



# Reflexivity for Restorying the Ontological and Epistemological Truths in Qualitative Research

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## ABSTRACT

This article serves to contextualize and problematize reflexivity as a construct for restorying the truths told by doctoral students in qualitative dissertation research. First, it gives an overview of Webster University's EdD program and its inception of requiring qualitative research coursework for contextualizing the importance of qualitative framing in doctoral research. Then, the authors review and examine the definitions of reflexivity as a construct in qualitative research, the logic-of-inquiry required in dissertation research, the connections of reflexivity to the program ethos, global perspectives on worldview and knowledge construction, and the reframing of ontological and epistemological truths in the literature. The EdD Director and five doctoral candidates recount their positionality and intersectionality, and contest the status quo framings of worldview and knowledge construction in educational research. Their resistance to the traditional ontological and epistemological truths and advocacy for restorying via reflexivity is a manifestation of their dedication to transforming the status quo ontology and epistemology in educational research.

## KEYWORDS

*philosophy, praxis, antiracism, critical inquiry, transformative learning*

## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is constructed through the research process. Who is allowed to participate in the knowledge construction process and research processes in and of themselves are rooted in power. When we think about the world view that we bring to our research and assumptions that we hold, how knowledge is constructed, and by whom matters (Pasque et al., 2021, p. 7).

This article tackles the status quo assumptions of ontology and epistemology in qualitative research. By giving an overview of the EdD program's transformation to a scholar-practitioner model, its ethos in social change, and its focus on interweaving theory and research with a personal and community voice, the authors share the importance of reflexivity and intersectionality in the process of reframing the truths that matter in qualitative research. Doctoral candidates' reframing of status quo ontology and epistemology is shared in the article as a collective manifestation of their dedication to disrupting the power structure of knowledge construction in educational research.

## OVERVIEW OF THE EDD PROGRAM

Webster University was established in 1915, and it now has sites and locations around the world, including but not limited to: Athens, China, Geneva, Georgia, Leiden, Tashkent, and Vienna, with a unique ethos of global citizenship (Webster University Website, n.d.). The inaugural cohort of the EdD program at Webster University started in 2015, with a flagship emphasis called "Transformative Learning in the Global Community," which was geared towards scholar-practitioners who were full-time professionals in the field (Webster University Program Website, n.d.; Webster University Google Site, n.d.). The EdD program prepares graduates for careers such as university faculty, higher education administrators, officers and administrators in non-profit organizations and government agencies, and K-12 leaders and educators.

Apart from centering equity for disrupting the status quo, the EdD was developed with a transformative frame that foregrounds personal and community-based contributions to social change. The theoretical frame of transformative learning stemmed from scholarly works of many authors and thinkers, including Paulo Freire, Michel



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Foucault, Jack Mezirow, Kevin Kumashiro, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Elaine Richardson, Henry Giroux, and Rich Milner. The revamped program, which was revised in 2018, foregrounds a holistic experience that is inclusive of scholarly and practitioner perspectives on transformative learning. Qualitative research coursework is an important cornerstone that connects theory to research and practice. Based on theories and scholarly works, scholar-practitioners design and conduct research for tackling a problem of practice and making transformative impact in the educational settings that the studies are intended for. This is the intentional logic-of-inquiry (Dewey, 1938) developed by the Director of EdD and doctoral faculty in the program.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH COURSEWORK

In 2018 when the program was redesigned, a sequence of two research methods courses: one on quantitative research methods and the other on qualitative research methods, were created for strengthening the scholar-practitioner focus of the program. In Spring of 2021, the qualitative research methods course was offered for the first time, following a quantitative research methods course in the Fall. The qualitative research methods course focuses on the examination of logic-of-inquiry (Dewey, 1938), particularly the epistemological and ontological framing of research using qualitative methods. The logic-of-inquiry, mentioned herein, is exemplified and operationalized as inquiry of practice with reference to the CPED model as cited in Bengtson et al. (2016). "Inquiry as Practice is the process of posing significant questions that focus on complex problems of practice... Inquiry as Practice requires the ability to gather, organize, judge, aggregate, and analyze situations, literature, and data with a critical lens" (Bengtson et al., 2016, p. 82). Also concerned with the inquiry of practice, Denzin et al. (2006) asked:

