



Poetic Report

Poetic Reflection on the Crisis of Representation in a Social Work Research

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Abstract

The notion of decolonising social work epistemologies may have stemmed from the protests of indigenous scholars and their allies in Canada, yet it goes beyond them to include other knowledges that have been excluded, minimized, or marginalized by mainstream scholars, agencies, and practitioners. Incubated in the habitus of Whiteness, the social work profession has given prominence to, and normalized viewpoints that are White, middle-class, and heterosexual, amongst others, though slowly responding to marginalized knowledges. Using the social constructionist framework, this reflective poem examines the representation of racialized voices in a qualitative research on privilege and interrogates accepted knowledge regarding student-scholar power relationship, agent-target status differentiation, and female-male social worker interactions, all within the context of education and practice. The tension was that the researcher found himself censoring some of his research findings as he challenged the uncodified restraints about what is acceptable as research outcomes. This is research poetry as a means of disseminating findings. It also poses many questions for practitioners to consider as they reflect on their own work.

Keywords: Decolonization; Social construction; Privilege; Social work poetics; Social work education

Poetic Report

*In this moment I have a different tact
Of relaying my research findings*

*Or my research perplexity
depending on where you sit*

I want you to make your note

And enlighten me,

Maybe in your light I can find mine

Challenge me, if you will

Maybe in your provocation

I can find meaning

In this co-constructed reality [1]

Of multiple subjects and subjectivities [2,3]

In search of knowledge that's

Becoming elusive

Like the waters of Heraclitus

In which you can't step twice

In the same place [4]

Fresh water, they say, always overflow

Is my education colonization or socialization?

Am I learning skills or culture?

Or am I freeing my mind to explore

as a researcher should,

turning every stone

*Can I still roam the wild when constrained by a theoretical
framework?*

What is sloppy or rigorous?

What is scholarly or profane?

What language is pleasing to the gatekeepers?

What's the password for new knowledge?

Who do I need to exclude or preclude;

to minimize or marginalize

to please my Masters

(who are Legion)?

So, I ask again: Is my education colonization or socialization?

*Social work, you see, as many other professions,
is incubated in the habitus of Whiteness*

That's what Bourdieu [5] implied. And he should know.

So how do I decolonize epistemologies without protest?

Yet in protest you may bite the hands that feed you.

But I don't even have to do that

For my education is already complete

I may have embraced a cogent deception

That has become my own self-deception [6].

I may have embraced Foucault's governmentality [7]

And Jeremy Bentham's philosophy [8]

to become my own panopticon.

All because I have been well-trained

I have the voice in my head

Indicating what may not be acceptable

Because it had not been so accepted in the past

Pavlov's dog is salivating in self-reflection [9,10]

Why do I have to heed the bell?

Perhaps it is because the circus elephant

knows the dance after the discipline of stakes

In a way, I've become the gatekeeper [11].

*But I need to get free:
Decolonization.
Dread.*

Who does research benefit?

- (a). The Research Chair?*
- (b). The Research Committee?*
- (c). The Copy Editor?*
- (d). The Funder?*
- (e). The Public?*
- (f). All the above?*
- (g). None of the above?*
- (h). Only A and B?*

*What if they don't like what you found?
Or it doesn't resonate with their experiences?*

*Copy Editor (Female, 38) accused me of bias in my research
presentation*

*Should I delete that part and let sleeping dogs lie?
So that I can pass and be published.
After all, he who fights and runs away,
They say, lives to fight another day.*

*Should I still write about Kwame's sexual harassment in the
workplace?*

*When my original question was about male privilege?
(Kwame, Male, 27)*

*Copy Editor said that was neither authentic nor scholarly
Though that was an emerging finding
On my way to the research findings [2]
So, should I turn that into a reflective piece
and pretend it was my own thought
after hearing a participant's report?
Or is it still data, though Copy Editor didn't like it?*

*My study findings revealed
That clients discriminated against social workers
In terms of their gender and race
Racialized social workers, particularly
Microaggressions, according to Sue [12]
But Copy Editor (White, Female, 38) said that was my own
bias,*

*A dog whistle to my race
Me: Black. Male. 50; a visible minority in a White-normed
world [13].*

*She could easily see where I stood
My writing belying my beliefs,
And that was not scholarly
So, I needed to revise and re-write
Though all I was asking the participant
was about his male privilege in female-dominated social work
practice*

*But his response didn't fit for Copy Editor
And it became my own problem of bias,
Not her own implicit bias
Or unfounded accusation
Or uninformed conclusion
Or assumption about the way things should be.
Or racism*

*Quist (Black, Male, 48) also claimed
that some of his White clients*

*tarnished his reputation, made false accusations
Copy Editor said I, the researcher, was heavy handed
I should prove or delete it
What proof do I have beyond participants' narratives? [14]
What proof should I have beyond any participant's narrative?
Objective to them, subjective to us.
What do I affirm, or deny, or report?
This crisis of representation is caused by whom?*

*Lived experiences become retold lives [15]
Oral histories become orthographic transcripts [16]
These are hard enough without the gatekeeper's insults
I'm presenting the subjective viewpoints of participants
Why can't they just be that?
Why can't they just BE?*

*Who determines the validity of knowledge claims?
Whose voice is privileged in qualitative research?
What's acceptable as research outcome?*

*Another participant was Trevor
his research name, like others
In the guise of confidentiality and anonymity [2].
Scholars say we account for negative cases
But how many gatekeepers can bear that
When these voices are outliers
bordering on the improbable
based on certain lived experiences?*

*Trevor, you see, is male, heterosexual, Latino
Trevor, you see, has a voice
A voice very shaky in telling his story
About how an 'agent' became a 'target'
with a target on his back
as he walked on egg-shells at work;
how his privilege diminished in social work practice
As compared to the larger society*

*Trevor, you see, has epistemic privilege
Privilege as a professional [17]
Good attitude, good disposition, friendly: all positive.
But as a man, he was an 'agent'
As a Latino man, he was a 'target'
In this Chronos: this micro-macro, exo-meso system [18]
where we accumulate experiences
Here, the agent-target dichotomy fused in him
And the agent became a target
Oppressed by women colleagues at work
Poking him, you see; touching him, calling him 'sexy'
The so-called hunter became hunted
Trevor the heterosexual and metrosexual
now objectified and petrified
Was he over-sensitive or did he internalize his oppression?
[19]
How do I represent his views
Without throwing his supervisors and agency under the bus
Just in case someone there read my dissertation
And anonymity is no longer anonymous?*

*Will that be political on my part?
Or naïve*

*or prudent
or pragmatic?
I may need to censor the part on male privilege too
In a female dominated agency
When Trevor suggested that women should not succumb to
their emotions
whenever clients exhibit patriarchal values
but that they should have a bigger meaning in their work,
confront gender stereotypes, and be reflective.
That sounds chauvinistic to me.
Not worth reporting? Not rigorous?*

*Male privilege is complicated in social work practice
But when we put a guard on all our mouths
Who shall speak for whom? [20]*

*And how can knowledge extend
Beyond what colonizers already knew?
Tell me, how can knowledge extend
Beyond our points of comfort?*

*I don't want to displace established knowledge. Not
necessarily.*

*I don't want to replace evidence-based information. Not at
all.*

I only want a thousand flowers to bloom

Multiple voices. Multiple experiences.

Multiple stories of multiple lives.

Multiple subjectivities informing knowledge and practice.

Is that too much to ask for?

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