Starting Where You Are: How Race Can Constrain Researchers within the Research Setting

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Abstract

What challenges can race and gender present for researchers of color? As Black women, we draw on personal reflections to look back at our graduate training and its influence on how we conducted ourselves in the field as graduate students and now as researchers in the academy. We particularly consider how mainstream pedagogical approaches to teaching qualitative methods might work to marginalize researchers of color throughout the qualitative research process. We lay out these complexities, not necessarily to offer solutions but rather to allow others in similar situations to think about their own journey as we collectively move qualitative research and teaching to new heights. We conclude this article with a short discussion of the direct implications for teaching and doing qualitative research.

Keywords

Teaching Qualitative Research, Reflection, Racial Consciousness, Critical Consciousness

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Starting Where You Are: How Race Can Constrain Researchers Within the Research Setting

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What challenges can race and gender present for researchers of color? As Black women, we draw on personal reflections to look back at our graduate training and its influence on how we conducted ourselves in the field as graduate students and now as researchers in the academy. We particularly consider how mainstream pedagogical approaches to teaching qualitative methods might work to marginalize researchers of color throughout the qualitative research process. We lay out these complexities, not necessarily to offer solutions but rather to allow others in similar situations to think about their own journey as we collectively move qualitative research and teaching to new heights. We conclude this article with a short discussion of the direct 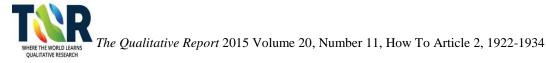implications for teaching and doing qualitative research. Keywords: Teaching Qualitative Research, Reflection, Racial Consciousness, Critical Consciousness

One can accurately describe the United States as a "total racist society" in which every major aspect of life is shaped to some degree by the core racist realities. (Feagin, 2001, p. 16)

How do mainstream pedagogical approaches to teaching qualitative methods work to silence and marginalize researchers of color? To answer this question, we reflect on our graduate methods training. As full-time faculty members at our respective institutions, we are both charged with training the next generation of qualitative researchers. Thus, the basis of this manuscript emerged through our efforts, as Black women, to transform our own teaching and engagement in research.

Qualitative researchers are often encouraged to reflect on how their backgrounds impact the ways they see the world and how that view impacts the ways in which they conduct research. Thus, as part of studying social worlds, qualitative researchers are urged to "start where you are." They are expected to actively engage in their social worlds in order to provide meaningful linkages between their personal experiences on the one hand and intellectual curiosity on the other. The notion of "starting where you are" comes from the work of Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006), who maintained that

> It is often said among sociologists that, as sociologists, we "make problematic" in our research matters that are problematic in our lives. With the proviso that the connection between self and study may be a subtle and sophisticated one, not all apparent to an outside observer, we would argue that there is considerable truth to this assertion. In fact, much of the best work in sociology and other social sciences—within the fieldwork tradition as well as with other research traditions—is probably grounded in the past and/or current biographies of its creators. That such linkages are not always, perhaps not even usually, publicly

acknowledged is understandable; the traditional norms of scholarship do not require that researchers bare their souls, only their procedures. In recent years, however, a number of fieldworkers within anthropology and sociology have bared both their souls and lives in their ethnographic texts. In doing so, they advocated, whether directly or indirectly, not only for starting where you are but staying there and making the personal or biographic the focus of your ethnography. (pp. 11-12)

In other words, ethnographic fieldwork can offer researchers a place of familiarity. Much of what attracted us both to qualitative approaches was the fact that the field offers a "symbolic home" where we can include the lessons gained from our previous journeys. This is a particularly significant "place" for researchers of color, who often experience feelings of being marginalized throughout their educational experiences (Benton, 2001; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). While we agree with Lofland et al.'s notion of qualitative researchers "starting where you are," we contend that the authors fail to acknowledge the ways that researchers' racial and gender statuses influence their interactions within the research setting.

In this manuscript, we argue that teaching qualitative methods must include a reflective period during which teachers and students are asked to recognize the role racial and gender statuses will inevitably have on fieldwork experiences. Likewise, the idea of "starting where you are" requires us to acknowledge that our participants also have a starting point, and participants' perceptions of the researcher and research environments are largely filtered through gendered and racialized lenses.

