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Intersectionality of social identity, trauma, and education: a first-generation college student's reflective journey

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ABSTRACT

This reflective paper explores the intersectionality of social identity, trauma, and education through the lens of a first-generation college student (FGCS) who is a neurodivergent Army veteran. I share my personal journey and experiences, highlighting marginalized communities' challenges in the education system. I delve into the impact of cultural invasion, the transmission of trauma across generations, and the importance of critical consciousness in addressing educational inequality. I also discuss the role of spatial thinking and language in shaping learning experiences. I emphasize the need for cultural awareness, inclusivity, and equity in educational spaces and highlight the transformative power of embracing one's differences. Overall, I explain the complex dynamics of social identity, trauma, and education and call for a deeper understanding and critical examination of these issues.

This reflective paper delves into the intersectionality of social identity, trauma, and education, focusing on the experiences of a first-generation college student (FGCS), a neurodivergent Army veteran. I highlight the unique challenges marginalized communities face in the education system, advocating for cultural awareness, inclusivity, and equity. I emphasize the transformative power of personal narratives and the influence of social identity on inclusive social justice advocacy. Amplifying diverse personal narratives challenges oppression and promotes empathy for marginalized voices in society. Through this exploration, I examine the role of personal narratives and social identity in shaping social justice advocacy, underscoring the importance of embracing these elements to foster transformative change while acknowledging intersectionality and developing critical consciousness.

As a 2nd-year doctoral student at the University of San Diego's School of Education and Leadership Studies (SOLES), I bring a unique perspective to an intersectionality of social identity discussion. With a Mexican heritage and a heterosexual, married-with-children. I navigate the complexities of social identity while working as a bilingual social work professional focused on trauma. Drawing from Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, I analyze my experiences and the sociopolitical environments that shape them, including racism. This critical reflection informs targeted actions aimed at promoting social justice (Mosley et al., 2019). Next, I discuss Mexican folklore, including language, food, and music, passed down through generations to communicate spatially as a form of reasoning for a native Spanish speaker.

Spatial thinking

Cultural factors affect learning differences, particularly in spatial thinking and language, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in education. I acknowledge the social construction of knowledge by the elites, as discussed by Freire (1970). As a 2nd-year doctoral student in a leadership

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program, I notice ethnic studies resonates with social justice talks in the classroom environment. However, I have life experiences with bilingual peers who spoke English as a second language, embracing Spanish music like "Banda" and "Corridos," including television novelas that invigorate an exploration of traditional folklore. Integrating alternative learning approaches that incorporate spatial logic moves beyond conventional paradigms. According to the National Academy of Sciences (2006), spatial thinking involves space concepts, representation tools, and reasoning processes, using space to solve problems. Mental imagery aids in comprehending and recalling object qualities within spatial structures. As a neurodivergent student, my Spanish background influenced my above-average decoding and understanding of unfamiliar words. Language not only conveys thoughts and information but also represents the cultural identity of specific communities (Kellogg, 2016). In U.S. society, Standard American English is predominantly used by White Americans (Thomas, 2018). Next, I discuss my upbringing in East Los Angeles (LA) and how it influenced my education.

East Los Angeles

Growing up in East LA shaped my understanding of personal experiences within larger sociocultural contexts. I explore the role of background characteristics, socioeconomic status, and peer influence in shaping critical consciousness on social justice issues. In my neighborhood, highly accomplished or affluent individuals were rare, and the norm was working-class blue-collar workers. East LA, my birthplace, influenced me to challenge traditional narratives and reconstruct educational experiences. Many school peers from immigrant families chose to make quick money to support their families amidst gang distractions. My story combines scholarship and storytelling to take readers on a journey beyond education, showing how it relates to the larger sociocultural context. Reflecting on my life journey, I have recognized the impact of background characteristics, socioeconomic status, student satisfaction, and peer influence on shaping my critical consciousness on social justice matters. Once I graduated from high school, I went to college at San Jose State University (SJSU). Thereafter I attended graduate school in New York City. During this period, I earned two master's degrees and began my career in social work until I decided to volunteer as a direct commissioned officer in the U.S. Army. I felt the window of opportunity to enter the military was getting smaller based on age requirements, which encouraged me to serve soldiers. After my honorable discharge from the U.S. Army, I moved to Palo Alto, California, in the Bay Area. Next, I discuss FGCS's obstacles and how their cultural background can hinder their willingness to seek assistance.

