

Breaking Silence and Opening Windows: Insider Stories of South Asian Canadian Women

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Quite understandably, emotional responses, whether controlled or spontaneous, whether positive, negative or apparently neutral, permeate our day-to-day interpersonal interactions. Although the roles and functions of emotions are seldom acknowledged in either the social sciences literature concerning relationships between dominant/dominated individuals and groups, or in one's workplace, emotions pervade all socially constructed systems and structures of power and concomitant social relations. In one's workplace, for example, emotions are often relegated to the margins. They are regarded as unnecessary intrusions or viewed as being individual, personal, subjective, instinctive, feminine and accordingly, allowable to some extent, in private spheres of one's life. Further, emotions are not welcome as part of legitimate places/spaces in publicly funded educational spheres (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zorn, 2007).

As a series of backdrops, this paper draws on important works of Megan Boler (1999), as well as critical feminist studies (Baszile, 2008; Delpit, 1988; Mogadime, 2008). It explores how understanding the roles and functions of emotions (positive and negative) provides valuable insights into identifying forms of social control. It further explains some key strategies of enforcement of dominant discourses in public educational institutions. As importantly, it identifies minority women teachers' responses to the socio-economic and cultural work environments in which minorities are seldom welcome. The discussion will include a few findings from my far larger study about the experiences of South Asian women teachers in a western Canadian, prairie city (Aujla-Bhullar, 2012) as a window revealing insights concerning emotions previously silenced.^{1,2}

Using stories, I tease out how discussions of emotional responses in the teachers' narratives either enforce and/or reflect dominant hierarchies and values of a predominantly, ethnocentric, eurocentric educational system. The place of emotions is evident throughout my study and yet the presence of emotions as entities of social control, power, or resistance are little explored. I endeavor to investigate the roles and functions of emotions, in this article.

How emotions govern one's expectations and subsequent, internalization of different patterns of social relations requires a careful attention to the presence of emotions in the teachers' stories. When incidents of discrimination or examples of appreciation for one's work are shared with one's colleagues, the presence of how one 'feels' is not often contested. However, with deeper analysis we can derive an understanding of roles and functions of emotions and develop strategies to engage, resist, reason with and perhaps even contest gatekeepers of power and hegemony in educational systems.

The structural and systemic barriers facing minority women in my study manifest continuing oppression. The barriers act as mechanisms which govern and influence interpretations of experiences of minority teachers. The experiences shared are advanced as evidence of oppression as we explore and uncover the emotions generated in daily interactions.

Within educational institutions, the day-to-day experiences reflect major challenges, dilemmas, hurdles and constraints which are confronted and experienced by minority teachers.

From this study, I recognized women's reluctance to speak openly of issues such as discrimination, power imbalance, and privilege, and the complexity and difficulty involved in telling their stories to the researcher, although, I too, am South Asian. The women's stories tell of the need to remain silent or to feign ignorance of what is really at play, in interactions in their everyday lives in the workplace. The emotional tensions surrounding this reluctance, and ways of coping in order to survive, are evident as they share their perspectives and experiences.

Breaking silences and/or keeping silent

At the beginning of one's teaching career, dominant individual and group perspectives tend to exercise power and control. Carl James (2005), originally from the Caribbean, in quoting Lisa Delpit's (1998) work, states aptly that: "Those with power are frequently least aware of — or least willing to acknowledge — its [power's] existence. [In contrast] those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (p. 119). Several women highlight poignant stories concerning positive and negative impacts of teaching in their respective schools. There are difficulties in responding to negative, often stereotypical comments and/or problems associated with identifying circumstances around racism:

I almost feel afraid to say anything. I may overreact in a professional way or I might just react very personally and emotionally. I don't know if I could ever separate that? In conversations... it may not mean that somebody is saying something directly against you but they're saying it against a culture that you identify with. Of course you're going to take it personally. - Claire

