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# Institutional Researcher Reflexivity: How IR Professionals Can Utilize Researcher Reflexivity in Qualitative Studies of Community College Students

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# Community College Students

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that researcher reflexivity, a common qualitative practice, is a specific tool that institutional research professionals endeavoring to conduct qualitative research studies involving Students of Color can use to unpack issues of power and privilege that exist between the researcher and the researched. This may be particularly useful among institutional researchers working within community colleges that serve a disproportionate number of racially minoritized populations and other vulnerable student groups. I offer a reflexive account of various experiences related to race, gender, and social class that I encountered in a qualitative research study of Black and Latino males I conducted as an institutional researcher. The purpose of this reflexive account from the field is to support the argument for more qualitative approaches to institutional research, while also advancing the argument that critical qualitative research be leveraged with the explicit purpose of advancing racial equity from the context of IR not traditionally associated with equity, advocacy, and qualitative inquiry involving race.

Institutional researchers must increasingly rely on a variety of methodological approaches to generate information that can be used to guide institutional improvement and practice on college campuses. Qualitative approaches can help institutional researchers uncover new dimensions and complexities of the institutional contexts they routinely assess quantitatively (Lindquist, 1999; Volkwein, 2008). The consensus in higher education literature seems to be that institutional researchers *should* incorporate *more* qualitative approaches in institutional research (IR) and assessment (Kimball & Loya, 2017).

The current emphasis on the use of qualitative research, however, brings to light some considerations concerning the feasibility of its application in an IR context. It is unclear, for example, how qualitative studies may fit into routine IR activities (e.g., accreditation, enrollment management, academic program review program evaluation, and self-study) both in terms of practical execution (e.g., time allocation, resources, etc.) as well as in terms of how qualitative evidence of institutional effectiveness is weighed, valued, and utilized by campus leaders and external constituencies. Quantitative evidence is the currency of institutional research. Thus, the clarion call incorporate more qualitative approaches into IR practice may underestimate the difficulties in both the adoption of qualitative research methodologies by IR professionals and its reception by campus leaders and policy-makers.

Arguably, a more immediate concern is that the dynamics of *power* and *privilege* (inherent in the use of any methodological approach) are noticeably absent in discussions around the use of qualitative approaches in institutional research and assessment. Do we assume that IR professionals trained to privilege quantitative approaches will readily embrace a constructivist interpretation of reality? How might IR professionals transition between epistemological and ontological assumptions of qualitative and quantitative paradigms? The question of *how* the adoption of qualitative methodologies in an IR context might explicitly engage with issues of power and privilege, race and racism, is an important one. This is especially true in light of the fact that institutional research is a field (like many others) in which individuals from racially marginalized backgrounds are not well represented (let alone in leadership positions) yet qualitative studies of students increasingly focus on the experiences of Students of Color.

In this paper, I argue that *researcher reflexivity*, a common qualitative practice, is a specific tool that IR professionals endeavoring to

conduct qualitative research studies involving Students of Color can use to unpack issues of power and privilege that exist between the researcher and the researched. This may be particularly useful among institutional researchers working within community colleges that serve a disproportionate number of racially minoritized populations and other vulnerable student groups. As Milner (2007) pointed out, researchers need not share the same racial or cultural background as their participants, but it is important that researchers "be actively engaged, thoughtful, and forthright regarding tensions that can surface when conducting research where issues of race and culture are concerned" (p. 388). To this end, I offer a reflexive account of various experiences related to race, gender, and social class that I encountered in a qualitative research study I conducted as an institutional researcher. The purpose of this reflexive account from the field is to support the argument for more qualitative approaches to institutional research, while also advancing the argument that critical qualitative research be leveraged with the explicit purpose of advancing racial equity from the context of IR not traditionally associated with equity, advocacy, and qualitative inquiry involving race.

## What Is researcher reflexivity?

Researcher reflexivity is a common qualitative practice in which the researcher, as the instrument of data collection and analysis, considers the ways in their subjective experiences shape their interpretation of participants and their realities. Reflexivity is, thus, a reflection in which researchers consider who they are in the world (perspectives, beliefs, ideas, etc.) inform the research from its conceptualization to analysis (Berger, 2015; Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017). As Gordon (2005) stated,

> Reflexivity is meant to advance the understanding of both the researcher and the eventual readers about how past experiences and beliefs shape the ways in which stories get told. Through interrogation and disclosure of preconceptions and attitudes, researchers reveal their positionalities and this openness becomes a strength of qualitative work tying it to an interpretivist paradigm. (p. 280)

Reflexivity, then, "not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insights on how this knowledge is produced" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178).