Interdependence

The challenges faced by FGCS and the influence of their cultural backgrounds on help-seeking behaviors highlight the intricate nature of interdependence-based relational concerns and emphasize the importance of addressing cultural influences and relational dynamics in educational settings (Chang et al., 2020). After leaving the military, my goal was to use the GI Bill for a doctorate. While working full-time, I sought guidance from mentors as an FGCS and applied to nearby schools multiple times. My employment facilitated my transition from the military to civilian life at the Palo Alto Veteran Affairs Medical Center, where my personal and professional background allowed me to establish trustworthy relationships. It is common for veterans to be the first in their families to pursue higher education (Barragan et al., 2021).

FGCS are individuals whose parents did not attend college or university (Tsai et al., 2022). The US Department of Education (ED) (2020) extended this classification to include students whose parents do not possess a college degree, regardless of their educational background. In contrast, my mother grew up in a small rural village in Mexico and completed a grade school education through 4th grade. Compared to my mother, I have the privilege of pursuing higher education without social and economic constraints against women. Despite my achievements, marginalized FGCS may feel isolated and invalidated by peers and faculty (Chang et al., 2020). Chang et al. (2020) found Asian and Latino

American college students expressed interdependent concerns and relied on self-reliance. Asian Americans were more motivated by the fear of losing face, while Latino Americans were encouraged to maintain in-group harmony and avoid exacerbating problems. These findings demonstrate the complex nature of interdependence-based relational concerns that arise from racial and ethnic differences. Given the challenges faced by first-generation (FG) immigrant children, including intergenerational trauma, it is crucial to explore these difficulties and their impact.

Children of first generation immigrant parents

Cultural invasion is a tactic to replace national customs with foreign values. A cultural invasion sheds light on the transmission of trauma across generations and underscores the need to recognize and address cultural trauma within marginalized communities. Unfortunately, cultural invasion is often overlooked in classroom discussions unless addressed explicitly in ethnic studies. Experiencing two cultures can enrich, but also brings challenges like discrimination and struggles as a minority (Brown & Lee, 2014). I have seen the challenges immigrants face when assimilating into a new society (Estrada et al., 2020).

Moving to a new country involves more than adapting to a different culture. The process involves managing stressors and adapting to social norms, affecting self-concept and interactions (Zhen-Duan et al., 2018). First-generation immigrant children may struggle with inherited trauma from their parents, impacting their present struggles (Bakó & Zana, 2018).

In retrospect, the term "trauma" is commonly used in medicine and psychology to describe individual pain. However, in sociology, trauma is understood as the collective experience of social pain. It describes negative emotional responses to separation, rejection, exclusion, or isolation from important aspects of life, like social status or relationships (Abrutyn, 2023). Cultural trauma stems from horrific events that alter a group's identity and leave a lasting impact on their consciousness (Alexander, 2004). Conversely, cultural invasion serves as a potent tool for domination, often employed to reinforce oppressive realities. As a firstborn male in a Latino family, I navigate double standards and conflicting traditions.

Double standard

Navigating clashing traditions is intertwined with cultural invasion and double standards' impact on social identity (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). Recognizing and addressing oppressive realities is crucial in dismantling these structures (Jemal, 2017). Cultural invasion, as highlighted by the Union of International Associations, is a significant issue in society. It involves displacing Indigenous tribes for economic gain and intentionally invading their cultural norms and values (United Nations, 2009). However, it is essential to acknowledge that cultural invasion is not just a tool of domination (Freire, 1970), but also a consequence of it. According to Freire (1970), cultural invasion is when those in power insert themselves into a foreign culture under the guise of helpfulness. As a male firstborn, I am aware of the discrepancies that come with my entitlement. Gender and cultural expectations create a double standard that unfairly limits the potential of women in my family and beyond (Fernicola, 2023). The clash of U.S. and Latino cultures, as noted by Capielo Rosario and Dillon (2019), causes confusion for those who compare their lives to the host culture (Sam & Berry, 2010). FGCS also face systemic problems that make them feel unwelcome in educational spaces (Holley & Gardner, 2012). These issues stem from policies that perpetuate racism and neglect the struggles of marginalized groups like FGCS. Marginalized communities suffer from collective trauma caused by cultural invasion they endure.