Advocates of colorblindness argue that the US has achieved the goals set during the Civil Rights Movement. As such, the most efficient way to execute anti-racists practice and policies is to disregard race (Connerly, 2007; Skrentny, 1996). Yet, critics have argued that race conscious policies and practices are necessary to address racial inequalities (Omi & Winant, 2014).

We are both Black women who are several years removed from our doctoral training programs. Through our experiences in conducting and training others to conduct qualitative research, we have come to realize the complexities of teaching students of all racial backgrounds how to do fieldwork in a racialized society. Years later we have come to understand the importance of promoting notions of racial consciousness throughout the qualitative research process. After all, Omi and Winant (1994) suggest that "one of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race" (p. 59).

We were given access to a variety of subjects, and we both received feedback from some of our disciplines' most respected scholars including some of the most eminent leaders in the field of multicultural education. Although they successfully helped to launch our academic careers, we found that their teachings inadequately prepared us to do work in a deeply racialized world. In the sections that follow, we share our own experiences as we developed as qualitative researchers in the fields of sociology and education. We lay out some of the complexities, not necessarily to offer a magic solution but rather to allow others to think about their own journey as we collectively move qualitative research and teaching to broader inclusion.

Overview of the Problem

Training the next generation of qualitative researchers is an esteemed task. Being charged with doing so caused us to reflect upon our backgrounds, specifically how our backgrounds influenced and continue to influence our thinking as researchers and teachers. Thus, we began to reflect on our own graduate training and its influence on how we conduct

ourselves as researchers in our present locations. Our qualitative teachings encouraged us to study people in their "natural environment" rather than in a controlled setting (Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2010), and through our experiences we learned the racialized settings that we enter into are far from "natural." For instance, Wangari's (African Kenyan immigrant) experiences interviewing mostly White school teachers about African immigrant children and Kamesha's experiences interviewing African American women about suicide, each occurred within a social (racialized) context.

In agreement with Paulo Freire's (1974, 1998) basic assumption that we must raise our critical consciousness so that we can develop the capacity to pave our own road, our main goal in the academy is to transform our own thinking as well as that of our students in order to move toward new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively in the academy.

We belong to different disciplines, trained in different regions of the country, and have our own sets of experiences. Through our reflective processes, we have come to notice one glaring similarity that has significantly shaped how we teach qualitative methods: We are Black women who received our qualitative methods training at predominantly White institutions.

We both acknowledge that despite the fact that we were both trained in two entirely different doctoral programs in two different regions of the country, we experienced similarities in our training and subsequently the ways in which we learned to conduct our research. Our faculty gave us ample opportunities to gain field training. Lofland and colleagues stated, "More than any other kind of social inquiry, fieldwork takes advantage of researchers' personal connections to the world(s) around them, seeing those connections as avenues to potential research" (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 9). While we agree with this basic premise, we have found that as researchers we faced challenges gaining trust due to social divisions fueled by socially constructed notions of race and gender.

Background

In this section, we share our experiences as Black women in the academy. Additionally, we look back at our graduate training and its influence on how we conducted ourselves in the field as graduate students and now as researchers of color in the academy. We speak to dilemmas that emerged while conducting fieldwork in a racialized society. We conclude this section by highlighting the ways that we rectified these issues, often with little guidance from our qualitative training.

Kamesha's Story

In August of 2002, I (Kamesha) stepped through the doors of my graduate program, energetic and ready to change the world. I believed that my purpose on earth was to combat social inequality. I knew that I needed the tools to collect data in order to ensure that the people who rarely get to share their voices would get a seat at the table (through me). However, I went into the doctoral program completely unaware of the challenges that I would face both inside and outside of class. Soon, I began to question my abilities. Was I too ambitious? Was I smart enough to be there? Looking back, I realize that the majority of graduate students go through this process. In fact, academics have even given this overwhelming sense of doubt a name: Imposter Syndrome (Langford & Clance, 1993).

I was one of two African Americans in the doctoral program at a predominately White institution housed in Texas. The other African American, also a female, made it a point to get as far away from campus as she possibly could. She had completed her bachelor's degree at the same institution and had created a support group outside of the department. In other words,

I was on my own. I had moved from Illinois to Texas with no idea how to navigate graduate school or department politics.

