

Reflections from the Editorial Leadership Team: Creating a Brave Space for Narrative Writing

Darlyne Bailey, Monica Leisey, F. Ellen Netting, and Kelly McNally Koney

Abstract: *Reflections* V28(3) includes an update from the Editorial Leadership Team and Editorial Board. In this General Issue of *Reflections* authors reveal what can happen when practitioners, clients, educators, or students feel unsupported or marginalized. Most importantly these authors offer valuable insights and strategies used to create safe, authentic, and brave physical and virtual spaces in which to cope with sadness, loss, trauma, and change. We reinforce this theme by sharing our thoughts about the brave space *Reflections* provides for narrative writing, how powerful it is to own one's positionality, how it impacts one's interactions across professional roles and relationships. We hope readers will be as delighted as we are with the creativity emerging within the pages of this issue!!

Keywords: brave space, safe space, sadness, loss, positionality

Our Editorial Letter for this issue begins by thanking the many people who continue to make the publication of *Reflections* possible. We begin with those whose commitment provides an exemplar for the wise words of Kahlil Gibran (1923), “work is love made visible” (p. 23). Our letter then focuses on *Reflections* as a brave space for narrative writing as a prelude to highlighting the articles in this issue and their interconnected themes. Lastly, while a double-blind, peer-reviewed journal, *Reflections* would not be possible without authors investing their time to share their experiences and feelings and our reviewers making the time to provide thoughtful, formative feedback.

Appreciation to the Dedicated People Who Make *Reflections* Possible

Deepest appreciation goes to Jack Pincelli (Lead Copyeditor) who works diligently reading final copy and issuing galley proofs in the production process. Much gratitude goes to our 2021–2022 Copyediting and Production team members—Sarah A. Valek (Copyeditor) and Assistant Copyeditors Madeline Buhrow, Marty Dodig-Lamar, Karla Seese—and our 2022–2023 Production team, Heather Anderson and Lindsay Young.

There have been a number of personnel changes since our last Editorial Letter. We are especially grateful to Reinhild F. Boehme who served as Publisher for *Reflections* during the 2021–2022 academic year and has returned to her full-time position as Assistant College Lecturer in Social Work at Cleveland State University (CSU). Reinhild's organizational skills and her attention to detail were incredibly helpful as she shepherded the journal through the last year. Many thanks go to Cathleen A. Lewandowski who, until June 2022, chaired the Publisher's Executive Committee in her role as Director of CSU School of Social Work. It is with deep appreciation that we thank both Cathleen and Reinhild for their dedication to *Reflections* and to CSU, our publishing home since 2012.

We are very pleased to recognize our new Publisher, Christopher A. Mallett, who is the new Director of CSU School of Social Work. A long-time professor at the School, Chris has taught

graduate and undergraduate courses as a licensed social worker and attorney in Ohio. We are working closely with Chris planning for the future of our beloved journal.

Endless thanks go to our Section Editors who continue to volunteer their skills and time to facilitating the submission and review process. We are indebted to Crystal Coles (Research), Jon Christopher Hall (Practice), Beth Lewis (Field Instruction), and Arlene Reilly-Sandoval (Teaching and Learning).

Guest Editors & Special Issues

This spring “The Impact of COVID 19 on Preparing Future Helping Professionals and on Practicing with Individuals, Groups, and Communities” was guest edited by Katherine Selber and Lynn Levy. Katherine and Lynn were so pleased to receive multiple manuscripts in response to their call that they are editing a second COVID issue that will be published in 2023. We are so grateful to Katherine and Lynn for all that they have done to make these two issues a huge success.

A timely trilogy of issues on racial injustice and systemic racism is in process. The first issue “Black Racial Injustice: Personal Reflections to Change Strategies” was guest edited by Priscilla Gibson, Patricia Gray, and Rebecca Chaisson and published in October 2022. The next two issues will be published in 2023 and 2024. Patricia Gray is lead Guest Editor on “Practicing While Black,” and Tiffany Baffour and Shonda Lawrence are editing a “A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs.” We are especially excited that a teaching institute including editors and authors from this trilogy is being proposed for the Council on Social Work Education’s 2023 Annual Program Meeting.

We look forward to the future Special Issue entitled “Care & Control: The Intersections of Professional Helping and Nation-State and/or Citizenship-based Belonging” guest edited by Ahn Ngo and Maryam Khan, faculty members at Wilfried Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. This Special Issue will contribute to the critical and intersectional social science scholarship by addressing contradictions, negotiations, possibilities, and the im/possibilities of providing professional care within the broad nexus of “citizenship.”

A Brave Space for Narrative Writing

As helping professionals, it is important to continually reassess one’s positionality and how it impacts the creation of spaces in which we can learn, develop, and grow. Positionality is composed of all those things that contribute to our multi-faceted identities. Murphy et al. (2020) underscore how writing narratives can provide a means to learn how positionalities shape perception and can aid writers in understanding and analyzing power dynamics, privilege, and oppression. We are honored to edit a journal in which our contributors reveal their positionalities, show courage in sharing their emotions, and tell their stories of lived experiences and evocative understandings. Our authors continue to inspire us to make and sustain *Reflections* as a brave space for narrative writing.

