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# Social Positioning in Social Work Practice: Stories of Hopes and Struggles among Racialized Minority Workers

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Social Positioning in Social Work Practice: Stories of Hopes and Struggles among Racialized  
Minority Workers

BY

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B.Sc., University of Guyana, 2007

THESIS

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## **Abstract**

The primary purpose of this qualitative research is to understand the experiences of racialized social workers and social services workers and how social positioning plays out in their practice. What are the experiences of racialized workers in their work places? How do they position themselves in terms of their age, gender, race and professional identity in the various contexts of their practice? Do they experience self-doubt? How are they recognized or misrecognized for how they position themselves? How do they deal with these experiences? What are their stories? These were the main questions that this narrative research sought to capture in the lived realities and stories of participants. Data were generated through a guided conversation with five (5) frontline and management social workers from across social services organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. The process of interpreting these rich stories was informed by theories of social positioning. Thematic analysis was used to augment the narrative approach. Findings indicate the varying ways in which workers position themselves in relation to clients, co-workers, managers, and community partners. In addition to positioning race, gender and age separately consciously and subconsciously, findings also indicate complex intersectional experiences of positioning. Implications for social work practice and key learning points are discussed.

## **Dedication**

To the minority social workers and social services workers who continue to faithfully serve the most vulnerable populations in spite of their own challenges in the field.

## Acknowledgements

Phil 4:13 (KJV), “I can do all things through Christ which stengtheneth me.” For with God all things are possible! It did seem impossible in the beginning but with faith first, the support, encouragement and love from those who believed in me, it was accomplished.

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## **SECTION I: SETTING THE STAGE**

I have chosen to organize this thesis into three sections as follows:

Section I has three chapters that capture the foundations of the research. In Chapter 1, I explain how I got to this research and introduce you to how I am positioned in the study. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature and identify the gaps. In Chapter 3, I take you through the methodology of the study.

Section II is dedicated to the findings and stories of participants in five chapters. I dedicate a chapter to each participant to capture the unique findings in our conversation.

Section III concludes the journey in two chapters. In Chapter 9, I present the discussion of themes that cut across all the five stories, implications and recommendations. In Chapter 10, I conclude by reflecting on my personal journey through this research.

## Chapter 1- Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a brief introduction of the research and the researcher. I start by discussing the purpose and relevance of the study and conclude by positioning myself in relation to this study. First of all, I will start by the preamble of my research puzzlement: Who am I?

### Who am I?

I was covering reception that day because we were short of staff when two young women entered the center in a hurry. I figured they needed urgent help or perhaps they were being chased for some reason. I stood up in a gesture to welcome them but also let my presence be known as a source of help. I was not prepared for what came next.

*We are here to see the manager, she is expecting us!*

Oh, I thought to myself. Surely it was not me they were referring to as I had no such appointments set. I thought to myself, how do I respond to these two young women who seemed in a hurry but also were getting impatient, as I appeared baffled.

*Can you call her and let her know we are here?*

I am offended! Not only are they being rude but they were not even allowing me to give my greetings to welcome them to the center. You know, the one that goes “Hi there, welcome to the center, how can I help you?” These two were not having it so I chuckled inside and responded with a deep sarcasm from nowhere. “And what might the name of the manager you are looking for be?” Clearly frustrated, they responded.

*We are here to see XY!*

My mind was racing, and so was my heart. I didn't want this experience to get the best of me but I was having a reaction I had never felt before that angered me. I figured the only way out was to

call the staff member who was not the manager whose name they echoed. I reached for the phone to call her, but before I could connect with the voice on the other end of the line she appeared in the guest area of the office. It was as if I didn't exist; the two young women seemed relieved as they saw the familiar face of the staff and ran towards her.

*She didn't want to let us talk with you. We told her we are here to see the manager!*

The staff seemed even more perplexed by what they said, as she quickly pointed to me and told them that I was the manager.

And my reaction? WOW! Did that just happen? I guess I could brush it aside for what it is, just a moment, but I couldn't think straight afterwards. It was too unsettling. The receptionist that day was me, the manager. In my mind, I was a manager first and a receptionist second. Being the manager that day didn't matter as the story unfolded. I knew who I was; they didn't know that and perhaps somewhere in this encounter they managed to unnerve contradictions within me. I was meant to feel the frustration that perhaps the receptionist had experienced time and time again. It was an emotional experience that I overcame by hiding my frustration and hiding in my privilege as a manager. I tried to use my unnoticed privilege to shame the two young women.

While I could get out of the actual situation not physically scared, I walked away thinking of all the 'what ifs' concerning my actual positioning and why I felt hurt. Let me just say I had more questions than answers. The more I reflected, the one thing that kept sticking out was that this cannot just be my subjective reality about who I am and how I am seen in the workplace. It generated bigger questions in my mind: What does a manager look like? What do I look like? I am a young Black woman and I can't help but wonder if race played a role in effacing my positioning as a manager. This led to the question of how can I share my story and find out if others have similar experiences. My research starts from this point of entry.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore social positioning in social work practice by employing a narrative approach to generate stories. It is to examine how racialized minority social workers interpret their social positioning and relate with others in their practice in the context of social service organizations. The specific objectives are:

1. To understand how racialized minority social workers think about their social positioning in their practice.
2. To explore how encounters of social positioning impact working relationships at different levels of the organization.
3. To understand how workers resist or cope with experiences of social positioning in their practice.

For the purpose of this research, I refer to social workers as individuals working in social services organizations and social work professions. I prefer this definition because not all social workers work in social services and not all social services workers are social workers.

Also, for the purpose of this study, I adopt the definition by Elejabarrieta (1994) that social positioning refers “not only to the symbolic occupation of a space of identity and action but also to the dynamic through which positioning expresses identity and allows individuals to build the space of reality in which their identity can be expressed” (p.248). That means positioning not only places the individual in a specific position, but also posits that, in expressing identity, individuals are also a part of creating that space at the same time. I believe social positioning also considers the identity constructions that workers experience. As part of my research, I also draw on Wortham (2004) who defines social positioning as “an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly applied to an individual” (p.166). This definition

supports the conceptual presentation of social positioning as a co-construction of identity that occurs in social interactions. This shows that individuals are defined by their given positions that can create conflict with their perceived self as in the case of my encounter with the two young women in the above preamble.