Trauma affects individuals and communities

The impact of trauma on individuals and communities encompasses the collective experience of social pain resulting from cultural invasion. Addressing educational inequality requires a critical

understanding of systemic causes. Cultural invasions, such as U.S. slavery and its enduring effects, poverty, violence against Indigenous people, and mass trauma, continue to impact multiple generations directly and indirectly (Njaka & Peacock, 2021). Torres (2019) asserted the Indigenous People of the Americas have endured ongoing psychological domination due to horrific events. Critical consciousness looks at the structural causes of educational inequality, not just cultural or fatalistic ones (Jemal, 2017). It considers the broader social system, academic discourses, processes, and structures influencing educational disparities (Rondini, 2015). A person with critical consciousness may argue that Native Americans in the US are pushed toward low-status jobs, limiting their college attendance and maintaining inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Despite colonizers' failure to fully eradicate them, Indigenous voices still speak of their dignity to future generations. Although my upbringing is located in a non-Indigenous neighborhood, I empathize with the challenges faced by Mexican immigrants seeking a better life in a new country. Next, I discuss the importance of being held accountable as a student by a community of teachers and parents supporting my growth.

Bilingual teachers

Bilingual teachers showed me the value of cultural competence and how it affects building trust in relationships. I faced numerous challenges growing up in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood in LA, surrounded by fellow first-generation students whose parents had a grade school education. Despite the environment of frequent altercations between rival gangs and ongoing police surveillance (Huston et al., 1996), I remained focused on my education and committed to achieving my goals. The support of bilingual teachers, who worked closely with my parents to ensure my accountability and progress, proved invaluable (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005). Some White teachers' cultural ignorance hindered their relationships with parents (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). These cultural disparities extended beyond the school environment, with White police officers frequently patrolling the area. My diverse educational background highlights the value of recognizing and handling cultural distinctions (Azmitia et al., 2023). Through my education, I overcame my inferiority complex and confronted the societal forces that contribute to oppressive social structures (Jemal, 2018). This critical analysis of oppression allowed me to examine social identity and advocate for social justice (Goforth & Pham, 2023). While college campuses strive for diversity and inclusion, society often presents different intentions (Grindstaff, 2021). Students must adapt to a culture where poverty can lead to trauma and function as a barrier to success (Tanyu et al., 2020). In the face of these challenges, I was determined not to become another statistic at risk of imprisonment.

Cycle of incarceration

The challenges faced by FGCS and the impact of the cycle of incarceration highlight the significance of defying stereotypes and pursuing higher education. As an FGCS aspiring for a professorship, I remind myself of my reasons for pursuing doctoral studies, despite the atypical expectations for minorities. According to Glass (2022), FGCS graduates make up 30% of all doctoral candidates. Students of color faced additional challenges before entering doctoral work. Approximately 40% of students of color do not earn their bachelor's degree after 4 years (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Only 8.8% of Latinas earned a doctoral degree in 2018–2019 compared to higher percentages for White, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Black women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In contrast, 7.7% of Black men and 9.3% of Latinos earned a doctoral degree in 2020–2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). It is crucial to consider campus climate and address the gender disparity and challenges faced by Hispanic and Black males pursuing a doctorate in predominantly White institutions (Espino et al., 2010).

Despite the odds, I understand the determination and resilience required to excel against all obstacles. I firmly believe in my worth and reinforce positive affirmations, further reinforced by my decision to live on campus (Roberts & Soria, 2021). Instead of becoming another statistic at risk of

incarceration, I intentionally invest in education. I have recognized that oppression exists at all levels of society, where different groups are categorized and labeled (James-Gallaway et al., 2024). Although dominant structures perpetuate these inequalities, there is a tendency to act negatively toward those labeled as oppressed (Gonzalez & Gattone, 2018).

Reflecting on my journey, one of the most painful factors that fueled my passion for learning was the trauma caused by my father's repeated incarcerations due to criminal behavior. His absence influenced my childhood development and my understanding of masculinity (Cox, 2009). However, the positive impact of others, including my mother, counterbalanced my father's absence. College was both scary and liberating, breaking me free from the cycle of imprisonment. I explore the impact of an absent father on my emotional growth.

