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Publication Date

DOI

Peer reviewed

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Toward a Critical Race RPP: how race, power and positionality inform Research Practice Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This research article challenges the normative construction of RPPs as an inherently equitable, post-racial and ungendered methodological framework. By utilizing critical race theory broadly, and whiteness as property in particular, we highlight how without explicit consideration for the racialization of research identities, RPPs are incapable of disrupting oppressive power structures that hinder equity and social change. As WOC researchers working on a large National Science Foundation granted study, we witnessed two issues in RPP methodologies: (1) institutional power granted by Academe is negated when whiteness is prioritized and minoritized race/gender identities are involved; and (2) niceness is weaponized as a means of protecting education and research as the property of whites in order to maintain the status quo. By utilizing our counterstories to unpack and interrogate the onto-epistemological and sociopolitical infrastructure of RPPs, we offer implications and best practices for how to foster more transformative and racially-just research partnerships. Specifically, we use CRT to theorize a Critical Race-RPP (CR-RPP) methodology that seeks to decentre whiteness and privilege the voices and needs of People of Color and other marginalized communities within schools and academia.

Introduction

In recent years, Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a methodological framework designed to rectify inequitable power dynamics in educational research to produce more practical, useful and relevant results (Calabrese Barton and Bevan 2016). Because they are 'long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers' (Coburn *et al.* 2013, p. 2), RPPs are intended to blur the hierarchical lines between researcher and practitioner in order to catalyse equity-oriented reform in schools (Bang and Vossoughi 2016). By encouraging researchers to work alongside practitioners to collaboratively define and address pressing 'problems of practice' in school communities, RPPs attempt to rectify the 'gulf between research and practice [and] the limited use of research in education policy and practice' (Welsh 2021). Importantly, RPPs recognize the historical causes of this schism, noting how generations of exploitation by and exclusion from traditional research has fostered a sense of distrust between researchers and practitioners. Thus, RPPs are an attempt to right a historical wrong by inviting those who have been traditionally excluded from the decision-making process to take their rightful 'seat at the table'. Because they are designed with power and equity in mind, RRPs are often perceived as a more impactful and democratic means of conducting educational research with minoritized groups (Denner *et al.* 2019).

Yet, it is our experience as Womxn of Color (WOC) that distortions and disruptions can persist in RPP dynamics as a result of unchallenged systems of race, gender and class oppression that mediate the *researchers'* experiences in the partnership. As WOC researchers – coming from communities who have usually been the 'researched' rather than the 'researcher' – our liminal existence as researcher, practitioner *and* community stakeholder helps expose racialized ruptures in RPP's equity-oriented design. As a result of racialized sexism, we continually confront cloaked systems of power within RPP infrastructures that silence and exclude minoritized researchers, even as they strive towards equity-oriented change in schools.

We argue that RPPs are built upon several racialized assumptions about power, collaboration and research identities: (1) researchers benefit from institutional privilege granted by the academy and, as a result, have inequitable amounts of power and privilege compared to K-12 practitioners; (2) practitioners occupy a historically marginalized status, and as a result are at a risk of experiencing further exclusion and exploitation by university researchers; thus (3) for RPPs 'to work', the researcher must be willing to cede some of their institutional power in order to make the research process more equitable and inclusive for practitioners (Ryoo *et al.* 2015, Penuel and Gallagher 2017, Bevan *et al.* 2019, Denner *et al.* 2019, Sexton *et al.* 2021). But what happens when the roles are reversed? Do RPPs still 'work' when researchers come from historically marginalized race and gender communities and practitioners from privileged ones? We posit that without explicit consideration for the racialization of research identities and the intercentricity of racism in both schools and academe, RPPs are incapable of disrupting the matrices of domination that hinder racial equity for minoritized groups.

Our existence within the racial borderlands of both society and academe has equipped us with robust epistemological vantage points that enable us to see where, why and how racialized ruptures occur within RPP frameworks, and subsequently, to theorize ways to disrupt and rebuild RPPs in more emancipatory and racially-just ways. It is our experience that when RPP discourse constructs the researcher as inherently privileged and laden with institutional power, whiteness – as a power structure and as a transactional, commodifiable property right – is protected by ignoring how race, gender and class mediate one's access to that power. In its current articulation, RPPs downplay the centrality of racialized sexism in higher education, and how WOC researchers are uniquely oppressed within and beyond the academy. We believe that in order to establish equitable and racially-just relationships between researchers and practitioners – particularly when researchers come from hyper-marginalized communities – RPPs must intentionally centre issues of race and racism *within the partnership*. Without an intentional focus on and mutual understanding of how to impede racism that occurs internal to the RPP, we find that RPPs can unintentionally (re)define equity in ways that uphold structures of whiteness and the oppressive status quo.

