



Troubling Dominant Understandings of Emotion in Educational Settings: A Critical Reflection on Research and Curriculum

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Abstract

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, educational research on emotions and social emotional learning has increased substantially. With this influx is a need for more critical work that explores how such research can both challenge and reproduce social injustices. In this conceptual paper, we critically reflect on the first author's thesis study to explore how Western-dominant frameworks of emotion can shroud marginalized ways of thinking, feeling, knowing, and being. Our paper is guided by the question, how can we explore social-emotional aspects of education in ways that dismantle the privileging of white, neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial worldviews? We consider how such worldviews (which often partner with post-positivist paradigms) can 1) position emotions as instrumental toward the end goal of "academic achievement," 2) neglect how race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and context shape people's understandings and experiences of emotion, and 3) privilege individualistic models of emotion over relational, embodied, and collectivist understandings. The paper ends with an overview of three frameworks (one arts-based, one discourse-based, and one rooted in Indigenous pedagogies) that could be potential starting points toward transformative, decolonial explorations of emotion.

Keywords: *Emotion, social emotional learning, critical reflection, decolonial education, culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogies*

In my second year of graduate school, I sat in a blue plastic chair in the fifth-grade wing of an elementary school, conducting my Master's thesis study. Recess had just ended and a torrent of students flooded the hallway, cheeks flushed from ball-throwing and voices still cranked to the outside setting. Beside me, my participant worked on a survey designed to measure her emotions: pride, excitement, frustration, and nine others, each listed beside a 1-10 scale. I had instructed her to accurately report on how strongly she felt each emotion in the moment, not yet disclosing that I had delivered a predictor variable—praise—a few minutes earlier. I was exploring whether two types of academic praise ("process praise" focused on effort and strategy use, versus "person praise" focused on inherent ability) predicted fifth-graders' emotions in the midst of a challenging puzzle. As a graduate student conducting a quasi-experimental study, I believed that "rigorous" research should attempt to control for all the "noise" in the world except for my variables of interest.

As my participant hunched over her paper, the rest of her classmates barreling along behind us, I had to suppress a laugh at the irony of our situation. Here we were, both working to drown out the noise and commotion of a world that never holds still. My fascination with human

emotion, in all of its social, embodied dynamism, was reduced to a list of twelve words next to a scale of ten numbers. I asked myself, what assumptions about research, knowledge, and reality am I making, shaped by my experiences as a white, middle-class, young-adult woman who has spent more than eighteen years in Western institutions of education? How can I recognize my simultaneous reproduction of and resistance to dominant paradigms of social science? How can I learn from my own contradictions to support understandings of emotion that challenge the current hegemony of educational research?

Introduction

Students in educational research fields, including the first author of this paper, are often taught the pillars of post-positivist science without deeply interrogating the power relations that are embedded in research. Although the paradigm wars of the 1980s forged new paths for critical scholars (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), post-positivism continues to act as a dominant paradigm in many research disciplines, framing research as a tool for discovery and representation—more than creation and transformation—of our worlds. In a society responding to neoliberal emphases on management, marketization, and measurement, post-positivism partners with a demand for “accuracy” and “accountability” to constrain what is valued in empirical pursuits (Spooner, 2018; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). In such a framework, inquirers are limited in how they can create knowledge about emotion in narrative, aesthetic, and embodied forms. To open more space for these forms of knowledge, post-positivism must be decentered as a privileged philosophy of research.

The first author’s thesis, a quasi-experimental study that manipulated two types of researcher-to-student praise and then measured students’ emotions, built on criteria of “good” post-positivist inquiry without seriously considering the constraints and alternatives to such an approach. In this conceptual paper, we (the first author and her committee chair) make time and space for such considerations, focusing less on the thesis itself and more on the discourses that shaped it. The purpose of this article is *not* to say that post-positivist studies are unethical, poorly designed, or false in their “findings.” Our critique is not on post-positivism itself, *per se*, but on how the knowledge produced by such research can reproduce white, individualistic, patriarchal, and colonial discourses.

We do not claim that post-positivism is inherently inferior to other frameworks, that all quantitative research is post-positivist, or that all qualitative research is critical and/or interpretivist. Rather, we open with the first author’s snapshot story of her thesis as a point of rupture, a place where our researcher-identities became more aware of their own binds and began transforming those binds into a critical reflection of emotion-based research in the social sciences. Following Ahmed (2017), we draw from our particulars to question broader themes. Guiding this paper is the question, *How can we create research and curricula on social-emotional aspects of education that recognize and decenter white, neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial ways of knowing?* We pose this question specifically to scholars whose inquiry involves the construct of emotion and/or social-emotional learning, but also to any educational researchers who find themselves positioned in fields that are still dominated by objectivist epistemologies and individualistic ontologies.

Theories and frameworks of emotion are always inextricable from the wider socio-cultural-economic climates in which we live (Apple, 2004; Ahmed, 2004; Hoffman, 2009). Our focus in this paper is less on *what* emotions are or *why* they occur, and more on *how* understandings of emotion are situated in various contexts and implicated in *whose* lives. Toward what ends do we study emotion? How do outcomes vary across contexts? In the following sections, we provide a

brief history of research on emotion in the United States and discuss how educational studies can lead to social reproduction *and* transformation. We then highlight three prevalent issues in the field: 1) emotions as instrumental toward “academic achievement” (a term shaped by neoliberal values of competition, individual merit, and rational choice), 2) emotions as “neutral” (the need to move beyond white, Western frameworks), and 3) emotions as possessions (the need for relational frameworks). We end with a discussion of three frameworks that could be beneficial in exploring emotions among diverse populations in educational contexts.