What are the moral and ethical consequences of these effects for lived human experience? Do they contribute to an ethical self-consciousness that is critical and reflexive, empowering people with a language and a set of pedagogical practices that turn oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, and doubt into trust? Do they engender a critical racial self-awareness that contributes to utopian dreams of racial equality and racial justice? (p. 777).

Denzin et al. (2006) further constructed the purposes of the inquiry of practice and the meaningful impact on humanity of the dissertation research projects. Dissertation research projects in the EdD program are designed with a common goal of transforming the status quo realities in educational systems and improving the lives of all stakeholders.

The qualitative research methods course includes an array of selected methods such as case studies, ethnographies, narrative inquiries, grounded theorizing, discourse analysis, etc. Some key terms include: triangulation, reflexivity, intersubjectivity, member-checking, systematicity, credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability. Data analytical frameworks and the use of data management software such as NVivo, Dedoose, MAXQDA are explored in the course. The course was sponsored by the Beatrice and David Kornblum Institute for Teaching Excellence and doctoral students enjoyed two years of NVivo subscription for free.

Owing to the logic-of-inquiry and framing of transformative learning as both personal and community-based, personal voice is deemed inseparable from the logic-of-inquiry. Thus, reflexivity is

threaded throughout the dissertation process. For instance, a doctoral candidate may design a dissertation in practice that tackles a problem of practice originating from personal histories or lived experiences. Many of the program graduates designed dissertation studies because of experienced trauma and intergenerational racism. Their personal and family voice is critical in shaping the purpose of the studies. For example, a graduate from the EdD program, Dr. Veronica Clay, talked about her framing of dissertation on mental health resources for urban public schools in the St. Louis metro area at the commencement ceremony in 2022. Clay (2022) gave a speech about how the dissertation project originated from her family trauma due to a lack of accessible mental health resources at the time. Clay was a professional counselor, and she became a voice and advocate for transforming the status quo of mental health resources in urban schools, upon graduating from the EdD program.

## DEFINITION OF REFLEXIVITY AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMING

According to Schwandt (2015), reflexivity is, "the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth" (p. 224). Strunk and Locke (2019) further expand the definition of reflexivity as "an analysis of researchers' positionalities within a study. They interrogate their social positioning and social location, especially in relation to the purpose of the study and their participants" (p. 303). As such, reflexivity can be considered as "introspective" (Valandra, 2012, p. 204) internal dialogue that can reveal and unravel "uncomfortable realities" (Woodley & Smith, 2020, p. 2). Though these definitions did not explicitly mention the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind what count as research and knowledge, reflexivity, as a key construct in qualitative research, is often viewed as the checks and balances required for claiming credibility in qualitative research (Strunk & Locke, 2019). Centering reflexivity means that the dissertation is written with the first-person voice, *I*. It is a defiance from the positivistic worldview of generalizability and universal truths (Davis & Harrison, 2013).

It is important to review the philosophical frame that this key construct evokes. Like Lakoff (2004), underscored, "every word, like elephant, evokes a frame" (p. 3). Besides a logic-of-inquiry that originates from or is facilitated via a personal voice, the ontological, epistemological, and axiological frames that reflexivity evokes are deeply rooted and connected to criticality. Schwandt (2015) mentioned,

This is particularly true for many critical researchers concerned with the charge that their research can become nothing more than a self-serving ideology and for feminist researchers wary of duplicating androcentric perspectives and race and class bias in their investigations (p. 224).

