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Gathering, Telling, Preparing the Stories: A Vehicle for Healing

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Abstract

This article connects the process of healing for women of color and indigenous people with the process of sharing their oral stories. It summarizes lessons learned from a project that facilitated the discussion and processing of issues of survival and success in the academy among women of color faculty in social work programs across the United States (Vakalahi, Starks, & Ortiz-Hendricks, 2007). A surprising yet perhaps expected dimension of the journey toward collaboration and publication was the shared experiences of personal and collective healing among the editors, contributing authors, and women who read these shared experiences and later expressed interest in telling their stories. The process of collecting the voices confirmed the continued experiences of sexism and racism in society while deepening the understanding of the need for support and sisterhood. Reflections on the process were as significant as the collected inquiry data. The critical need for validation and support of indigenous practices, alternative pedagogy, and systems of change at all levels of the academy and society is stressed in this discussion.

Key Words

women of color • indigenous research methods • healing • use of stories

Healing is defined and conceptualized in multiple ways by various cultures, peoples, and groups. For instance, in one context, healing refers to bio-psycho-social-spiritual health and well-being at all system levels, from individual to society.

It implies recovery, spiritual and physical balance, and emotional safety. Healing requires validation, support, nurturance, establishing boundaries when necessary, and moving through pain to a place of health and well-being. In a traditional Western context, processes for healing almost always involve prescription medicine. Alternatively, processes among people of color and indigenous cultures reflect healing that involves histories and ancestral awareness, rituals, ceremonies, and medicine from the natural environment. These healing practices occur within the family circle and community context (Horton, 1994; Stewart, 2008; Struthers, Eschiti, & Patchell, 2004). The process of healing among people of color and indigenous people is rooted in the intersected elements of relationships, alignment, and ritual. Although sparse, the literature emphasizes this significant role of relationship in the context of healing (Some, 1993; Starks & Hughey, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, essential to the process of maintaining these relationships and connectedness is alignment with self, others, history, culture, and spirituality, as well as the integral role of ritual in all healing processes (Mehl-Medrona, 1998; Smith, 1999).

Indigenous processes for healing have existed for centuries. However, rightful recognition of these processes and practices as integral to the success and survival of people of color in the academy across the United States and, particularly, indigenous women of color educators in social work programs has not occurred at a respectable level. Such healing processes are often ignored or perceived in condescending ways by those unfamiliar with or unwilling to acknowledge the powerful effect of these healing processes on the success of women of color in academia. Creating a learning context in which all university constituents are able to practice respect for human diversity and nondiscrimination as well as a teaching context that respects inclusion and diversity is mandated by the Council on Social Work Education as a part of its educational policies and accreditation standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008). However, few would make the argument or connection of such meanings to the needs of women of color and indigenous people in these institutions. In fact, an amazing insight occurred during the implementation of the project upon which this reflection is based (Vakalahi, Starks, & Ortiz-Hendricks, 2007). During the sharing of lived experiences pertaining to inequality, inequity, oppression, strengths, and survival, personal and collective healing occurred among these women of color who were editors as well as contributing authors.

As indicated by Smith (1999), stories are the foundation of qualitative research with indigenous people and people of color. The development of qualitative methods rooted in oral traditions has been explored and substantiated by researchers around the globe, including Loopie (2007), Padgett (2008), and Quantz and Thurston (2006). However, the contextual and historical influences on story-telling and story-taking are critical features of the oral traditions of people of color that are often ignored or

minimized in qualitative research. Despite the complex and often contentious history of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, Alaska Native/American Indians/First Nations, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, their oral traditions have not been explored extensively to reveal the depth of their lived experiences and the way those experiences inform their survival and success. Despite the fact that indigenous methodologies are not always respected as having integrity by dominant cultural research paradigms, groundbreaking work by Wilson (2008) and Smith (1999) supports nontraditional and ethnographic means of assessing such information.