### **Relevance of the Study**

Social positioning in the context of organizational practice cannot be ignored because it operates in the forefront of our everyday work life. Although social positioning is hardly obvious in the context of organizations, the conflicts of social positioning in encounters is more deeply hidden and naming it causes a lot of emotional distress. This invisibility and the distress it causes have serious implications for social work practice. My research is important because it has the potential to inform organizations and workers about the possible underlying factors that may be influencing the organization's culture, program outcomes and the working relationships between workers, clients and management. This research is also relevant because it will inform the employees about their capacity to work effectively in the organization and manage their professional identities. It is my hope that my findings will help minimize the potential to harm clients and co-workers by creating an awareness of how social positioning plays out in practice in the organization. This research taps into an area that has not been fully explored with regards to organizational behavior and how social positioning can affect the stability of social service organizations around retention, motivation, productivity, and failed programming. This research offers a starting point for future in-depth research to address these gaps in knowledge specific to racialized social workers' experiences.

This research is also relevant because attempting to look at the impact of social workers' interpretation of their own positioning and the positions from the organization can be challenging

for practitioners in social work. Do workers have different positions at work in the face of roles, diversity, adversity, cultural differences, income status, family and community, gender, race and class, to name a few? By talking about their experiences in practice, participants bring awareness to areas of social work where support is needed. The findings identify both unique and common experiences shared by others with regards to social positioning in social work practice.

In many instances within an organizational context, there are silent conflicts developed among workers that lead to bigger issues in human resource management. These silenced issues, sometimes labeled non-work-related issues, I believe, can be traced back to the social positioning of employees and their own identified ways of practice. Often silenced issues are issues of injustice and inequity. The pursuit of social justice as stipulated in the CASW code of Ethics (2005) prompts social workers to make silenced voices heard.

The implication of social positioning in social work practice is a question of ethics and social identity expression entwined in organizational behavior. There is no recipe on how and when to position self in practice. Social positioning is an ongoing subjective negotiation that happens in relation to others and it is full of surprises and conflicts (Elejabarrieta, 1994). Social workers cannot ignore these conflicts and the potential ethical dilemmas associated with their social positioning. Because of the subjectivity around social positioning, it is necessary for social workers to own what they believe in as practitioners through clarification with clients and self. The self-awareness is necessary to avoid doing harm to clients because as social workers, we practice the values of our profession in the context of unequal power relations (Mandell, 2008). As Corey et al. (2007) state: "When therapists expose their values, it is important that they clearly label them as their own" (p.72). Social positioning cannot be ignored because conflicts emerge out of the encounters of such values, subjectivities and identities (Kumsa, 2007). There is

an awareness that needs to be had for employees and managers alike as social positioning may influence programs and the very dynamics of an organization's culture. A worker's social positioning is not separate from employee interaction and it may play out in the work environment causing tensions and conflicts that impact working relationships and productivity directly and indirectly.

In my own experience, how I was positioning myself informed the way I navigated encounters with colleagues, staff, clients and my supervisors. Although I wasn't aware of this at the time, I find it very helpful to reflect on my experiences and make the connections to how I interpreted those positions and the conflicts of social interactions that produced further struggles. It is easy to ignore social positioning or assume that it is irrelevant in connecting with clients in the helping relationship. The internalization, self-doubt and being misrecognized when positioning self is even more concerning in this regard for the social workers. I believe that identities are negotiated in encounters and that social workers need to be aware of the impacts.

### **Positioning Myself**

I was born into a middle-class family in the only English speaking country of South America, Guyana. Guyana, a plural society representing a diverse people traditionally divided into six "races," was no stranger to political unrest and racial conflicts. I enjoyed living in a society where Blackness was not the minority and where my ability was not questioned by racial stereotypes and institutional racism. When I migrated to Canada to pursue graduate studies and start a new life, Blackness became an enveloping identity. It didn't take me long to see a major shift in how Blackness was "less than" and in the minority. I knew then that life was not going to be the same and my work environment challenged me in more ways than one.

Is it possible to enter the social work profession and leave yourself out of it? This question was one of the first critical questions I asked myself as I started to examine my experiences against the new information. I believe that those values, beliefs, perceptions and histories that make me an individual are a part of my daily routine and available for my use. These values and beliefs that accompanied me to Canada were a part of my identity and I took them with me into the workplace. How I position myself in social work practice appears to be a debatable topic, yet a relevant one. After all, it is a helping relationship between human beings. I am concerned with how passionate I am with what I do in my profession but also how I am being seen in the work environment - those seen and unseen subjectivities that influence the way I work.

I struggled with the idea of separating the different parts of me in my practice - my values, beliefs, identities, and those fundamental things that I have acquired through my years of socialization, education and professional experiences. In hindsight, these experiences have influenced the way I work and the way in which I wanted to be seen in the work environment. The constructions imposed by others undermined my own sense of professional individualities and capabilities. My years of work experience have presented me with many settings in which I felt that I had to recreate myself to fit in - the way I dressed, how I chose to wear my hair, the way I interacted with clients and staff, to name a few. It appeared that daily, traversing who I was and what I did in my career had to be strategic for me to be successful and feel like I had accomplished my job. What was happening in these encounters? How were my views and reactions shaped by my histories and known identities? What was seen and what was not seen?

I entered the world of employment being naïve or with a false sense of acceptance of who was as an individual. There were conflicts between how I was seen and how I wanted to be seen that were evident in my social interactions daily. The misrepresentations of self I experienced



covering reception that day sparked in me self-doubt, fear of rejection and the need to seek acceptance in the environment. I realized that these constructions of my identities were not really my own doing; rather I was trying to fit into a mold that would not accommodate me. This is what led me to reflect on not so much the interactions, but how they made me feel and doubt what I can do and who I thought I was. Would I ever be accepted as a young racialized minority manager? My environment didn't seem to accept that I was both a racialized minority and a manager. I don't think it's too much to say that my encounter perhaps was reshaping my reality as racialized and as someone in a position of power. I don't want people to be color blind when we interact. I don't want to be treated in a special or condescending manner when others come face to face with my position as a racialized manager.

These were key questions that I asked myself during these times. More importantly as a social worker, how am I seeing or not seeing others, whether coworkers or clients? How does this impact our relationship? How does this impact on their sense of self? This has led me to look further into the lived experiences of social workers faced with the same challenges of positioning themselves in the organization based on their own stories. This sense of responsibility to resist the imposition of others' constructions of me prompted my research. This sense of responsibility also prompts me to explore how as social workers, social interactions and social positions cause us to critically doubt ourselves and feel misrecognized. My research gives voice to the experiences of racialized social workers in their professional encounters.

Drawing on my encounter with the two young women, I am interested in exploring how social workers interpret their positions in their practice, how their positions are misrecognized, and what implications their struggles with positioning may have on their practice. In my encounter with the two young women, my positioning as a manager was effaced and it hurt.