In this paper, we draw upon our experiences as WOC researchers navigating racist educational institutions within the United States to illuminate how RPPs are rooted in whiteness. We leverage CRT to highlight the mediating role whiteness as property plays in maintaining inequitable and racially problematic partnership dynamics for WOC researchers. Additionally, we showcase how the racialization of research identities (namely 'researcher' and 'practitioner'), and the institutionalization of 'niceness' and 'mutuality' as central commitments in RPP dynamics work to protect and uphold research as a white property right. Through our counterstories, we bring this issue to the forefront as we reimagine RPPs that can enact liberation for those groups most directly impacted by racism and white supremacy. We believe that a Critical Race-RPP (CR-RPP) framework can begin to do just that.

Positionality

As a Black womxn and a Chicana**,** we come to this work with the understanding that unbiased research does not exist, and that conventional research is often race-evasive[1] and rooted in whiteness (Smith 2021) . Our collective training in Black Feminist Thought, Chicana Feminisms, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) have taught us to leverage our minoritized funds of knowledge and ways of

knowing to critically 'read the world' as a means of survival and transformational resistance (2005). In this way, we are able to 'talk back' (hooks 1989) and 'research back' (Smith 2021) against paradigms that reify oppressive conditions for People of Color. As WOC who are also first-generation college students that attended low-income urban schools, our epistemological lenses are further augmented by our personal experiences with racial domination that informs our theoretical and methodological approach to educational research. Thus, we began our tenure with RPPs as 'outsiders-within' (Collins 1986) equipped with both academic expertise and experiential knowledge about how systems of power function to prioritize whiteness in educational and research settings.

Despite rhetorical commitments to equity (Penuel and Gallagher 2017, Denner *et al.* 2019), the RPP frameworks and disciplinary networks we navigated continually left us hyper-vulnerable to and under-protected from racial and gender microaggressions. Upon experiencing the cumulative weight of racialized sexism within various RPP settings, we began to understand the need for a nuanced theoretical approach that could recognize the permanence and pervasiveness of racism in educational institutions, and challenge the structures of whiteness that kept our voices on the institutional margins. Importantly, our specific RPP project team – including faculty members, PI's, graduate student researchers and the administrative staff – have dedicated their careers to remediating issues of educational inequity, and are very attuned to critical theories of race, gender and education. Thus, this paper is neither a critique of our research team nor of our specific research project; rather, it is a critical race interrogation of the socio-political infrastructure (i.e. norms, policies, practices, etc.) and onto-epistemological underpinnings (i.e. how and why research is done, with whom, in what ways, and for what purpose) of RPPs as a methodological framework in educational research.

Theoretical frameworks

In the field of education, CRT scholars acknowledge that race and racism are utilized to determine who is included and excluded from gaining access to educational resources and opportunities (Huber 2009). This is particularly relevant to our analysis of RPPs, where matrices of domination reinforce the racialization of research identities to exclusively define *who is able to conduct trustworthy and empirically sound research,* and subsequently *who is able to produce knowledge that shapes and defines the conditions of education for minoritized groups*.

Though not an exhaustive list, the following tenets illuminate how CRT as an onto-epistemological and theoretical standpoint can render visible the oppressive conditions, assumptions and methodological practices of RPPs:

1. *The permanence, pervasiveness and centrality of race and racism*: CRT acknowledges that racism is permanent, pervasive, and deeply enmeshed within the cultural fabric of U.S. society, and therefore must be centralized in discussions of equity and educational research (Bell 1991, Ladson-Billings 1998, 2017). CRT simultaneously recognizes race as a social construct designed to categorize and subjugate People of Color (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, Lopez 1997), and that these categories are sedimented by the dialectical relationship between macro and micro structural racism. In the case of RPP's, the macro-component of racism is the endemic and institutionalized disease of white supremacy that not only creates socially constructed racial categories for 'researcher' and 'practitioner', but simultaneously allows for the institutionalized Othering of WOC researchers as deviant and less than.

2. *The Importance of an Intersectional Analysis*: CRT simultaneously recognizes the presence of interlocking, mutually constructing matrices of domination that create exacerbated and profoundly nuanced manifestations of racism for multiply marginalized communities (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). When applied to RPPs, this tenet illuminates how unidimensional constructions of race, power and privilege further subjugate WOC researchers, disallowing truly equitable research partnerships to materialize.

