Counter-Narratives: The Importance of Our Stories in Adult Educational Research

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Abstract

We propose the development of counter-narratives as a research methodology in adult education to increase the visibility of Ph.D. professionals and merit the educational equity this field aspires to reach.

Keywords: Counter-narratives; methodology; adult educational research; testimonios; feminisms

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote a book that paved the way for women of color to enter academic spaces brimming with White men demonizing Anzaldúa's form of being and writing. This popularized book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* used auto-*historia* to describe the classist, sexist, and racial oppression Chicana/Latina women faced both from their families and within educational institutions as they struggled to find their place inside the realm of higher education. Anzaldúa's book aimed to shift the academic language and environment from one where elitism and racism co-existed to one where students of color could express their way of knowing without prejudice and *Otherness*. We define Otherness as individuals from different ethnic groups that are marginalized because they do not fit the status quo of the dominant group. Most importantly, Anzaldúa's first-person counter-stories and the (re)telling of Mexican history, refuting the majoritarian narrative of gender and racial oppression, stand as valuable beacons of hope for the expectation of change. In the interest of drawing similar principles into the field of adult education, we propose the development of a counter-narrative theoretical framework in adult educational research to fill a void and give voice to those whose race, ethnicity, and gender play a vital role in their experiences as Ph.D. scholars and research professionals.

For the purposes of this paper, we define counter-narrative as the mode to (re)tell stories from the point of view of the oppressed to challenge dominant and racialized ideologies that arise from deficit-based narratives. Counter-narrative is a general term that derived from the realm of critical legal studies and flowed into education-based fields where it takes a back seat to critical race theory, Chicana feminist epistemology, and Latino studies (Miller et al., 2020). Clearly, a stronger methodology is needed to highlight personal stories from the perspective of minority groups who are researchers, scholars, and participants in a traditionally White field. By encouraging the academy to incorporate counter-narrative methodology in their research, we strongly believe that adult educators can better challenge the exogenous ways of Eurocentric deficit thinking. The expected result is that minorities, by recounting their stories and experiences along their educational pathways, will be better able to validate their ways of knowing and being.

Outside the field of adult education, we are not alone in this thinking. Speaking to this issue, Miller, et al. (2020) argued that "practices of inequity and the resulting experiences of institutional racism are captured in counter-narratives voiced by students of color and their teachers" (p. 270). Similarly, Manglitz and Brookfield (2020) contend that counter-narratives can guide our voices and research to collect authentic stories that push against racial and gender inequality in a predominately White field.

Arguments such as these underscore the important need for a counter-narrative theoretical framework that goes beyond the traditional, and that can disrupt the negative ideologies in the stories of women or men of color in the field of adult education. We, as minority man and women in adult educational research, strongly desire to form a space for the stories of Black, Chicana/o, and Latina/o professionals to be heard on a deeper level. Specifically, we propose to take traditional critical methodologies further by exploring counter-narratives like testimonios as a theoretical framework in adult educational research. Therefore, the question guiding our paper was, how would the use of a counter-narrative theoretical framework aid researchers and participants, particularly those who form an affinity with marginalized groups, in the field of adult educational research?

Literature Review

Through our research, we conducted a brief literature review to determine if prominent adult education journals had employed counter-narratives in adult educational research. These peer-reviewed journals included *Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ), New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education (NDACE), Adult Learning and Journal of Transformative Learning*. Specifically, we searched for key terms such as *counter-narratives* and *counter-stories* within each journal and discovered that these were not widely applied concepts in adult educational research. Of the four journals, three contained literature that included the key terms. We identified each article according to Miller et al.'s (2020) interpretation and categorization of how k-12 educational research applied the concept of counter-narratives in their literature. The authors stated that the three categories observed were: counter-narratives as a research method, counter-narratives a theoretical or methodological framework, and counter-narratives a pedagogical tool for teaching and teacher education.