My off campus experiences were equally challenging. The college town lacked racial diversity. I frequently encountered strange looks when I walked into the post office or grocery store cashiers who dropped my change on the counter rather than placing the money in my hand, and semi-trucks with the confederate flags on their trailer in the next lane over. These on campus and off campus encounters reminded me of my marginalized status as a Black woman.

My status as an "outsider" seemed inescapable. Eventually, I reached a crossroad, with two options before me. The first was to continue on my path to obtain the degree that I was seeking, despite the fact that I was losing a bit of myself every day. My second option was to leave the program and keep my sense of self. Making my decision more difficult was the fact that I was the first in my family to go to college and certainly the first to attend graduate school. My family and friends were proud of my accomplishments, and I wanted to continue to make them proud. Thus, I chose to stay, and the consequences of that decision have been profound.

By the time I got to my first graduate-level qualitative methods course, I was a different person. I no longer valued what Collins (2000) referred to as "taken for granted" knowledge that I had when I started the program. I found myself questioning everything that I had learned through my years as a Black woman in America. I questioned whether my interests were scholarly enough, and I questioned how my ideas and my experiences could even fit into the box of "mainstream" sociology. Based on my experiences, I even questioned whether it was possible to "do research" without the pervasiveness of race impacting my field experiences.

Qualitative research in general can be an especially demanding endeavor. Yet, being Black and female, added additional hurdles to the process. First, I was aware of Black women's underrepresented voices in social science research, so there was the added pressure to include and accurately represent their voices in my project. I had to turn to the works of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) to gather the courage to see the value in my "taken for granted" knowledge.

Second, the notion of "starting where you are" takes on a different meaning for researchers of color. I sought writings from authors who saw value in personal accounts from non-Whites. To name a few, the works of bell hooks (2003), Joe Feagin (2014), Patricia Hill Collins (1986), Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (West, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995), Richard Delgado (1989) reminded of the importance of bringing firsthand accounts (including my own) to literature. Though it took me several months to regroup from this process, I have since been able to introduce students to the many other works that contribute to a multidimensional "story."

The Role of Race and Gender in Developing a Research Design—Kamesha's Dilemma

For my dissertation project, I decided to examine racial and gender variations among Blacks and Whites related to suicide. Literature reveals that White males consistently have the highest numbers of completed suicide and Black females have the lowest, a phenomenon referred to as the "Black White suicide paradox" (Rockett, Julie, & Jeffrey, 2006). Suicide is noted as one of the few exceptions in which Whites outnumber Blacks in morbidity and mortality rates, particularly given that Blacks seem to be just as suicide prone as Whites. At the time of my research, empirical studies had done little to explain this social phenomenon.

The purpose of my study then became to dismantle this paradox through firsthand accounts. Once I got to the point where I was ready to draft my research design, an interesting dilemma surfaced. I sought advice regarding the best methodological approaches to speak to the phenomenon, and the vast majority of feedback I received from my colleagues encouraged me to interview Black women. I agreed. Yet, a part of me was also interested in White men's take on the topic.

I had established relationships in predominately White communities just as I had established in the Black communities, so finding participants would not have been an issue. However, thoughts of interviewing White men brought up unexpected emotions. I became particularly concerned with the ways my racial and gender backgrounds might influence my interactions with interviewees. After all, my lived experiences alongside my scholarly knowledge substantiated the pervasiveness of race. The works of Omi and Winant explain the notion of "racial common sense" (1994, 2014). They describe "racial common sense" as the associations that we make about an individual's behaviors or attitudes based on their perceptions about their group membership.

Accordingly, I wondered how White men might interpret my questions. How might they interpret me, an African American woman, asking the questions? Would the questions that I posed be perceived differently if I were white or male? I was facing a dilemma that went beyond the scope of my qualitative training. While my methodological training prepared me to collect and analyze narratives, it did little to help me mitigate the role that race and gender would play within the research setting.

Ultimately, I decided to only interview Black women. Although the study made a significant contribution to the suicide literature, for many years afterwards, I wondered how often researchers of color fail to include Whites in their study because they question whether notions of race will overshadow the focus of the study. I later learned that what I experienced was a dilemma all too common among researchers of color.