A Brief Historical Context of Emotions in the Social Sciences

In their review of emotion-based research, Paoloni and Verónica (2014) suggest that “it is surprising that research on emotions in school settings has been so slow to emerge” (p. 570). When considering the socio-historical context of emotions in colonial research, *is* this really surprising? The history of such research in the United States is, according to historians Stearns and Lewis (1998), both old and new. “Research” in the U.S. has long drawn on the Enlightenment notion of “rational” observations toward the discovery of universal “Truths,” which often involves bracketing emotion and adopting a positivist view of the world. The last two decades of the twentieth century, with the paradigm wars that contested positivist constraints on scientific inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), contributed to a new wave of explicitly emotion-based research in education. However, emotion was a topic of inquiry for early psychologists as far back as the late 1800s.

At the end of the nineteenth century, emotion was taken up by the emerging field of psychology as a biological construct to measure, manipulate, and control (Stearns & Lewis, 1998). The James-Lange theory (James, 1884), one of the earliest psychological frameworks of emotion, suggested that emotion was the result of bodily changes from environmental stimuli. This model was later critiqued for its causal assumption that humans experience emotions and physiological reactions linearly rather than simultaneously (Cannon, 1987). A key theme during the early 1900s was a push toward emotional control and the belief that “de-emotionalized” bodies could promote standardization and replication (Stearns & Lewis, 1998). Entering the mid-1900s, behaviorist paradigms provided further momentum for a pendulum swing away from the introspective and psychoanalytic traditions that threatened psychology’s credibility as a legitimate positivist science. New cognitive models of emotion emerged in the 1980s (e.g., Lazarus, 1988) in response to the limits of behaviorism (i.e., its disregard of humans’ attitudes and appraisals), but the emphasis on emotional management/regulation remained—particularly in educational contexts (Hoffman, 2009). In sum, much of the twentieth-century research in the social sciences either neglected emotion entirely or understood it across a split of “cognitive” versus “biological” perspectives (Paoloni & Verónica, 2014).

The turn of the twenty-first century brought several “gains” including integrative frameworks that recognize emotion as physiological, cognitive, *and* cultural (e.g., Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Paoloni & Verónica, 2014); popular sentiments that learning is about more than cognitive intelligence quotients (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990); and a rise of social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula. SEL curricula typically aim to promote empathy, care, and relational skills among students (Cherniss et al., 2006; Elias et al., 1997). However, all of these signs of “progress” should be critically examined. Despite the shift away from positivism and toward more interpretivist and critical frameworks in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), Western understandings of emotion remain bound to the perceived inferiority of women, people of color, and the working/lower class (Stearns & Lewis, 1998). Emotions have long been positioned on the

feminine, bodily, irrational, subjective side of an implicit binary with masculine, cognitive, rational, and objective on the side of scientific “progress” (Ahmed, 2004; Lesko, 2012). Research continues to privilege white, middle-class knowledge (Hoffman, 2009), and even many cross-cultural studies on emotion use white samples as benchmarks and baselines. Too often, marginalized populations are treated as homogeneous, exotic, and/or deficient within educational research (Rowe & Royster, 2017). While scientific “advances” recognize the importance of research on emotion and SEL, these advances continually fail to ask, value *for what*, *for whom*, and *in which contexts*? Where might the historical emphasis on emotion “management” and the search for meta-theories of reality linger?

Educational Research as a Site of Social Reproduction *and* Transformation

U.S. education is currently dominated by neoliberal discourses that constitute education as the acquisition of measurable competencies and self-control (Apple, 2004; Hoffman, 2009; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). This “object-list model” of learning (Emery, 2016) lends itself to standardization and competition, which work to maintain social hierarchies on the basis of sex, race, class, and other facets of identity (Apple, 2004). Social reproduction theorists (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) argue that schools reproduce inequalities by teaching curricula and delivering assessments that privilege the “achievement” of groups who already hold the most social capital (Bourdieu, 1973). This privileged capital includes elements of personality, self-presentation, and identity, all of which are implicated in SEL curricula.

Public schools can be seen as agencies of acculturation in which dominant ideologies about emotion are both reproduced and resisted by students. Those whose cultural identities clash with Western curricula may still take up some of these dominant beliefs, not through overt control as much as subtler hegemonic forces. Carnoy and Levin (1985) complicate social reproduction theory by illuminating the contradictions within capitalistic education: Even while schools reproduce social relations of power, the education system is also a site of conflict and contestation. SEL curricula are not only instruments of the elite but are also produced by conflicting power relations among social groups. As dominant discourses “hail” or push people toward particular subjectivities (senses of self), people “speak back” with multiple responses (Ngo, 2010). Thus, we recognize education as a space in which inequities are reproduced via social practices and internalized identities *and* where transformation can occur for greater social justice.