What about gender? What about age? What about race? What about the positioning of the receptionist? What if I was the receptionist? Would it still hurt? What if the receptionist was an older White woman, a young woman, a Black man or a White man? Would the encounter be different? Would their positions be effaced equally? What about my positioning as a manager? How many identities have I effaced from my position of privilege? How many people have I hurt? I learned that our identities and subjectivities are not set or fixed. If anything, our positions are relational. Above all, they are negotiated in our encounters with others. How we negotiate these encounters has tremendous implications for our practice. This is the subject of my research and I position myself both as marginalized and as privileged. In relation to potential participants, I position myself both as an insider and outsider because how we position ourselves will be different although we may share some common experiences.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter, I provide a critical review of relevant literature on social positioning and other constructs associated with it, namely, social location, social identity and the use of self. I start with the review of social location because that is where I started my journey into this research. I will then examine the literature on social identity, the use of self and come to social positioning at the end. In the last section, I recap key takeaways and pose my research questions.

### **Social Location**

When I was mistaken for the receptionist at the workplace where I was the manager, I was surprised and shocked but I quickly attributed the mix up to my social location around race, gender and age. The construct of social location has its roots in feminist standpoint theory. In this theory, social location refers to the social positions a person occupies in society based on groupings like class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation within the context of oppressive power relations (Collins, 1990; Harding, 2009; Zaytoun, 2006). Social location is social, economic and political position created by oppressive social structures. According to standpoint theory, dominant and subordinated groups in these locations know and see reality differently because their consciousness and perspectives are shaped by their lived experiences in these locations. Collins (1990) expounds on how Black women's lived experiences of class, gender and race shape their thoughts and, therefore, their standpoints. Zaytoun (2006) uses the construct of social location to rethink the psychological development of self and she offers a framework to position the development of self within social, economic and political contexts.

Swigonsky (1994) brings feminist standpoint theory and social location home to social work research.

Standpoint theory argues that although subordinated groups are not privileged in their social location, their knowledge of social reality is more privileged, complete, objective, and authentic than the knowledge of dominant groups (Collins, 1990; Swigonsky, 1994). This is because oppressed groups must develop a “double-vision” that helps them understand both the oppressors’ view of reality and their own as they struggle to survive oppression and endure as a group. In this, standpoint theory also lends itself to a fitting methodology for research, especially in social work where we seek to understand the lived experiences of marginalized groups (Swigonsky, 1994). Standpoint theory argues that, since everyday problems emerge from social structures imposed on marginalized groups, research should seek to transform social structures and empower marginalized groups rather than blaming the victims.

It is this critical learning that attracted me to social location. After many shockwaves and unsettlements of self-doubt, I came to realize that the problem is not in my head; it is in the social structures of race, gender and age that assign the position of the manager to dominant groups. I was not seen as the manager because I was a young Black woman, not a middle-aged White male. If this is a structural problem, I am not the only one experiencing this. I wanted to research the lived experiences of other social services workers to get a more complete perspective with the goal of transforming these structures, as Swigonsky (1994) suggests. Moreover, marginalized groups experience structural oppression in various social locations at the same time and we need an intersectional lens to understand this experience. Crenshaw (1989) developed intersectionality to refer to how Black women experience race, gender, and class at the same time. While this explains much of my experience, however, my understanding of social

location was unsettled as I realized how standpoint theory and methodology are seriously questioned.

Reflecting on decades of achievements and challenges at a Standpoint Theory Symposium, Harding (2009) sums up the contributions of standpoint theory as productively controversial. Naidu (2010) applauds the pursuit of ‘studying up’ and redressing injustice in standpoint theory but wrestles with its rigid categories of social location. She argues that these categories include a rich tapestry of lived experiences that do not fit into these rigid locations. She uses her ethnographic research with African women cleaners working at a university and African women working as Zulu dancers to show how the rigid categories of ‘race’ or ‘Black women’ fail to capture their realities because these African women are enmeshed in local and global power relations. In another study, Rolin (2009) also applauds standpoint theory for challenging oppressive power but argues that this does not address the complexities of power relations. She rejects that unprivileged groups have less partial privileged knowledge and argues that all knowledge is partial wherever it is located. These challenges gave me a pause because the experiences of racialized social workers will differ based on their circumstances. My research seeks to understand the stories of racialized minority workers in their particular circumstances.

### **Social Identity**

Like social location, the construct of social identity is also fraught with controversies. Identity is a sense of self and who one is. Discussing the similarities and differences between identity and social identity, Stets and burke (2000) define social identity as a person’s knowledge of belonging to a social group. They describe it as a process of self-categorization, which is the reflexive capacity of self to see itself as an object, name itself, and categorize itself in relation to other categories. Self-categorization has consequences in that it magnifies similarities within

one's group and differences from outside groups. Stets and Burke (2000) also note that, in identity theory, the reflexive processes of self-categorization are named as processes of identification. In identity theory, the core process of identity is categorization of self as taking up a social role, integrating it into a sense of self, and performing it. In this theory, role is a relatively stable component of social structures.

Weaving together the common elements, Stets and Burke (2000) argue that both theories assert that people are born into preexisting social structures and draw their identities by making meaning, whether through the process of identification or self-categorization. In this light, much like social location, identity is also static category primarily determined by social structures. Although we all draw our identities from social categories, Stets and Burke argue, individuals have a unique sense of self depending on the unique combination of social identities they braid together. Expanding on the meaning making process of identity from social constructionist perspective, Hall (1997) and Gergen (2015) emphasize the role of language and discursive practices. They argue that meaning making is necessarily implicated in relations of power. Ideas about others are represented through language. Meaning, including the meaning of self, is produced and communicated in language. Hall (1997) describes the process of meaning making as the poetics of identity and the consequences of representation as the politics of identity.

The literature is replete with the challenges of identity in the organizational settings where identity is commonalities and differences are constantly challenged and negotiated. For example, Luna (2016) examines the practices of women of color organizations in the US and their two-way struggle. On the one hand they work to build solidarity and create a single collective identity of women of color within their organizations. On the other hand, they strive to give expression to the differences and multiple identities within organizations of women of color.

This study shows the disparities in organizational politics in who is heard and who is not. Employees were concerned not only with being included but also with being a part of organizational decision making.

Aronson & Smith (2011) identified potential areas of struggle in how managers in social service organizations experienced divided identities. They highlight how managers are caught in the crossfire between staff, community, clients, regulators, and government. Identity informed the ways in which each manager made decisions. In this study, workers realized that there was a need for performing multiple identities to manage relationships where they must pick and choose battles. Identity was affecting the forming and maintaining of working relations from management to frontline staff.

Workers are driven to maintain the status quo in the organization and this impacts actions and reactions in the work environment (James, 1997). According to James (1997) “internalized norms and values provide support for identity and a sense of confidence about ability to handle situations” (p.110). What is valuable from this study is that different ways of coping are seen from different individuals based on socio-economic, ethnicity and job categories.