Wangari's Story

Taking a critical look at the world around me began early in my life (Wangari). I began my career as a high school teacher in one of the sprawling slums in my hometown of Thika, Kenya, and later I served as a volunteer social worker for the Child Welfare Society of Kenya and the Kenya Red Cross Society in the 1990s when Kenya heaved under the burden of trying to accommodate many refugees from surrounding nations. I came to understand that the reasons that these people chose to flee their own countries were often about one group of people consciously or unconsciously being in a position of privilege while others not in that group were made to feel marginalized and silenced. Still, I admit that while living in Kenya, I did not fully conceptualize what it meant to feel marginalized and silenced. Let me explain what I mean. Looking back, I now understand that, for one being an African from Africa, the concept of being a minority, and the issues that go along with being a minority, did not fully occur to me. As Black Africans, we are the majority in terms of numbers in my country. This means I never viewed race as a dimension of stratifying people (Tormala & Deux, 2006). Secondly, just being a member of the largest ethnic group meant that I may have had only a superficial understanding of what my fellow Kenyans from minority groups, or what refugees who came into my country called "marginalization." In my naiveté then, I did not fully understand that there might have been some systemic forces that enabled some people to acquire certain privileges, while at the same time making it more difficult for others to do the same.

Fast-forward 10 years to August 2001 when I migrated to the United States and found myself in graduate school. Through the multicultural knowledge I was acquiring at school, I quickly began to understand how race was used as a dimension to stratify me to the bottom of the race continuum. Feelings of being a marginalized and silenced outsider, albeit unconsciously, became a part of me. For example, my sister, who also saw and helped me to understand these social forces, joined me 3 years after I arrived, and took immediate and decisive action against what she termed as "racism" and "marginalization" by joining the Urban League so that she could have a forum to "speak up" and fight for justice for herself and others whom she felt had been marginalized and treated as the other. Having felt both like an insider

and outsider has given me a crucial understanding of what it means to be in the position of "the other."

In August 2005, I enrolled in one of the best education schools in the country to start my doctoral work in education. I was fortunate enough to benefit from the invaluable wisdom and guidance of some of the top scholars and researchers in the field of education including the field of multicultural education research. They provided me with challenging new ways of thinking and expanded my horizons as a scholar and a citizen of the world. I must admit, though, that at the time, I may not have understood fully how various concepts that I learned would collectively come to influence the way I thought about and conducted my research. Looking back and reflecting on my research process, I came to realize how race, gender and the fact that I was a recent immigrant all made me feel uneasy about the research process. For example, there were times when I felt vulnerable during the research process, second-guessing myself on my capacity to elicit objective responses from my subjects. The lingering feelings and doubts became a part of my research journey in general albeit in a subtle way. Yet in retrospect, almost towards the end of the research process and thereafter, this position of vulnerability slowly became one where I started to draw strength because it enhanced the process of my learning to be a researcher, how I relate to others on and off the research site and also how sincere I was with myself in the research process. I came to understand and make sense of these feelings and doubts, after my research journey, upon my reflecting on a key note presentation in a conference I attended the following year after my graduation. This presentation was titled, "Sharing your best self in a vulnerable time: How to tell your story" (Guthrie, 2013). The overarching theme of the conference and this talk in particular was to sensitize pre-tenured women on how to thrive in the academy. Being critically conscious of my vulnerability in the field has enabled me to confront my own subjectivity. I think my vulnerability in my graduate school research such as the second-guessing myself stem from my own identity as an African Kenyan immigrant scholar and teacher who had already had contact with the Somali people in my prior teaching years in Africa. Having had that prior contact might have led me to perceive my dialogues with my participants in different ways. For example, an African immigrant interviewing American teachers gave me a sense that the way the participants viewed me may have curtailed them from speaking their minds especially when it came to sensitive issues of race. On my end, I interpreted teachers falling short of speaking what was really on their minds as being a result of the participants viewing me and the Somali children who were the subject of our discussion as simply Black, while they viewed themselves as coming from another race.