Based on the rapidly changing demographics of the world today related to gender and race, the need for inclusion of alternative research paradigms as well as collection and disbursement of more information on the experiences of women of color and indigenous people in academia is imperative and timely (Starks & Cashwell, 2007; Turner & Myers, 2000). The research continues to be sparse as it relates to the needs of these women of color. Nothing better speaks to their experiences than an analysis of voices representative of each of their respective groups. Women of African American, Alaska Native/American Indian/First Nations, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino American cultural backgrounds best speak to their own issues, concerns, and needs. This was the underlying motivation for the book *Women of Color as Social Work Educators: Strengths and Survival* (Vakalahi, et al., 2007), which is the basis of this article's reflections.

Today, gender and race remain as barriers in academia, and social work programs are, unfortunately, not immune and contain many elements of larger oppressive academic and societal systems. Women of color and indigenous people continue to face enormous institutional and interpersonal barriers to advancement in academia. The small number of women of color faculty increases their social isolation and limits opportunities for them to share their stories and journeys. A cursory look at the statistics on Hispanic faculty members in social work programs emphasizes this point.

TABLE 1. *HISPANIC FACULTY IN SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS*
(Council on Social Work Education, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003)

Faculty Totals	**2000**			**2001**			**2002**			**2003**		
	%	*n*	*N*	*%*	*n*	*N*	*%*	*n*	*N*	*%*	*n*	*N*
MSW & BSW/ MSW	4.35	220	5,058	Data not reported for this year			4.9	246	4,943	5.0	257	5,163
Baccalaureate Only	5.6	90	1,615	Data not reported for this year			4.1	66	1,590	4.1	60	1,447

N = all degrees, *n* = Hispanic degrees

Given the low percentages of Hispanics achieving doctoral degrees, it is not surprising that they are underrepresented on the faculties of social work programs. The growth of Hispanic faculty on the master's level was less than one-half percent over three years, and there is a reduction of Hispanic faculty on the baccalaureate level during the same time period. These statistics include both male and female Hispanic and total faculty in social work programs. If gender is factored in, even lower numbers would be indicated for Hispanic woman since Hispanic men historically have surpassed Hispanic women in social work education. These statistics also suggest that it may be harder to retain Latino/a faculty in academia.

The demands to qualify for tenure and promotion further limit time to dialogue with others and interfere with collective share-care activities. Women of color are seriously underrepresented, overworked, and unequally paid (Turner & Myers, 2000; Vargas, 2002). The predominant barrier is racial and ethnic bias resulting in unwelcoming and unsupportive work environments for faculty of color (Aguirre, 2000). Thus, it is no small stretch to envision the underpinnings and various dimensions of the multi-level operations of social work programs in universities that have excluded and are historically oppressive to people of color.

Narratives are the primary form in which peoples' experiences take on meaning (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Therefore, an oral histories approach creates the framework for this discussion. This article reflects on the gathering, telling, and preparing of the stories of women of color social work educators and connects the process of healing for women of color and indigenous peoples with the process of sharing oral stories. It summarizes lessons learned from a project that facilitated the discussion and processing of issues of survival and success in the academy among women of color faculty in social work programs across the United States (Vakalahi, et al., 2007). A surprising yet perhaps expected dimension of the journey toward collaboration and publication was the shared experiences of personal and collective healing among the editors, contributing authors, and women who read these shared experiences and later expressed interest in telling their stories. The process of collecting the voices confirmed the continued experiences of sexism and racism in society while deepening the understanding of the need for support and sisterhood. Reflections on the process were as significant as the collected inquiry data. The critical need for validation and support of indigenous practices, alternative pedagogy, and systems of change at all levels of the academy and society is emphasized in this discussion.

*HER*STORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Knowledge of the interconnectedness of the healing processes and outcomes among women of color and indigenous women is critical for understanding their lived experiences and their meanings for their survival in social work education and

the academy. The concepts of collectivity, the holistic nature of healing, and the link between the past and present in the process of being healed are significant to the experiences of women of color and indigenous women. Also important is the unique cultural background that each woman brings to the collective.