### **The ‘Use of Self’**

The “use of Self” is core component of social work practice (Mandell, 2007). The ‘use of self’ has its roots in clinical therapy informed by liberal humanist notion of self (Rossiter, 2007). The ‘self’ depicted in the ‘use of self’ is cohesive, unified, and independent and it has been challenged as it does not address social context and concerns of power relations (Gergen, 2015; Rossiter 2007). According to de Montigny, “To speak of self evokes philosophical debates about core constitutive features of identity and personhood, which raise, in turn, debates about rationality and agency, morality and ethics, memory and subjectivity” (p.183).

However, the 'use of self' can be seen as ambiguous. The worker's self will inevitably influence perceptions and decision making (Reupert, 2006). How social workers use themselves in practice is very much related to the setting. The use of self is unique within the social work field. According to Raines (1996), "One of the differences between social work and the other therapeutic professions is the degree to which we meet people who have suffered malignant deprivations and losses...only the provision of an authentic person will suffice" (p. 373). Social work represents a profession based on a helping relationship that requires the worker to meet clients where they are. Meeting clients where they are at in many cases requires workers to bring aspects of their identity to that relationship. This is what the 'use of self' embodies and what arguably distinguishes social work from other professions (Dewane, 2006, p. 544).

According to Dewane (2006), "Melding the professional self of what one knows (training, knowledge, techniques) with the personal self of who one is (personality traits, belief systems and life experience) is a hallmark of skilled practice. The use of self is much more than self-disclosure (p.544). Dewane identified five operational uses of the self: "(1) Use of personality, (2) Use of belief system, (3) Use of relational dynamics (4) Use of anxiety and (5) Use of self-disclosure" (p.544). She suggests these categories to define and describe the use of self in a social work practice. My study, therefore, uses this understanding of the use of self to explore the self-awareness that shapes and builds the workers' capacity to change their practice daily (Kondrat, 1999; Mandell, 2008).

I concur with D'Hondt (2007) in asserting that "my thoughts, memories, and values accompany me everywhere and are always available for my use" (p.51). Can we separate our values and beliefs from our professional practice in social work? Beyond our knowledge and skills, I believe that who we are enters our professional practice as social workers. However,



self-awareness helps us take responsibility for our thoughts and actions in our practice (Adamowich, Kumsa, Rego, Stoddart & Vito, 2014; Mandell, 2008).

Finally, there is the challenge of institutional changes within the shifting context of professional practice that influences the worker 'use of self'. For some workers, positions of influence are at times contradictory to the policies and practices they must carry out (Aronson & Smith, 2011). It is this contradiction that implicates the 'use of self' in the midst of such change. These institutional changes that often time bring tensions can be seen as a threat to the personal working relationships and the their worker identity (Aronson & Smith, 2011). Even without such shifts, the subjectivities we bring to our professional practice may not be easily identified but they do exist. The challenge for social workers is how to develop the ability to identify how institutional changes influence professional interactions.

In the organizational context, managers, frontline and other professional social workers struggle with the use of self as their multiple identities challenge their professional practice. For example, Kumsa (2007) encounters issues of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality identity playing out in her interaction with clients. Morrel (2007) struggles with gender, race, and professional competency. Others connect these struggles to the importance of critical self-examination (Kondrat, 1999; Lafreniere, 2007; Mandell, 2008) and possibilities of improved ethical practice (Coleman, 2012; Weinberg, 2007). I argue that social identities are issues in the use of self that social workers encounter at the most routine level of everyday practice. When workers experience structural disadvantages, it influences the way they work (Macclean & Webber, 2015).

Adamowich et al, (2014), report that social work practitioners express "intense tension between their ethical responsibility to confront power and the invisibility of their own privilege"

(p.138). In this study, power was among the major themes that emerged through participants narratives. Weinberg (2007) affirms that “the use of self is one of the thornier and more elusive concepts in practice, often under theorized and assumed” (p. 213). She states, however, that the use of self “can be an instrument to move toward ethical relations in practice” (p.213). Self-reflexivity in social work practice is a recommended approach to how workers engage with conflicting positions in practice.

### **Social Positioning**

The construct of positioning has its origins in marketing where it meant strategies for communication that would allow product placement with competitors (Van Langenhove & Harré,1994). It was the strategy of communication was to distinguish between products by positioning one favorably against its competitors based on key features or hetaeristic. In the context of social interaction, individuals take positions that present particular identity or features in a particular context. Meaning is ascribed to behaviors when people position others and themselves and make them comprehensible within the context of a conversation (van Langenhove & Harré 1999). Therefore, social positioning is contextual. A shift in context influences how individuals are positioned as the conversation unfolds.

Hollway (1984) introduced positioning to the social sciences, stating that discourses make social positions available to be taken up by individuals and groups (p.236). She further posits that social positioning is relational as meanings are made through the available discourse in social interaction between people. While Hollway used social positioning to understand gender differences and subjectivities, others have expanded the theory to broader areas of human interaction (e.g. 90; Harré 1991; Howie & Peters, 1996; van Langenhove & Harré, 1991; 1994).

Van Langenhove & Harré, (1994) describe social positioning as “the use of rhetorical devices by which oneself and other speakers are presented as standing in various kinds of relations...includ[ing] relations of power, relations of competence, moral standing” (p. 362). These relations imply that people are embedded in larger discourses and they position themselves and be positioned by others in ongoing ways that produce their social realities. This shows that social positioning is a fluid process as opposed to the static construct of role taking in social identity. Extending this process, Howie and Peters (1996) describe three processes known as discursive practices: 1) conversation, 2) institutional practices, and 3) societal rhetoric. This views people as locations of social act and discursive practices as ongoing processes happening at the interpersonal, institutional and societal levels. Narratives in everyday conversation have storylines that are embedded in larger societal rhetoric and they indicate how individuals relate to and position each other in their daily encounters. However, people can also position themselves and others in terms of their individual attributes (Howie & Peters, 1996; Van Langenhove & Harré,1994). In my study, it is the combination of these social processes and personal attributes that offer a framework to examine social positioning through the experiences of racialized minority social workers.

In the context of social work, a study carried out on a Swedish social work text examines how differences were created and how the social positioning of the authors around gender, race and class was normalized (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011). According to this study, “taking on a position also always creates a particular way of knowing” (p. 547). In their analysis, Fahlgren and Sawyer examined positioning in the discourses embedded in the writings of social work authors. By doing this, they contextualize social positioning and reveal its link to scenarios of individual encounters. How the authors positioned themselves in their writing influenced the

ways in which readers understood the text. This power of positioning is an invisible force that may be taken for granted. As Fahlgren and Sawyer argue, “when not explicitly stated, knowledge position can become a powerful force in creating a discursive truth that might not be taken seriously” (p. 547).