To Trust or Not to Trust—Wangari's Dilemma

A fundamental purpose of qualitative research is to "illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of human beings and the world in which we live," as well as to develop a "new understanding for emancipating practices" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 11). My research focused on listening to the voices of 15 American teachers' experiences, of working to meet their Somali students' day-to-day needs and challenges. Out of the 15 teachers interviewed, 11 were female. Four were male. Of the four male teachers, one was an African, one was African American and two were White. Of the 11 female teachers, seven were White, two were Asian and two were African American. In general, as an outsider, I struggled with whether the nature of the questions I asked dictated the results that I received from the different participants. I was overwhelmed with anxiety wondering how the Americans both male and female, White or African American or Asian in general would interpret my questions as a recent immigrant. Would the stereotypes they had perhaps heard of Africa and African people (Tormala & Deux, 2006), influence the way they responded to me? How would my

Africanness influence how the mostly White teachers interpreted and responded to my questions? Also, given that I was an African female immigrant, how would the males in the study interpret and respond to my research questions? I wondered if I affected how male versus female participants responded to me in the study. I caught myself many times trying to see the world from the perspective of my participants and wondering whether they trusted me as a researcher. Could I achieve the objective of my study, which was to illuminate and understand the depth of the richness of this phenomenological study? As an African woman interviewing American teachers, I had the sense that the way most of the participants viewed me may have prevented them from speaking their minds, especially when it came to sensitive issues of race. During the interviews, one participant said she could only speak with the tape off, and another did not want to be quoted. I interpreted these teachers' unwillingness to speak openly and honestly to me as being related to our different racial backgrounds, a dilemma for which I was not trained to avoid or address.

Scholars have long debated the issue of researcher membership as being insiders or outsiders of the communities they study. For example, Merton (1972), conducted an in-depth discussion on the contrasting views of being insiders or outsiders in the domain of knowledge. In an attempt to move from a dichotomous view of the insider-outsider concept, researchers underscore the relative nature of researchers' identities and group membership depending on the specific research context by emphasizing the "space between" (Corbin & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012). While occupying the space between, Rubin and Rubin (2005, 2012) point out the need for a researcher and the interviewee to develop a relationship within a conversation partnership. The authors further explain that how one feels and how one acts in an interview can greatly affect the quality of the exchange. I certainly struggle to occupy different spaces in the process of my research. During the data collection process, in an attempt to generate engaging conversations with participants, I felt a strong need to let participants know that I was an insider and that I understood, empathized, and sympathized with them as teachers of immigrants because I was their colleague. However, as a recent immigrant, I also had a keen sense of being an outsider. I was occupying the "space between" but did not fully understand this concept at the time.

Toward Empowering Graduate Students and Educators of Color with the Necessary Tools to Find Their Place in the Academy

As was the case with both of us, and is likely the case with many students of color, graduate programs inadequately prepare future researchers of color to deal with the race and gender issues that can arise during qualitative research. This lack of preparation must be acknowledged and addressed, as a failure to do will prevent us from collectively moving qualitative research and teaching to new heights—ones that accurately and equally reflect the lived experiences of diverse races and genders.

Through our experiences, we offer insight into the ways in which students, who will ultimately become researchers, are affected by their training process, which then ultimately influences how they conduct research in the field. We encourage those who teach qualitative methodologies to take note of the impact that race and gender have on the research process. Failure to do so can incite feelings of apprehensiveness and further marginalize students of color. We must equip researchers of color with the necessary tools to identify race- and gender-related complexities that can arise. For example, it is important for researchers of all racial backgrounds to become critically conscious of the space they occupy in the research process (Few, 2007; Goldenberg, 2014).

They need to understand that the unique space or position they occupy in their research may be an empowering one that can help them interact with their participants and can

strengthen their research by leading them to continually reflect on and ask questions about the position they hold relative to the research question they have asked. By no means are we suggesting that the researcher must belong to the same racial background as those who are joining us in a study. Instead, we encourage researchers to acknowledge that they are entering into an environment that exists within a social and historical context. Through this process researchers become better equipped to construct more reliable questions and gather more usable data of individuals' within their "natural" settings.