When I'm talking about racism, I think it has a different impact on the kids when compared to if it came from someone else. I can't hide the fact that it upsets me. My voice gets all shrill and I really get into it. I can't hide the fact that it upsets me. - Maya

Recognizing one's race in explicit terms and speaking about it candidly is a place of reluctance and apprehension. There is deliberate action to deflect adverse or heated emotional exchanges in discussions of racism, anti-racism, race relations, and introduction of provincial government educational equity policies and measures (Mogadime, 2008). The narratives here illustrate the complexities of balancing how others may perceive and enact race (positively/negatively) at individual and collective levels. It heightens the desire on the part of minority teachers, to prove that race should not be allowed to undermine the achievements and qualities (such as, educational qualifications, knowledge, skills, individual and cultural attitudes, attributes and assets) which they hold:

Kirenjit: Growing up you're going to play the race card if somebody is rude to you or somebody's not going to give you an opportunity. I don't think I ever have... but hearing some comments now, which are really common, we want to suppress this whole issue and act like it [oppression] doesn't exist.

Author: So, you didn't want to be included in a category that cites your race as the reason for...?

Kirenjit: I didn't want to be targeted as someone who is accusatory. It's such a big factor but I never want to be questioned or seen as "Did she really earn this? Or is it a hand out or break?" Like, "She got that position or scholarship because..."

Similarly, Alyssa echoes the undesirable associations of using race as an explanatory factor. She reflects on the difficulty of naming or confronting prejudice and racism for fear of being dismissed as overreacting and being too emotional:

When you call it out you're considered confrontational and it's hard even for yourself to question, "When do I let things go? Where do I confront things?" You don't always want to be confrontational and claiming affirmative action because, again, you're going to be stereotyped.

The feelings of uncertainty and tension in how dominant others perceive them, create additional tensions. They worry that other issues related to teaching may be lost in the resultant chaos likely to occur when and if, they speak out.

Kirenjit, after further reflection, speaks to the fact that her racial identity cannot be ignored in her teaching role. Instead, she feels that it is prudent to accept that others' perceptions and judgments of her are not likely to change on any account. She acknowledges that her determination to focus on her teaching merits, strengths, accomplishments, towards fostering a more inclusive education in her classroom, are often diminished by dominant others:

I realize that my role as a woman of colour is extremely significant and, while I don't want to become jaded or cynical, I need to stop believing that people around me (teachers, staff) will see me for all the other qualities I hope to bring to the table and not just my colour. It feels like a tug-of-war because I want to be identified and acknowledged and as East-Indian/Canadian woman. However, I don't want to be seen as just that and automatically judged by popular stereotypes. I want to create a truly inclusive environment but in doing so I think/probably that I will face backlash, perhaps because non-visible minorities may feel like I'm pushing an 'agenda.'

The life experiences of being a visible minority in Canada sets the foundation for the women to reflect, cope and work within the systemic barriers and prejudices in the workplace. The women indicate that sharing their insights garners attention to the distinctions between what is and what should and could be.

Unfortunately, in emotionally charged instances, the subject/object positions of minorities and their presence in schools can be seen as threats to dominant gatekeepers' perceptions and worldviews. Dominant gatekeepers are challenged, and some may be forced to re-think their methods of how to work with/for others, the minority colleagues and students with whom they interact. Kirenjit's reflection on an encounter with colleagues and a parent of one of her student's, highlights this dilemma well:

I remember one parent coming in and they were very, very demanding about their child's schooling. The student had come from a very traditional school in Vietnam. I was just like "well you know, coming from the background he is and where he's been you know it's not abnormal that his parents are feeling this way right now."

And they [other teachers] kind of flipped out and said to me, "You know what, it doesn't matter if you're white or you're black, or brown or whatever..."

I was like, "I didn't mean it like that..."

And they kept on going, "Because all parents are going to demand it not just from certain cultural background..."

I was like but I never said that... that "white parents don't care." It just got to be very defensive.