Why are we calling this a brave space? A decade ago, Arao and Clemens (2013) reframed dialogue around diversity and social justice by moving beyond the concept of safe spaces to that of brave spaces. Student feedback led them to consider how the word *safe* was often viewed as a place in which participants could remain comfortable in sharing their thoughts and feelings about controversial and sensitive issues. In brave spaces discomfort inevitably arises when diverse voices challenge participants' perspectives and worldviews. Arao and Clemens further say that brave spaces are replete with challenging interactions among marginalized and privileged populations, emphasize support and personal growth, and recognize that it takes courage and is hard to grapple with injustice.

Crediting Arao and Clemens's (2013) work on brave dialogic spaces, a plethora of educational and communications scholarship has been building around the idea of creating brave spaces through reflexive writing that encourages deep exploration of lived experiences. And it is important to point out that the concept of reflexive writing transcends educational level. For example, Spence et al. (2021) expound on how middle and high school education can suppress students' imaginations by ignoring "opportunities for self-reflection . . . especially in historically marginalized communities" (p. 847). They go on to say that "reflection supports the ongoing development and growth of the self . . . forcing a person to grapple with new ideas and to express their experiences. Impressions of life, social interactions, and political events are clarified through dialogue and writing" (p. 849). These authors assert that opportunities for students to fully express themselves in this type of writing can promote positive learning, growth, and development (Spence et al, 2021). *Reflections* refers to this as narrative writing. And we are encouraged to see more and more educators and practitioners elaborating on how narrative writing can be a form of self-care in a format that contains "emotions that can invoke insights and empathy unlike the impersonal descriptions of conventionally structured and written journal articles" (Hurd & Singh, 2021, p. 354).

We are honored to carry on the vision of our founders, Sonia and Paul Abels, to ensure *Reflections* remains a brave and inclusive space in which diverse voices are welcomed, multiple and divergent views can be expressed, emotions can be provoked, and in which we are challenged to consider alternative ways of thinking—and being. With all of that in mind, we recently expanded our calls for creative expression to include a Permanent Call for Art, Poetry, and Photography as well. Our intention is to reach out to helping professionals from multiple traditions so that we can all learn from a broad range of practitioners, educators, and students who have meaningful stories to tell and who are willing to step into the brave space that *Reflections* provides.

Highlights of This Issue

The authors in this issue emphasize the importance of owning one's positionality as well as recognizing how it impacts one's interactions across professional roles and relationships. They reveal what can happen in those spaces in which practitioners, clients, educators, or students feel unsupported or marginalized, but most importantly these authors offer valuable insights and strategies used to create safe, authentic, and brave physical and virtual spaces.

Raising our consciousness about the importance of time and space for dealing with the profound sadness that accompanies loss, trauma, and grief is a theme that permeates our first three contributions. Babando's narrative poem mourns the loss of sadness in a world that seeks happiness at all costs, challenges us to consider how emotionally bland our world would be if we never experienced the contrast between the depths of sadness and the heights of love, and encourages us to honor the teachings that sadness brings. Articles by Allen and by Dixon and Tam focus on the impact of client suicide as one of the most stressful events in the careers of helping professionals in clinical practice. Stunned and profoundly sad when their clients committed suicide, these professionals immediately began questioning themselves. They each ask, What should I have done differently? Allen recalls the isolating, emotional emptiness of a space in which colleagues did not know what to say and in which trauma-informed practice had not been taught. Dixon and Tam speak to how the suppression of sadness can have negative effects on one's practice and how it takes time and space to regain the hope needed to increase growth, self-awareness, learning, and inner peace. Both articles offer sound advice about developing postvention plans for mental health professionals and how to embed peer support into mental health practice spaces.

Creating safe learning spaces is a theme of the next four articles. In teaching a course on trauma-informed practice Shepard creates a safe physical classroom space for engaging with others, listening to their stories as a form of poetic embodiment, and building a healing co-learning community. Shepard encourages students to be attuned to their emotions and physical reactions. Wong writes from the perspective of a former English as a Second Language (ESL) student whose professors viewed social justice in education as a matter of equity and who provided inclusive spaces for diverse student learners. Experiencing their accommodations in the classroom provided Wong with a valuable example of how social justice positively influenced the author's professional career development. O'Meara writes about how the pandemic made the author sensitive to the physicality of space as a learning environment. Being forced to teach from home meant adjusting to shared spaces not specifically designed for teaching as well as recognizing that not everyone has access to their own space, much less the flexibility required to design and support student engagement in learning spaces that enhance socio-emotional well-being. Franco, Harmon, and McCafferty use counter-storytelling and personal narrative-making to contextualize their lived experiences as Black and Latinx faculty members teaching within White spaces. By creating brave spaces, the authors offer opportunities to explore their own relational positionality and contribute to a more inclusive and safe work environment.

