experiences of race and racism

As DiAngelo (2018) asserted, I have never been forced to see myself in racialized terms because my race lies at the top of the societal hierarchy and never harmed me socially nor excluded me from receiving or achieving what I wanted and needed. After all, race and white supremacy are social constructs that were invented centuries ago by Europeans to justify colonialization, chattel slavery, and other forms of economic exploitation of non-white, including indigenous, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latinx peoples (Gerald, 2022). Like most white Americans, I had to be taught racism and my lessons have been consistent and ubiquitous. I sense that most Americans conceptualize racist individuals, especially anti-Black racists, as those waving Confederate flags, wearing white hoods, burning effigies, or spouting racist rhetoric or tropes on social media. I believe that racist beliefs and ideology, however, are much

more insidious and subtle. In my childhood, for example, "Cowboy and Indian" movies and television programs "justified" the decimation of indigenous people and the elimination of their languages and cultures because they threatened our white supremacy and Manifest Destiny, yet the "noble savage" stereotype was manipulated to promote environmentalism in the 1970s. As a child, I recall my mother referring to our African American mail carrier, Wilson, as "nice for a colored man" or George Jefferson's strut during the introduction to *The Jefferson's* as "typical for a colored man." When my brother and I would misbehave, my father would threaten to move our family to a largely African American neighborhood as a punishment. When my grandmother was placed into assisted living, she would say, "See that nurse over there. Her husband is as Black as the Ace of Spades" or neighbors would refer to the "Zebra couple," conveying contempt for any white person who would "lower" themselves to be involved in an interracial relationship. Of course, this couple's biracial children were the first suspects for any misdeed or vandalism done in our community. In my family's eyes and as sanctioned by a recent ruling by the United States Supreme Court, affirmative action has given undeserved advantages to communities of color while denying whites their usual preferential access and treatment, with no acknowledgement of centuries of systematized exclusion and disenfranchisement of people of color nor the transformative power of diverse thought and experience, especially in higher educational settings. Yet, my family was cordial toward our neighbors who were refugees from the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. As educated professionals, they were the "exceptions," sharply contrasted to the "communist gooks" that we were fighting in the Vietnam War at the time. In later years, my family was warm and welcoming to any person of color that I brought to their home, but, again, their positive regard for this individual person was never extended to the racialized and minoritized groups of which they were a part.

As a child, I was confused by these racist comments. One of my most indelible memories from childhood is the kindness and empathy that the lone African American girl in my kindergarten class showed towards me while the other kids, all white, bullied and taunted me for crying during the first days of school. For me our mail carrier, Wilson, was kind and gentle period. On network television, I watched *Julia* and saw an African American widow who worked as a nurse, self-sufficient and capable, while remaining a loving and conscientious parent. These counternarratives prompted me to read the book, *Roots,* and watch the mini-series it inspired, though the profound inhumanity of slavery was sanitized to appeal to a more "mainstream" (read white) audience and intentionally decontextualized from the racial upheaval that had characterized the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. After all, for white Americans, slavery, thus systemic racial oppression, had been abolished for more than 100 years. Decades later, Steve McQueen, a British director of African descent, rendered the brutality of slavery in all its graphic, unvarnished detail in *12 Years a Slave*, a portrayal that made an inextricable connection to our current racialized and minoritized realities in the United States indisputable.

Experiences of race and racism in work settings

Despite living in one of the most racially and ethnically diverse and populous cities in the United States, my professional life in the "helping professions" has exemplified our racialized society. Most of my professional colleagues for 35-plus years have been white, and all my immediate supervisors have also been white. My first internship as a graduate social work student was in a day treatment center connected to a state psychiatric hospital. All the patients in the center had been or were currently institutionalized with psychiatric diagnoses. All were also people of color, except one older Jewish woman. All clinical staff members,

except one African American, were white. The racialization of severe psychiatric diagnoses as well as the provision of mental health services in this context was blatant and undeniable. Years later, when I began working in adult ESOL programs, I quickly learned that immigrant students often assume that their instructors will be white and "native speakers" of English, and I have witnessed and learned through my research that instructors of color, especially if their home languages were not English (which is further complicated by linguicism and xenophobia), are often treated in disrespectful or disparaging ways by students and colleagues.