The position and space identified, the emotional intensity generated, subsequent misunderstandings identified in the above interactions, characterize what happens when dominant discourses of authority and trust are disrupted (Baszile, 2008). Emotions, as Megan Boler quite rightly states, "reflect particular historical, cultural, and social arrangements" (Boler, 1999, p. 4). How we are identified by dominant others is the primary vehicle for our classification. In other words, we are marked and labeled by skin colour in order to fit into certain preconceived negative notions of brown-ness. The process of classification, often influences the places to which we are assigned in institutions and within society. In essence, such classifications are anachronistic, imperial vehicles, the relics of a colonial legacy. The classifications successfully organize and maintain the power of the dominant gaze and the systems which have been developed to manage and govern the unwanted others.

The presence of emotions as a critical lens to understand the experiences of Kirenjit and others, attest to a part of Megan Boler's (1999) documentation of a critical teaching moment. In speaking about her classroom experiences during the peak of the Gulf War in 1991, she discusses the impacts of hearing the news of the war on her students and herself:

How can I not raise the haunting question about our distinctive emotional experiences at this historical moment? How can I not ask about the profound numbness, due to our veritable powerlessness that seems to have rendered us both speechless, and further isolated from one another (pp. 136-137)?

Megan Boler continues with the acknowledgement that during such a major international crisis, the formal curriculum requires disruption.³ Furthermore, it attests to the "identity politics of that particular classroom" and the spaces we occupy as individuals and community at a particular moment (Boler, 1999, p. 139).

Boler's recognition of the need to address "distinctive emotional experiences" can also be a site of distress. This was evident in my own study and demonstrated well by a participant, Claire's experiences. The following excerpt from Claire's longer interview, outlines the impact

of an interaction with a student's mother, where the emotions and behaviours presented by the parent made it impossible to remain in such an environment:

I had this one mom who said, "I don't know if you know, but genetically we are from a very superior race; I don't think you understand that." This was during parent teacher interviews and the way she was talking just reminded me of World War II and the Nazi mentality.

This incident almost had Claire leave teaching as a career, permanently. She left this particular school shortly after the incident. She felt disregarded by the administration for their inability to handle the incident. She then took time to reflect on whether she wanted to continue with teaching:

"I remember thinking, I'm done with teaching, this is horrible. I can't imagine doing this for the rest of my life.' I was so depressed over the whole thing."

Claire was verbally attacked and deeply hurt. The response to the emotional experience, as in most cases of overt discrimination, becomes the responsibility of the recipient and not the aggressor. The contrasting responses of both Claire and Boler speak to the fundamental bases of emotional experiences and the need for a critical attention to one's environment and place within it.

Beauty in Breaking Silences

The strength of emotional responses can also be seen in the feelings of joy and excitement. Teachers described instances of delight when students were enthusiastic to interact with a visible minority teacher. Whether it was discussing serious topics (i.e. family values) or joking around about cultural innuendos, many of the women indicated surprise and delight in sharing experiences with their students. Seeing a visible minority teacher and discovering that she could speak a language other than English was a thrilling moment for many students. Minority students would sometimes say that a visible minority teacher encouraged and enhanced their feelings of security and confidence in being in a school in which they were not always welcome. The teachers recall some minority students' positive reactions, genuine questions and responses to being included in culturally sensitive learning processes:

There was this connection. They understood or wouldn't be hesitant in telling me about their weekend. When I would ask, "What did you do this weekend?" They would talk to me very openly and say, "Oh, well you know last weekend was Eid." - Alyssa

They can relate to you even by visually seeing a different colour. They don't have to be the same colour or background, it's just instantly they relate to you. They ask if you watch the same soap operas or anything like that. Instead of bringing apples it'll be lychees and stuff. They open up to that rather than with fear of an outsider judging them. - Simren

We had an influx of people from China and they [students] felt like... I don't know like I was an Aunt or something. They just clung to me. - Michelle

Visible minority teachers are powerful presences and influences in/on the lives of some minority students. Their presence functions with intended and unintended reciprocity between the students and themselves. Often enacted in the following ways: it dispels feelings of separation and/or indifference on the part of the students and teachers.