There is great variation and ambiguity in the ways that researchers have utilized reflexivity. As Pillow (2003) noted, "most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research" (p. 176). A recent qualitative study by Yao and Vital (2018) who, by drawing on Finlay's (2002) classification of reflexive practices, offered particular *dimensions* of reflexivity among U.S. graduate students conducting research in international contexts. The idea that reflexive accounts may have common characteristics, elements, or dimensions is helpful toward understanding what goes into a reflexive account. For example, attention to *power dynamics* that exist between the researcher and social contexts is one dynamic of reflexivity (Yao & Vital, 2018). Another dimension of reflexivity may include *introspection* whereby researchers became clearer about "the link between knowledge claims, personal experiences of both participant and researcher, and the social context" (Finlay, 2002; p. 215, as cited in Yao & Vital, 2018). Finally, researchers might reflect on *reciprocity* with research participants (Pillow, 2003). Taken together, the three interrelated but distinct dimensions of reflexivity—introspection, power dynamics, and reciprocity—are specific foci that might be woven throughout a reflexive account. There are many more organizational structures and typologies within reflexive accounts (e.g. Gordon, 2005; Pillow, 2003).

**Reflexivity has its proponents and opponents**

It is important to note that there are many critiques of reflexivity as a qualitative practice, namely, that it is basically a form of self-absorption. It has been referred to as a privileged intellectual pursuit, in which academics engage in the "erotics of their own language games" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Patai (1994) called the proliferation of reflexivity in qualitative research an "academic fad" (as cited by Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Others have reduced it to narcissistic, self-indulgence that does nothing to actually produce better research. Yet, Gordon's (2005) reflection on "repertoire of logics" (p. 298) involved in the maintenance of her White

privilege within her research on schools is a prime example that reflexivity, far from an exercise in self-indulgence or self-flagellation, can be a powerful tool in identifying mechanisms that reproduce racial oppression and privilege in educational research.

Specifically, Gordon (2005) pointed to the specific ways in which, by virtue of her privileged status as a White woman she was able to avoid conversations about race, what may be akin to what Yao and Vital (2018) referred to in their study as *discursive deconstruction* whereby a researcher become more aware of the symbolic power of language as it is interpreted across social contexts. She writes:

> We need to recognize that the majority of researchers are (still) White. It is probably that most of us are unaware of the variety of logics and the attendant strategies that we draw upon in order to reinscribe White norms through our work in qualitative research and evaluation. As we consume and produce research we need to interrogate the White norms we encounter so that we can envision alternative interpretations. An interrogation of our own Whiteness and the Whiteness of the word around us needs to be central to the reflexivity that has become a standard measure of goodness in qualitative research... (Gordon, 2005, p. 299).

Gordon (2005), thus, pointed to the possibilities of reflexivity to support openness and awareness among researchers, particularly those who might otherwise engage with Students of Color as the other who is, by some external force(s) outside of their own control or influence, relegated to a marginalized status in society by virtue of race. Race, racism, Whiteness, power, and privilege are all ripe for consideration—as they have been in academic research—in the institutional research context (Abrica & Rivas, 2017; Abrica, 2018), the particularities of which are described next.

## Reflexivity in institutional research

A recent special issue of New Directions for Institutional Research (NDIR) highlighted specific ways in which qualitative research can be incorporated into the work of intuitional researchers. As part of that

issue, Mwangi and Bettencourt (2017) offered a "toolkit" of qualitative concepts for consideration in the incorporation of qualitative IR work (p. 11). The authors offer a hypothetical example of an institutional researcher and the decisions that this individual might engage with throughout the research process. I propose that researcher reflexivity is a helpful addition to this toolkit and to the broader discussion regarding the incorporation of qualitative methodologies in institutional research and assessment.