The definition of ontology as the "nature of being" (Bracken, 2010, p. 2) and epistemology as what is knowledge and "how knowledge is shared" (Bracken, 2010, p. 2) is rarely challenged with criticality. A critical reflexivity towards ontology and epistemology would include questions such as: Who owns knowledge? Is there a universal worldview? Why is worldview and knowledge defined and perpetuated mostly by White Europeans? Whom do we cite when it comes to ontology and epistemology? Other than perpetuating "self-serving ideology" (Schwandt, 2015, p. 224), do we carry the professional responsibility to reflexively challenge the status quo of

White-centered ontological and epistemological assumptions in educational research (Stanfield, 1993; Yancy, 2004)? And if we do, should our definition of worldview and knowledge be inclusive of various racial, cultural, and ethnic varieties? What does a global perspective on worldview and knowledge construction look like? Axiology is defined as “The branch of Philosophy concerned with the general problem of values that is, the nature, origin, and permanence of values” (Tomar, 2014, p. 51). Like our argument on ontology and epistemology, would axiological assumptions of what counts as values be transformed to be more inclusive?

Reflexivity has been widely discussed in qualitative research methods; specifically, autoethnography (Humphreys, 2005), narrative inquiry (Dubnewick et al., 2018), and case studies that are self-authored (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Humphreys (2005) advocates for researchers to use autoethnographic vignettes as a methodological means for enhancing the reflexivity of their work as “the use of vignettes is explicitly reflexive” (p. 852). Similarly, Dubnewick et al. (2018), reference reflexivity as an essential element of autobiographical narrative inquiry. According to Dubnewick et al. (2018), reflexivity provides “narrative inquiries with avenues to make clear their research justifications/puzzles, become wakeful and open in their inquiries, and support shifts in relational knowing and being” (p. 1). In addition to autoethnographies and narrative inquiries, reflexivity is important among case study and ethnographic researchers (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Chiseri-Strater (1996) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in case studies and ethnographies:

Turning in upon ourselves as researchers makes us look subjectively and reflexively at how we are positioned. Turning in upon ourselves prevents us from removing ourselves from our research process, from our connections with our informants, or from our written translation of data to text (p. 119).

As such, reflexivity has been widely adopted in autoethnographies, narrative inquiries, case studies, ethnographies, and many qualitative methodologies with self-storying elements due to its influence in supporting the researcher’s curation of significant and reliable data.

## HOW IS REFLEXIVITY OPERATIONALIZED IN THE EDD?

At Webster University, the reflexivity construct is operationalized as a critical review of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and researcher positionality (Milner, 2007) via qualitative methodological means such as reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Crenshaw (1989) explained, “Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them” (p. 139). Crenshaw’s (1989) term, intersectionality, which demarcates the gendered and racialized experiences of African American women, is an important pillar for building reflexivity in educational research; because doctoral students, as emergent scholar-practitioners, need to recognize the multitude of race, gender, socioeconomic class, and other identity traits which have an intersectional impact on the psyche and emotional wellbeing of an individual. Intersectionality laid down the groundwork for minoritized populations to articulate the complex and intricate discrimination that they experienced, and therefore, it is an important lens that foregrounds minoritized voices in educational research. Also rooted