For me, this validates that the positions we take up in social work practice may be invisible but they are also linked to our ways of being, meaning making and understanding. To me, this is how we produce similar discursive truths and create knowledge. I argue, therefore, that the storylines in our conversations and how we position ourselves and others in our everyday practice link us to our professional institution and to the larger societal discourses about gender, race and age at the same time. Perhaps the same process of creating discursive truth can be said when analyzing experiences of racialized social workers and how they are positioned and repositioned, thus creating unique ways of knowing that is internalized for social workers.

### **Identity and Positioning**

For the purpose of my study, then, I have identified key studies to connect the dots between the theories of social identity and social positioning and to explore theories of social positioning in organizational contexts.

To start with the conceptual link, I draw on Elejabarrieta (1994) who uses the lens of positioning to articulate the relationship between social identity and social representations. As he asserts, the fact that the use of social positioning “is restricted to the field of interpersonal discursive practices should not lead us to think that it is the only conceptual level on which the notion can be placed” (p. 247). This validates the study of Howie and Peters (1996) that delineates three levels of discursive practice at the interpersonal, institutional and societal levels.

As Elejabarrieta warns, it is dangerous to assume that discursive practices are created in an organizational and socio-structural bubble. It is through everyday life that individuals slip in and out of different positions that are far from random. He sees these localizations as intentional and strategic systems of communication. In this light, then, positioning is negotiable within social structures and is more intentional and fluid than ritualistic and static. Social positioning can express identity and action as well as allow individuals to be active in creating a space in which identity can be expressed (Elejabarrieta, 1994, p.248). I use this sense of positioning and identity in my study to examine the narratives of participants produced within their organizational contexts.

For the empirical study linking social positioning to organizational context, I draw on Menard-Warwick (2008) and Wortham (2004), both carried out in the institutional context of schools. Menard-Warwick views social positioning as “an event of identification in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual” (p.166). In other words, when an individual is positioned by another in an encounter this assignment either supports their reality or goes against it. In her study Menard-Warwick sought to understand events of identification around gendered positioning in the context of adult student employment. She argued that the events of positioning students were directly related to the assumptions about the students that came from the teacher. These events are almost invisible yet their consequences are deeply felt. This also demonstrates strong teacher-student power relations within which identification events and positioning take place. To elaborate this further, Davies and Harré (1990) and Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) identify two types of positioning: reflexive positioning (when individual claim identities for themselves) and interactive positioning (when others assign identities). However, the two types are intertwined, helping us understand how

people position and reposition themselves through interactions.

In the second study, Wortham (2004), examines the processes of “thickening identity” in a classroom setting, which adds another layer to our understanding of identity. Thickening identity suggests the stabilizing of an individual’s identity over time as others repeatedly and consistently position them. Describing a classroom situation, Wortham notes: “The student’s identity thickens over time as various people, including the student herself, position her in mostly convergent ways across many classroom events” (p.169). This student was repeatedly and consistently treated as an outcast by a spectrum of people, which led to her becoming an outcast as in self-fulfilling prophecy. Thickening identity goes contrary to the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. However, it also demonstrates the power of repetition and normalization through which certain identities and social structures are sediment and solidified even through the fluidity of positioning and repositioning. Davies and Harré (1990) elaborate on how people make choices that stem from their history as subjective beings in positioning themselves. Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) posit “in many contexts, certain identities may not be negotiable because people may be positioned in powerful ways which they are unable to resist” (p.250). Connecting the dots, I argue that identities solidify and thicken through the fluid choices of positioning based on past experiences.

### **Moving Forward**

Each of the concepts I examined in this review offer key elements that I take into my study. Moving forward, then, I examine each of them through the lens of social positioning in the narratives of participants. Thus:

- From social location and standpoint theories, I examine the ways in which participants social locations are positioned by oppressive social, economic and political forces. I take the passion to transform oppressive relations and empower vulnerable groups.
- From social identity, I use social positioning to explore both self-categorization and identification, both fluid and solid, both unified and multiple forms of identity.
- From the use of self, I examine how social workers position and reposition themselves in their everyday practice, I examine how they use themselves both in both subjective and objective ways.
- From social positioning, I take the lens through which I explore all other concepts, I examine positioning at all levels: interpersonal conversations, institutional practices, and societal discourses.

### **Research Questions**

To understand the stories of how racialized social workers in my study position themselves in the context of professional practice, I ask the overarching question:

*How do social workers position themselves in practice within their social services organizations?*

To break this overarching question into smaller and manageable research questions, I divide it into four sub-questions as follows:

1. How does the way social workers position themselves affect the way they practice?
2. How do social workers experience their social positioning in the encounters they have at different levels in the workplace?
3. How do social workers experience self-doubt because of the challenges with social positioning in their practice?

4. How do social workers cope with or resist the challenges of social positioning in their practice?



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter, I present the methodology of my study. So, *how do social workers position themselves in practice within their social services organizations?* The methodology of my study is designed to address this overarching research question in ways that create a good fit between concepts and methods but also between who is studied by whom, how, why, where and when. To help me do this, I organized this chapter into six sections. First, I present the conceptual underpinnings and guiding thoughts of my research. Second, I offer rationale for why I used a qualitative method and particularly a narrative approach. Third, I provide an outline of my participant invitation strategies. Fourth, I speak to how I generated the data in the form of stories. Fifth, I present my processes of data analysis. In the final section, I present the ethical considerations that informed and guided my study from Day One.

#### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

I approached this study with a critical lens on social positioning and researcher subjectivities. The root of the study was my subjective experience as a starting point to research. Therefore, I employed a reflexive approach as expounded by Davies et al. (2004). This reflexive approach according to Horsburgh (2003) “acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in both the process and product of the research endeavor” (p.8). I used a narrative approach to capture and analyze the personal stories of participants in the field. Spector-Mersel (2010) argues that narrative research is not simple methodology but a philosophy offering a unique epistemological perspective. According to Riessman (2000; 2008, 2011), the narrative approach is in favor of positionality and subjectivity rather than the assumption of neutrality and objectivity. In other words, my approach was in line with the aim of my research. From this

approach, I believe I can highlight the experiences of participants and bring consciousness to the issues they struggle with while also acknowledging my own subjectivities in the research.