INDIGENOUS HEALING PROCESSES

Linda Thomas (1998), a Womanist theologian, noted that:

> Ideally, the [W]omanist scholar is an indigenous anthropologist that is, one who reflects critically upon her own community of origin and brings a sensitivity to the political, economic and cultural systems which impact poor and working class [B]lack women being studied. At the same time she gives priority to the life story of the subject in a way that underscores the narratives of a long line of subjugated voices from the past to the present. (p. 496)

As expressed above by Thomas (1998) in relation to the healing nature of sharing one's life story, women of color from all cultural groups bring a rich legacy of strength, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills that reflect a long line of communal, familial, and personal voices. Reflected in this statement is the reality of personal healing for indigenous women/women of color as a collective endeavor and being healed as a collective outcome. Also of importance to healing are the collective voices from the past to the present. Collectivity in healing as an outcome of sharing one's stories and, indeed, one's life were the experiences of the women involved in the Women of Color Project described in the following paragraphs. Readers also felt validated and experienced the collective healing as they recognized "this is my story too."

To further emphasize this concept of healing as a collective outcome connected to the past and present, thirteen indigenous grandmothers from all over the world - the Americas (Far North, North, South, and Central), Africa, and Asia - met at a retreat center in upstate New York in the fall of 2004 and agreed to form an alliance. They declared,

> We, the international council of thirteen indigenous grandmothers, represent a global alliance of prayer, education and healing for our Mother Earth, all her inhabitants, all the children, and for the next seven generations to come. We are deeply concerned with the unprecedented destruction of our Mother Earth and the destruction of indigenous ways of life. We believe the teachings of our ancestors will light our way through an uncertain future. We look to further our vision through the realization of projects that protect our diverse cultures: lands, medicines, language and ceremonial ways of prayer and through projects that educate and nurture our children. (Schaefer, 2006)

As emphasized by the thirteen indigenous grandmothers, the healing processes of indigenous women/women of color are complex, holistic, collective, global, and intergenerational in nature, yet unique to their own cultural groups. Survival and success are grounded on practicing and passing on ancestral teachings, prayers, and education as well as one's responsibility to protect one's community, language, and medicinal and ceremonial ways. Such healing requires spiritual, social, psychological, and biological health and well-being on all system levels including the individual, family, group, community, and society.

The women of color in the project practice healing processes uniquely tied to their cultural values, beliefs, and practices. For example, among Alaska Native/American Indian/First Nations people, healing is spiritually connected. The belief is that the integration of mind-body-spirit is crucial to wellness. Rituals such as song, dance, sweat lodges, and medicine wheels are often used by indigenous healers in the community (Mehl-Madrona, 1998; Weaver, 2005). One First Nations woman in the project commented on the fact that her spiritual holy days were out of sync with Western holy days and in conflict with the academic calendar, and thus, her holy days of cleansing and spiritual renewal were completely ignored or undervalued in the academy. Healing among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders centers on a collective identity in which family and community are primary to the process. Strong spiritual and human relations are crucial in this process. The underlying principle is that the health and well-being of the family and community must occur first in order for individual health and well-being to come about (Vakalahi, Heffernan, & Johnson, 2007).

Moreover, African Americans have historically used natural coping and survival strategies to promote their own emotional well-being. Fighting the negative effects of racism, oppression, and discrimination is second nature to most African Americans in the United States and is no different for those teaching in institutions of higher education (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). African American families and communities, similar to other ethnic families and communities, are resilient as a result of understanding and practicing indigenous processes handed down through the generations. This resilience is a result of finding ways to promote mental health despite racial adversity and oppression. African American resilience is achieved primarily through racial pride, spirituality, community connectedness, and resourcefulness (Westbrooks & Starks, 2001).

Likewise, Asian Americans generally approach healing from a holistic, integrated, and spiritual perspective. This approach usually extends beyond what is considered traditional Western medicine and includes restoration of the individual (Moodley & West, 2005). Hispanics/Latinas also have historically relied on traditional healing

processes found in botanicas, or herbal shops, and the use of indigenous healers called *curanderas* or *espiritistas* (Moodley & West, 2005). Spirituality and resiliency are also dynamics involved in healing for Hispanics/Latina women.