Brave spaces that reach wider and wider audiences are elaborated in the next two articles in which their authors take us into online learning platforms and reveal strategies they use to create virtual spaces in which students feel supported and safe to be vulnerable and authentic. Housed in a Primarily White Institution (PWI), Vazquez strives to change virtual check-ins from being an elite White space into an authentic space free of fear in which plausible solutions to combat racial injustice can emerge. Kattari and Hess frame their engaging narrative as a conversation between an educator and student focusing on creating a space of possibility by using TikTok for developing and sharing knowledge across professions, nations, and generations. Vazquez and Kattari and Hess demonstrate how to use social media for social justice education. In both narratives, the authors stress how important it is for purposes of transparency and accountability

to name the positionality from which faculty members and students alike enter into their virtual classrooms.

English and Charron and Singh examine the importance of positionality for researchers. English writes a very personal narrative about how the author's role as a researcher has been influenced by "kithship" in which trusting relationships are built among friends who become one's family of choice. When a kithship family member dies, English describes the disrespect and control that occurred when blood relatives forced others into spaces where they could not thrive as they faced the emotional challenges of misgendering and deadnaming a beloved transgender friend. Charron and Singh emphasize the importance of reflexivity in every phase of their research as an ongoing process and point out the dangers of attempting to bracket qualitative data without first recognizing the impact of our own positionalities and experiences. Lessons learned include understanding that one's viewpoint is ultimately subjective, that all perspectives may hold truth, and there is great value in exploring the impacts of the intersectionality of one's different identities with respect to the privilege or oppression they hold.

The theme of acknowledging and owning one's positionality within professional workspaces continues in our last two narratives. Shaw, Carter, and Tolbert-Banks compare the unpredictability of driving a "struggle bus" that lurches in multiple directions to navigating the changing spaces in which helping professionals journey on a daily basis. The authors share personal experiences and offer critical reflection tools designed to promote psychological introspection. Fleischer focuses on the critical importance of quality Clinical Supervision, sharing what happens when supervisors do not reflect on their own positionality and fail to provide safe spaces for listening and learning. Fleischer identifies characteristics that enhance the supervisory relationship. Both narratives remind us that helping professionals continually encounter emotionally laden situations that take time and space to process.

The authors in this issue reflect on their positionalities, share their lived experiences, and offer sage advice on how to create spaces that engender hope and possibility. We trust you will find this issue as you find all of *Reflections*—full of compelling narratives offering insights that will be useful to educators, practitioners, students, and others who venture into this brave space. Once again, we look forward to hearing from you!!

References

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135–150). Stylus.

Gibran, K. (1923). On work. *The Prophet*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Hurd, F., & Singh, S. (2021). 'Something has to change': A collaborative journey towards academic well-being through critical reflexive practice. *Management Learning*, 52(3), 347-363.

Murphy, M. K., Soyer, M., & Martinez-Cola, M. (2021). Fostering “brave spaces” for exploring perceptions of marginalized groups through reflexive writing. *Communication Teacher*, 35(1), 7-11.

Spence, L. K., Costa, P. J. B. M., Cullars, A. (2021). “They’re killing our imaginations”: Dialogue and reflexive writing development in historically marginalized students. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 847-863.

About the Authors: Darlyne Bailey, PhD, LISW is Editor-in-Chief, *Reflections*, Professor and Dean Emeritus; Director, Social Justice Initiative, Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr, PA (dbailey01@brynmawr.edu); Monica Leisey, PhD is Associate Editor, *Reflections* and Associate Professor, Salem State University, School of Social Work, Salem, MA (mleisey@salemstate.edu); F. Ellen Netting, PhD is Associate Editor, *Reflections* and Professor Emerita, Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Social Work, Richmond, VA (enetting@vcu.edu); Kelly McNally Koney, MSSA is Assistant Editor, *Reflections* (kmkoney@msn.com).

With Gratitude...

We would like to recognize and thank the reviewers who contributed their time and invaluable assistance to *Reflections* V28(3):

Priscilla Dawn Allen, Mari L. Alschuler, Vaugh DeCoster, C. Lee Anne Deegan, Elba Figueroa, Nanette I. Fleischer, James Angelo Forte, Charles Garvin, Stephen Granich, Annette Grape, Mark Hager, Jay Hall, Michelle Hanna, Anthony J. Hill, Laurel Hitchcock, Erica Goldblatt Hyatt, Maryam Kahn, Matt Price, Jessica Sniatecki, Lara Vanderhoof, Victoria R. Winbush, Darrin Wright

We appreciate your commitment to this journal and its authors!!

Supporting Reflections

Ways to contribute to the publishing of *Reflections*:

- \$\$ (any amount) — FRIEND OF REFLECTIONS
- \$250 or more — FRIEND FOR LIFE
- \$1000 or more — A THOUSAND THANKS

Please visit: <https://www.csuohio.edu/class/reflections/friends-reflections>. Thank You!!