In the context of this study, I aligned with the social constructionist approach. Social construction theorizes that people are agents who weave themselves into their social world by making sense of their environment and making meaning within social relationships (Gergen, 2015). I believe that if social relationships are fraught with inequitable power relations, then our everyday interactions, including our professional interactions in the context of organizations, are riddled with inequitable relations of power. However, our positions within webs of power relations may be invisible to us (Foucault, 1980). This highlighted the importance of making visible our hidden social positioning in my research. I brought aspects of how I was positioned in encounters and how these positions impacted my organizational experience. My research examined the subjective experiences of racialized social workers in a structured environment. As individuals interact within the organization, they learn more of their hidden subjectivities through encounters - that is, their social positioning. The narrative approach elicited stories from participants through the sharing of my own experiences with social positioning in social work practice. This approach helped me understand how participants in my study positioned themselves as well as the factors that influenced this in their daily work.

### **Qualitative Research**

A qualitative study was appropriate for my study in keeping with the social constructionist paradigm and narrative approach. I used narrative inquiry within the tradition of qualitative research to generate stories in the field. The narrative approach focused on stories as sources for theorizing and exploring identities (Spector-Mersel, 2011). This qualitative approach is in keeping with my research need to understand the issue from the perspective of participants

by soliciting their stories (Creswell, 2014). Throughout the study, I could engage with the research participants inter-subjectively and subjectively through this approach.

### **Participant Invitation Strategies**

Once approval was given from the Research Ethics Board, I started reaching out to potential participants who would soon be a part of my study. I sent out a total of eleven (11) invitations to previous work connections and referrals in the field between November 2017 and January 2018. I could invite five (5) participants from social services organizations within the Greater Toronto Area and conduct guided conversations. The rationale for including different social services organizations was to provide differing contexts for analysis. Similarly, my rationale for inviting frontline and managers was to tap into differing perspectives and professional positions to allow for the thematic organization of stories. This strategy allowed me to purposefully invite participants who I believed shared differing perspectives on the research questions (Creswell, 2013) and addressed the research objectives (Palys, 2008). The participant invitation strategy was purposive and occurred within the network of racialized individuals and referrals I previously established in the social services community.

I invited participants based on the following inclusion/exclusion strategies:

- 1) Participants must identify as racialized minority social workers. I decided on racialized minority participants because my study is inspired by my personal experience.
- 2) In addition to identifying as racialized, participants should also have experienced challenges in their workplace with positioning around age, gender and race. I selected these areas based on my experience of social positioning within social work practice.
- 3) Participants should have at least two years of providing social service experience in a social service organization in the Greater Toronto Area. My rationale for imposing a

minimum of two years is because I believe, with a minimum of two years' experience; participants would be able to generate the stories I was seeking.

- 4) Participants should be willing to consent to being audiotaped during our conversation.
- 5) Participants should be able to communicate in English. The rationale for this is that I can only understand English.
- 6) Finally, participants should be willing and interested in sharing their experiences in relation to the research question.

All invitations were sent and received through email. One email invite was sent to all potential participants and included a copy of the information and consent form (please see Appendix B). Interested participants responded to my email with their confirmation of interest and interviews were scheduled. The first five (5) participants who responded to the invite and who met the invitation criteria were selected and scheduled for interviews. There was later one potential participant that responded to the invite after the participant interviews for this research was met. I informed this participant that data collection for the study was already completed and thanked them for their interest to be a part of this research.

Of the five (5) conversations completed for this study, there were four (4) participants that identified as female and one (1) as male, four (4) of them were between the ages of 20-30 and one (1) participant between the ages of 30-40. The participants were in the field for less than ten (10) years working in frontline and management roles in social services agencies in the Greater Toronto Area.

## Data Generation

I generated data for my study through guided conversations. I chose to frame this in the form of a conversation rather than an interview to minimize the power differential inherent in the research context (Kvale, 1996). Interview implied a hierarchy with power resting on the researcher - the researcher asking questions and the participant responding. In my conversational approach, both participants and researcher shared stories. These conversations were conducted with participants at locations identified as convenient for them (please see Appendix E for the conversation guide). Two interviews were conducted at actual workplaces, one at a local library and two at participant's homes. All participants consented to being audio recorded during our conversation and ensured that the estimated time needed for an unobstructed interview was possible. In addition to the guide, I employed various qualitative strategies to encourage the dialogue. My qualitative strategies included: asking additional information, seeking clarity, summarizing and paraphrasing throughout our conversation. Participants were also informed at the opening of our conversation that they could ask questions at any time as it was very conversational. I took brief notes during our conversations followed by detailed notes directly after or within 24hrs of completing the conversation.

Overall, conversations lasted between 38 to 77 mins. The narrative approach I selected allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own words. Sharing my story at the start of our conversation aligned with a reflexive approach to firmly place myself in the process of generating stories (Davies et al., 2004). It also made the implicit explicit and made visible my role in co-constructing the stories (Reissman, 2008; 2011). I also chose to combine my story and experience as a start to the conversation to help me access relevant narratives from participants and generate stories (Reissman, 2008). During the conversations, I focused on those guiding

themes in my conversation guide to facilitate the discussion. I also built on the questions and themes that arose after each conversation for further probing in the next. I transcribed the conversations soon after I completed them. After completing transcription, I moved to analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

In conducting my analysis, I drew on the methods of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) augmented by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Combining these two methods allowed me to interpret and restory the narratives as well as create a thematic procedure of codes and themes leading to the creation of meaning within the stories shared in the conversations. I started analysis by listening to the audio tapes again and again to familiarize myself with the content holistically. Listening to each participant several times gave me a sense of the unique stories of each and the common threads of all stories. While completing transcribing and organizing my notes, I followed Bailey (2008) in considering the process of transcribing as the first phase of qualitative data analysis. Transcribing made the stories easier for indexing and categorizing into themes and subthemes. During transcription, I took copious notes on the side and within my journal as I immersed myself in the raw data.

To be thorough in my analysis of findings, I used the phases of Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis and created processes that outlined the thorough review of the rich data that were generated for the study. Creating processes were aimed at ensuring the credibility of how the data were extracted and analyzed at each stage. In addition, completing this manually warranted a thorough process that supported the analysis framework identified in my methodology. It was truly a peeling away of layers during the analysis. I was very much reminded of an onion and the many layers it has. This analogy captured my experience at this stage of the research. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), the thematic approach "offers an

accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data” (pp. 77). In addition to thematic analysis, Riessman’s (2008) strategies of narrative analysis allowed me to link the personal to the broader social and political processes.

Using the steps of Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis guide captured my approach to analysis as outlined below:

#### *Step one - Getting Familiar with the Data*

Once all the interviews were transcribed, I listened to each audio recording and reviewed the notes to ensure correlation. During the time in which I listened to the audio, I once again took notes of all the interesting patterns within each individual conversation. At this stage I was getting an understanding of the storyline in each conversation and connecting the participants story with my research. I moved back and forth between the transcribed notes and the audio in getting a better understanding of the shared stories in each conversation. During this stage, I too was very reflexive of my own challenges that came up as I engaged with the stories. I recorded in my journal to capture those moments.