Researcher reflexivity is well-suited as a methodological tool to challenging the tenants of *neutrality* and *objectivity* typically associated with the field of institutional research. Kimball and Loya (2017), for example, argued that qualitative research can build among IR professionals what Terenzini called *organizational intelligence*: "an understanding how colleges and universities function" with regard to an "institution's political dimensions and the formal and informal dynamics of power" (Terenzini, 2013, p. 141). The authors advance the argument that the use of qualitative research can enhance the knowledge of IR practitioners by providing them with the political savvy and deeper understanding of complex post-secondary environments.

While it may be the case that qualitative research is well-suited to allow for a deeper understanding of college environments (both four-year and two-year), the concept of organizational intelligence—or any of the other competencies Terenzini (1993, 2013)) said IR professionals should have—make no mention of how one's subjectivity might inform the development of these competencies. For example, the idea that institutional researchers should be savvy to the politics of their environment assumes that individual subjectivities and positionalities do not differentially shape their engagement with said environment. Reflexive qualitative research practice may allow for an understanding of the ways in which the qualitative study may be influenced by the unique political context in which it was conducted.

Beyond there being specific competencies for institutional researchers outlined by Terenzini (1993, 2013)), there has long been a presumption of neutrality associated with the profession. Saupe (1990), for example, wrote:

> Institutional research, like other types of research, should be *objective*, systematic, and thorough. *The outcomes of the*

> *research should be as free as possible from the influence of personal philosophy, political considerations, and desired results.* The information provided by institutional research is combined with *academic and professional judgement* in planning and other decision-making processes. (p. 2, emphasis added).

Abrica and Rivas (2017) stated "By presenting results that are touted as 'neutral,' IR professionals become complicit in normalizing discourse, policies, and practice that serve to perpetuate structural racism and educational inequity (p. 3).

Reflexivity offers IR professionals the opportunity to disrupt the presumed neutrality of the work they do, providing space and opportunity to formally articulate and render visible the structures of inequity that are most often hidden from view. This is particularly a valuable exercise within the community college context, which serves the majority of Students of Color in higher education while most community college leaders, institutional researchers, and policy-makers are White. Abrica and Rivas (2017) posited that the presumption that IR is a politically neutral entity on campus serves to reinforce the colorblindness and privileging of Whiteness. Gordon (2005) addressed this reflexively.

Ultimately, IR as a research context is inherently not neutral (Abrica & Rivas, 2017; Abrica, 2018). Amidst calls to increase the use of qualitative methodologies in IR, there must also be recognition of the ways in which the unique context of IR—the professional socialization of institutional researchers, presumptions of neutrality associated with IR offices, and the colorblindness with which competencies of IR professionals have been described—shape all aspects of the research process. Moreover, IR professionals may not share the demographic characteristics of increasingly diverse student populations, particularly on community college campuses. Indeed, Association for Institutional Research (AIR) membership survey data indicated that the typical IR professional is statistically oriented, middle-aged, and has an earned doctorate in education or the social sciences (Lindquist, 1999), all of which may position IR professionals in positions of economic and social privilege not enjoyed by community college students.

## Researcher positionality

At this point, it is important to point out that reflexivity works in tandem with the concept of positionality (Yao & Vital, 2018). That it, is it important to first identify the ways in which one's social identities are positioned in society before exploring how they are positioned differently than one's study participants. Central to my reflexive account on the research process and my experience in the field is my subjective experience as both a Woman of Color and institutional researcher on campus, my *researcher positionality*. My racialized experience informed both my interactions with participants as well as my interactions on campus. Thus, as I reflect on my experience from the field, I find that there is a need to consider not only the dynamics involved in the relationships I built with participants (especially with regard to power, privilege, race, and gender) but also the broader political context in which I found myself. That is, the campus environment was a multidimensional, layered milieu that I found myself constantly having to navigate. Those navigational experiences, in term, shaped the salience of my identities as I interacted with participants.

In terms of my experience in the broader campus environment—a Hispanic Serving Institution located in Southern California—I often felt betwixt and between worlds. On the one hand, there were several other Women of Color who worked on campus in support staff positions. The majority (around 70%) of the campus was comprised of Students of Color, including members of my own family. I enjoyed representation in the demographics around me. At the same time, I was the only Person of Color on campus with a Ph.D. and worked in an all-White IR office. Several experiences with the broader IR community (regional conferences and meetings) were attended almost exclusively by (apparently) White male IR colleagues. Thus, I felt that I was represented amongst the demographics of the broader campus but underrepresented in the IR profession.