Previous research findings regarding race and racism

In my research, instructors of color have confirmed my observations and shared that their students have made racist comments directly to them or on instructor evaluations. Colleagues have shunned and ostracized them socially, making for an uncomfortable work environment, or have undermined their work by failing to share materials or resources. Supervisors have been unduly punitive and unfair on evaluations or have used evaluation forms that seem tailored to justify their non-reappointment. Clearly, as a microcosm of American society, racism and racist treatment appears ubiquitous in the field of education and warrants more explicit discussion in preservice preparation and continuous professional development (Housel, 2022a, 2023), including transforming instructors from arbiters of the status quo to agents of needed societal change (Freire, 1970).

Sexism and Gender Bias

Similar to the race and racism section, I will discuss personal experiences, work-related and professional experiences, and examples from previous research in my exploration of sexism and gender bias.

Personal experiences of sexism and gender bias

Since my early childhood, I have struggled against gender stereotyping and strict genderized socialization practices. I have always questioned why boys and men were discouraged from expressing their emotions and condemned for crying, especially in public, all of which felt completely natural to me. My parents were atypical of those in the suburban Midwest in the early-to-mid 1960s and bought me dolls and kitchen sets along with my matchbox cars and Tonka trucks. They nurtured and supported my athleticism through competitive swimming where I broke national age group records, became a high school All-American, and earned an athletic scholarship to college. Yet, despite my athletic prowess, peers still called me a "tomgirl" because I often preferred playing "house" and "dress-up" with girls, which defied the norms related to gender segregation of play and friendship common at that time. I also earned money babysitting, instead of cutting grass, shoveling snow, or delivering newspapers as my older brother did, which was also deemed unconventional. The macho bravado displayed in mainstream media and culture did not feel syntonic with how I felt comfortable expressing myself as cis-male or being in the world. Fortunately for me, my father and grandfather were gentle, nurturing, and affectionate and provided powerful counterexamples to this unbridled *machismo*. Similarly, I connected with, admired, and ultimately emulated the strength and emotional intelligence demonstrated by the women in my life: my mother, my aunts, my grandmothers, our neighbors. I was grateful that my parents acknowledged and nurtured my androgynous and non-binary proclivities and did not punish me for crying, sharing emotions, nor revealing my true self. Their unwavering love, support,

and acceptance ultimately gave me the confidence and courage to "come out" as gay in 1981 and to live my truth, personally and professionally, ever since.

My own struggles against gender stereotyping have not prevented me, however, from embracing my cis-male privilege and internalizing sexist beliefs and language. I remember being reprimanded by a friend in college for referring to adult women as "girls," which infantilized them and diminished their strength, power, and capabilities as adults and peers. When I wish to curse another person, a sexist epithet is often the first that comes to mind. In American society, saying a man's behavior or demeanor is like a woman's or calling him a genderized slur is considered the worse insult possible. Although my chosen professions are predominated by women, leadership and other positions of power are often occupied by men, usually white men (again, the compounded privilege afforded by race and cisgender). Based on outdated myths and stereotypes, women are often not perceived as leaders in the United States.

Experiences of sexism and gender bias in work settings

According to recent United States Census Bureau data (2022), women in America still earn lower salaries and hourly wages than men, and the pay gap widens with age (the combined impact of sexism, ageism, and classism). This gender pay gap is slowly narrowing, however, for younger women with higher levels of education who enter occupations that have been "traditionally dominated by men." Maternity leave is also not mandated by federal law and, when offered, tends to be shorter in duration than in other Western countries. Given the adjunct nature of work in adult educational settings (Housel, 2022b), women are often reliant on their spouses or domestic partners for health insurance and other benefits because they do not teach enough hours at any singular setting to earn such benefits.