in racial justice, Milner (2007) advocates for educational researchers to “pose racially and culturally grounded questions about themselves,” (p. 395) and that researchers should “research the self,” (p. 395) and “the self in relation to others,” (p. 395) in the process. Milner’s (2007) work contests and confronts the status quo of educational research which could be color- and culture-blind, and thus it is a relevant theoretical lens towards building a scholar-practitioner reflexivity. Being informed with Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality and Milner’s (2007) researcher positionality, doctoral students, who are emergent researchers, also need a methodological tool for the manifestation of reflexive considerations. Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) reflective journaling provides a clear guidance towards how reflexivity could be carried out. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) reflexive journals “record a variety of information about self (hence the term ‘reflexive’) and method” (p. 327). The journaling focused on how the researcher is making decisions in the research process with respect to “self” is a critical process for establishing “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). Reflexive journaling is only one of the means for interweaving intersectionality and positionality in qualitative research. There are other methodological tools that serve a similar function. For example, Solorzano and Yosso’s (2002) counter-storytelling, which highlights the minoritized experiences and narratives as counter-narratives to the “majoritarian” (p. 28) perspectives. Counter-storying the realities for minoritized population serves a similar goal of disrupting the oppressive power structures that exist in the system. For example, an Asian American’s self-stories about anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic count as counter-stories. The methodological means for researchers to narrate their intersectionality and positionality should not be limited to reflexive journaling and counter-storytelling. Any methodological means that allow for the narrators to tell their lived experiences and how they position themselves in complex realities would work.

## CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO OF ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Scholars have criticized the ivory towers of higher education as a power structure that perpetuates “white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, classism, ethnocentrism, and rationality” (Allen, 2012, p. 18). EdD programs housed within the ivory towers are no exceptions, and we need program reflexivity when claiming social justice and equity as learning outcomes or program goals. Are the program lead and faculty predominantly White? Has each milestone been designed with equity-minded pedagogy and assessments? Does the program offer equitable learning opportunities to diverse learners? Does the teaching and research perpetuate White supremacy, classism, racism, and ableism? These are critical reflexive questions for all program directors, faculty, and students to think about.

It is the White scholars and their social realities that created and constructed ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Any course or program can be racially biased because the philosophical framing was contextualized as such. Racially biased ideologies transcend every aspect of the EdD program, including coursework development, assessment, and academic socialization among doctoral faculty and students. The consensus is that the ontological and epistemological truths of educational research have been contested as being “whitewashed”

(Lee-Johnson, 2023, p. 519), as well as “color- and culture-blind” (Milner, 2007, p. 392).

It is therefore critical to reimagine the opportunity for emergent scholar-practitioners to employ and create research methods with reflexivity, so as to confront the status-quo of whitewashedness in the ontological and epistemological framing of their studies. In the following paragraphs, doctoral candidates’ narratives are shared and discussed, exemplifying how they interwove reflexivity with intersectionality for contesting status quo ontologies and epistemologies in their dissertation projects.

## REFLEXIVITY FOR RESTORYING ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRUTHS

My (EdD Director) intersectionality as a first-generation immigrant mother-scholar in the United States shaped the revamping of the doctoral program in 2018. Because of my intersectionality with triple jeopardy, i.e., being non-White, mother-scholar, speaks with an accent, and the microaggressions that I experienced in the ivory towers as well as my vision and mission to expand the diversity landscape of the EdD program, I have intentionally revamped the program with faculty of color teaching in the program. In addition, I have built the EdD to be equity-centered, with the vision and mission to transform the status quo of inequities among minoritized populations. At CPED Convening 2022, Dr. Valarie Kinloch, Dean of Education of the University of Pittsburgh, gave a definition of equity at the Opening Speech. Kinloch (2022) said, “equity requires redistribution of resources to schools, communities, students, and families who need them the most.” As a woman of color and an immigrant mother, I am committed to redistributing resources for empowering minoritized populations. One of the ways, other than having program reflexivity on the equity-centeredness in each EdD milestone (e.g., admission, content in coursework, comprehensive exam, prospectus, and oral defense), is to ensure an inclusive global construction of ontology and epistemology, so that the program embraces diversified perspectives in theory, research, and praxis framings of coursework and dissertation projects.

### KERRI FAIR

Reflexivity has permeated my doctoral program journey in both traditional and creative ways. I have learned that pausing systematically, as well as spontaneously, to acknowledge my present state/stage in the research process, and to situate it within the process, is meaningful to the work. Being reflexive involves “self-inspection” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 224) throughout the research as the researcher “is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand,” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 224). I practiced reflexivity at a pivotal point in the program by reflecting over my doctoral journey, considering how and when I chose to curate topics and resources as well as how each shaped my decisions. As a result, I wrote my own theory of the phenomenon (teacher burnout) as a participant for transparency.