Beyond the unique position I occupied by virtue of my racialized and gendered status in the context of IR, I found myself needing to navigate the presumed neutrality associated with my IR office. It was in the context of having to *pitch* the study to members of the campus community (higher level administrators, faculty, staff) that I felt the need to attend to the schism between the language I was familiar with and the language of IR. I was used to, as a result of my doctoral training, engaging

frequently with explicitly racialized language like "racism" and "Students of Color." Yet, I learned from various interactions with other members of the campus environment that this language was somewhat jarring to those more comfortable with colorblind language. Questions about why efforts should be focused on helping specific racialized populations rather than interventions geared toward all students were the norm at various committee meetings I attended. It was in the context that I felt the need to be on the defensive about my explicit focus on Students of Color, particularly, Black and Latino males. Thus, as my language, and my racial and gendered identities became increasingly salient in the broader campus environment, I was keenly aware of my unique and privileged position that allowed me to capture my participants' experiences. I felt a great sense of responsibility to do justice to my participants' stories and to show naysayers why—informed by my academic training and personal experience—race matters.

## An institutional researcher's reflexive accounting within the research process

In the sections that follow, I engage in a process of reflexivity and describe the ways in which my various social identities and positionalities informed my approach to a qualitative study conducted in the context of an institutional research. I draw on a single study of Black and Latino males at a two-year community college in Southern California to highlight how conducting the study in the context of an institutional research office uniquely informed the research process in previously unexplored ways. Elements of *discursive deconstruction, introspection, power dynamics, and reciprocity*—concepts operationalized by Yao and Vital (2018) and Pillow (2003)—are present throughout my reflexive accounting of the design, implementation, and analysis stages of the study. Such organization mirrors an illustration by Finlay (2002) who outlined reflexive practices from the pre-research through data analysis and reporting stages.

To be clear, I am not addressing the polemic concerning quantitative and qualitative research in either academic or intuitional research. Nor do I present empirical study findings about students, staff, or faculty. Some reflexive accounts provide engage reflexively through the re-analysis of data (e.g., Gordon, 2005) while others reflect on field experiences

more generally (e.g., Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017). The latter is the case in this paper. Again, the purpose of this reflection is to add to the body of literature regarding the use of qualitative research institutional research so that other IR professionals might be forewarned, challenged, and possibly inspired to leverage qualitative data to advance knowledge on Students of Color in community colleges.

### *Conceptualizing the study*

Relative to all other student groups—including Women of Color—Men of Color experience disproportionately low rates of transfer to four-year institutions and baccalaureate degree completion (Abrica, 2018; Harris & Wood, 2013; Wood, Palmer, & Harris, 2015). Research has documented that Men of Color—including Black, Latino, Native, and Asian American men—often experience negative racial stereotypes, racial microaggressions, and other factors, which can undermine their academic persistence (Abrica & Martinez, 2016; Abrica & Hatch-Tocaimaza, in press; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Salinas & Hidrowoh, 2018; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Urias & Wood, 2015; Xiong, Allen, & Wood, 2016). At our college, Men of Color were shown to be disproportionately impacted on the outcomes of transfer, certificate, and degree completion.

While it would be easy to ask deficit-oriented questions like "Why are these men failing?" (Harper, 2010), I thought it necessary to document both the challenges these men faced as well their sources of support and strategies for success. As such, the empirical study was guided by the research questions: 1) What do Men of Color identify as primary challenges to persistence and how might the nature of these challenges change over time?, 2) What are the individual persistence strategies and sources of support that Men of Color utilize to support their academic persistence?, and 3) In what ways did students' racial, gendered, and immigrant identities shape their academic persistence during the 2015–2016 academic year?

As I developed the study, my approach was inherently constructivist in nature as I was primarily interested in understanding student experiences and generating meaningful information that could guide institutional practice. I would be centering the meaning that participants make of their lives, of their realities. The development of the research questions was informed by an extant literature base on the experiences

of Men of Color in community colleges, which suggests a need to balance quantitative portraits of student failure with an emphasis on the things that racially marginalized students to be successful in spite of institutional barriers. Thus, I was careful in the framing of my research questions to use language that did not reinforce deficit perspectives of this population. Reflecting on language used around campus—questions from faculty about why students don't try harder and comments from staff about the importance of supporting success of all students and not targeting particular racial/ethnic groups—I thought it important to emphasize the ways in which students are successful despite challenges they may encounter.