Previous research findings regarding sexism and gender bias

In findings from my previous research, female participants have stated they have felt diminished by their male supervisors, especially during the performance evaluation process or if they attempted to introduce innovative andragogy into their adult ESOL classrooms. They have also overheard sexist comments made between male students and their female classmates, including some having blatant sexual overtures. They opined that many immigrant men who are recent arrivals often do not understand how their flirtatious behavior might be considered inappropriate or sexually harassing in an American educational and cultural context, including directing such comments toward female instructors. In other cases, gender oppression has gotten complicated by racism, ageism, linguicism, and xenophobia where African American female instructors have felt multiply oppressed and where immigrant female instructors have been discounted by students, superiors, and colleagues because of their accents (linguicism) and their "third world" countries of origin (xenophobia and white supremacy). Aligned with Stojanović (2022), research participants who are younger female instructors have articulated feeling infantilized and diminished by older, especially male, supervisors, colleagues, and students. Similarly, dynamics of sexism and gender oppression are often considered "taboo" subjects to address in preservice preparation, continuous professional development, and classroom instruction (Housel, 2022a, 2023), which is telling in a field predominated by women.

Homo- and Transphobia

Of the oppressive dynamics explored in this study, heterosexism and homophobia are the ones that I have confronted most directly in my personal and professional lives as well as the ones that I have internalized most profoundly. As a research participant shared (Housel, 2023), heterosexism is not only a societal norm and expectation globally, but homosexuality is a punishable crime in many countries as well as forbidden in many religious belief systems, especially religious orthodoxies, and described as "deviant," "immoral," and "sinful." If you are gay, you just "haven't met the right woman yet" or "the right man" if you are a lesbian as if one's sexual and affectional orientation could change so easily. Homosexuality was only removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 through queer activism, but its perception as a "sickness," "perversion," or "psychopathology" has lingered until today. Throughout history, homosexuality has been criminalized, and homosexuals imprisoned (e.g., Oscar Wilde and countless others) or institutionalized, enduring lobotomies, electro-shock therapies, and other tortures under the guise of medical treatment and cure. Conversion therapies have remained so prevalent and damaging that they have been outlawed in many states in America. Only recently have same-sex marriages been codified into law in the United States as have gender-affirming surgeries, changing official documentation, like birth certificates, and using the bathroom aligned with one's gender identity, but many states have recently reversed these trans-affirming advances. As often happens, with every human and civil rights victory that minoritized groups experience, there is reactionary backlash. Just as the end of slavery brought the Jim Crow Laws, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the anti-miscegenation laws, and widespread lynching of African Americans, the same degree of domestic terrorism has manifest with anti-queer violence and discrimination, often through legislation at the state level, as well as with mass shootings in queer bars (e.g., Orlando and Colorado Springs), protests against "drag queen" story hours in public libraries and burning pride flags in New York City, and the widespread, often unpublicized, murders of transgender women, especially trans-women of color (the intersectionality of gender oppression, racism, and transphobia).

Personal experiences of homo- and transphobia

Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in suburban America, there were no role models for queer children like me coming of age. I remember that I initially bristled at the word "queer" when it became a term of empowerment with the offshoot of Act Up called Queer Nation in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Much like the painful history surrounding the "n" word in African American culture, queer was used to debase and degrade homosexuals and incite homophobic intimidation and violence. In the hopes of being more inclusive of all people grappling with or uncertain about their sexual orientation and gender identity as well as our supporters, the alphabet soup of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or allies, plus others who feel comfortable under this inclusive umbrella) is more easily encapsulated as "queer" for me. Even the hallowed halls of academia, infamous for their traditional views and institutionalized *isms*, now offer coursework in Queer Studies. Much has changed in my lifetime, but much remains to be accomplished before equity and equality are experienced by all minoritized people, including queer folks.