There are several ways that researchers can gather information about their social and historical environment of interest. Perhaps, they can closely examine demographic trends about their setting. For example, if the researcher is interested in conducting research in a certain school, they can gather demographic data on the student body as well as the surrounding neighborhoods. They can also look at how this particular school compares to other schools in the district. In doing so, the researcher is better positioned to create a more comprehensive research design.

Finally, teaching qualitative methods must include continuous reflective periods during which both teachers and students are asked to recognize the role that their racial and gender statuses will inevitably have on developing and carrying out their research design. Only through creating an awareness of how race and gender constrain researchers within the research setting can we equip researchers of color to "start where they are."

The Evolution of Our Teaching Practices: Implications for Teaching Qualitative Methods

I (Kamesha) was introduced to works the of Paulo Freire (1974) and Gary R. Howard (2006), along with Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989; Flagg, 1993; Lopez, 1994; Matsuda, 1989; West, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) frameworks near the end of my doctoral program. These works remain vital in shaping how I train newly minted researchers. While it did not take me long to recognize Gary Howard's claim that "the process of schooling is neither power-neutral, race neutral, nor culture-neutral" (Howard, 2006, p. 118), it took me some time to figure out how best to equip students with the knowledge to recognize this reality. I now understand the importance of sharing similar works with students early on in their graduate training. Introducing Critical works, in conjunction with the qualitative research literature is especially important when it comes to challenging myths of color-blindness in our society. I am noticing that the students have become much more reflective about their positionality in the research process.

Right from the onset of my graduate studies, I (Wangari) was fortunate to sit at the feet of some of the most eminent scholars in the field of education. They taught me to always ponder, always evolve as an educator. They introduced me to various concepts including culturally relevant practices and critical democratic education (Apple, 1993, 2012; Apple & Beane, 2007; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2001). Despite this kind of preparation, why then did I still feel inadequately prepared during my field work, giving me doubts that I could achieve the objective of my study, which was to illuminate and understand the depth of the richness of a phenomenological study? Now as a full time faculty member of my institution, training the next generation of researchers is a reality for me. One of the tools I impart to my graduate students is that qualitative inquiry is a mystery that no one scholar has a one- size-fits-all clear cut way on how to conduct qualitative inquiry. Looking back, I now see that it is not easy to teach everything to every one in your graduate student body. At some level, students have to "teach themselves" about their own unique space, but there are many resources within the research literature that might be introduced to students, even if the student must be largely

left alone to explore them (many sources have been cited in this paper, but we had to discover them on our own). This is because in addition to race and gender, people have very different and unique experiences that they alone can bring to the forefront. Thus, advocating for my students to be self- motivated to take full responsibility of their learning of that which is unique to themselves in relation regular graduate coursework allows them to start reflecting about themselves early before they even get to the field. Thus, rather than wait for that perfect "methodology class," I teach all my graduate students to start seeing themselves in their research narrative by gradually leaning in to research by incorporating various aspects of the research that they will find in the field.

In taking full responsibility to teach themselves, I also teach students "how to reflect" about themselves and their learning. I share personal stories that are unique to myself. I continue to encourage students to discover scholars in the field who are engaging in deep reflections of their identities. Examples that stand out are, *The River Forever Flowing*, by Ming Fang He (2000), which is a deep reflection by the author in cross-cultural and multicultural landscapes; bell hooks' (1994), *Teaching to Transgress* where the author advocates for teachers to achieve the gift of freedom by "transgressing" against racial, sexual and class boundaries, or Elliot Mishler's (2004) *Craftartists' Narratives of Identity* in which the author analyzes in-depth interviews with craftartists who reflect on their lives to answer the question of what we mean when we refer to our identity and how we can represent it in the stories we tell about our lives.

Conclusion

In this reflective piece, we considered how mainstream pedagogical approaches to teaching qualitative methods remain deficient in training researchers to do qualitative work in a racialized society. We reflect back on our graduate level methods training with particular attention to how our training influenced our fieldwork decisions as graduate students and now as researchers in the academy. In conclusion, we offer suggestions to teachers on how to supplement existing qualitative training literatures.