Transformation requires more than small changes within the same hegemonic frameworks. Although stakeholders should be applauded for making “new moves” (e.g., developing SEL curriculum and disrupting dualistic frameworks of emotion), many remain bound to the dominant gameboard of neoliberal discourses. This gameboard set the boundaries of the author’s thesis as a quest to “fill in the gaps” or build on the “progressive” knowledge produced by past literature. The authors responded to the proclaimed need for further research on praise and emotion by hypothesizing that specific types of praise would relate to specific emotions. This meant producing a measurable definition of emotion, clear categories of praise, and an interest in generalizability over context. We seek to recognize what may go unquestioned and unexamined when a study is confined within such boundaries. Our goal is not to call for the replacement of one hegemonic paradigm (e.g., post-positivist educational research informed by neoliberal ideologies) with another, but to illuminate the realities that are marginalized behind dominant assumptions about what it means to think, feel, learn, and know. In this mission, we address several concerns in the research on emotion.

Three Central Concerns in Emotion-Based Research and Curriculum

Emotions as Instrumental Toward Academic Achievement

Our first concern responds to the question of *whose interests and what ends are being served by research on emotion?* This question came to light in the first author's thesis study as she simultaneously resisted and reified the use of emotions for academic ends. As mentioned, the purpose of this study was to examine whether different "types" of praise predicted fifth-grade students' emotions. Despite the author's intentions to recognize emotions as important in and of themselves—positioning them as dependent variables, rather than mediators or moderators—she drew on frameworks, methods, and assumptions that centered academic success as the core "so what" of the work. While we do not intend to demonize research that examines how emotions relate to academic outcomes, we are critical of the power relations that constitute categorical and quantifiable measures as the *best or most rigorous* means of exploring emotion. By treating emotions as measurable, isolatable, universally labeled, and linked with academic outcomes, this thesis reproduced what a growing body of work is producing: a story that, with good intentions, tells stakeholders how they can hone students' emotions into "adaptive" profiles for an outcome with higher value—academic achievement.

How do dominant discourses position and preserve "achievement" as a desired educational outcome? The U.S. education system is rooted in colonial practices that protect and legitimize white, male, middle-class interests under the realm of capitalism (Lesko, 2012). Even in the twenty-first century, these imperialistic regimes continue to oppress people via culturally-biased testing, inequitable distribution of resources, and an emphasis on measurable skill-sets (Apple, 2004). Contrary to the promise of education as the ladder of upward mobility, only certain bodies can come out on top. The educational emphasis on sortable "skills" appears in SEL, which was introduced in 1994 as "the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making within the context of a safe, supportive environment" (Cherniss et al., 2006, p. 243). While SEL programs may aim to enrich students' lives and relationships, many standards include terminology such as *regulate, monitor, control, reduce, and manage* emotion. With this, emotion is subverted beneath the *cognitive processing* of emotion that can be more objectively measured. Hoffman (2009) states:

The emphasis on emotional skills reveals that emotion per se is not the focus; rather, it is the cognitive processing of emotion that is important—the "reasoning about" emotion and the behaviors one associates with such reasoning. SEL is fundamentally about psychometric and pedagogical possibility: Skills can be taught and the learner's competence in their performance can be measured...individual performances can be measured, deficiencies can be assessed and remediated, and in the end all children can be taught the appropriate skills and behaviors (p. 538).

The concern is not that measurable performance and emotion regulation are *bad*, but that standards tend to frame emotion as a means to behavioral control and academic "productivity" rather than an integral aspect of life to be fully experienced, explored, and valued in itself. Hoffman (2009) goes on to say,

Unless a parallel emphasis is placed on the qualities of relationships that arguably should contextualize skills and behaviors, the discourse risks promoting a shallow, decontextualized, and narrowly instrumentalist approach to emotion in classrooms that promotes measurability and efficiency at the expense of (nonquantifiable) qualities of relatedness (p. 539).

A continual emphasis on emotional self-management can lend itself to rigid definitions of “success,” “appropriate skills,” and “career readiness” that privilege upward growth of the nation more than inward/outward growth of the people in it. Self-management can also work as a tool to create subjects who will, through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, reproduce the standards of “achievement” that serve the interests of dominant groups (Burke, 2017; Zembylas, 2014). “Whole child” education that grants attention to social and emotional wellbeing is greatly needed to promote balance and break binaries. However, holistic frameworks can also become assimilated into classification devices that perpetuate the very injustices they seek to heal. When SEL is taken up with an emphasis on self-regulation, rationality, and measurable achievement (and covertly, whiteness, masculinity, and capitalistic values), it can become a new way to test and sort students among the haves and have-nots (Apple, 2004) and can promote students’ own *self*-sorting and internalizations of worth (Hatt, 2012).

Without denying the benefits of SEL in certain contexts, curricula may sometimes *intend* to nurture emotion yet incidentally re-marginalize emotion under the dominant discourse of categorization and cognitive control. Academic achievement and emotion regulation must be critically examined as conduits of power that reinforce social stratifications. When emotions are construed as capital to be managed toward dominant definitions of achievement, what does this mean for groups of people who do not benefit from those ends? Who is involved in producing the dominant knowledge on emotion, and whose knowledge is pushed to the fringes?