Experiences of homo- and transphobia in work settings

Pharr (1988) was on the cutting edge of exploring how multiple oppressive dynamics (intersectionality), especially economic disenfranchisement and exploitation, disproportionately impacted women and were foundational underpinnings of the patriarchy to keep women marginalized as "second class citizens," especially in work settings. Embracing intersectionality, she characterized the third wave of the women's movement as "multi-racial and multi-issued" with the goal of transforming the world for all oppressed peoples ("we won't get there until everyone gets there"). Like Chesler (2018), she connected the mental health pathology and homophobic religious beliefs mentioned above to the "sexism that permeates religious and psychiatric history." Finally, she asserted that "without the existence of sexism, there would be no homophobia" (Pharr, 1988, p. 26) because, as women, lesbian couples are doubly oppressed by sexist beliefs. In a heterosexual model, gay men assume the role of women by developing intimate relationships with men. I would extend Pharr's argument by adding that, without sexism, there would also be no transphobia because trans-people defy traditional, binary, and sexist expressions of gender identity and expression. As mentioned above, homo- and transphobia can manifest in underground employment through commercial sex work, underemployment based on earned educational credentials or life experience, unequal pay and access to leadership roles through promotions as well as homo- and transphobic taunts and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Previous research findings regarding homo- and transphobia

Not surprisingly, my research participants have not freely volunteered anything related to queerness or homo- or transphobia unless asked directly. When queried, participants stated that, unlike race or gender, queerness in all its varieties and sexuality in general were "taboo" subjects in classroom discussions and condemned by program administrators. Rarely, if ever, were these issues addressed in preservice preparation or continuous professional development (Housel, 2022a). Although there are many "queer" educators, discussions of queerness, homophobia, and transphobia are typically relegated to "special interest" groups in professional organizations and conferences where like-minded people affirm the importance of their work and struggles but the larger membership is not challenged to examine their own internalized homo- and transphobia. I know that my journey as a cis-gay man has been fundamentally different and less complicated from what lesbians, trans, and nonbinary people have endured because of other complicating oppressive dynamics. In my social work training, I was always told only to share personal information if the disclosure would have "therapeutic value" for my clients. Perhaps this training has made me more reticent to share my sexual orientation with my students as an educator, especially in postsecondary settings where discussions of anything related to sex could be construed as sexual harassment. Such prohibitions have recently been codified into law in Florida's "Don't' Say Gay" ban in public education. These backlashes and prohibitions notwithstanding, I am still committed to grappling with any gender and trans bias that I have unconsciously internalized. There is no question, however, that I have internalized homophobia and have always been propelled to overachieve to compensate for this "awful, deviant, and sinful" thing that I am. Any criticism or imperfection, especially professionally, brings up this negativity and shame and prompts me to question my competence and ethical standing in a nanosecond. As Kendi (2019) asserted, overcoming internalized bias is a lifelong enterprise.

Discussion and Implications

As the findings of this autoethnographic inquiry attest, intersectionality was an appropriate conceptual lens because exploring various oppressive dynamics in isolation would have proven artificial and, in the end, impossible. As Pharr (1988) asserted, the common threads of these distinct oppressive dynamics share root causes in American society, and ultimately none of us will be truly free until all of us enjoy basic human and civil rights. Despite holding ourselves up as beacons of democratic values and principles, our history and cultural dynamics have been fraught with contradictions. Our Jim Crow laws were the blueprint for South Africa's apartheid, and our miscegenation laws were the foundation for the Nazi's anti-Semitic and racist Nuremburg Laws. Regarding racism specifically, Kozol (1991) asserted decades ago that racialized inequalities persist in the United States because frank discussions of race and racism continue to be muted, discounted, and more recently disparaged as manifestations of "woke" or "cancel" culture. I would contend that the other oppressive dynamics explored in this study have also not been confronted in frank and substantive ways. For example, we must grapple with and reverse the unequal treatment of women, queer people, and those who speak unstandardized or accented English and challenge institutionalized discrimination in our society and its educational system. Although this inquiry is centered in the United States, societal hierarchies and oppressive dynamics exist in different permutations in all countries and are equally worthy of introspection and study.

