

Narrative Analysis of Experiences of First-Generation Black Youth from East Africa

Hikmet Mawi

Guided by the overarching question of how Black youth narrate their identities and experiences, this research project sought to focus on first-generation youth of East African descent. In an effort to imagine and include Black youth in research, I grounded my inquiry within Childhood and Youth Studies to consider how youth are at a temporal, structural and experiential convergence of dominant discourses and significant socio-political policies. Looked at from this vantage through intersectionality, Black youth's discursive portrayal within research in narrow terms renders them as single, homogenous lump. This project is an effort in countering the limiting single narrative about them.

Method

This qualitative research engaged 7 first generation Canadian Black youth of East African descent. They are between the ages of 16-24 recruited through social media and word of mouth. Each participant was asked to provide photo(s) that they felt represented their identities through their everyday experiences and were invited for an hour-long Zoom interview. The resulting data was transcribed and coded for thematic and narrative analysis. A narrative profile was made for each participant to capture their point of view and interpretations of their life experiences. Their photo submissions were used to engage in what Luttrell calls "collaborative seeing" between researcher and participant in meaning making.

Findings

The preliminary findings of this exploratory project can be grouped into experiences and narratives. When looked at from the point of experience, first-generation youth who are recent immigrants (less than 5 years) had a stark difference in their experience to those who immigrated much younger (more than 5 years). Recent immigrant youth described their everyday experiences through schooling and work as having to find their footing within the Canadian fabric, often describing it as challenging. On the other hand, those who immigrated much younger described their everyday experiences identifying their privilege because their parents have made sacrifices. All participants identified their Canadian experience and identity as important. They also emphasized their cultural, social or religious roots as essential.

In terms of narrating themselves, first-generation youth portrayed themselves using similar words. When asked to describe themselves using three words or phrases, they all used action and descriptive words. The words they used centered around -ings indicating their doing, words such as "caring, hard-working, helping, entertaining and understanding" were chosen often by the majority of participants. They also used adjectives to describe their central identities as "patient, curious, positive, self-aware, funny and proud". These are significant findings because often Black youth are narrated by others using deficit descriptive.

The "collaborative-seeing" of visual data produced the most poignant narratives, in which each participant sought to tell more than what was presented. In the words of a participant, "a photo doesn't tell the whole of who I'm". Indeed, this project sought to highlight the rich narratives of Black youth and their identities pushing back on the notion of reductionist dominant narratives that are often narrow in their perspectives and wrapped in Western hegemonic epistemologies.