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## An Exploration of Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative, Book Review

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## **An Exploration of Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative, Book Review**

### **Abstract**

*Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative* by Kakali Bhattacharya and Norman K. Gillen (Kent) provides readers with scenarios from the authors' personal and academic lives through which they explore the major themes of the book (2016). These themes include researcher positionality, presenting research through ethnodrama, navigating academia, and pedagogical approaches to examining privilege. This review recommends the book for professors working with Master's students or undergraduates to facilitate reflection on their positionality in relation to their students (in the case of pre-service teachers) or research participants.

### **Keywords**

Race, Positionality, Arts-Based Research, Critical Pedagogy, Post-Colonialism

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## **An Exploration of Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative, Book Review**

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*Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative by Kakali Bhattacharya and Norman K. Gillen (Kent) provides readers with scenarios from the authors' personal and academic lives through which they explore the major themes of the book (2016). These themes include researcher positionality, presenting research through ethnodrama, navigating academia, and pedagogical approaches to examining privilege. This review recommends the book for professors working with Master's students or undergraduates to facilitate reflection on their positionality in relation to their students (in the case of pre-service teachers) or research participants. Keywords: Race, Positionality, Arts-Based Research, Critical Pedagogy, Post-Colonialism*

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Imagine the following scene: You are at a conference. A shy, white man gets up to present and, rather than reading from a paper or PowerPoint, begins to speak as his participant, dramatizing his research. The performance is entertaining and touching, but there's a catch: his participant is a Latina woman and no mention is made of the researcher's role in interpreting her experiences. He has chosen what words she will speak and how to speak them, is embodying this woman but has given the audience no inkling as to how his own life experiences have filtered these choices and colored this representation – they see only his embodied version of the woman's experience. His is a brave choice and an engaging research topic, but also a problematic one.

This vignette is one of many true stories shared in the book, *Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative* by Kakali Bhattacharya, associate professor of Adult Learning and Leadership at Kansas State University, and Norman K. Gillen (Kent), adjunct instructor of English and Industrial Communications at Del Mar College (2016). Kent is the man who, for his dissertation, investigated the educational experiences of a Latina woman during desegregation through the lens of Chicana Feminism and created an ethnodrama to represent his findings. Kakali is the female, Indian-born, tenured professor who supervised his dissertation and led Kent down the path of recognizing the key role he played in his own research—the importance of recognizing and naming positionality, privileges, and power as a researcher—particularly when investigating and rendering the experiences of someone from a background markedly different from your own.

Kakali candidly shares with readers the first time that she encountered racism upon immigrating to North America from India, how that along with her relatively privileged position as a member of the Brahmin caste and highly educated academic has affected her academic orientations both in her own research and in mentoring Kent. She shares experiences of exclusion and academic bullying faced when she first entered academia and is blatantly honest with readers about her internal struggles as she directed Kent's dissertation. She writes “frontstage” and “backstage dialogues” between herself, Kent, her mentors, and the other members of his committee in which she poses challenges concerning notions of identity, integrity, and power relations in academia. Kent, likewise, and with startling honesty, shares his passion and commitment to his research, his struggle to understand the relevance of or path to examining his positionality, his challenges with the research process and unpacking his own backpack of white male privilege.

Like Kent's conference presentation, the book is innovative, engaging, personal, and troubling. The authors share many deeply personal narratives and, doing so, they offer useful insights to readers. I found the following themes to be most striking: (1) Researcher positionality; (2) Presenting research through ethnodrama; (3) Navigating academia; and, (4) Pedagogical approaches to examining privilege. The following excerpt of Kakali's narrative illustrates how these themes are interwoven:

How do I teach people who enjoy enormous amounts of privilege, that most of them are unearned, and that their posturing, their way of knowing the world and living their lives is all a result of the invisibility of those privileges (McIntosh, 1990)? How do I motivate White folks to empathize with people who are oppressed on a daily basis? How do I interrogate their position, and become a critical ally, especially when teaching with this Brown body while occupying a predominantly white space? (Bhattacharya & Gillen, 2016, p. 13)

The iterative nature of these themes, some of which are evidenced by the above passage, recur throughout the six chapters of the book.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Kent describes struggling to write his chapter on positionality, considering Kakali's advice to:

list the privileges "with which I process the world" as a White male. But what exactly does that mean? ... What does she want me to write? – All kinds of incriminating things about myself? That as a White person, I view the world through a heritage of racism and discrimination and prejudice? ... To admit to her that, deep down, I am a racist and there is nothing I can do about it? ("My name is Kent, and I am powerless to the influence of racism.") Is this what she envisions the study's concluding chapter to accomplish? Is this its purpose? To admit to characteristics which I feel are inherently untrue? (Bhattacharya & Gillen, 2016, p. 152)

In externalizing these inner struggles, the authors offer two gifts to readers. First, a rare glimpse at the self-doubt that I can only imagine most novice researchers are laden with despite the overabundance of positive findings, experiences, and outcomes in published accounts of research. Second, a sort of pathway through dealing with ethical questions of representations and positionality in the form of useful references, theories, and concrete examples. This theme is of use to readers grappling with similar questions, struggling to address their subjectivity in their own research, or (as discussed later) struggling to help their students deal with similar questions.

### **Presenting Research through Ethnodrama**

Both authors present dialogues throughout the book, Kakali, drawing from Goffman's (1959) concept of frontstage and backstage drama, and Kent drawing from Saldaña's (2003) notions of ethnodrama as a form of research representation and reflection. Some dialogues occur in Kakali's mind between herself, Kent, and a mentor (backstage dialogues), others are excerpts of dramatized research representing the life experiences of Kent's research participant (ethnodrama), and others are pieced together conversations that took place "frontstage."

Readers seeking to deepen their understanding of how drama might enrich the research process will benefit from the numerous examples here as well as the rationale often present to justify or question the choices made in these dramatic representations.

### **Navigating Academia**

As a doctoral student, I was intrigued at the rich description of interpersonal tensions rife throughout Kent's dissertation process, Kakali's career, and both authors' struggle to help students push themselves to examine uncomfortable topics. Seeing the detailed process of revision, feedback, and dissertation defense was a unique and useful reading experience, as was learning of the bullying Kakali faced as a high achieving female new to professor-hood. The book provides insight to those facing similar struggles in academia, both at the graduate and post graduate level.

### **Pedagogical Approaches to Examining Privilege**

The final chapter offers pedagogical practices for examining privilege with students, but this theme is present throughout all chapters. Many of the experiences shared could be excerpted for discussion among students from the undergraduate through the doctoral level. This theme makes the book useful as a course text for those educating preservice teachers, particularly in subjects such as multicultural education or diversity studies. The authors share the difficulties they have had addressing white privilege with their students as well as some reflections on and strategies concerning how to deal with these difficulties.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this book has much to offer the fields of educational and qualitative research. It offers glimpses into how innovative approaches (like ethnodrama) can be used to address central issues concerning research (like positionality) by sharing personal accounts of navigating academia. It also offers pedagogical advice to those looking to help students question their own positionality. A critique of the book is that due to its recurrent nature, some of the questions posed or points made occasionally seem repetitive, but this same critique could be turned to advantage in those wishing to use a chapter or two to help guide novice qualitative researchers or preservice teachers through these important issues.

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