### *Reflecting on gender dynamics involved in data collection*

In total, I conducted a total of 30 focus groups and interviews (12 focus groups, 18 interviews) during the course of an academic year with 39 Men of Color. I worked under the assumption in scheduling three interview rounds, that participants would persist toward their educational goals even if that meant they were not enrolled for one term or another. Indeed, some students returned to campus to participate in my focus groups and follow-up interviews even if they had chosen not to enroll for spring semester. I have to believe this continuity was a result of the depth of our conversations and the rapport established, especially with Latino participants.

   Indeed, the fact that I grew up in the same community, went to the same high school, and lived in the same area as my participants shaped a mutual comfortability which informed the kinds of information shared. I assume they felt this level of comfortability based on the nature of information shared, the language they used (sometimes using words in Spanish, local slang, etc.). Some of their experiences were ones I had had and I felt I could understand what they were saying more because of these shared experiences. I possess what Delgado Bernal (1998) identified as cultural intuition, a cultural knowledge base rooted in shared lived experiences with participants. Through the exercise of this qualitative study I was able to harness my lived experience and positionality as a woman of color—one that includes direct experiences with the racial and economic oppression—to understand and connect with participants.

Yet, there were several times where my gendered identity likely kept participants from sharing things with me or in front of me. Two Latino participants—James and Michel—were responding to a question I posed about financial aid. James shared his financial challenges and explained that he was in a position where he did not have "girlfriend money." He described that he needed money to date, especially "White girls" to which Michael said "You just start listening to some Kanye West. No gold diggers, bro." The conversation went on, and I allowed it because it seemed to be bringing up some issues of race, status, and sociocultural perspectives around money. James explained that he "only dates White girls." Michael said authoritatively: "Let me tell you something. When you get older, you start realizing what you're missing out, bro." The conversation went on as if I weren't there, with both men talking about the virtues of dating "White chicks" versus "Mexican chicks."

One comment was about the willingness of a "Mexican chick" to "scrap" and Michel's enjoyment of this scrappiness from his children's mother. Michel seemed to suggest that he takes the scrappiness from "his girl" but doesn't mind it because he is still able to assert dominance in the relationship. At this point, I was truly offended by the comments about women being "feisty," "scrappy," or "crazy." Though marginalized in some ways by racial and economic oppression, they were still privileged by their gendered identities and engaged in offensive conversation about women right before my eyes. It was clear that part of the reason they were so open and honest was because I was a non-threatening Woman of Color over whom they could assert dominance.

In many ways such conversations brought to bear the tension I felt—and still feel—as a Woman of Color studying the experiences of Black and Latino males. That is, I found myself asking questions around the extent to which this research serves (or not) my self-interests. On the one hand, endeavoring to illuminate the dynamics of race and racial oppression serves my interest as part of a racially minoritized group. On the other hand, I wondered how my representation of Black and Latino males reinscribed power and privilege, thereby compromising my own liberation and freedom within a patriarchal society. Such questions have been asked by feminist researchers in the past, such as Willott (1998) who stated:

> There is a tension between being a researcher and being a feminist. As a feminist I want to see a change in the patriarchal

relations between men and women. I would like this change to extend to my relationships with the research participants, but found it difficult to challenge directly. As a researcher I was careful to nurture relationships, to avoid stepping over invisible lines in which these relationships might be jeopardized, and to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. (p. 183, as cited in Finlay, 2002, p. 537)

Like Willott, I found myself playing a role of nurturer, sister, and confidant. Meanwhile, in doing so, I felt a bit as though I was surrendering power, yielding the floor to *their* needs, in much the same ways that I do in relation to Men of Color and society at large.