Fathers' demons

The absence of a father and understanding the root causes of toxic home situations emphasize the need for compassion and support for those affected by trauma and addressing intergenerational trauma. Witnessing toxic home affairs has broadened my perspective on society, particularly about my father. Within the context of inequality, I sought help to break the cycle of incarceration through positive interventions for students affected by parental incarceration (Cox, 2009). Rather than internalizing violent behavior as the norm, I focused on my father's life experiences that led to his alcohol abuse, childhood trauma, and antisocial actions. Unlike my father, I have a mother who raised me since birth. Winnicott (1949) highlights the importance of a mother's exceptional traits, such as enduring pain, controlling anger, and being patient for future rewards, in the development of a child. The intersection of culture and trauma can limit and fail to support abuse victims. Negrete's (2024) study sheds light on the challenges faced by Latino men in reporting emotional and verbal abuse in their relationships due to cultural stigma, shame, guilt, and fear. As a bilingual social worker, I've found compassion and uncovered suppressed emotions, highlighting the importance of care and healing. It is important to remember men are often stigmatized in society for seeking mental health care and not overlook the need for support and understanding when examining other realities, such as intergenerational trauma resulting from war, genocide, slavery, and refugee experiences. Living in two countries has shaped my filter for questioning the status quo.

Two worlds

My ancestry includes Mexico and the U.S., with migrant relatives who taught me the value of diverse perspectives and embracing differences. Bicultural lenses play a crucial role in promoting critical thinking and understanding. As a person with dual heritage, I understand the coping mechanisms needed for FG individuals in bicultural environments. Drawing from the insights of Njaka and Peacock (2021), p. I have learned to effectively communicate the experiences and legacies of U.S. slavery to communities of color. A mentor from the African American Studies Department at SJSU deepened my understanding of U.S. history by examining figures like Frederick Douglas and Cesar Chavez. This mentorship taught me the significance of using bicultural lenses to foster critical thinking among students of color. Fishman et al. (2008) suggested mentorship interactions challenge power structures and the pressure to assimilate. Assimilating into a White hegemonic norm is not the only option (Cavazos, 2012). I aim to preserve the history of people of color and promote self-representation in the curriculum, to avoid misinformation, distortions, or stereotypes (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020). Next, I discuss how social justice advocacy and decolonizing education align.

Decolonial framework

Embracing a decolonial framework in education is essential for challenging oppressive structures and promoting transformative learning approaches. Through critical examination, I have experienced

a paradigm shift in my understanding of oppression, power, and privilege. Unlearning the teachings I received in K–12 public school are necessary steps. Rabbideau (2023) reaffirmed the subjective decision-making processes in K–12 leadership, often led by White educators who may not fully comprehend the actions and abilities of students of color, particularly Black students and their culture (Frankenberg et al., 2016). This misinterpretation is not accidental but rooted in systemic racism and White privilege (Blanchett, 2006).

Educational leaders, especially those who identify as White, can significantly benefit from adopting a decolonial framework. This approach provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by White individuals in understanding the impact of their actions on leadership decisions. Rabbideau (2023) emphasized the importance of critical self-reflection on the role of race in the experiences of students and leaders, enabling adequate support beyond campus life. To effectively address racism with authority and intelligence, educational leaders who apply transformative learning, think more clearly with gravitas. Dismissing new ideas as irrelevant or nonsensical, as suggested by Mezirow (1997), only reinforces preconceived notions and hinders the creation of a dynamic and thriving anti-racist learning environment. Therefore, leaders must remain open to new ideas, such as decolonized thinking, as Tuck and Yang (2012) discussed, and be willing to learn and grow. Next, I discuss how the increasing literature on critical autoethnography, drawing from my background, guides me to become a more thoughtful leader.

Critical autoethnography

The significance of critical autoethnography in promoting self-reflection and personal growth highlights the need to address research gaps and amplify marginalized voices. As part of my decolonized mind-set, I am actively relearning how current and historically oppressive social forces continue to impact society. I recognize the importance of theories like critical postcolonial analysis in understanding the power dynamics of intersectionality and advancing ethnic literature that gives voice to disenfranchised individuals whose stories have been erased or misrepresented (Hernández & McDowell, 2010). My research will involve conducting a qualitative study using critical autoethnography as a methodological approach. This approach encompasses understanding people's experiences, analyzing power structures, and using theory to challenge oppression (Reed-Danahay, 2017). The process and findings of this research can serve as a model for self-reflection and personal growth for educational leaders like me.