Regardless of the methods used, it is clear that women of color/indigenous women do not abandon their cultural ways of healing despite their level of education or adherence to traditional religious practices. In fact, each woman brings her unique cultural background to their collective experience in the academy and other institutions. As expressed previously, the literature relating to the experiences and healing processes of indigenous women/women of color in academia remains sparse. Out of a sense of responsibility for future women of color academics and for expanding the existing literature, the Women of Color Project was created to facilitate the story-telling, story-taking, and analysis of voices representative of African American, Alaska Native/American Indian/First Nations, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and Latina/Hispanic American women. Described below is the project upon which this reflection and discussion is based.

THE WOMEN OF COLOR PROJECT

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) pioneered the work on designing research that is relevant to indigenous Pacific Islander cultures, which includes methods that may be applicable to other indigenous cultures. Her focus on social justice as the framework for research supports social work values that drive social work research and, in particular, projects such as this on women of color as social work educators. Smith's model embraces the design of research that includes the partnership of those studied and is cognizant of existing power structure, inequalities, inequities, and oppression, as well as respectful of indigenous ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. These are concepts that framed the work with these women of color educators and, in that process, brought about personal and collective healing.

To provide context of the representation of women of color in social work education, the following numbers are offered as a basis for the reflection and discussion that follows. According to CSWE (2005), women in social work education comprise approximately 66.2% of the total faculty, nationally. Of these women, over 71% are white (non-Hispanic), and 14.5% are of African American background, comprising the largest minority population. Of the 72% white faculty in social work education, white women comprise 66%. African Americans, both male and female, comprise 13.4% of all social work faculty; however, women comprise over 71% of African American social work faculty. Hispanic American faculty (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and other Latino) comprise approximately 4.8% of the faculty in social work education; again, women are the majority of Latino faculty (62.1%).

Asian American faculty comprise almost 2.5% of the social work educators at accredited social work programs with just over half (56.7%) of that faculty being female. Alaska Native/American Indian/First Nations educators comprise 1.1% of social work educators with 64.4% of these educators being women. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders comprise less than 1% of social work educators, and the majority are male (71.4%) (Starks & Cashwell, 2007).

The idea for this project grew out of "talking stories" and sharing of experiences in educational institutions and with people in these systems, between the three co-authors of the project. The three co-authors are social work educators: one Pacific Islander woman, one African American woman, and a woman of Hispanic American cultural background. Although living in three different parts of the nation and coming from three different cultural backgrounds, these women agreed that the similarities and intensity of their stories warranted further examination and comparison. The "talking stories" time provided opportunities for self-reflection, re-energizing, and re-assurance of the responsibilities of these three women to their respective communities of color, next generations of women of color, educational systems, institutions, and beyond.

Using an exploratory method, the project focused on the questions of "what are the experiences of women of color as social work educators" and "what and how personal, social, cultural, and systemic factors contributed to their success or failure in academia." Although 40 women were approached, personal and professional barriers prevented participation for some; therefore, only 28 women of color social work educators participated in the project. Using an interview guide, each woman of color was asked to submit a narrative of her personal story. The discussion hereafter consists of reflections on the processes and oral stories of women of color who participated in the Women of Color Project.

REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

During the two-year period of project creation, story-telling, story-taking, analysis, and publication, several significant events occurred nationally that impacted the process. For instance, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina destroyed lives and livelihood in the state of Louisiana, thus profiling the glaring disparity in national response to disasters that target people who are poor, of color, or otherwise marginalized. In the same year, Rosa Parks, considered the mother of the civil rights movement, died. In addition to the emotional weight of national events such as the ones mentioned above, life events including personal illnesses, deaths in the family, relocations, and additional professional, family, and community responsibilities impacted the participation of many women of color educators. Of the 40 women invited to participate, 28 completed the project. Many women of color expressed their regret and disappointment in not

being able to participate in this most important work because they just could not be involved in one more project and still maintain their sanity. The realities of fatigue and being overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated in the academy came to life in both the stories told and those not told.