Ultimately, the goal of this autoethnographic inquiry was to demonstrate one way for educators to initiate more direct and uncensored discussions regarding the complex history of oppressive dynamics present in their own countries by taking the critical first step of consistent self-reflection and reckoning of their impact on their personal and professional lives. Acknowledging our own power, privilege, and the areas we have been oppressed are essential first steps, including not being pigeonholed by these oppressive dynamics. Similarly, we must accept that we might be perpetuating oppressive dynamics and stereotypes in our classrooms, schools, and programs through our words, actions, and especially what we fail to do and commit to making needed changes on an individual level. After all, maintaining the status quo is easier, especially when one is afforded a position of power and privilege (Roy, 2018). In the early stages of my teaching career, I was guilty of these "sins of omission" by overlooking oppressive or disparaging comments made in my classrooms. In my mind, I made the excuse that maintaining harmonious and "pleasant" classroom dynamics was more important. Of course, this rationalization only preserved my own sense of security and comfort at the expense of the integrity and humanity of all my students, sacrificing a more equitable and inclusive classroom in the process. I have since acquired the professional confidence and nurtured the self-awareness to confront oppression and injustice whenever they manifest themselves among students, colleagues, and supervisees. On occasion, I have even summoned the courage to speak truth to power, including superiors. Moving beyond individual responsibility, coordinated collective action is imperative if we ever hope to provide justice to the oppressed, secure basic human rights for everyone, and make equity and authentic inclusion realities in American society, especially within its educational institutions (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

Limitations and Areas for Future Study

Autoethnographers have historically been challenged by "the widely held belief that introspection and subjectivity have no meaningful role in the work of social scientists" (Bochner and Ellis, 2021, p. 250), including educational researchers. By these more traditional research standards, the most obvious limitation of this study is subjectivity. As cited in Wall

(2008), Bochner (2000) argued that most Postmodernists believe that the methods and procedures employed in both qualitative or quantitative research are inevitably intertwined with the values and subjectivities of the researcher regardless of their purported "objectivity." Like Bochner, I would argue that there is a degree of subjectivity in all educational research, regardless of how scientific its methodology, because researchers are human beings and influenced by their unique perspectives, social circumstances, and contexts. Personally, I have often wondered why quantitative researchers are not expected to make a positionality statement in their journal articles because statistical analyses can be as prejudiced and manipulated by personal bias as qualitative research can be. Although the "findings" from autoethnographic inquiries might also lack generalizability in the conventional sense (Stojanović, 2022), there is generalizability if the findings resonate with others (Ellis et al., 2011) and, in this case, prompt them to grapple with, confront, and challenge the oppressive dynamics in their lives. Areas for future study could include exploring how these dynamics might be present in other countries and contexts, and how other oppressive dynamics, like classism, ageism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, are evidenced in American society and elsewhere, present in educational research, and manifest in adult education programs.

Conclusion

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens
can change the world: Indeed, it's
the only thing that ever has.
Margaret Mead

Former President Obama has often referred to our "great experiment in American democracy" because, as a nation and society, we have consistently failed to live up to our democratic ideals. Throughout our complex history, our political will has often vacillated between being more restrictive, intolerant, and dictatorial to more accepting, just, and equitable. We often seem to take one step forward toward a "more perfect union," then stumble two steps backwards. The seemingly unyielding dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression embedded in the nation-state of the U.S.A. since its inception have perpetuated a culture akin to Orwell's totalitarian *Animal Farm* where "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." These inequities and hierarchies are equally present in our educational institutions and programs, Pre-K through postsecondary, including those serving adult EBLs (Housel, 2022a, 2023).

Bochner and Ellis (2021, p. 253) challenged us to achieve needed social changes by first posing the following questions: How can we make life better for everyone and what kind of moral and equitable world can we construct? In our quest to make ourselves and, in turn, our societies better, we must first confront the "pain, suffering, and inequality we find in the world," then create and sustain just and equitable remedies. The creation of these equitable solutions must begin within ourselves. We must examine our reactions and question whether they would be the same if the person were not a person of color, a woman, or queer or trans. Do we hold racialized and minoritized people to more exacting standards than we do those holding positions of power and privilege? Transforming our words and actions so they become more democratic and equal is a crucial first step in realizing needed societal changes in the United States and elsewhere. The aspiration of this study was to motivate others to embark on similar introspective journeys regarding power, privilege, inequality, and oppression, including their personal and professional impacts. As Freire (1970) would advocate, radical social change

must begin with innovative educational practices that transform this critical consciousness on the individual and group levels into collective, purposeful social action to forge and preserve more compassionate, just, equitable, and democratic societies.

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