### The trauma of engaging with students' financial challenges

Reflecting on the interviews, the stories participants shared brought to life everything from homelessness, domestic violence, and academic struggles. Other issues of ethnic identity, language, racism, microaggressions, intergroup dialogue, intragroup conflict, national identity, intergenerational mobility were raised. I was humbled by the richness of the data but disheartened that there were so many aspects of the students' lives that I would not and could not influence with any program or intervention. Rather, so much of what participants described were often, in my view, vestiges of a historical legacy of racial discrimination and disenfranchisement of people of color. Yet, the students were resilient and strong; I vacillated between hopeless and hopeful. Participants' experiences were traumatic for me to listen to given my own bouts of homelessness and experiences with living in poverty.

I often struggled with the fact that I was taking home a salary and using Equity funds for the purpose of conducting research on campus, and often wondered if I was some kind of race profiteer, taking money that should go directly to students. I felt that there was already enough research on Men of Color that leaders could use to create an effective intervention or program. But this was not my decision to make. If practitioners on campus felt that localized information on our students was needed, then that is was I needed to provide. I needed a job and I decided that it was appropriate for me to utilize my qualitative skillset to provide the information requested and that this was an endeavor

that I should be compensated for. Certainly, such feelings of *deservingness* (i.e., my perceived ability to contribute to research and knowledge on Men of Color and to be paid for generating this information) are couched within a capitalistic scheme, which leads individuals to determine their work and value based on the products and labor they can provide.

### Equity-mindedness and IR socialization

Meanwhile, as I was negotiating these issues with participants in the study and thinking about how all of this was informing the data collected and the relationships we were building, I was also navigating an increasingly complex positionality as a newly hired institutional researcher on campus. My day-to-day activities were centered on remaining objective and politically neutral (Knight, Moore, & Coperthwaite, 1997; Leimer & Terkla, 2009). Other projects required a dispassionate representation to campus constituents so as to reify the belief in the neutrality of the data and our office. Indeed, it is a pillar of the profession to remain politically neutral as a data analyst in IR so as to ensure trust from key stakeholders, says Terenzini (1993, 2013), who wrote:

> IR professionals need a keen understanding of the people in the college and university settings: what faculty, administrators, staff, students, and others value, what is important to them. It is the ability to anticipate how others will respond to a proposal, and idea or opportunity (or threat) and whether the reactions will be positive, neutral, or negative. IR is knowing what it will take to secure others' support. (p. 143)

Consistently, I found my identity as an "equity-minded" (p. 446) researcher-practitioner at odds with my quantitative projects (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004; Felix, Bensimon, Hanson, Gray, & Klingsmith, 2015). My qualitative research activities were not consistent with messaging around what it means to be a number-cruncher and an IR professional (see Author citation for discussion of IR socialization experiences).

Qualitative research allowed me the opportunity to draw on my positionality to understand participants' realities in ways I knew would not likely be afforded by my White colleagues. I understood—because

of my qualitative research competencies and positionality—that I was making a unique contribution to the campus (Bensimon, 2007). Reflections on positionality is a capacity of qualitative research not previously identified as a desirable skillset given the overwhelming focus on quantitative skills and presumed notions of researcher objectivity (Abrica & Rivas 2017). In other words, I relied on my social identities to build relationships with participants and my ability to reflect on those identities to generate meaningful information to guide institutional practice (Delaney, 1997). Such assets are not typically thought of as residing within institutional research professionals, especially because this field assumes a primacy of quantitative research (Abrica & Rivas, 2017; Abrica, 2018).

As an institutional researcher conducting this qualitative study, there was a dual reflexivity to attend to. That is, there were two relationships in which I had to continually assess my positionality and my relationship to. That is, I was engaged in reflexivity in terms of my relationship to my campus environment—how my relationship in my institutional research context was shaped by and shaping the study. I was also engaged in reflexivity in terms of my relationship to the study participants. While reflexivity works in conjunction with positionality to help researchers and consumers of qualitative research how the research was conducted, it is the reflection on researcher's relation to participants that is often the focus of reflexivity. However, I was engaged in a practice of reflexivity within the broader campus environment. To put it simply, I was engaged in the practice of reflection on both my relationship with the institutional research context as well as my relationship with the research and participants.