The strong emotions and attention to one's minority status is a place of positive reinforcement for the teachers and students in their respective classrooms. Developing trust and avoiding misuse of power are strong aspects influencing interactions between students and teachers and in creating places of hope and building social change in a critical and emotionally supportive environment.

Although the accounts of school environments marginalizing minority teachers and by extension minority students, the women teachers in the study employ strategies to empower themselves and their students. The use of humour or nonchalant voices to lighten the mood when the conversation turned their responses to culture-specific encounters was identified:

Some parents have an accent but don't mock that accent, even though you see Sonia doing it (laughing). - Alyssa

I don't know if it's an age thing or society is becoming more accepting, or whether I just don't really care about it... you get to a certain age where it becomes "whatever." - Serena

These instances where emotional responses to stress were met with amusement speak to the attempt of minimizing and dismissing the hurt and frustration experienced by these women. As they are being reflexive, they are also filtering their emotions and feelings of being subjected to their subjectivity. It is an interesting phenomenon that occurred frequently throughout the conversations, indicating a subtle but meaningful form of how one experiences and lives through difficult circumstances.

Concluding comments

The nature of storytelling itself is to engage and interact with others, and on that basis to evoke emotions. Storytelling uncovers a myriad of thoughts, feelings, reflections, and vulnerabilities. Stories capture our hearts and minds and are a vital part of our life from birth onwards. The participants' voices exist in a political, systemic, and dominant discourse of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism. They shared often troubling stories, seldom told. They excavated and brought to light their experiences. In so doing, the participants' stories challenged restrictive notions that minorities speak and share a single perspective, voice and worldview (Smith, 2010).

The feelings of empowerment, pride and resilience are evident when the women reflect on their past and present experiences as teachers. However, the point of departure occurs when incidents of discrimination, marginalization and oppression threaten to overpower their good work and sense of self-worth, as associated with one's profession.

Emotional responses function as sites of resistance and control. The participants demonstrate that reason and emotion are not separate. They are intertwined and often underpin decision making processes in schools in which minority teachers tend to be marginalized.

For my part, in conducting the study, and analyzing the emotions as a site of resistance, I went through a process of embracing and relearning the contextualization of emotion as a progressive way of knowing. Previously, I internalized the idea that emotions were undesirable in discussion and writing in academic works. I understand that feminized emotional spheres where others and I reside have historically been dismissed and marginalized by dominant discourses of control, rationality, and objectivity. The experiences shared with me in this research fueled a richer analysis of how we can understand experiences that go beyond empathy.

Laying foundations for social change begin within spaces of tensions and challenges to one's thinking. By sharing stories and exploring concepts and voices that are often marginalized, we may open a window by which we see, hear, and breathe new understandings of existing social structures.

Endnotes

1. Parts of this paper were presented at the 60th annual Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Conference in Vancouver, Canada in 2016. The paper was part of a panel presentation entitled: "Emotion as a site of resistance, control, and holistic learning: Critical emotion scholarship across diverse educational context".
2. The examination of emotions from a critical perspective uses narrative research around the lived experiences of women of colour teachers. This study was conducted in a large urban centre in Western Canada. There were 10 women who participated in this study, all varying in their years of teaching experience, position, and ethnic background. These women self-identified their background and/or descent as South Asian, South East Asian, East Asian, and the diasporic experience of being Indian/African. In the larger study, the women's feelings of belonging and desire for recognition were explored and problematized in terms of their identities as Canadian visible minority woman.
3. I suggest that the formal and non-formal school curriculums which reinforce the status quo, require disruptions which are not triggered by international crises. In my doctoral dissertation, I will explore ways in which schools can create more inclusive curriculums in which community involvement is meaningful and valued.

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