3. *Centrality of experiential knowledge and voices of People of Color*: CRT recognizes that lived experiences of People of Color are legitimate and critical to understanding the current condition of educational inequality (Solórzano 1998, Solórzano and Yosso 2002). When applied to RPPs, this tenet recognizes WOC researchers as holders and creators of knowledge (Bernal 1998, 2002) whose everyday experiences with micro-aggressions can illuminate the vestiges of racialized sexism within RPP infrastructures that continually silence and denigrate People of Color within and beyond the academy.

4. *Challenge to dominant ideologies*: CRT encourages scholars to interrogate dominant narratives such as objectivity and meritocracy that strive to neutralize real conversations about race and racism by constructing illusions around 'fairness' and 'equal opportunity' when the lived reality of People of Color suggests that structural racism remains intact (Crenshaw *et al.* 1996, Solórzano 1998). In the case of RPPs, this tenet illuminates how notions of objectivity (e.g. who is capable of conducting valid and trustworthy research) and meritocracy (e.g. who earns the right to serve as researcher) are weaponized against WOC researchers to position them as deviant, aggressive and unprofessional in an attempt to silence their funds of knowledge and continually curtail any attempt to enact true transformative change for racially marginalized communities.

We acknowledge these tenets as vital to the way we see the world and approach educational research. We use CRT to challenge and highlight the areas in which racism and other forms of oppression manifest within RPPs, rebutting the common construction of RPPs as inherently progressive and equity-oriented. CRT allows us to emphasize the ways in which we, as WOC researchers engaging in RPPs, experience interlocking systems of oppression that construct research identities along axes of race, gender and class. Utilizing this critical lens, we 'interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities' (Dill and Zambrana 2009, p. 1) embedded within RPP norms and working assumptions, and highlight how those hegemonic ideologies foster rhetorical and discursive violence against marginalized researchers.

To bring these manifestations to light, we simultaneously employ the concept of whiteness as property as an analytic tool. Through this critical lens, we can better demonstrate how RPPs protect whiteness under the guise of protecting 'niceness' (Patton Davis 2016). Coined by Harris (1993), whiteness as property details the many ways in which property has been legally conceptualized, arranged and protected for whites. As Annamma (2015) writes, 'whiteness became further ensconced as property when it defined the legal status of a person as free, while blackness defined slavery' (p. 297–298). As a result, whiteness itself came to function as a form of property, which manifests in four property rights that maintain whites at the top of the racial hierarchy: (1) *the right to disposition;* (2) *the right to use and enjoyment;* (3) *the absolute right to exclude;* and (4) *the right to a good reputation and elevated status*. In the analysis of our counterstories, we draw upon the *right to a good reputation and elevated status* and *the right to exclude. The right to a good reputation and elevated status* contends that whites are inherently good and worthy of trust and respect. *The absolute right to exclude* involves having the power to determine who is, and who is not allowed access to white privileges such as conducting trustworthy research. These two concepts were especially useful in illustrating how current conceptualizations of RPPs function to protect whiteness as a form of property.

Literature review: RPPs and the racialization of research identities

RPPs seek to disrupt traditional power hierarchies that privilege the knowledge of researchers over that of practitioners (Penuel & Hill, 2019). Because they 'are premised on equity as a way of working' (Bevan *et al.* 2019, p. 1), RPPs have helped the educational research field think more critically about how systems of power are often the animating force beneath tense and/or ineffective research coalitions. By definition, equity-oriented RPPs work to

> challenge power dynamics and hierarchies, equally value all knowledge, experience, and skills, collaboratively develop shared language and vocabulary regarding research, educational theory, and practice, and regularly clarify and surface needs, wants, and expectations relating to the partnership and partners' professional contexts. (Ryoo *et al.* 2015, p. 1)

Researchers are encouraged to employ reflexive practices that enable them to check their institutional privilege by ensuring that historically excluded voices – such as those of practitioners - are heard and valued (Bevan *et al.* 2019). Indeed,

> by challenging the structural hierarchy that oftentimes prioritizes the problems and the knowledge base of the researcher, RPPs can elevate the practitioner's needs and experience to produce more relevant research and outcomes, and allow for the critical examination of how power and culture can impact research and education implementations (Sexton *et al.* 2021).

As the field continues to take up RPP's as a means of recifying educational inequity through equity-oriented research, it is crucial to continually consider the ways invisible systems of race, gender and class continue to shape institutional partnerships on ideological, systemic and interpersonal levels. By applying CRT to RPPs foundational assumptions – that researchers maintain a position of power and privilege over practitioners – we render visible the innocuous systems of race, gender and class oppression that animate RPPs and mediate how partners from multiply marginalized communities are seen, heard and treated in the research space. These systems have further implications for the ability of RPPs to move past rhetorical commitments to equity to simultaneously catalyse tangible, transformative change in the educational systems that maintain the subordination of marginalized groups – both in schools and in the academy.