**Discussion and implications**

Higher education researchers—both intuitional and academic researchers alike—have advocated for the increased use of qualitative methods in institutional research yet there is much unknown about what the adoption of qualitative approaches might look like in the unique context of institutional research offices. We are left wondering about the myriad ways in which qualitative research studies may be uniquely shaped by the context of institutional research both in terms of process and outcomes, or how institutional researchers can responsibly employ

qualitative methodologies to advance institutional knowledge on the experiences of Students of Color. Perhaps more concerning is that IR professionals might not engage in a reflection of their own positionality or be prepared, in the context of conducting a qualitative study, to meaningfully engage with Students of Color. Milner (2007) for example, warned of dangers that can emerge "when and if researchers do not engage in processes that can circumvent misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentations of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems" (p. 388). Such dangers may include inattention to racialized experiences, the development of policies and practices that may have deleterious consequences for Students of Color, or reinforcement of Students of Color as inherently deficient and unable to achieve success. It is vital that institutional research offices, at a minimum, discuss the fact that IR professionals—who are predominately White—would be conducting studies involving populations that are increasingly non-White.

Amidst calls for institutional researchers to use leverage qualitative methods to better understand, interpret, and describe to others the complex and ever-changing nature of contemporary higher education institutions, one rationale stands out. That is the rationale advanced by Kimball and Loya (2017), who argued that the incorporation of qualitative research does not just add value to the work of IR, but that such methodologies build the necessary competencies of IR professionals as outlined by Terenzini (1993, 2013). For example, Kimball and Loya (2017) posited that leveraging qualitative approaches allows for a deeper understanding allows IR professionals to increase their organizational intelligence, which includes "knowledge of the kinds of issues and decisions that middle- and upper-level administrators in functional units face" and "understanding how colleges and universities function" with regard to an "institution's political dimensions and the formal and informal dynamics of power" (Terenzini, 2013, p. 141).

However, Abrica and Rivas (2017) have noted that such intelligences, as outlined by Terenzini in both his original (1993) and revised paper (2003), do not explain how such competencies serve to promote racial equity in higher education. Moreover, the schema of competencies does not account for the fact that IR as a field is sorely lacking in racial diversity (Lindquist, 1999) and yet we are asking this group of professionals to engage in qualitative research with students who are increasingly diverse. Academic and institutional researchers must begin to reckon

with the power inequities and political dynamics on college campuses and the ways in which our work perpetuates observable racial inequities. One way to begin to do this, I posit, is by not only advocating for the use of qualitative methods in IR but doing so in a way that first and foremost engages IR professionals in the practice of researcher reflexivity. Engagement with research reflexivity as part of the qualitative research process can help IR researchers thinking more broadly about *critical institutional research methods* that may include qualitative approaches which interrogate rather than describe, question rather than report, and story rather than quantify observed racial disparities in transfer, degree and certificate completion in community colleges.

## Conclusion

Part of engaging in a reflexive process as part of a qualitative study conducted in an institutional research context is attending to the political tensions that may exist in engaging in qualitative research in a field that has for so long privileged the use of quantitative approaches. IR is not typically thought of as being associated with any kind of advocacy or equity, but rather with political neutrality and objectivity (Terrenzini, 1993, 2013). If indeed qualitative research can advance student equity by providing a fuller picture of the experiences of Students of Color who so often are depicted as deficient in motivation and grit, why would qualitative research offices leverage this when so much of the IR professional socialization relies on researchers maintaining political neutrality and objectivity? If quantitative competencies and the ability be perceived by campus constituencies as politically neutral are prioritized among IR professionals, perhaps qualitative research can offer an entrée into equity work while still maintaining a core research identity (Peña, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006; Saupe, 1990). Qualitative research offers IR professionals the opportunity to leverage data and findings to generate information that can be used to do more than emphasize student failure (Abrica & Rivas, 2017; Abrica, 2018).

Beyond the tensions that might exist in leveraging qualitative research to promote a more complete understanding of student success, IR professionals conducting research with Students of Color must proceed cautiously and in tune with the many insider/outsider dynamics that will emerge with participants (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle,

2009). While it is not the case that a researcher must share the identities of their participants to relate or build a trusting and reciprocal relationship, Milner's (2007) warnings about the potential harm must be heeded. It was most certainly the case that at times I was an insider: sharing the same low-income, Mexican upbringing as most of my Latino participants. Yet, participants' expressions of masculinity were at times oppressive, bringing to bear questions about a feminist approach to advancing interests of Men of Color. I continue to be engaged in this reflection.

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