I am a White, married, Christian, middle-aged, cisgender woman with three preteen/teenage children, raised on a farm, educated in the suburbs, and employed as a teacher in both suburban and urban settings. I have had formative experiences as a woman in both my personal and professional life that have contributed to my experience of teacher burnout. One of the most significant factors is my developmental age: middle age. It has

become important to me to focus on women from a variety of settings who have experienced burnout during their mid-career/middle age stage of life to hear their varied stories. Before I formally shaped my methodology, it was necessary to better understand myself and the ways in which my identity and intersectionality appeared during my experience of the phenomenon. To do so, I chose to participate in a pilot version. As I engaged as a participant during the semi-structured interview, I found myself peeling away the surface stories I had been telling myself, or that society influenced me to tell, about my experience. Before engaging in my approach, I told and retold myself the story of my burnout experience over and over in my mind. It became a familiar song and elements of it popped up in places where it did not belong. My story was full of constraints, and in the retelling of it in my mind, it became a tool used to translate other stories/experiences that unfolded in my life after; unbeknownst to me. Being untold and unexpressed, the story held more power over my life. Through introspection and reflexive writing, I pieced together elements and experiences that were pivotal in creating an environment where burnout could take root and eventually thrive. What’s more, I could better understand the choices I made that started the healing process and signs that indicated progress toward self-transformation, self-acceptance, and a return to a healthier self. It is my hope that my doctoral work provides a space for others of a similar age to engage in introspection and reflexivity to better understand their experience of the phenomenon as well as themselves. My dissertation title is *Stories Most Difficult to Tell are the Most Vital to Share: A Phenomenographical Investigation of Teacher Burnout Theories and Narratives*.

### KATHERINE O’CONNOR

I am a doctoral candidate in the EdD program, and I self-identify as a biracial, White and African American woman, adopted by White parents. My intersectionality can be described as biracial, woman (cisgender), middle-class (sometimes lower-class), partnered, childless, heterosexual, liberal, and atheist/Darwinist/humanist. Because of my unique intersectionality, I grew up being minoritized because there were rarely any teachers or peers who looked like me. My sense of self as a doctoral candidate has been informed by my ontology and critique of the monoracial White ontological assumption that has been normalized in U.S.-American society. To examine my biracial ontological sense of self, I chose autoethnography as the method. In my prospectus, I wrote, “This is a journey that I am hoping others like me can see themselves in and relate and begin to see hope. It is a journey that I hope educators can take bits and pieces from and intertwine them in their teachings,” (O’Connor, 2022). My ontological sense of self is to be explored with vignettes, photos, and a multimodal representation of myself. My reflexivity is deeply intertwined with my intersectionality and positionality with challenges on a monoracial, reductionist, and dehumanizing framing of my biracial identity that is perpetuated via social interactions and media representations. My dissertation title is *Shades of Beige: An Autoethnography on my Biracial Sense of Self*.

### TAMARA RODNEY

I am a doctoral candidate in the EdD program. My intersectionality is that I am Black, female, Muslim, an immigrant, and a mother. When naming my intersectional identities, my Blackness is fundamental to who I am, and its place as first is an act of honoring. In my daily choice to honor my Blackness, I am able to