Undoubtedly, a foundational assumption of RPP frameworks is that researchers – regardless of their intersectional identities – are inherently privileged because of their institutional status (Tuck 2009). As articulated across the RPP literature,

> the world of research is a site of privilege and oppression that has long-term negative consequences for communities … [and] the set of skills, expertise, and time required to make RPPs successfully cross lines of colour and power are not part of most researchers' training, leaving them ill equipped to avoid perpetuating existing systems of injustice. (Denner *et al.* 2019, p. 1–2)

The risk of researchers reifying systemic injustice is further bolstered by the institutional, cultural and demographic whiteness of the academy, which stands in stark contrast to public schools communities serviced by RPPs. In his review of RPP's, Welsh (2021) highlights the problematic racial chasm between universities and communities of practice, noting, 'public schools are increasingly populated with Black and Latinx students, yet the scholars who research the conditions and experiences of these students are largely white' (p. 171). While these assertions hold a great deal of truth, they subtly create monolithic racializations of researchers as 'white and privileged' that overlook the lived experiences of Researchers of Color who make up a steadily increasing portion of scholars doing equity work with and for Students of Color in public schools (Musu-Gillette 2016).

We believe that these assumptions are a result of unchallenged matrices of domination that allow for the social construction of research identities that are monolithic, ahistoric and do not account for intersectionality. Through our counter stories, we showcase how these racialized assumptions were deployed by various RPP stakeholders as a way to protect and uphold research as a white property right.

Methods

Research design & context

We employed a critical race counterstory method using autobiographical reflections (Williams 1991, Martinez 2020) to present our narratives as two WOC engaging in an RPP. Counterstorytelling has been hailed as both a CRT method and methodology used to bring the stories of those racially

and socially marginalized to the forefront (Solozano and Yosso 2002, Martinez 2020). These narratives are used to document the experiences of marginalized people that are often overlooked or outright ignored by dominant groups (Delgado 1989). Counterstorytelling acknowledges stories and experiences as valid sources of data that can be used to challenge majoritarian stories (Yosso 2006). We use our counterstories to dispute the majoritarian story that has been constructed around RPPs: that RPPs are a more equitable, socially-just method of engaging in research. As demonstrated in the literature, RPPs tend to take on race-evasive ideologies that often privilege whiteness in subtle and innocuous ways. Thus, our counterstories are used 'as a tool for exposing, analysing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, p. 32) embedded within RPPs.

The counterstories presented stem from our experiences working on a large NSF-granted qualitative study that aimed to highlight the experiences of underrepresented students in Computer Science (CS) classrooms through an RPP. At the time, we were both doctoral student researchers hired to help better understand the experiences of marginalized students enrolled in CS. The research took place in a large urban school district on the West Coast of the United States which primarily served low-income Students of Color. Though the larger study ultimately encompassed multiple school districts across multiple states for up to five years, our participation in the study took place over the course of one academic school year. In this first leg of the study, each WOC researcher worked with one designated partner school, and worked closely alongside a respective teacher-partner. Each WOC researcher conducted weekly site visits to their target school, spending anywhere from 1 to 2 h attending various class and lunch periods. While in the field, researchers recorded their observations in weekly field notes that included photos, videos, student artefacts, and our candid 'observer comments' about the classroom proceedings. As a crucial part of the RPP process, we held bi-monthly teacher/researcher meetings to discuss fieldnotes which reflected the researcher's observations. As a research team, we also met weekly to discuss updates, observations and initial analysis with regards to each of the three research sites.

Data collection

The sources of data used to construct our counternarratives include analytic memos, our experiences as WOC researchers confronting whiteness throughout our RPP, and collaborative analysis meetings. All of these sources of data are leveraged in our autobiographical reflections. The analytic memos were written during our time actively working in the RPP and were used to practice researcher reflexivity on the data corpus, often detailing our individual frustrations with the status of our education system (Saldana 2021). Given that our field notes were frequently shared with our partner teachers, analytic memos became a place for us to write freely about how we witnessed racial injustice play out within our partner schools.

Counter-storytelling recognizes these stories as 'valid and valuable data' (Yooso 2006, p. 10). As colleagues and 'homegirls' (Pough 2015), we engaged in storytelling with one another, expressing our sadness and anger with RPP infrastructures and epistemological underpinnings, and the depiction of RPPs as an inherently equitable approach to research. These stories, we realized, opposed the majoritarian narrative perpetuated by RPPs: that WOC researchers have equitable and impermeable access to institutional privilege granted by academe. Although we experienced many microaggressions during our tenure within the RPP world, we detail two particular stories that triggered the need for a conceptualization of Critical Race-RPPs and act as the main source of data in the construction of our counterstories.