Additionally, it can inspire others who, like me, represent marginalized voices and are committed to challenging the status quo. I can identify and address these issues by intentionally examining structural inequities and dehumanizing aspects rooted in colonization. In the next section, I will reflect on how migrants contribute to society by bringing diverse creative and analytical skills, including neurodivergent pathways, to learning environments.

Palo Alto

Embracing a decolonial perspective has become increasingly important to me as I enter a new phase of life and start a family. I have witnessed the value of diverse perspectives firsthand, particularly during school celebrations like International Day. Although the food is always a highlight, I have noticed that most attendees are Chinese residents of Palo Alto, likely due to the area's renowned public high schools and its association with technology icon Steve Jobs (Carlyle, 2013). In contrast to my neighbors, who are predominantly professional engineers, I have chosen a different path, running a clinical practice focused on mental health and well-being. This line of work has taught me the significance of clarity and decency in all aspects of life.

A decolonized lens is crucial in preventing the continued exploitation of marginalized groups, mainly migrants, who often face exclusion and lack social protection (Giammarinaro, 2022). Despite the challenges posed by an influx of newcomers, I have been enriched by the presence of migrants in my

community. Their resilience and determination have inspired me to excel academically and personally, even after discovering my reading disability. Rather than succumbing to a predetermined fate, I thrived as a student through participation in enrichment college prep programs and the guidance of supportive counselors who used an ethnic studies curriculum. These experiences bolstered my self-esteem and confidence, leading me to develop effective study habits and discover the unique neurology of my brain, which functions best with reasonable classroom accommodations. The following section delves into my journey of self-discovery and academic success as a neurodivergent student.

Different brainpower

Before my learning impediment diagnosis, I was unaware of my brain's unique functioning. It was during my contemplation of attending law school that I realized something was different. This realization led to a profound epiphany – I embraced my brain's differences. Rather than dwelling on perceived shortcomings, I took control of my academic journey. I used educational renewal to retake courses and transformed my grades from Cs and Fs to As. Seeking reasonable classroom accommodations catered to my learning style highly improved my GPA. Exploring neurology, I discovered that chronic stress, particularly prevalent in those living in poverty, can profoundly alter brain chemistry in the prefrontal cortex (Leitch, 2015). The following section discusses my experience as a Ronald E. McNair Scholar and its influence on my aspiration to pursue a doctoral degree in leadership studies.

Ronald E. McNair Scholar

Unfortunately, these brain alterations can lead to deficits in higher reasoning, control, judgment, and decision-making without medical intervention. Throughout my K–12 education, I lacked access to disability resources, which hindered my academic progress. However, my path took an unexpected turn when I was chosen to be a Ronald E. McNair Scholar at SJSU in May 2001. This prestigious scholarship program, which supports FGCS, provided me with invaluable mentorship, financial assistance, and research opportunities, solidifying my desire to pursue a doctoral degree (Renbarger et al., 2021). As part of the program, I participated in a socialization colloquium that empowered me to bring diverse perspectives and leadership into a White hegemonic faculty environment (Peteet & Lige, 2016). The next section highlights my decision to study at the Ivy League Columbia University.

Columbia University School of Social Work

Studying the early years of civil rights leader Cesar Chavez in the Sal Si Puedes neighborhood of San Jose expanded my understanding of how social identity develops. This enlightening research, conducted as a McNair Scholar, opened doors for me. Through a combination of perseverance and mentorship, I received admission offers and generous financial support from top graduate schools nationwide. My dream school, Columbia University School of Social Work, became my first choice. Attending Columbia represents the culmination of my efforts and a testament to the transformative power of embracing one's differences. I am excited to immerse myself in the vibrant intellectual community and contribute to the field of social work. With a clear vision for my future, I am ready to seize this incredible opportunity and continue my journey of growth and success. In the next section, I will emphasize the importance of finding the right learning environment while recognizing the value of playtime.

Learning accommodations

The impact of learning accommodations and recognizing neurodivergent pathways underscores the importance of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. In this exploration, I delve

into the influence of childhood experiences and trauma on the development of autonomy. My acceptance into an Ivy League institution is a testament to my strength and character. Following my disappointment with my LSAT score, I underwent a neurological evaluation and gained valuable insights about myself. As an adult, I came to realize the complex challenges that disabled students face when learning without adequate resources.