In our findings, we discovered that AEQ only published one article applying counter-narratives as a research method approach. The article, titled "(Re)defining the Narrative: High-Achieving Nontraditional Black Male Undergraduates at a Historically Black College and University", is written by Ramon B. Goings (2016). It exemplifies the application of counter-narratives as a data collection tool that aids a researcher in authentically analyzing the experiences of minorities. Within the narrative factors approach that AEQ published, varied data was collected from participants and researchers concluded with an intentional creation of a counter-narrative.

We also found that the journal NDACE published an article written by Elizabeth A. Roumell and ArCasia D. James-Gallaway (2021) titled, "Social Movements, Community Education, and the Fight for Racial Justice: Black Women and Social Transformation". Their approach situated counter-narratives within the scope and theoretical underpinnings of CRT to conceptually frame the research study. The NDACE article does not explicitly state their theoretical framework, however, they use CRT underpinnings and the concept of counter-narratives to discuss the ongoing issues with Black women in public and political spaces.

Our findings also exposed that *Adult Learning* has not published counter-narratives in their journal. However, the *Journal of Transformative Learning* published an article Miller et al. explained using counter-narratives as a pedagogical tool in teaching and teacher education. Counter-narratives were used with K-12 education and the professional development of its'

teachers and students as a mode of instruction either by having them develop their own counter-story or teaching them to recognize one. Kindel T. Nash (2013) wrote the article titled, "Everyone Sees Color: Toward a Transformative Critical Race Framework of Early Literacy Teacher Education" and based counter-narratives as a pedagogical tool for K-12 teacher pre-service.

History of CRT

We also thought it judicious to delve into the history of CRT because educational research cannot be explained without naming the critical legal studies (CLS) scholars, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Derrick Bell, and Patricia Williams who were foundational in its development (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). Critical race theory also cannot be discussed without naming Gloria Ladson-Billing and William Tate (1995) as the revolutionary scholars who began the movement for educational equity for students of color. One of the CRT tenets includes counter-narrative as a concept that stemmed from CLS but has since developed in educational research as a tool of resistance against the majoritarian narratives indoctrinating school inequality for students of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Several critical race theorists and critical Latino scholars have employed counter-stories in educational research to empower the voices silenced by the dominant society; however, they are specific to K-12 (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Miller et al., 2020) or traditional Chicana/o or Latina/o undergraduate students (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In adult education, counter-narratives are widely underused. Yet, given that it is a field of traditionally White scholars whose stories are the ones most accounted for (Guy & Merriweather, 2011), many incoming students or scholars of color do not have a role model or an assortment of alternative research methods to choose from (Quintero & Peña, 2019).

Research Design

First, and foremost, we must acknowledge that our proposed counter-narrative theoretical framework encompasses the tenets of critical race theory (CRT), Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) and some elements of Chicana feminist epistemology. Latino critical race theory not only looks at the experiences of Latinas/os through a CRT lens but includes issues such as culture, ethnicity, language, and immigrant policies/status (Huber & Villanueva, 2019). It is our desire to build a counter-narrative theoretical framework with all the tenets of CRT, and LatCrit for a better lens when doing adult educational research, especially as individuals of minority groups. By launching our counter-narrative theoretical framework, we also aim to push adult educational research one step further. We, subsequently, adapted Huber and Villanueva's (2019) principles of *testimonio* because it best aligned with the tenets of CRTs and LatCrit and is a prime example of a counter-narrative that can be functional as a research method or conceptual framework. Testimonio also involves a research process that disrupts and resists negative majoritarian discourses by highlighting social injustices through a first-person narrative (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012).

In table 1 we list Huber and Villanueva's (2019) principles of testimonio and align it with our suggested principles of counter-narratives for adult educational research. This table can be used to facilitate adult educational researchers and scholars in recognizing or constructing counter-narratives in their studies. We also suggest reflecting on the theoretical underpinnings of CRT and LatCrit to assure that the counter-narrative indeed challenges the Eurocentric deficit

based majoritarian narratives. In doing so, we can inform our White counterparts of our authentic experiences and strive for equitable adult education.