Data analysis

We then moved to the analysis phase that included our respective analytic memos and personal experiences. We met regularly to make meaning of our stories in what we called 'collaborative

analysis meetings'. These meetings often interweaved analysis with additional storytelling. We frequently retold the two incidents that led us to write this paper while also sharing new untold stories about our qualms with the structure of RPPs. Over time, we recognized that these meetings were used to begin conceptualizing what Moraga and Anzaldua (2015) call a *theory in the flesh*, where our lived experiences as WOC researchers pushed us to create 'a politic born out of necessity' (p. 23). These meetings are when we first began to conceptualize a CR-RPP. Since these meetings were held via zoom, audio recorded, and transcribed, we began to analyse the contents of these meetings as well. Once we reached a point of saturation, we employed concept coding which allowed us to use key concepts and phrases that represented larger ideas (Saldana 2021). With these codes, we collaboratively created categories that allowed us to centre our unique narratives in order to provide nuance to the extant literature on RPPs (Saldana 2021).

Our RPP counterstory

The weather outside has proven to be much too cold for two graduate students from the West Coast. Instead of being at the computer science conference with the rest of the research team, Cynthia sits at their shared vacation rental with little to do but recover from a bad cold. After two days of staying in bed, she has finally begun to feel better and decides to make her way from her bedroom to the living room to see the snow outside. She opens her laptop when Tiera walks in through the door, shimmying the cold air off of her. She lets out a big 'UGHH. It's so cold outside'. Cynthia smiles and asks how her presentation went as Tiera removes her coat, gloves, and boots from outside.

> **Tiera:** Ugh. It was okay. I feel like there were moments of hope, where folx really started to understand the importance of conducting this equity work with and for Youth of Color. But there were other moments - too many other moments - where I was reminded of how unwelcomed and invisible I was as a Black womxn in these spaces, and how violent RPPs can be for Womxn of Color like us.

> **Cynthia:** Oh nooooo! What happened?

> **Tiera:** Okay, so I'm sitting at this table right? And it's this RPP roundtable session, where we were supposed to be talking about equity and how we, as social justice researchers, can work with practitioners to address the harm that systemic racism causes for Students of Color in CS classrooms. So, we start talking about challenges and tensions that arise between researchers and practitioners when trying to collaboratively solve problems that arise in the classroom. And so I bring up what happened to you while you and I were working in an RPP. I told them all about how your teacher partner was a white man who was questioning your qualifications! I brought up how you had shared your field notes with him from your observation in his class and how he immediately dropped out of the study after reading them because he felt you "weren't qualified to be a researcher in his classroom." I was like, "this happened in the RPP that I am a part of and it's a problem that this white man was questioning a Womxn of Color as if he knew more about research than she did."

> **Cynthia:** Did you tell them about the email he sent you and the rest of the research team?

> **Tiera**: YES! I explained to them that this man read your field notes that included practices that were rooted in scholarly research - IN PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES - and told them that he said that you needed to leave your own feelings out of the write up and that doing so was 'unprofessional' and 'unscholarly'. I explained to them that you were using observer comments to document your initial analysis and reflect on your experiences as a first generation college graduate and Student of Color.

> **Cynthia**: Right?! I was legitimately using what we had learned and thoroughly discussed as a research group. I separated my observer comments from the rest of the fieldnotes for that reason. I purposefully used the observer comments to make it known that it was separate from the narrative. I really just wanted to think through why students weren't engaged in the course material. It was honestly so cool and engaging. The teacher was super enthusiastic about it too, which by the way, I made note of in my field notes. But no matter what he did, the students in my group that day just didn't seem engaged. They told me they thought it was "boring" and would go off on other tangents not related to the task at hand. I thought, ok, let me go ahead and pull from my own experiences as a first generation college student and Chicana. Given that every person in that computer science classroom identified as Latinx, I figured maybe I can leverage my insider-outsider knowledge to understand this. AND ALL HE READ when he read my fieldnotes was that one set of observer comments instead of all

of the positive things that I had said about his pedagogy, and how I was just trying to understand why students were not engaged.

Tiera: EXACTLY! I told the table all about that! I explained to them that it was so obvious that white fragility was at play. As a white man, he was not about to let a Womxn of Color depict him in a negative light in any way. The way that he emailed you and CC'd our bosses to say that you didn't know how to do "unbiased" research and that he knew how to do research "better than you." The fact that he then mansplained to you what a classroom observation should look like, when you're a doctoral student at a well-known higher education institution studying education, is just mind blowing.