Emotions as “Neutral”: The Need to Move beyond White, Western Assumptions

Because race/ethnicity, class, gender, and other aspects of identity are always embedded within research paradigms, researchers must critically consider how their work implicates students in direct and indirect ways. In this section, we continue to draw from the first author’s thesis study to explore how well-intending research can revert to assumptions that attach individualistic, Eurocentric labels and expectations to students’ emotions. Due to the small sample size of the thesis, the authors excluded race/ethnicity from analysis, citing this as a factor that should be explored in future research. Beneath this common disclaimer is the assumption that race/ethnicity *is* a “variable” that can be “left out” of a study. We argue here that it is not and cannot—and nor can any other facet of identity. By this, we do not mean that quantitative researchers should extend demographic surveys to include measures and categories for infinite aspects of identity. Our point is that “variables” do not just appear when they are presented in measures: identity is always embedded in research designs, frameworks, and citations. Race and ethnicity shape and are shaped by ontological and epistemological beliefs, and whiteness often partners with an individualism that shrouds the collectivist beliefs held by many people of color. Recognizing the non-categorical, intersectional identities at play in any study can help to protect against the marginalization and instrumentalization of certain groups of people and certain ways of knowing.

Despite general consensus that educational research must devote greater attention to marginalized communities, such statements appear more often in the discussion sections of manuscripts than in the guiding frameworks. In the U.S., Black and Brown people are marginalized not

only as participants but also as voices missing from theories and reference lists (Ahmed, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Even when variables are carefully measured and manipulated (and even if no statistical differences are detected between groups), research projects are not ideologically-neutral (Apple, 2004) and ideologies are not identity-neutral. When we say that research is always “cultural,” we mean that studies are always bound to “a multilayered, interacting, dynamic system of ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals” (Hamedani & Markus, 2019). The problem is not that particular identities and versions of reality are always woven into the tacit assumptions of research—the problem is that many researchers are unwilling to recognize it (Ngo, 2010).

Problems also arise when demographic information is collected and analyzed in sweeping categories that do not allow for disaggregation and intersectionality. Native American students are particularly affected by this, as data collection procedures often homogenize the diversity of tribes, socio-economic status, regions, and lifestyles that fall under the category “Native American” (Brady et al., 2020). Such homogenization can perpetuate deficit beliefs about students and obscure their assets and complexities. Whether researchers are designing qualitative studies that recognize identity in non-categorical ways or quantitative studies that explore identity with categorical measures, scholars must reflexively consider what assumptions, stories, and biases they are inevitably bringing into their work.

Going Beyond Constructionist and Socio-cultural Models

As we critique the hegemony of post-positivist studies of emotion in educational settings, we must also acknowledge sociocultural models of emotion. Since the increase in emotion research at the end of the twentieth century, numerous scholars (e.g., Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Butler, 2015; Cameron et al., 2015; Kitayama & Markus, 1994) have challenged the essentialism that still predominates in many disciplines (e.g., that emotions are discrete and predictable; that reality is stable and discoverable). For instance, constructionist frameworks of emotion (Cameron et al., 2015) advocate for non-rigid labels and high within-category variability: Although there are physiological “basic ingredients” for an emotion such as anger, contextual and culturally-specific knowledge complete the recipe. In this sense, emotions are tied to cultural values and may be expressed and experienced differently for different people (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). Kitayama and Markus’s (1994) anthology is based on the premise that emotions can only be understood by exploring culture. Guidelines for SEL curriculum continually acknowledge the need to be “culturally appropriate,” fair, and sensitive to each individual learner (Elias et al., 1997; Garner et al., 2014).

Even amidst these commendable bodies of research, several challenges remain. These include a) the general lack of critical theories of emotion that explore power relations and social injustices (Ahmed, 2004; Milley, 2009), b) the continual struggles to implement critical frameworks into educational curricula, and c) the need to move beyond statements of multicultural *sensitivity* or *awareness* toward deeper actions of cultural *responsiveness*, *sustainability*, and *revitalization* (McCarty & Lee, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). It is not enough to recognize that multiple emotional realities exist. We must understand that these realities are historically- and culturally-bound (Brave Heart, 1998; Hamedani & Markus, 2019) and that some realities are privileged at the expense of others. We must hold a space for individual and group differences *and* similarities, working to neither exoticize nor assimilate those deemed “other.” Because dominant worldviews often become equated with what is considered “normal” or “common sense,” the knowledge being produced about emotion is always a particular version of knowledge. Not only must we recognize

that common sense is a social product, we must also consider how common-sense practices can marginalize, pathologize, exploit, and punish particular bodies.

The Hegemony Behind “Positive” and “Negative” Emotion

Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony helps to explain how dominant ideologies shape social practices and identities through consent, not force. Defined as “the social and cultural process by which certain parties gain and maintain power and control” (Tucker & Govender, 2017), hegemony involves 1) creating categories and structures that define our realities, and 2) producing “experts” that legitimize particular structures as objective fact (Apple, 2004). Hegemony is never absolute, but hegemonic forces do constrain realities and maintain inequities. For example, the notions of individuality and management in the U.S. are used to label particular emotions as positive, adaptive, or appropriate. This differentiation between “good” and “bad” emotions has become especially relevant in the past few decades, as educational, psychological, and developmental researchers broaden their focus on preventing negative outcomes and reducing risks to include promoting positive outcomes and enhancing strengths (Catalano, 2004; Elias et al., 1997; Fambrough & Kaye Hart, 2008; Paoloni & Verónica, 2014).

The first author followed this approach in her thesis study, measuring six “negative” emotions (e.g., shame, boredom, anxiety) and six “positive” emotions (e.g., pride, relief, enjoyment) to move beyond the goal of simply decreasing “harmful” emotionality. In doing so, the study highlights the question of *whose* labels are assigned to particular emotions. Grouping emotions across binaries is ubiquitous but never neutral. Even with the acknowledgement that not all negative emotions are “maladaptive” and not all positive emotions are “adaptive” (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007), how do meaning attributions depend on various aspects of culture and context?