Many of the women talked about the therapeutic nature of the process. They referenced sadness, anger, denial, depression, anxiety, and isolation as defining experiences for them as they put their thoughts on paper. Some women recalled, for the first time, traumatic incidents in their lives, while others were not even aware of how inoculated they were from discomfort and humiliation. A most important theme emerged. The women had to constantly second guess their abilities, their scholarship, and their motives, which produced in them much cognitive dissonance and confusion. In the process of completing the Women of Color Project, several major themes emerged and have been selected as the basis for the reflections and discussion that follows. This interweaving of reflections on the process and discussion of some of the themes manifests the holistic and collective perspective of these women of color.

OPENING THE WOUNDS, HEALING THE SPIRIT

The risk of telling the stories again and recapturing the memories was like opening old wounds that may or may not have been healed. Risk to faculty for exposing the issues and concerns was great, particularly for untenured women faculty. Although fears were expressed regarding retention and potential for retaliation, they were not a restraining force. The stories took on a life of their own and could not be silenced any longer. Some participants indicated that their stories had already been written and were just waiting for the opportunity to be shared, hoping to heal the wounds.

In addition to the original voices, poetry was another form of expression for women of color in this project. The following original poem was contributed by one of the voices and depicts the issues and frame of reference for many women of color:

I am a Woman of Color (Dr. Andrea Stewart, 2005)
A mirror reflection of all women, I am uniquely equipped
Beginning with my entrance into a multicultural world
Hosting diverse human beings whose mind sets have clearly shifted
Arbitrary boundaries hindering my progression through life
I will not be stationary, stagnant or stale as I press forward
You see, I am a woman of color
Red skin, black skin, brown skin, bronze skin, yellow skin,
olive skin and maybe a little blue skin
Big feet, little feet, flat feet, wide feet, and even narrow feet
Blue eyes, brown eyes, green eyes, hazel eyes, and misty gray eyes

Long hair, short hair, curly hair, kinky hair, straight hair, dreadlocks,
no locks, bald, and maybe some knots
You see, I am a woman of color
Maybe I'm tall, short, petite, medium or large, a figure 8, 9, or 10,
thick or slim, I am in
Just as I am, beauty exemplifies my inner being outward
Refocus your vision and see the real woman that I am
A nurturer, supporter, mediator, believer, motivator, mother, sister,
grandmother, surrogate, and role model
You see, I am a woman of color
I may be an educator, administrator, a counselor or therapist
It really matters little if I do not change one life
I know now that one becomes many, when each one touches one
Even when I reach out to unify where there are divisions, racism,
ageism, sexism, classism, all the isms surface
Oppression, discrimination, biases and prejudices bruise my ego
sometimes, but my back will not bend
You see, I am a woman of color
I'll stand tall and boldly voice that I will make a significant difference
and be part of the solution not the source of the problem
Destiny shaped my life and charged me to accomplish my mission as well
as goals
Where failures and defeats seem to stifle my victories, they will not be
champions
My strength embraces my sisters' strength and binds all women's strength
You see, I am a woman of color. (Stewart, 2005).

Expressing similar sentiments regarding the experiences of indigenous Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women in the U.S. environment is the poem by a Maori woman, Dr. Vernice Wineera:

For Mereana a Metaphor
"Come with me," you said,
"I want to show you something."
And from a large kete you pulled another,
and another, and more,
with colors like paua, pounamu,
Papatuanuku.
Taonga beautiful of form.

Colors of puha, Maori potatoes,
pipi from grey-black sand.
Kete, expectant vessels waiting to be filled.
Drawing them forth out of each other,
your fingers caressing each ridge and weave,
you voice a quiet, perplexed thought,
"The kiekie, it feels different here."
It's true. The kiekie, pulled and prepared
in a season of sun,
is rigid, less supple.
Dry, away from homeland air,
life-giving, warm, earth-moist air.
Transported now to winter New York,
your mokopuna grow hard,
toughen in this alien place.
But listen to me, Mere.
Still they glisten,
the inner glow you wove with grace,
with giving hands,
is a felt thing,
and more—
their mana wills me home
to hill and creek and shore.