Cynthia: Yeah … honestly, I remember being so nervous after getting that email. I thought to myself, "maybe I don't know what I'm doing". I thought I was going to get fired. But to get a text from you and an email from our bosses defending me and my research approach was so comforting. But, honestly, it still made me feel so icky. I felt so stupid. The imposter syndrome after that was real.

Tiera: Girl, he missed out by not listening to you. Not only are you from the community that he was trying to serve in that classroom, but you have been building yourself up as an educational researcher. But it was obvious that to him, as a white man, that did not mean anything. OK BUT, this is when things get worse and I realize that I am tired of having conversations about racial equity in front of a bunch of white folx who claim to do equity RPPs.

Cynthia: Oh god, it gets worse?!

Tiera: SO much worse. So, I'm telling this story as an obvious example of whiteness at work when this random conference attendee at my table starts coming for me!

Cynthia: About what? What did they say?

Tiera: First of all, this white womxn just assumed that the story that I had told was about *me* and not you. Then, she said that maybe the RPP didn't work because *I* was "too aggressive" and "too angry". She went on to say that I needed to make sure that I was being cognizant of how I was presenting myself to ensure a "good partnership".

Cynthia: Ok so let me get this straight. Not only did she make assumptions about who the story was about, but she called you - a Black woman - "aggressive" and "angry"? That's literally by the book, misogynoir!

Tiera:*Eyeroll* Yep.

Cynthia: Wow. What did you respond?

Tiera: I told her, "First of all, this story was not about me, but about my colleague who also happens to be a Womxn of Color. Second of all, there is a fundamental problem with how you just assumed that because I am Black, that this incident must have occurred as a result of me being too 'aggressive' and 'angry.' I gave no evidence - in the actual story, or in my calm and professional retelling of the story - that I am an aggressive or angry person. I think it's important to recognize that those two words that you used to describe me are profoundly racist, sexist and stereotypical".

Cynthia: YESSSSS! I'm so glad that you told her that! What was her reaction?

Tiera: She got red in the face and started getting visibly upset that I had challenged her. Would you believe she started yelling? She just basically doubled down on her racism, and said that being kind and understanding in RPPs was an important part of making sure that they work and that if they didn't work, it was clearly something that I did on my end. I just rolled my eyes and left because I was tired.

Cynthia: Wow. I'm sorry that happened to you. That whole interaction is so wild honestly. I can and can't believe that happened.

Tiera: Yeah, I mean this whole RPP trend is very interesting because we have folx who are arguing for more equitable practices within research and in schools but then turn around and micro-assault us as if we are the problem. How can you say you're doing equity work for

Students of Color, but then constantly denigrate and attack Women of Color who are speaking up for those same communities?

Cynthia: I swear, RPPs need a stronger racial analysis. All this stuff is happening because they focus on "equity" and "inclusion" rather than race, racism and white supremacy.

Tiera: Exactly! It's like we need a Critical Race RPP to really get things done in this field.

Discussion

Our counterstory, forged at the intersection of racialized pain and resistance, exemplifies the pervasiveness of race-evasive racism within RPP norms, beliefs and infrastructures; it simultaneously reveals that despite having rhetorical commitments to equity, RPPs in their current articulation not only fail to disrupt racism as it occurs in real time, but they also reproduce and re-entrench the racially oppressive status quo. Although the normative culture of RPPs is to explicitly name and agree to uphold various tenets of equitable partnerships (e.g. 'I statements', 'assuming positive intent', 'placing equity at the center', etc.), our countless experiences with racial hostility show that these race-neutral norms are not enough to halt the regular dissemination of racially traumatizing sentiments and behaviours.

Furthermore, by failing to intervene upon racism in real time, RPPs further substantiated the very same oppressive conditions they are premised on dismantling. On the one hand, the inability to halt or redress the harm of racial microaggressions inadvertently sustained a 'chilly' and 'racially hostile' disciplinary environment for WOC researchers - a feature directly linked to disproportionately high attrition rates for Womxn and People of Color in STEM and in higher education research. On the other hand, it resulted in material and discursive consequences for the partner schools, whose access to equity-oriented teaching, learning and professional development resources was mediated by the practitioners' involvement in the larger study. The practitioner's decision to remove himself from the study ultimately stripped his school site - which served primarily low income Students of Color – of crucial and hard fought STEM resources that could help remediate the systemic inequities currently facing the Students of Color in that school.