Ahmed (2004) points out that “even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling” (p. 10). For instance, Western norms tend to value and foster students’ pride for individual accomplishments, whereas many East Asian norms attribute pride to achievements that benefit others (Eid & Diener, 2001). While pride is often viewed as desirable for people with strong individualistic beliefs (aligning with norms for self-promotion), *guilt* may be desirable for those with stronger collectivist beliefs because guilt provides information that can promote social cohesion (Eid & Diener, 2001). Even if guilt is still considered to be “negative” in the sense of unpleasant, classifying guilt as a “negative” emotion with “maladaptive” implications can frame guilt as inappropriate and undesirable, which may not align with some participants’ values and beliefs. For some, guilt may motivate toward responsibility and reconciliation. This misalignment may perpetuate deficit views toward certain groups of people and may drive efforts to assimilate students’ emotional experiences into more Eurocentric patterns of understanding. Researchers should also not assume that students will hold a particular belief simply because of their group membership or identity.

Despite substantial evidence of inter- and intra-group differences in how people understand emotions (Crivelli et al., 2016; Kitamura & Markus, 1994; Mortillaro, 2013), researchers often anticipate and seek out cultural differences while ignoring similarities. Other times, scholars may focus more on missions of cross-cultural validation for Western-derived measures and findings than on delving into heterogeneous complexities and counter-stories. This is not to say, for instance, that pride is *not* adaptive for some people, but to acknowledge the continual deferral of “others” to the position of the footnote, suggestion for future research, or exception to a statistical finding. The first author’s common-sense decision to list pride as a “positive” emotion in her study

is not “wrong,” but it is embedded with cultural assumptions in need of critical reflexivity (not just sociocultural acknowledgements).

The Hegemony Behind Rules of Emotional Expression

Not only do many SEL guidelines (e.g., Elias et al., 1997) rely on Eurocentric classifications of emotion, but they also imply that there are particular, “appropriate” ways to experience and express one’s emotions. *Appropriate*, defined as “especially suitable or compatible” (Merriam-Webster, 2019), is always bound to culture and context (suitable *for whom*; compatible *with what?*). Burke (2017) suggests that taking on and performing “appropriate” emotional profiles is usually easier—and often subconscious—for those with greater privilege in a given society. As we discussed earlier, the concepts of academic “achievement” and “success” are produced by a neoliberal-informed system that sorts people within hierarchies. Similarly, emotional displays are often held against the same hyper-rational, Eurocentric benchmarks.

For example, individualistic ideologies tend to view explicit, verbal expressions as good and necessary. Failing to “communicate” one’s emotions brings a concern of suppression and negative outcomes (Hoffman, 2009). SEL curricula often emphasize verbal expression of emotions as an important skill, disregarding that these are Western, middle-class values (Hoffman, 2009). For some cultural groups, non-verbalized emotions are not at all considered to be building toward eminent explosion (Saarni, 1997), and requiring all students to talk about their emotions in large-group contexts may be culturally insensitive and harmful. Students’ SEL “incompetencies” are often cast as deficits, rather than as culturally unrecognized, undervalued, and/or shaped by structural inequities. While there have been applaudable efforts to make SEL programming “culturally relevant” (Denham & Weissberg, 2004), very few programs devote follow-up studies to examine how they are actually being implemented and experienced by diverse groups of students (Garner et al., 2014). Mere adaptations to dominant frameworks cannot stand in for projects that recognize and develop curricula rooted in marginalized voices, needs, and values.

As a second example, hyper-rational understandings of emotion can reproduce hegemonic expectations about gender. Even if people of all genders use the same words to describe their emotions, girls are still expected to be cheerful, smile, and avoid anger—with the double-bind of being assertive but not volatile and sensitive but not “needy” (Burke, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). Assumptions of excessive emotion tend to be attached to women, particularly queer-identifying women and women of color (Ahmed, 2004; Rowe & Royster, 2017), and female anger is often framed as a choice and/or pathological (Ahmed, 2017; Ringrose, 2006). Boys are often told implicitly that the *only* acceptable negative emotion to express is anger (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016; Way, 2013), yet boys of color and lower-class boys receive far worse punishments for displays of anger than do middle-class white boys (hooks, 2004). Even as many SEL curricula encourage boys to express their emotions, emotional control continues to be rewarded (Hoffman, 2009). When studies only examine gender through statistical differences in self-reported emotional intensity, what nuance is lost? Emotion, gender, race, and class are intersectional, and dominant frameworks often gloss over that intersectionality with a focus on discrete group differences. Dominant frameworks also tend to view identity and emotion as contained within individuals, rather than recognizing the relationality of affective experiences.