#### *Step two - Identifying Interesting Codes*

Within each conversation I started by identifying the codes that were unique to that conversation that reflected the participant’s context and interpretation of their experience. This repeated exercise of extracting codes and creating definitions for them within conversations was completed across all conversations in the order in which the conversations were completed. Next, I moved to creating the data extracts that went with the codes that were identified in each conversation. I created data extracts by using the procedure of emplotment described by Emden 1998b (as cited in Kelly & Howie, 2007). I did this to focus on the responses of participants throughout the entire transcript by removing my questions and comments. I then reviewed the

remaining text to match with the identified codes found initially. Here I physically went through the transcription for each interview writing in the corresponding codes and highlighting each transcript by way of colors. Once I matched the extracts and codes and created the codes definition list, I moved on to reviewing the codes by grouping them to create themes.

#### *Step three - Creating Themes*

Themes were identified as I reviewed the codes within each conversation for similarities. Reviewing the code definition list for each conversation and grouping like codes together based on these definitions created themes. For a deeper analysis in creating themes, I reviewed the extracts to see how the codes were linked by the raw data in terms of occurrence and intersections in the data.

#### *Step four - Reviewing and Grouping Themes*

Once I created and defined themes, I brought together the extracts to support the individual themes. This entailed a back and forth with the data extracts, the transcript, and the code definition sheet. At this stage, I started to summarize and group the data extracts connected to the themes. I was very focused on ensuring that I was respectful of the participants' views and my own subjectivity in deciding what to include and what not. The first draft of the summarized findings for each conversation initially had limited representation of my voice in the writing.

#### *Step five- Refining and Defining*

After a preliminary report of the individual conversation findings and analysis, themes were further refined and merged to create major themes and sub-themes. The refining and defining came from the back and forth with the data looking at repetitions and similarities. During this time, new definitions materialized and new themes were formed thus editing the preliminary findings of each conversation to be more accessible for member checking. My



summary was revised to be inclusive of my voice in the research as well as to complete the analysis.

#### *Step six - Producing the Report*

The conversations were analyzed with a focus on the participant's context and past experiences that were evident in how they were experiencing social positioning in their practice. According to Riessman (2008), "Personal narratives provide windows into lives that confront the constraints of circumstances (p.24)." To capture the rich stories of participants, I organized the major themes and sub-themes to capture each participant story in a separate chapter in the findings section. The findings chapter for each participant represented a collection of stories instead of one story. There were stories within and around the themes and sub-themes and this is where things got complicated. Understanding the beginnings and endings of participants' narratives is an interpretive task that can be complex (Riessman, 2008). As they emerged in the findings, each of the participant's stories were captured around the major themes. At this stage, I participated in the co-creating of the meaning within the stories shared by including my own voice along with selected extracts to support the findings that were unique from each conversation. Storytelling is collaborative and assumes an interaction between the tellers and listeners and questioners (Riessman, 2008). I incorporated the first-person voice as well as that of a storyteller to invite readers on the journey I went on with each conversation. Storytelling has that power to bring people in to listen (Riessman, 2000). As I further analyzed the findings and moved to the discussion, I went back and forth with the literature to see how my findings were compared to earlier studies. I also sought out new research to support some of the unique findings. According to Riessman (2000), "There is no canonical approach to validation in interpretive work, no recipes or formulas (p.22)." The interpretive eye and approach I have

brought to the narratives of my conversations in the field captured the experience of the participants to the best of my ability. While a detailed analysis of the conversations was not the case of this research rather than the context of stories and experiences, I believe that interpretative aspect of narrative analysis aided me in the study of personal experiences and meaning making (Riessman, 2000).

Further, to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, I solicited feedback by member checking within the conversation initially. I aim to provide participants with an executive summary of the analysis for feedback before my defense. Pre-selected quotes used in the analysis are a part of the summaries to be sent to participants for approval. This consent to use quotes was done by email. (See Appendix F for email template). Throughout this study, I kept a reflexive journal to keep track of the process and my own subjectivities in the research. I have incorporated those insights of my reflection into the final chapter of this thesis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research followed the ethical considerations applicable to any research conducted within the faculty of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University. In other words, this research was submitted to and received clearance with the Research Ethics Board (REB) of Wilfrid Laurier University. Clear guidelines in the form of an informed consent with all information pertaining to this research was prepared and shared with participants before consent and then reviewed once again before the actual conversation in the field (Please see Appendix B). A demographic sheet was also prepared and shared with participants at the beginning of our conversation (See Appendix D). At the start of each conversation in the field, a review of these guidelines was done and participants were yet again reminded that the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any point. Before we started the conversation, participants were cautioned against any

emotional response to prompts or questions in our conversation. I reviewed the steps we would take to ensure they are taken care of if assistance was needed, to connect with community resources or if we needed to take a break in our conversation. Instead of providing a list of these places as planned, I confirmed what connections in the community participants were aware of if they needed support. I thought this was a better approach as these were professionals in the field and I did not want to take for granted they did not know of resources they can access. It turned out to be a good approach as participants were first to mention their internal organizations' employee assistance program as an option. One additional helpful reminder at the start of the conversations in the field was that participants could ask questions throughout our conversation. To ensure confidentiality as much as possible, participants selected pseudonyms for themselves.

Besides institutional ethics board, I also addressed ethical concerns around my own positioning as a researcher. This being a research on positioning, addressing this concern of ethics becomes very important. To address my positioning in places of power and privilege, I kept reflexive notes to strengthen my critical self-reflection. Throughout my interpretation of participants' stories and analyzing data and organizing themes, I checked and cross checked the power inherent in my meaning making and definitions. In addition, the direct quotes I use in this thesis will be checked and approved by participants to protect their anonymity. Participants will also have an opportunity to review the findings section related to the stories they shared prior to my completion of this thesis. All participants will receive the final approved copy of the overall research findings.

## **SECTION II: PRESENTING MY FINDINGS**

In this section I present the findings of my study. I have organized these findings into five (5) chapters. I dedicate a chapter to the stories of each participant. There are main themes and sub-themes within each chapter. I have used direct quotations from participants throughout the chapters to give strength to and highlight the identified themes.

I could not have engaged with the rich data from this research by not taking into context the unique experiences of each participant individually before examining the collective and shared experiences that emerged across the entire data set. I will discuss the analysis from across conversation in the next section on Connecting the Dots.

In this section on findings, I present Bell's Story in Chapter 4, Becky's Story in Chapter 5, Caroline's Story in Chapter 6, Cat's Story in Chapter 7, and Tristan's Story in Chapter 8.