In the following subsections, we situate the events of our counterstory into a rich body of critical race scholarship, and utilize the whiteness as property framework to illuminate how *the right to a good reputation* and *the absolute right to exclude* were the animating force beneath these racially hostile RPP interactions. In particular, we discuss how RPP's race-evasive norms, policies and practices (re)constructed dominant narratives about equity that decentred race, prioritized niceness and 'equally valued all voices, knowledge and backgrounds' in ways silenced WOC, hindered transformative educational reform, and ultimately further substantiated a racially oppressive status quo. The following takeaways capture these covert and racially elusive phenomena more explicitly: (1) institutional power granted by academe is rendered illegitimate and ineffective when whiteness is prioritized and minoritized race and gender identities are involved and (2) niceness is weaponized as a means of protecting the inequitable status quo in STEM and in academe.

Institutional power granted by academe is deemed irrelevant when whiteness is prioritized and minoritized race and gender identities are involved

When RPPs faltered, the blame was assumed to be the fault of the minoritized researcher. When Cynthia, who identifies as Chicana, shared her fieldnotes with a white male practitioner, he aggressively questioned her ability to do rigorous research because of the personal reflections she shared as separated observer comments. This practitioner labelled the researcher as 'unqualified' and 'unprofessional', specifically commenting on her lack of 'objectivity'. His assumptions about Cynthia's incompetence prompted him to 'teach' her how to do 'appropriate' research that is 'free of opinions' (i.e. traditional westernized notions of objective research). Although the practice employed by Cynthia was grounded in existing literature (e.g. Merriam and Tisdell 2016), her intersectional reflections on race, gender and class were perceived as a threat to the sanctity of the research in general, and the partnership in particular. When our bosses asked to meet with the practitioner to work through this racialized rupture, he declined and dropped out of the study.

When Tiera shared this example at a conference as a way to spark discussion around her concerns about RPP's race-evasive approaches to equity, a white female conference attendee insisted that Tiera did not know how to conduct RPP research and offered instructions for how to do so appropriately. Both the practitioner and conference attendee admitted to having minimal experience with the research methods, theoretical frames, and coursework being leveraged by the researchers. Yet, the implied reason for the ineffective partnerships was the sole result of racial deviance, gendered incompetence, and poor understandings of professionalism.

The wealth of knowledge and experience maintained by the WOC researchers were discounted and viewed as fraudulent. In this case, the *absolute right to exclude* manifested in the right to question our academic credentials and label us as intellectually suspicious and unqualified. Whiteness as property was protected with both attempts to preserve normative Eurocentric views of research and the perception of who can adequately enact such research. Additionally, both the practitioner and conference attendee experienced a threatening feeling to their *absolute right to exclude* resulting in feelings of anger and ultimately disengagement. This finding suggests that RPP's commitments to 'equity', without addressing biases that emerge, enable narratives of racial/gendered deviance to emerge in ways that seem rational.

Niceness is weaponized as a means of protecting the inequitable status quo

'Niceness' is a fundamental component of whiteness as property as the social norms defining the 'nice' and 'appropriate' ways of talking about racial equity protect white interests. As posited by Low (2009), the desire for niceness is 'a relatively new construct that focuses on the ways people make moral and aesthetic judgements to control their social and physical environments and defend their white privilege' (p. 79). In the context of RPPs, equitable partnerships require all parties to ascribe to normative (read: white) constructions of 'niceness' that criminalize uncomfortable discussions about race, racism and oppression. 'Niceness' was weaponized during our RPP when Tiera, a Black womxn researcher, presented findings about a fractured moment in her RPP experience and was blamed for the ineffective partnership. It was stated by a white female audience member she was likely 'too aggressive' and 'too angry' in her approach with the white male teacher – even though Tiera was not the researcher involved in the aforementioned incident.

Ultimately, the underlying assumptions of RPPs is that the model will work if and when WOC 'play nice'. Analysed through a whiteness as property framework, it becomes clear that the *right to a good reputation and elevated status* is threatened by honest conversations about intersectional oppression. Subsequently, racialized notions of 'Niceness' are weaponized when perpetrators of social injustice viscerally protect their presumed right to 'innocence' and 'good reputation'. By deploying racist assumptions about WOC as aggressive and incompetent, RPP partners utilize 'niceness' to circumvent substantive conversations about race that could remediate systemic oppression for People of Color.