Since using learning accommodations in college, my social identity has intersected with a neurodivergent pathway. I have discovered how adverse childhood experiences shaped my brain, but I also cherish the joyful memories of playtime that counterbalanced the despair. According to Winnicott (1971), creating a space for play is crucial as it fosters the development of independence and a sense of self and others in children. Suitable enough care, as Winnicott suggests, nurtures behavioral systems that are vital for survival and lead to healthy and adaptive outcomes. Fortunately, I have developed many positive behavioral systems, nurtured by the unwavering support of my single-parent mother, which has strengthened our bond and laid the foundation for my growth. Next, I delve into the impact of childhood experiences on the development of autonomy, self-evaluation, and the importance of addressing trauma.

Good enough mother

Donald Woods Winnicott, a renowned English pediatrician, contributed to psychoanalysis in the late 1920s. He coined the term "good enough mother" to describe a caregiver who actively responds to an infant's needs. Winnicott's revolutionary concept of play and reality emphasizes the vital role of a safe playing space in personal growth and the development of autonomy. It is essential to recognize that adverse experiences can profoundly impact children and that trauma can be transmitted across generations through epigenetic pathways, leading to heightened responses to further trauma (Yehuda, 2022). As a seasoned social worker, I am aware those in positions of power often overlook contextual distress and systemic issues such as racism and other forms of oppression (Chin et al., 2022). Reflecting on how childhood experiences shape our autonomy and self-evaluation, I continuously examine my internalized beliefs and values to lead a meaningful life. In the following section, I will address my personal experience in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) during K–12 education, highlighting the challenges this public school district faced, including segregation and low academic performance.

Los Angeles Unified School District

The experiences of LAUSD shed light on the systemic challenges of racism and oppression within the public school system. My early childhood years exposed me to the realities of LAUSD, where I witnessed overcrowded classrooms and a significant majority of students being children of Mexican immigrant parents, enduring segregation within the system. LAUSD faced multiple hurdles, including high dropout and suspension rates, low academic performance, and the presence of gangs on campus, necessitating police surveillance. The administration's perceived lack of competence exacerbated these issues. During this time, the Little Hoover Commission released a report on the district's management of its property resources, revealing mismanagement of LAUSD's fiscal and capital assets (Shapell et al., 1981).

The report highlights the pressing need for critical race theory to inform infrastructure improvements and resource allocation, ensuring that the needs of marginalized students are prioritized. It is crucial to approach these systemic challenges comprehensively, involving educators, administrators, policymakers, and the community. Although LAUSD has made efforts to implement reforms, ongoing work is necessary to achieve systemic change and ensure equitable access to quality education for all students. College preparation programs for nontraditional students played a significant role in propelling me to new heights. Additionally, growing up in a gang-infested neighborhood motivated me to rise above the dysfunction and embrace education as a pathway to a better quality of life. In the following section, I explore the intersection of power, privilege, and oppression in my work as a clinical social worker, emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness and inclusivity.

Relearning social identity

In my work with individuals who have experienced trauma, I have observed challenges in adapting and exploring social identity within therapeutic settings focused on healing and liberation (French et al., 2019). Many of my clients come from marginalized communities and speak English as a second language, necessitating a departure from the traditional Western framework. The Western framework often normalizes White culture, reinforcing the status quo and perpetuating notions of perfection, power, and privilege (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). As a bilingual Spanish-speaking social worker serving marginalized communities, I strive to establish trustworthiness by acknowledging the historical value and exclusivity ascribed to Whiteness or White culture (Harris, 1993) and the position of judgment it has held over others (Charbeneau, 2013). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that globalization, facilitated by the internet and social media, has transformed how people live, work, and interact worldwide. In this context, the perpetuation of White dominance and the denial of privilege to others must be documented and understood to challenge and dismantle it. This necessitates a deeper exploration of critical race theory and its implications, especially considering the opposition faced by critical race theory in the public school system following racial tensions (Rabbideau, 2023).

Living in an increasingly interconnected global community, the interplay between language and identity carries profound implications for culture, society, and individual self-perception (Sharofova, 2024). It is crucial to recognize that White dominance is perpetuated through a systematic and complex process (Leonardo, 2004). Educational leaders can contribute to a more just and equal society by critically examining these dynamics, promoting inclusivity, and striving for equity. Next, I will emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and the need to challenge Western frameworks in government settings and higher education.