recognize the Whiteness all around me. My gender and religious identity exist alongside my professional identity of teacher educator. As a high school teacher and an adjunct faculty member, I witness how White epistemology is intertwined throughout our education system, from grade school to graduate school. I've also witnessed how such White epistemologies suffocate and dehumanize Black women, Black Muslims, Black immigrants, Black mothers and all diasporic African peoples. As a result, I argue for "epistemic freedom" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 1) that can only be realized through a critical review of white epistemology in K-12 schools. My working dissertation title is *Confronting White-Epistemology: A Theoretical Analysis of African American Graduates of a Predominantly White High School*. The framing is predicated upon Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) "epistemic freedom" (p. 1) which recognizes Black epistemology, while simultaneously elevating its inclusion and validation in the knowledge base of K-12 experiences and curricula. As a Black immigrant, I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors before me. Ancestors who decided to uproot and transplant themselves and their families to the United States. In their sacrifice, live my accomplishments, especially in predominantly White spaces. I must name and confront epistemologies that are rooted in Whiteness, to allow for the continued construction of established Black epistemologies; this allows me and those who look like me to be seen as fully, and entirely, human.

Reflexivity allows me to acknowledge that my perceptions shape my "assumptions, values, political position and use of language" as a researcher (Haynes, 2012, p. 72). Thus, reflexivity demands an examination of one's epistemological and ontological assumptions (Haynes, 2012). The corporeal recognition of these facets of oneself is what prevents bias and ultimately the influence I have on my research. As a student in this doctoral program, I learned to see reflexivity and the work on research positionality by Dr. Rich Milner as valuable tools for how I situate myself in my research (Milner, 2007). Researcher positionality goes hand in hand with reflexivity because it leads to greater self-consciousness and subjectivity when engaging in qualitative research (Milner, 2007, p. 389). I view any encouragement to remove myself from my work as the ignoring of reflexivity and positionality, and thus as a sterile and dishonest approach to research. Positionality demands that we name and examine our many identities and how position us in the research, but it also leads us to a better understanding of our need, as researchers, to be reflexive practitioners.

Meier (1963) offers up what I posit as a definition of reflexivity. He says, "it is the way in which a person's own individual experience intersects with trends in the larger social and intellectual milieu, that shapes the social consciousness and the direction of his/her scholarly research" (p. iv). I would be remiss if I did not recognize the trends in my current social and intellectual climate -- a climate that I want to date back to the summer of 2020. The very first course in our doctoral program was a global histories course, where we studied social movements. The class afforded me the opportunity to study the modern-day struggle for Black lives, known as the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. It was during the global clarion call of #BlackLivesMatter, August 2020, that I was admitted into Webster University's doctoral program and began my doctoral journey. As all other social movements before it, the #Black Lives Matter movement allows for the affirming of Black lives, and this socio-intellectual movement continues to shape my own biography and my scholarship. Scholarship that seeks to celebrate and affirm Black lives; to do that we must regularly name and confront, the unnamed

yet dominant, frames of Whiteness that have always shaped the systems and policies in America.

## JENNIFER ONO

My professional and personal self is deeply intertwined with my dissertation topic. My intersectionality is White, lower to middle class, immunocompromised, woman (cisgender), divorced mother to two older teenagers, with 32 years of experience as a teacher in school systems around the U.S., and an instructional coach to adults in K-12 schools. I have two biracial children who spoke Hawaiian pidgin as they grew up in Hawaii. As a mother and a scholar-practitioner, I witnessed firsthand how their speaking of Hawaiian pidgin was not supported in schools and how their home language was lost because of the marginalization and lack of acceptance of varied languages in schools. As such, I reflected upon my educator experience. I constructed a mixed-method dissertation project entitled *Radical Transformation of the Power-Language Dynamic in the K-6 Classroom: A Mixed-Methods Study of Elementary School Teachers in the United States*.

My dissertation will collect descriptive statistical data regarding public school teachers' self-efficacy regarding support for other languages and qualitative interviews with participants to determine what strategies are in place for support. It challenged me, as I acknowledged the epistemological use of mainstream White English in classrooms. This caused deep analysis and reflexivity between my lifelong profession and my desire for language acceptance. My doctoral research was a calling that originated from my intersectionality as a mom, an educator in the field, and a passion to save the home languages of other children. It is a manifestation of my dedication to contest the Whitewashing effect that continues to wipe out other languages inside and outside of schools.