Theorizing Critical Race RPPS (CR-RPPs)

To date, research has been done to conceptualize 'effective' and 'collaborative' RPPs that can catalyse social change in schools (e.g. Coburn and Penuel 2016). Researchers are striving to uncover the ways 'authority, status, and cultural norms of researchers and practitioners each influence how partnerships define problems and the kinds of strategies they pursue to address those problems' (Coburn *et al.* 2013, p. 2). Towards this end, we employ the guiding principles and tools set forth by CRT to theorize CR-RPPs. CRT demands that any analysis of RPPs extend beyond surface-level issues of equity, inclusivity and diversity to simultaneously consider the ubiquity of racist structures deeply embedded with the onto-epistemological, theoretical and methodological fabric of RPPs in ways that disallow for truly transformative educational change to occur. CRT's focus on macro- and micro-structural manifestations of racism, as well as its heavy reliance upon historicity, experiential

knowledge and interdisciplinary research, work to expose invisible matrices of domination that allow RPPs to rhetorically work towards equity without tangibly changing the racist systems that create and sustain racial oppression within and beyond the academy. As our counter-story exemplifies, current conceptualizations and practices embedded within RPPs utilize 'niceness' to protect research as a white property right and privilege safeguarding of the partnership over the interests of those further marginalized by schools. With CR-RPP, we (re)imagine RPPs that work to enact liberation for the marginalized. We offer five commitments that animate our conceptualization of a CR-RPP. Specifically, we believe partners must:

1. *Recognize that the problem of practice is rooted in white supremacy and institutionalized racism in schools*. Those interested in truly engaging in equity oriented RPPs must acknowledge and be prepared to openly confront the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression are present within the U.S. education system. Ignoring this reality by engaging in race-evasive approaches only uphold white dominance by circumventing real conversations about the systemic impact that structural racism has on the everyday lives of People of Color including Students and Researchers of Color. Partners must be willing to engage in an open and meaningful conversation about how the 'problem of practice' is a direct result of the prevalence of white supremacy and institutionalized racism in schools, both at the K-12 and higher education level. This should occur at the beginning of the partnership before identifying the 'problem of practice'.

2. *Understand how 'power' (i.e. who has it systemically and who does not) is dictated by matrices of domination leave Communities of Color hyper-(in)visible and underprotected within RPPs*. Our stories demonstrate how racism and sexism functioned together to silence us within the RPP community. Those seeking to truly enact and participate in equity driven RPPs must be willing to actively resist and better understand the ways in which intersecting forms of oppression create disparate experiences within RPPs for marginalized groups, and mediate how people that exist on the margins of society (e.g. People of Color, LGBTQ+, dis/abled folx, etc) are perceived and treated within these frameworks.

3. *Routinely address race/racism and other forms of oppression throughout all levels of the partnership*. In order to advance racial equity within RPPs, conversations around issues of race/racism cannot be restricted to one meeting. Instead, all partners must agree to engage in frequent and thought-provoking dialogue around oppression. This can be accomplished by integrating bi-weekly or monthly meetings that integrate exercises designed to reflect on racial privilege(s) or discuss assigned readings on the racist history of education in the U.S.. It is also essential that both researchers and practitioners be willing to 'call out' (letting someone know their racist behaviour is unacceptable) and be 'called in' (engage in a deep discussion and period of reflection)[2] to openly discuss racist incidents within the RPP. White fragility has no place in these meetings.

4. *Demonstrate a commitment to privileging – rather than 'equally including' – the voices and experiences of People of Color and those most directly impacted by systemic racism*. When making decisions about how to identify 'problem of practice' in the name of equity, both researchers and practitioners are responsible for addressing the needs of People of Color and those communities most directly impacted by racial domination. Their lived experiences with and onto-epistemological understandings of racism must be centred as valid sources of knowledge used to inform the RPP. One way to do this is to ground conversations about racial justice and educational equity in the rich intellectual histories, theoretical frameworks and analytical standpoints of People of Color – regardless of their status as student, researcher, practitioner or stakeholder.

5. *Share a collective responsibility to the students and their communities, rather than each other or the institutions that the partners represent*. When RPP literature solely focuses on the importance of fostering trusting, mutually beneficial, and effective partnerships, the research centres the experiences of the researcher and practitioner. While we recognize that issues between partners will arise and are important to confront, we challenge partners to remember that racially-just research

should be about the students and their communities. When issues do come up, ask yourselves and each other, 'whose needs am I centering?'.

Although this is not an exhaustive list, we believe these race-centred commitments are a crucial starting point for researchers and practitioners hoping to leverage RPPs towards more transformative, racially just and equity oriented change. We encourage those engaging in RPPs to consider our recommendations and continue to push against race-evasive policies, practices and ideologies that maintain white dominance in the field of education. If RPPs are truly to transform schools, it is prudent that conversations around intersecting forms of oppression be at the forefront of the partnership and be turned into action where the needs of People of Color are centred and their knowledge is valued.

Notes

1. We use the term 'race-evasive' in this article as opposed to the commonly used 'colorblindness' term to in order to 'resist positioning people with disabilities as problematic' (Aannamma et al, 2015, p. 153).
2. See https://creativeequitytoolkit.org/topic/anti-racism/call-out-call-in-racism/

Disclosure statement

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