First, we ask that all researchers acknowledge that one's (researcher and subject) racial and gender statuses can impact their data collection experiences and study outcomes. We approach this dilemma similar to Hunter, Ortloff, and Winkle-Wagner (2014). We ask teachers and researchers to reflect and journal about this issue. Teachers should prompt researchers to consider the role socially constructed notions of race and gender has historically played and may continue to play their research settings. For instance, if the researcher is conducting fieldwork within a mostly White elementary school (as we saw in Wangari's case), we would prompt the researcher to consider how the lack of racial and likely class diversity might impact how the researcher as well as how certain research questions may be perceived by the subjects. In addition, we would engage in a two-step process: (a) before going into a chosen research site, students are prompted to individually think about themselves and any fears and concern they have about their capacity to elicit objective responses in their data collection process and (b) we would ask the students, from their created lists, to individually categorize those fears and concerns that they think might be as a result of their race and or gender. After the categorization, students can be able to visually see and thus begin to understand how their own race and gender may result in attitudes that might influence the questions they ask as well as how they react to the answers they receive. This in turn will help to create a situation in which the researcher is able, right from the onset, to acknowledge and understand on a deeper level, his/her own biases. This acknowledgement and understanding might perhaps help students to create a capacity to "invite the interviewees to educate you to break your own stereotypes [and vice versa]" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 73). This reflection activity allows researchers to gain a

deeper understanding of themselves, their research participants and the space in which they both occupy. This process can help researchers in training to appreciate their unique backgrounds, improve their vantage point, and to better develop their unique contribution to advance the field of qualitative research.

Second, after acknowledging race and gender, we then ask for the researchers to embrace the notion of being vulnerable. In doing so, they become better equipped to understand and confront vulnerabilities within their own research projects. After completing the reflective exercise on fears and concerns relating to race and gender that we described above, instructors can then facilitate the practice of vulnerability by incorporating readings on the concept of vulnerability to help students to better understand and confront their own listed fears and concerns in research. Authors such as sociologist Jules Henry (2006) in his work titled, "Vulnerability and Education" and "Daring Greatly" by Brene Brown (2012) on vulnerability (Brown, 2012) may be used as examples. Once these readings are completed, students might perhaps inculcate a new disposition where they understand their strength given the unique space they occupy. Thus, rather than entering the field "second-guessing themselves" about how their race and gender might negatively impact their research, like we did during our own research processes, they enter it understanding that their unique spaces are actually spaces of strength and that they have the power to learn from their interviewees by discerning and seizing subtleties of the subject in question that they might otherwise miss (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) if they were bogged down with anxiety and queasy feelings about how they are perceived during the research process.

Through my experiences in interviewing Black women about suicide, I (Kamesha) became very familiar with the notion of vulnerability during my data collection process. Several of my participants' inquired about my personal interests in this topic. After the interviews ended, I would often answer additional questions from my participants inquiring about things such as how my interest in topic developed and why Black women? My openness to discuss these issues often resulted in the women recommending other participants for my study (snowball sampling). I was familiar with the details of the historical backdrop that preceded my study. The Black community's lack of trust towards White scientists who study and write about their "issues" is important point to note for any researcher studying health among Black Americans (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, & George, 2002; LaVeist, Nickerson, & Bowie, 2000; Spates, 2012; Thomas & Quinn, 1991). One way to do this is to follow a similar method to Thomas and Quinn's (1991) approach. They encourage open conversations between the conflicting parties (they use the example of confronting the damage caused by White scientists during the Tuskegee Syphilis study). In the classroom, I (Kamesha) encourage students to be prepared to address the "elephant in the room" prior to entering the research setting. Consequently, if the subject arises the researcher is better positioned to discuss the matter as it relates to the research topic.

In summary, we encourage teachers of qualitative research to "start where you are." However, "starting where you are" should require researchers' of all racial backgrounds to acknowledge that the subjects within their research settings also have a "starting point." As we seek to understand ourselves, we must also seek to understand the role that our presence may play in varying social settings. Much of this reflection must happen within, through personal reflection and research. But students can be taught and encouraged to do this work early and throughout their graduate careers, especially women of color, as our narratives and political positioning are almost never normative or the dominant culture in any graduate school course. Through our journeys we have learned the importance of reflecting and embracing vulnerability so that we can begin to see the value in our marginalized statuses as Black women. Only then can we recognize the uniqueness of our vantage point.

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