Emotions as Possessions: The Need for Relational Approaches

The objective of the first author's thesis study was to examine whether two types of praise were related to students' academic emotions. Within this objective, the *object* of the study was also clear: students' emotions, or emotions belonging to students. The assumption that people are subjects and emotions are objects is firmly embedded in dominant ways of thinking, speaking, writing, and behaving in Western societies. This assumption underpins research and curricula that frame emotions as coherent, measurable, and contained within the person believed to possess them. To be taken up by mainstream research in the social sciences, emotions are often forced to fit in with what Burke (2017) calls a dominant discourse of evidence—put simply, “if it can't be measured, it does not count” (p. 437). This dominant discourse also shapes *how* emotions are measured. As we have discussed, many Western researchers classify emotion as pleasant/unpleasant or positive/negative, which favors a physiological and individual interpretation of emotion above social and moral interpretations. In this section, we consider what is lost when researchers feel that their work on emotion can only be “sound,” “rigorous,” or “credible” when it entails individual-focused measurement. How can researchers disrupt the subject/object binary of emotion and explore how emotions are shaped and shared through relational spaces?

Some boundary-blurring work already exists. Kitayama and Markus's (1994) sociocultural model of emotion works toward a “dissolution... of the hard and fast boundaries between the inner and outer, the ideational and material, the self and society” (p. 341). In her work on interpersonal affect dynamics, Butler (2015) asserts that emotions are always social, never fully private, and are transmitted between bodies (also see Klimes-Dougan et al., 2014). Several critical feminist scholars push this dissolution even further—Ahmed (2004) suggests that emotions *create*, rather than traverse, the lines between self and society, and Davies (2014) conceptualizes emotions as intensities of energy that are always moving among bodies. Ahmed and Davies provide us with an alternative to studying emotions based on their source, recipient, or owner. Instead of measuring what emotion *is*, we can explore what it *does* by tracing the material and relational effects of its spillage.

The problem, then, is not that critical and contextual models of emotion do not *exist* but that they continue to be prodded toward the margins of scientific knowledge and remain absent from many SEL programs and curriculum. In educational research, students' emotions are usually the unit of analysis, paired with the assumption that while their feelings may very well be *influenced* by the environment, their emotions still belong to them. This individualistic focus can lead to two seemingly paradoxical issues: positioning students as passive recipients and positioning students as free (thus blame-worthy) agents. In the first issue, by focusing on clean, controlled pathways to and from emotion, researchers may position students as receptacles for emotions that can be manipulated, measured, and known. While such research is not inherently harmful, it must be ethically considered for unintended social and political effects. There is a need for more research *with*, not on, students to explore how emotions take shape in dynamic contexts and cultural understandings among teachers and students, students and other students, and researchers and students (Ahmed, 2004; Davies, 2014; Zembylas, 2005).

Regarding the second issue, problems can arise even when researchers recognize student agency in the construction of emotion. Dominant narratives of emotion in many SEL curricula understand agency as choice, ownership, and management. Emotion regulation is a key area of skill development, and when students “lose control” of their emotions, the response is often to

remove the student from the classroom and attribute the issue as internal to the student (Hoffman, 2009). This individualistic narrative is only one of many possible ways of understanding students' emotions. Some Japanese schools, for instance, draw up a more collectivist narrative: students who "act out" emotionally are seen as not feeling sufficiently attached to the classroom community. The failure is not in the student but in the relationship, and teachers may respond by trying to learn from (not extinguish) the heightened emotion and restore/strengthen the interpersonal connection (Hoffman, 2009). This narrative is similar to models of restorative justice (e.g., Mullet, 2014) in that "negative" behaviors are framed as relational problems that merit relational solutions. Those who harm others are not "off the hook" or excused for their actions but are actually placed more firmly *on* "the hook" by being urged to recognize how self and other are mutually implicated in the emotions that come to be (Davies, 2014).

It is also important for practitioners to look beyond the "problem behavior" itself to consider how emotions and actions are shaped by cultural and historical factors. For instance, Native American students are disciplined at disproportionately high rates in U.S. schools for non-violent actions that are deemed "deviant" (Brown, 2014; Sprague et al., 2013). There is a need for teachers (and Western culture as a whole) to recognize how historical trauma can manifest in ways that are seen as "difficult," "dysregulated," or "defiant." Again, by engaging *with* students rather than displacing them from the group with deficit-based assumptions, emotional healing can occur. Instead of framing emotions and behaviors as unconstrained "choices," they can be seen as interpersonal creations with interpersonal effects.

Emotions are both produced and productive, shaping social worlds. They do more than motivate us toward particular actions—they create *us* as actors (Zembylas, 2005). The labels we use and the translations we attempt to make are not just reflective but constitutive, albeit constrained by the cultural narratives available to us at the time. For example, the phrase "you made me angry" suggests that emotion has a clear source ("you") and a clear container ("me"), rather than emerging from and as a relationship (e.g., "the anger between us"). The functions of emotion words are always rooted in social discourses, which are heterogeneous and ever-shifting. *How can researchers better recognize and value collectivist models that attach emotions to relationships rather than individuals?* When researchers and curriculum designers feel compelled to confine emotions to individual bodies and pinpoint the starting and stopping points of emotional energy, alternative ways of knowing are closed off. In the following section, we briefly discuss three frameworks that can help to re-imagine emotion in educational settings.

Alternative Frameworks for Re-Imagining This Thesis and Shaping Future Studies

Our critical engagement with the first author's thesis has focused on how the study reproduced several concerning patterns within the dominant paradigm of educational research on emotion. Drawing from this paradigm, measurement was a given, as were categorical models and statistical analyses. Emotion was assumed to be located in the student, and its ontology was not only assumed to be knowable but also *isolatable* (caused by praise, the predictor variable). Emotions were positioned as factors toward achievement, and the study's theoretical framework was born from white, Western, rational modes of knowing. In this section, we shift our attention from exploring what *was* to explore what *might have been*, or what alternative frameworks could be used to learn about students' social and emotional experiences in school.