## TREZETTE DIXON

My intersectionality includes Black/African American, woman, mother, first generation college graduate, former intern, and career development practitioner. Many facets of my reality dominate my ontology. First, the realization that African Americans have a unique experience in our world (Dixon, 2022a). Second, my mother often reminded me of the power of education.

My mother always instilled in my siblings and me a love for education and being 'one' of the best. This vision for her children could be attributed to her difficulty achieving a high school education in the 1950s rural south, but she graduated with honors despite the challenges. She always told me stories of her education being interrupted to pick cotton in the fields of Tennessee to contribute to the family. She made sure we strived to put education first to make available other valuable opportunities. It is truly empowering to embrace my transformation over the course of this doctoral program (Dixon, 2022b).

Because of my intersectionality and calling to transform the status quo of ontological experiences of African Americans, my dissertation project sought to investigate early career development support for African American students. My dissertation title is *A Fork in the Road to Graduation: Understanding the African American Undergraduates' Decision on Whether to Participate in Academic Internships*. It is to affirm the rights of African American students and to contest the

predominantly White frame of reference when it comes to academic internship opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

This article aims at disrupting the White-centered knowledge construction in qualitative educational research. The writings of Kerri Fair, Katherine O'Connor, Tamara Rodney, Jennifer Ono, and Trezette Dixon are reflexive journals and counterstories that contest the status quo of the third person research report that is devoid of intersectionality and positionality. The unique intersectionality and positionality of each researcher contextualized and enriched the important stories being told. Most importantly, these counterstories diversified the existing ontological and epistemological assumptions in qualitative research. In the following paragraphs, the doctoral candidates summarize their dissertation projects and conclude how their journeys are interwoven with reflexivity as they re-storied their versions of truths.

**Kerri Fair:** Teacher burnout is often viewed as a condition to be treated. The treatment often comes from the organization or leadership, who are removed from the individuals experiencing burnout, and in the form of a one size fits all approach. When considering my personal experience with teacher burnout through the lens of my intersectionality, I saw that one aspect of my identity (my age) was more significant than others. Individuals experience burnout in ways that are unique to them, often connected to their intersectionality. My research hopes to show others that supporting teachers who are experiencing burnout requires an individual approach.

**Katherine O'Connor:** As a biracial person, I have spent my life trying to find my place in a world that does not acknowledge my existence in the same manner as it does persons who are of one race. U.S. culture, and its educational system, are steeped in whitewashing history and racial experiences. Utilizing an autoethnographic methodology allows me to reflect on my biracial life experiences, dissect them using scientific methods, and analyze them for their truth. As evidenced by Florida's House of Representative's bill, HB999 (The Florida Senate, 2023), as well as bills being passed or attempting to be passed in multiple other states, our normative culture often suppresses or eradicates minority voices. Autoethnography allows me to tell my story in the hope that other minorities will begin to tell theirs and to show we are not alone.

**Tamara Rodney:** Du Bois (1998) articulates so eloquently what I have frequently felt: this "two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (p. 194). This duality exists in many places, but most markedly in my epistemological experiences as a student in the American education system. Reflecting on my lived experiences while growing up Jamaican in America, I realize that the duality of my epistemic journeys at home and at school have never overlapped. Having learned and studied in American spaces much of my academic life, I am constantly in search of epistemic understandings that make room for Black frames of knowledge. Frames of knowledge which have always existed and go beyond the status quo of prevailing White epistemologies. Being raised in a Jamaican household, in America, by a Rastafarian father meant that I lived in constant company with diasporic black epistemologies as examples of the intrinsic humanness and historic impact of Black ways of knowing. It is from this two-ness of epistemological understanding that I shape and craft my qualitative research focus as a doctoral student. I do so in hope of reconciling this duality through the

promotion of othered epistemologies; to do this, I must continue to name and confront the dominance of White epistemologies.