GLOSSARY

Papatuanuku	Mother Earth
Taonga	treasure
Kete	baskets
Paua	abalone—its iridescent shell is used to decorate traditional wood carvings; also worn as jewelry
Pounamu	greenstone (jade)
Pipi	clams
Puha	milk-thistle, an edible weed that is a favorite green in the Maori diet
Kiekie	strong vine used in weaving baskets
Mokopuna	grandchildren, younger generation
Mana	Integrity

(Wineera, 2002)

With these expressions of deep emotions and strong perspectives regarding their experiences as social work educators, the question then turned to how these women of color accomplished the task of survival and success in the academy. The women identified several survival strategies, which included individual and collective mentorship, the need for self-care and personal/familial support systems, creating institutional supports, and rediscovering their own spirituality and alternative healing strategies. All of these strategies were manifested in indigenous and collective roles, rules, and rituals, which the women identified. The idea of collective identity and shared responsibility as a basis for healing oneself, the sisterhood, and one's community was expressed by the women.

These women shared the common occurrence of not being recognized for service to their communities through research and the spiritual healing of such service. The power of woman (*mana wahine*) and reverence for woman as "the house of humanity" was voiced by one of the indigenous women in the project (Hippolite Wright, 2007). However, it was reflected in all of the voices of the women who participated, including Barbara Candales, M. Jenise Comer, Anita Curry-Jackson, Darlene Grant, Ada E. Deer, Rowena Fong, Aracelis Francis, Lorraine Gutierrez, Ruby Gourdine, Esther Langston, Christine Lowery, Paula Morelli, Debora Ortega, Barbara White, Dianne Rush Woods, Corina Segovia-Tadehara, Andrea Stewart, Rita Takahashi, Debbie Hippolite Wright, Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, and Hilary Weaver. The three authors, Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi, Carmen Ortiz Hendricks, and Saundra Hardin Starks, also included their personal stories.

The process of telling their own stories through oral histories was a form of healing. The women felt as if they had gone through a re-traumatization but had emerged this time with a sense of being supported, sustained, and validated throughout the process. For some, it was the dance of anger all over again. For all, it was about survival, success, and making contributions to their respective communities as well as to the students for whom they facilitated socialization into the profession. Most importantly, the healing process lead to a sense of commitment to helping those women who come after them, the next generation of women of color as social work educators.

Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) write, "endurance, resilience, self-reliance, and tenacity have been characteristics of many women of color in the U.S." (p. 350). These characteristics reflect the sustaining factors that assisted these women of color in coping and surviving and describe their healing processes as they journey through the academy. The collective hope is that social work programs continue to make progress in moving toward acceptance and celebration of more indigenous models of support and healing. In addition, there is a need for social work education and the academy to recognize the importance of publications about indigenous models.

These publications need to be accepted as legitimate scholarship that can make a valuable contribution to the knowledge base of the social work profession. This scholarship could then be counted toward promotion and tenure.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL WORK RESPONSIVENESS

Innovation, inclusion, and global connection are buzz words in academic institutions and social work programs today. In those incidences and contexts where innovation, inclusion, and global connection truly exist, women of color/indigenous women and all people of color seem to thrive and succeed. Obviously, these occurrences are too few and far between in both the larger educational system and in social work programs. Examples of positive connections were realized in the relationships with those who stood by the authors' sides in support of the project. Individuals and colleagues, such as Suzie Cashwell, Diana M. DiNitto, Darlene Grant, Kathleen Kirby, and Clifford Mayes, helped to bridge such institutional and social work ideals and practices. We must all accept this responsibility to foster positive connections in order to level the playing field and build a brighter future for generations to come. Ideally, the institutional and social work program contexts in the academy would be one of inclusion and support with respect for human diversity and practice of cultural competency, equality, and social justice. As expressed by Brach and Frazer (2000), continuous commitment and institutionalization of policies and practices that support and are responsive to the needs of diverse populations builds the framework for culturally competent institutions and programs. Such institutions and programs recognize and embrace the strengths in diverse populations, establish supportive policies and programs that move beyond giving "lip service," and engage in genuine affirmative action.