Each of the following approaches involves creative, collaborative work with students and teachers, where emotion (not just emotion management) is welcomed as relational and contextual.

From a Deleuzian perspective, research projects are never confined to one conceptual framework but are “assemblages,” or dynamic entanglements of theory, practice, thought, affect, and other flows of intensity. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the metaphor of a “machine” (not as a rigid mechanism but as a hub of ongoing connections and transformations) to illuminate how inquiry produces an endless flow of potential knowledge. By conceptualizing each of the following frameworks as a “machine” that research can “plug into” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), we ask, *what questions and designs might emerge if the first author’s research interests were plugged into each one?*

Aesthetic Pedagogies

Arts-based research (Davies, 2014; Finley, 2008; Greene, 1995) is an excellent avenue for critical studies that seek to disrupt the binaries between art and science, rational and emotional, personal and social, and teaching and learning. Greene’s (1995, 2010) aesthetic pedagogy has guided research and curricula that explore art, ethics, and affect. If the first author’s interest in emotion had been plugged into an arts-based framework, her research questions might have included the following: *How is emotion produced through creative work (e.g., painting, writing, photographing, dancing, and /or video-making)? How can art be recognized as an epistemology for new understandings of emotion? How does student artwork reconstruct and deconstruct dominant narratives about emotion in educational settings? How can students and teachers engage with artistic pedagogy as a means to create new visions and actions toward social justice?* With these questions, praise would not have been forced into the thesis study as a variable but allowed to emerge organically, or perhaps not at all—more honed research questions would unfold with participants and over time.

Through what Greene refers to as the “social imagination,” teachers and students are encouraged to *move* and *make*, not just think and rationalize. Aesthetic education draws on questions of relationality (not “who am I?” but “who am I in relation to others?”), criticality (how can imagination be used not as a resolution but as an awakening or unsettling?), and responsibility (how can we rethink education to break destructive habits and move toward new alternatives; Guyotte, 2018). While the focus of aesthetic pedagogy is on social justice, it also understands emotion as a lively entanglement of energies, shared and spread across bodies. Greene urges educators to teach through ignorance, recognizing that we do not need to possess cut-and-dried knowledge about emotion to embrace it in education. Rather than looking for facts, an arts-based study could work to unsettle facts and create openings for new understandings. In sum, arts-based research can serve as a rich soil for nurturing emotional growth and social awareness, welcoming “SEL” into academics without the condition that it must be scored and captured.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Emotion Reflexivity

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is another qualitative machine into which the first author could plug. While CDA is a broad methodology with multiple definitions and approaches (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2014), it centers on unveiling and exploring “discourses,” or patterns of language, thought, images, and actions that do not just reflect but constitute our realities. Discourses clash and compete, and dominant discourses work to create and legitimize what becomes known as fact and reason. A key goal of CDA is to expose the discourses that uphold hegemony, question how discourses contribute to social inequities, and see the world as something that is constantly being created (Gee, 2014).

Related to CDA is Zembylas's (2014) framework of Critical Emotion Reflexivity (CER), which encourages teachers and students to reflect on how their habits, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions are shaped by particular discourses. CER can be thought of as a tool for doing CDA *with*, not *on*, participants. With the focus still on praise and emotion in educational settings, the first author could have drawn from CDA and CER to ask, *How are praise and emotion discursively shaped? How might the concept of "praise" be informed by Eurocentric models of teacher authority, student engagement, and behaviorist theories of learning? How do teachers, through praise, reproduce and challenge dominant knowledge about U.S. education? How is emotion understood within the dominant discourses of what it means to be a learner? How do emotions create, and how are they created by, learners' complex identities?*

Plugged into CER and CDA, the first author could invite participants to reflect on their own praise interactions and emotional experiences, perhaps including interviews, observations, and other textual analysis. Praise would be framed as an interaction that always involves emotion and is entangled with social power relations. Emotions would be seen as inseparable from identity—people are not passive in their emotional experiences but are constantly engaging in dynamic relationships *with* them. The researcher would read herself, teachers, and students as products and producers of interacting educational realities. Rather than seeing emotion as being produced in a stable pathway, emotion would be seen as a discursive creation with material effects. Participants would be recognized as co-producers of the knowledge that came forth. By facilitating decolonial endeavors such as co-generative dialogue among students and teachers (Emdin, 2009), this kind of inquiry could help to expose and work against oppressive structures that stifle the agency of students, particularly those who are marginalized on the basis of class, race/ethnicity, and cultural identity.

Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy

As a third potential "machine" for shaping future studies, Indigenous Social Justice Pedagogy (ISJP; Shirley, 2017) would also center participant voices and agencies throughout the research process. ISJP is defined as "a framework for *rethinking* the process of schooling for Indigenous students. Its primary focus is on reframing curriculum and pedagogy that aims to preserve and privilege Indigenous epistemologies while promoting nation-building in Indigenous communities" (Shirley, 2017, p. 165, original emphasis). As we discussed in earlier sections, much of the academic "knowledge" about SEL and teacher-student interactions has come from research on primarily white, middle-class populations. While large, diverse samples are sorely needed in educational research, they are not the only way to engage with marginalized communities. By working collaboratively in smaller groups, researchers and participants can learn more about one another's realities while refusing the confines of mainstream research paradigms. There is a great need for research projects that use culturally sustaining/revitalizing frameworks to explore how Indigenous youth experience academia.