Discussion

In our professional experience, counter-narratives served as a critical model of inquiry for our research studies. We have discussed the importance of sharing our personal experiences in our doctoral program to feel validated and motivated to continue our quest to our dissertation finish line. We see counter-narratives as an essential tool in disrupting the dominant narratives that stifle marginalized communities within the discipline of adult education and as strategies for giving agency to minority students so that they recognize and embrace their ability to facilitate educational research and add their voices to scholarship. The counter-narrative allows minority students an avenue for choosing their own words, to tell their own stories that provide alternative viewpoints, helping them create complex narratives that truly represent their realities. The counter-narrative goes beyond the notion that majoritarian narratives relative to positions of power tell the stories of those in the margins. Instead, these stories must come from the margins. Simply put, the stories that speak to the realities of the margins must come from the perspective and voices of those individuals. As researchers in the field of adult education, counter-narratives help us understand better forms of identity development, significant to how scholars of colors formulate a stable and keen sense of self. In bearing witness or engaging in testimonios, we tell stories from other perspectives that reframe and reject the misconceptions and half-truths found in master narratives. We highlight the stories that allow us to be critically reflective, locating the historical and cultural origins of our assumptions and questioning the meaning of those assumptions (Cranton, 1996). Counter-narratives make us whole as scholars because it lays bare the meritocracy that plays down the impact of racialization and implicit bias in adult education. As scholars of color, our self-actualization begins with understanding our worth, capability, and contribution.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The application of a counter-narrative theoretical framework in adult educational research would create a unique lens for adult professionals to understand how social injustices may occur. Kreber (2012) suggested that adult professionals would benefit from critical reflection in adult learning theories by understanding the lived experiences of their students or research participants. According to Yosso (2006), counter-narratives reflect on stories of our past where we were subjected to racial and social injustices. Therefore, connections formed through counter-narratives would allow adult professionals to reflect on their racialized experiences to promote and induce alternative perspectives in the field of adult educational research, particularly those with an affinity to marginalized groups.

Furthermore, this theoretical framework aligns well with current adult education learning theories that incorporate critical reflection as its' underpinning. For example, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model both discuss how adults ponder their experiences and learn through their actions to transform their perspectives. Kolb's learning cycle posits that adults learn because they have an opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences and bring prior acquired learning to the forefront. Kolb's model defines reflection as the internal transformation of experience; whereas transformative learning involves

critically reflecting upon an individual's past experiences to prompt a change (Mezirow, 1981). A perspective transformation occurs when past assumptions are critically reviewed and analyzed. Counter-narratives bolster one's ability to be open to new ideas and thoughts.

Conclusion

In summary, our research revealed that the concept of counter-narratives is seldom used in adult educational research. While disappointing, this was not surprising given that we, as doctoral students and Ph.D. professionals who currently navigate the field of adult education, cannot identify critical research with notable scholars that share our race, language or ethnicity. It is difficult to do research in a field that prides itself on social justice yet was slow to acknowledge the tension caused by concepts of race and White privilege. According to Manglitz and Brookfield (2020), it was not until 2010 that the academy "signaled a readiness . . . to move race and White privilege to the center stage of the field's discourse" (p. 429). The presence of a more inclusive methodology is needed within the field of adult education to better highlight the (re)telling of stories from people of color who are researchers, scholars, and participants in a traditionally White field. A counter-narrative framework within the academy will certainly help fill that void.

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Table 1

Principles of Comparison for Counter-Narratives

Principles of Testimonio	Principles of Counter-Narratives for Adult Educational Research
revealing injustices	reveal the lack of representation of people being *Othered* in adult educational research (Manglitz & Brookfield, 2020)
challenging Eurocentric ideologies	challenge Eurocentric male derived research
validating experiential knowledge that people of color have	validate our shared experiential knowledge
acknowledging that sharing lived experiences helps to heal our ancestral and current wounds	acknowledge that as women of color our shared lived experiences are adding to the collective to empower our voices
causing the transformation for racial and social justice	cause adult educational research to become more social just by increasing our visibility and voices