**Jennifer Ono:** Being a mother and an educator who witnessed firsthand the devastating loss of my children's home language, Hawaiian pidgin, challenged who I was... I reconsidered what I thought I knew as an educator and learned to push back against the language assimilation that still exists in elementary schools for speakers of home languages and dialects. My children lost their home language after moving out of our community and into a school system taught by under-trained educators to assist a linguistically diverse student population. I have the unique position and privilege of looking like much of the teaching force. Yet having children, of a different race, who have lost their home languages because of the institution that I identify as home to my career and passion. All children, their culture, and their language should be validated, accepted, and supported in classrooms, not erased. As educators and educational researchers, we ought to confront and contest such loss which has been caused by Whitewashedness (Lee-Johnson, 2023).

**Trezette Dixon:** Throughout my academic journey, my intersectionality has undergone a significant evolution, from Black woman, daughter, first generation student, and intern, to wife, mother of college students, and doctoral candidate. My appreciation of this multifaceted identity enabled me to use reflexivity to better understand my study participants, their individual journeys, and the personal and cultural influences that have shaped their career development decisions. Reflection on my intersectionality enabled me to recognize the similarities between my experience and that of my participants and to appreciate the formative role of my parental and cultural influences on my views of education. My educational trajectory further revealed the importance of support systems and experiences that enabled me to pursue and embrace my power and purpose of encouraging others. This has been expressed both through my research on the African American undergraduate experience and through my work as a career services practitioner. Ultimately, I have come to understand that to truly comprehend the journey of my participants, I must first understand my own.

In the above examples, doctoral candidates utilized reflexivity and intersectionality to restore (or reframe) the dominating and hegemonic realities of ontological and epistemological truths presented to them. Each of the doctoral candidates critically examined their lived experiences and intersectionality when tackling a problem of practice, and they reconstructed alternative or multiple truths which were yet to be confirmed in studies.

What is the significance of restoring the ontological and epistemological truths in qualitative research? Echoing American Educational Research Association 2023 conference theme, *Interrogating Consequential Education Research in Pursuit of Truth*, qualitative research should have "a real bearing on disrupting ableism, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination," (Milner, 2022, p. 2). By restoring the truths, we stand on each other's shoulders for contesting existing ontological and epistemological hegemonies that tradition placed on us. By restoring alternative truths in their dissertations, doctoral candidates transformed the status quo ontology and epistemology for 1) research participants and targeted audience of their dissertation findings, 2) minoritized populations that their projects empowered and advocated for, and 3) future scholar-practitioners and researchers in qualitative research when tackling problem of



practice. Most importantly, the EdD Director and the five doctoral candidates formed a collective transformative coalition for contesting the existing status quo philosophical frame and constructing alternative ontological and epistemological truths in EdD qualitative research.

To summarize, the importance of this article is threefold. First, it foregrounds the importance of reflexivity as a construct in qualitative research; reflexivity is a key construct that allows for first-person reflexive journaling or counter-storytelling and it contests the status quo assumption of a positivistic third-person point of view (see section on reflexivity). Second, it reviews the existing structures of ontology and epistemology that need to be critically examined: the status quo assumption of ontology and epistemology has been criticized as Whitewashed and Eurocentric. Third, it carries forward a momentum for scholar-practitioners to join the coalition towards transforming the ontology and epistemology that is whitewashed and therefore, not applicable to their intersectionality and lived experiences. The article could be referenced for qualitative research methods coursework design, program revision, dissertation and portfolio project design, and professional developments of faculty and students in the EdD.

With the reference to Pasque et al. (2021) in the introduction, research that constructs knowledge is power. It is imperative that we join this fight to contest the status quo ontology and epistemology, foreground the marginalized perspectives of minoritized people, and empower emergent educational researchers such as our doctoral candidates, so as to construct new realities that honor our diverse voices.

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