Columbia University School of International and Policy Affairs

As a doctoral student examining leadership through a social justice lens, I have come to recognize the importance of cultivating a deeper level of awareness. It is evident that research evidence is never morally or ethically neutral, and the truth is always influenced by the politics surrounding it (Tuck & Yang, 2014). In my exploration of social justice issues, I find myself constantly questioning who holds the power to define what constitutes evidence. This inquiry necessitates ongoing self-reflection and an understanding of power dynamics, privilege, and oppression (Green, 2014). While delving into the social construction of learning disabilities, I am struck by Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness development, which highlights how the cultural and social capital of dominant groups shape our understanding of reality.

As a neurodivergent student, I am intrigued by the development of brain power, even though the science behind it remains somewhat mysterious to me. It is crucial to acknowledge that Western and European philosophies heavily influence medical practices and the education of physicians in the United States (Hernández & McDowell, 2010). Likewise, standardized exams for graduate school entrance, which require a common understanding of "bias" and "fairness," per Woo et al. (2022), tend to exclude and restrict nondominant worldviews, further perpetuating power imbalances (Jimenez-Luque, 2018). Although I have attended predominantly White institutions for higher education, I have navigated through an imbalanced learning environment. However, I recognize that effective leadership necessitates cultural awareness and interpersonal coping skills for self-regulation, which foster creativity and innovation (Ivčević et al., 2023).

During my time in the Executive Master of Public Administration Program at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, I felt confident in my abilities to positively impact the government's efforts to address the suicide epidemic among active-duty soldiers. The following section will delve into my experience as a social work officer in the U.S. Army, where I navigated crisis situations and addressed the needs of marginalized communities.

Direct commissioned officer in the U.S. Army

Based on direct commissioned experience as a social work officer in the U.S. Army Medical Department and as an emergency services manager at Metropolitan Hospital in NYC, I have gained invaluable insights into crisis response. Managing multiple crises involving adults and children, I have gained a comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs of crime victims, including sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, suicide, addiction, homelessness, and HIV treatment. This experience is particularly impactful in disenfranchised communities with language barriers and reliance on Medicaid or Medicare (Johnson, 2023). My ability to prioritize, coordinate resources, navigate language barriers, and work within different healthcare systems equips me to address complex needs in military and civilian crises. Witnessing trauma's impact on marginalized individuals and the distinct coping mechanisms of soldiers and civilians drives my understanding. Next, I explore the U.S. Army's Warrior Ethos and the dual roles of soldiers as warfighters and diplomats.

U.S. Army's Warrior Ethos

Organizational behavior relies on clear direction, emphasizing the importance of heightened cultural awareness (Ocampo et al., 2019). Strategic planning provides a vision and specific objectives, enabling sustainable change. The US Army's "Warrior Ethos" has guided soldiers since 2003, prioritizing the mission and upholding Army values. Today's soldiers are expected to fulfill the dual roles of warfighter and diplomat (Moon, 2021). This approach acknowledges that future adversaries may not be organized as professional military units. The Warrior's Creed instills fighting spirit and upholds Army values, but it is important to recognize the inherent contradiction between winning "hearts and minds" and the inevitable bloodshed of war (Moon, 2021). The warrior identity carries a paradox of nobility, serving as a moral and psychological protection against becoming a monster in one's own eyes (French & Thomas, 2017).

My role as a direct commissioned officer extends beyond that of a soldier or warrior. I am responsible for expediting mental health support on the battlefield serving as a gatekeeper, evaluating fitness for duty, and addressing mental health stigma (Hartman et al., 2018). Similarly, higher education institutions face the challenge of retaining FGCS. Although access to college readiness programs can boost self-esteem, it may not be sufficient for long-term success in demanding academic settings imbalanced by racial demographics. Personal narratives and self-reflection on social identity serve as powerful catalysts for social justice advocacy.

In conclusion, this reflective exploration highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable practices in educational spaces. It underscores the need to recognize and address the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalized communities affected by trauma. Academic institutions can create environments that foster learning, growth, and social justice for all by promoting a decolonial framework, culturally responsive pedagogies, and leadership undeterred by critical consciousness. Amplifying diverse personal narratives and understanding the complexities of social identity allows individuals to challenge oppressive structures and work toward a more equitable society. Embracing personal narratives and intersectionality of social identity is crucial for individual growth and creating lasting systemic change.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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