Dreachlin (1996) discusses a five-stage model for developing culturally competent organizations and programs, which may provide a starting point for this work. Weech-Maldonado, Dreachlin, Dansky, DeSouza, and Gatto (2002) summarize Dreachlin's model as follows:

1. Discovery: Emerging awareness of racial and ethnic diversity as a significant strategic issue,
2. Assessment: Systematic evaluation of organizational climax and culture vis-à-vis racial and ethnic diversity,
3. Exploration: Systematic training initiatives to improve [organizations] ability to effectively manage diversity,
4. Transformation: Fundamental change in organization practices result in a culture and climate in which racial and ethnic diversity is valued,

5. Revitalization: Renewal and expansion of racial and ethic diversity initiatives to reward change agents and to include additional identity groups among the diversity initiatives. (p. 113)

The stories of the women of color who participated in this project support the application of this model in personal, programmatic, and institutional ways: 1) They stressed the importance of addressing issues of racial and ethnic diversity as integral to the institution's and social work program's strategic plan; and 2) They recommended continuous engagement in diversity assessment and awareness activities on all levels of the institution (i.e., program, students, faculty, staff, and administration) that are key for improvement and future directions.

Cultural competency is truly the mandate by CSWE's Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2008). Likewise, fundamental transformation and revitalization of the institution's and social work program's practices related to race and ethnic diversity result in an institution and social work program that are truly responsive to their constituents inside and outside of the institution. Rewarding innovative and transformational initiatives in the institution and social work program keeps the movement alive. For the participating women of color, creating an institution and social work program that is responsive to their needs and embraces the strengths and richness they bring to the academy is an ideal that can be realized with collective efforts and personal commitment. The need for self-definition and personal identity is also emphasized in the work of Berry and Mizelle (2006). These are the factors that will maintain the survival and success of current women of color as well as contribute to future women of color in academia and in social work programs.

CONCLUSION

This article provided an overview of the issues that evolved from the Women of Color Project. This overview included the process of collecting stories, sharing the process, and the perspective of voices representative of the various groups of women of color as social work educators. Writing, collecting, and reading the stories resulted in healing properties for women of color and indigenous peoples. Discussion of further reflections on these voices and suggestions for multi-systemic changes at all levels were also provided. On one level, these women of color survived and are successful because they have mastered the understanding required for success in the academy and the issues of self-care, mentoring, support, sharing, and healing. The women profoundly identified culture, language, spirituality, and family as major sustaining forces, while citing marginalism, racism, sexism, and duality as their major challenges. Their voices also reiterated the significance of a collective and inclusive effort among all people in building programs and institutions that practice equality and equity.

Another outcome is the need for the academy and especially social work programs to engage with the indigenous and ethnic communities represented by women of color. Their traditions and alternative paradigms need to be supported by social work programs and institutions. To reach these ideals, the intersectionality of such multifaceted lives and the ceremonial nature of work and research with these women must be recognized and embraced in both the institution and, more importantly, in social work educational programs. The importance of intersectionality will continue to be referenced in social work studies that profile women, ethnic communities and marginalized groups in general (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009).

Paulo Freire (2004) would agree that indigenous healing is simply another legitimate voice to be heard. It may contradict the scientific method of inquiry because indigenous healing relies on other-worldly practices. Such methods may defy psychoanalysis and traditional practices since indigenous healing employs its own paradigm shifts and balances. But these practices are very legitimate to women of color who actively utilize and are helped by such profound healing. As such, alternative indigenous practices should be embraced and accepted as a survival mechanism as well as a successful response to a world that has yet to treat all human beings as free and equal with dignity and rights (Tomlin & Berlin, 1998).

In her closing keynote lecture given at the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education on December 15, 2005 at the University of Edinburgh, Phipps states the following:

> This work I am suggesting here, is a work to unconceal our being, and this will not be an easy task. And yet, in the interstices of research in higher education, in the human gatherings, it is work which goes on in the relationships between people, in the moment between remembrances and insight, in the confessions and in the laughter, in the sharing of stories of grief and hope. (Phipps, 2007)

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