If the first author's thesis had been a collaboration with Indigenous students and teachers, the focus would have been on depth rather than generalizability. Instead of delivering pre-specified types of praise and looking for group differences in emotion, the first author could have asked, *what might social-emotional learning look like through a locally-relevant Indigenous framework? How is emotion a part of cultural identity and a history of colonial oppression? How do praise interactions shape and situate Indigenous students' emotions and identities in beneficial and detrimental ways? How can emotion be explored with a goal toward decolonization and building*

more respectful and reciprocal relationships among humans and more-than-humans (e.g., land, flora, fauna)?

ISJP involves sharing personal stories in intimate, trusted spaces (Shirley, 2017). In a study based on ISJP, negative emotion would not be judged or discouraged, but welcomed as an energy that can be transformed into a force for change and healing only after it is acknowledged. Indigenous populations are often met with “damage-centered research” (Tuck, 2009) that emphasizes suffering while failing to acknowledge the joys, strengths, desires, and contradictions of Native peoples. While pain should not be ignored, treating Indigenous people as exclusively “damaged” denies them their human complexities and can reify white supremacy with the savior mindset of “fixing” colonial misdeeds (Ahmed, 2004; Tuck, 2009). Savior-model ethics and damage-centered research, even when well-intended, can reinforce conquer-models that position Native people “underneath” those of European descent (Christians, 2018; Tuck, 2009). Emotion must be situated in socio-historical contexts and understood as a product of cultural relationships (including historical trauma and oppression), not just the product of an individual’s personality and first-hand experiences. As relational and often contradictory energies (Archibald, 2008), emotions could actually be seen as participants in the research process, changing and impressing upon all those involved.

If the first author were to approach a study in this way, she would need to deeply engage with her own emotions and biases, working not to appropriate, romanticize, nor claim ownership of the knowledge that emerged. Historically (and currently), well-intending researchers steeped in colonial paradigms have assimilated marginalized practices into lip-service versions that may do more harm than good (Hoffman, 2009; Hyland, 2017). A study that utilized Indigenous understandings of emotion to benefit privileged groups, without advocating for decolonization, could become a vehicle of *further* oppression. The intentions of ISJP research should not be to provide a post-positivist, generalizable panacea to all the inequities in U.S. society. Rather, such projects could draw from engagement models of ethics (Christians, 2018) to resist the colonial discourses that privilege Western institutional agendas over the needs and values of tribal communities.

Conclusion

In this conceptual paper, we have critiqued the dominant narratives of educational research on emotion that often reproduce social inequities and further marginalize the “other.” Knowledge about emotion in education continues to be shaped by hegemonic discourses that emphasize self-regulation, individualistic rationality, and academic achievement as the end-goal. When these discourses are paired with the privileging of post-positivist frameworks, it becomes even more difficult to resist concepts such as “everything can be measured” (Burke, 2017) or “emotions are objects to be managed” (Davies, 2014; Hoffman, 2009). We as a research community must do better in recognizing that these concepts, labels, and assumptions are always entangled with power relations. We return to the question, *how can we decenter white, middle-class, neoliberal, and patriarchal understandings of emotion in education?*

Critically drawing from our own experience with the first author’s Master’s thesis, we call for more work that 1) challenges neoliberal definitions of “achievement” as the implicit end-goal of emotional learning, 2) unsettles the dominance of white/middle-class frameworks, and 3) pursues, supports, and revitalizes collectivist and relational understandings of emotion. Even when emotion is defined within Western meaning systems (Ahmed, 2004; Davies, 2014; Hoffman,

2009), it has not been completely colonized (Sturdy, 2003). Perhaps social and emotional education can be positioned as sites of resistance from rationalization and commodification, with continued engagement of discourses that promote aesthetics and embodiment.

The three frameworks we offer as potential starting points to transformative, collaborative, decolonial research about emotion are by no means an exhaustive list. Our hope is to provide readers with new ideas of what inquiry could look like, even from within the field of educational psychology where explicitly critical and qualitative work is less common. We do not intend to jettison all quantitative science in our mission to promote qualitative, post-qualitative, and aesthetic ways of knowing—or to assume clean lines between these approaches. Importantly, no framework in and of itself can act as a safeguard against the persistent pressures of measurable academic achievement, ideological “neutrality,” or individualistic assumptions in the educational research about emotion. Scholars working within any framework must continuously consider *who* is benefitting from the work and *what* social practices, relations, and injustices are being changed (and/or staying the same).

The goal of transformative research is not to merely invert the binaries that weave through research and curricula but to deepen the critical realization that the “point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous” (Foucault, 1984, p. 343). We argue that, while greater empirical attention *is* being devoted to emotions in education, and while there *have* been “positive” developments in research, programs, and paradigms, none of these signs of progress can be taken as indication that we as a scholarly community are “past” the marginalization of emotion, certain bodies, and/or identities. Growth is nonlinear and dominant paradigms are sticky. What values do we hold the highest? Who is “we” and who is “them?” How can we pursue research with a social justice agenda while being humble but not immobile, working in but not as the institution? We must not privilege easy answers over difficult questions as we take on this transformative work.

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