## **Chapter 4: Bell's Story**

In this chapter I present Bell's story in four themes. Bell is a young Black woman in her late 20s. She has been in the field of social services for over 5 years and worked in both frontline and management positions in different agencies. At the time of our conversation, Bell was a frontline worker. She strikes me as a very reflective worker. During our conversation, she shared that there were many realizations that came up in the moment for her and she was not afraid to acknowledge them. It was refreshing to listen to her realizations because I too learned from her and realized that our conversation grew richer and more interesting. Bell reminded me a lot of myself when I started in the field. Her hard work and perseverance as well as being very focused on succeeding in whatever she puts her mind to was admirable. She was very relaxed during our interview which led me to relax and our conversation to be more organic.

The four main themes from our conversation were Positioning Self, Positioning Race, Positioning Gender and Intersectional Stories. Positioning Self has three sub themes: Self-doubt, Self-care and Staying motivated. Positioning Race has three sub themes: Repositioning Race, Inspiring Role Model and Appearing Young. Positioning Gender has three sub-themes as well: Unfavorable Female, To Speak or Not to Speak and Complex Gender.

### **Positioning Self**

For Bell, positioning self has layers of meaning. Sometimes it means that she has a strong sense of self-awareness and she is grounded in this awareness when she positions herself in her interactions with others. Other times, however, positioning self is a surprise to her as she responds to how others position her in her interactions with them. Still other times, positioning self is a repositioning of self through her encounters with others, which has both positive and

negative feelings attached to it. Positioning self is very important for Bell. It was a common thread throughout our conversation and it captured many reflective moments.

For Bell, positioning self when she is grounded in the solid self-awareness of who she is came as delightful and cherished movements. It gave her a sense that she was in control. It also meant that she was aware of how she was positioning herself in her interactions with others. Her self-awareness was also the basis of her strength. It gave her energy to reassert this sense of who she is when others challenged and rocked her positioning of self. All these aspects of self-awareness came up for Bell as she was responding to questions and reflecting on her professional encounters and making sense in the moment of our conversation.

Bell often felt misrecognized in some work encounters. She felt people did not remember who she is or what she said. In these moments, she found herself reflecting on whether she was bad at building strong connections and whether she was so unimpressive that people would not remember her. Grounded in her strong self-awareness, she retreated into the comfort of thinking that this misrecognition was outside of her control; it was not connected to anything she did or did not do in the interactions. Processing these encounters allowed Bell to ask herself questions and make meaning of her experiences. She realized that being true to herself and positioning herself accordingly is important as it keeps her on her toes. As she asserted, *“I honestly haven't thought it through [laughs]. The only thing I've learned is to just stay true to who I am... I guess maybe that's the learning out of it.”*

She emphasized that having an awareness of who she is as a professional and what she brings to the work should not be changed just because the environment is not receptive or can be challenging. However, there are times when she realizes that her self-awareness is not as solid

and her positioning of self is not fully conscious. Explaining how positioning is a subconscious way of being in social interactions for her, she says:

*It probably is, subconsciously, but I'm not like literally sitting there and be like - you're a black girl. Don't laugh too loud, right? It's not so in your face type of recognition...but in umm subconsciously yes it is happening where you know, again it's understanding your social positioning right?...knowing that you are a certain way and people already have a stereotypical umm preconceived notion of how you should behave and what kind of, what you bring to the table so umm, and it's always kind of, and I guess yes it is very subconscious.*

At times, Bell's conscious positioning of self is manifested in her sense of dressing for different settings in the workplace and how she considers the minute details of her hair styles.

Describing how she dresses when she enters work related meetings, Bell says:

*So I am African of African descent and I love wearing my African print. So at any given opportunity I will be rocking African print somewhere, somehow, but if we are going to a meeting where it's like umm heavily Caucasian-populated, I will tone it down. I will tone it down several notches. So I will be in the beige or I will be in the black and whites because I am going with umm two other managers who I know are going to be dressing like that. So I don't want to be questioned.*

I believe Bell's response in how she positions herself is connected to the norm within her environment around dress and appearance of what is acceptable and what is not. This norm forces her to not want to stand out. Bell is proud of her cultural upbringing but also wants to ensure she is not standing out and she does not exit herself from the norms of her profession. Reflecting further on how it feels to stand out in a meeting, she says: *"I didn't want to appear*

*LOUD..and I find African print is loud. Its vibrant and its energetic and its like...its screams in your face almost.”*

Speaking of her appearance and the implications of how she wore her hair, Bell sees a clear contradiction. It was as if the attention she seeks is not the attention she receives. How she positions herself is not how others position her. The longer she stays in the field going through the frustration of this back and forth positioning and repositioning of self, she accepts the contradictions she feels and finds a bitter-sweet balance in repositioning herself. Expressing this bitter-sweet balance, she says: *“I started to just not care. But even at the point of not caring, I would still care a little bit. So, I will wear my fro...but it would be a tamed fro.”*

She cared and she didn't care at the same time. For her, this conflicting way of being was not easily articulated, yet it was evident in how she positions and repositions herself in her encounters. I believe that our conversation was doing more for Bell in the moment as she came face to face with some of the experiences she had not thought of in depth. When asked how these experiences might have affected the way she worked, she said: *“I don't think I would say I approached work differently. I approached interactions with those people differently.”* This spoke volumes to me because she had become aware of context and positioned herself based on who she was interacting with.

### *Self-Doubt*

For Bell, self-doubt was an automatic place that she went to when she experienced these not so comfortable encounters that caused her to question herself. She considered race, gender, age and what she brought to her interactions in terms of skills and qualification to her work. When she felt misrecognized she doubted herself almost immediately in all these aspects of her identity. Self-doubt triggered feelings like she didn't belong. When she doubted herself, she



questioned whether she belonged in the environment and what she was doing there. Sharing what happened in one such encounter where her role at the time was a manager and she was not acknowledged, she said: *“It had me questioning myself like am I not doing something right? Am I not dressing the part? Am I not speaking the part? What is it? Am I not tall enough? I did wear high heels?”*

It was as if someone like her could not have been in a position like that based on merit and education. The mental checklist pointed me to the direction that this is something that happens often to Bell. She signaled that these were things she was very mindful of as she positioned herself daily. The fact that she felt self-doubt also meant that she felt there was something about the way that she was presenting that was not connecting in that interaction with the others. Such self-doubt was not her first road. It was a well-trodden path that brought out the contradictions of self-doubt and self-awareness yet again. Even through self-doubt, Bell stayed self-aware in the comfort of who she is and drew energy from it to question back the questioners and reposition herself.

The work of trying to prove her smartness is continuous for her just as overcoming the emotions that arise is, as she states: *“I’m always trying to prove that - NO I’m smart! Listen to me! I am SMART! [laughs] Like why do I have to?”* Wow! That’s all I could say because Bell speaks to my own experience so deeply. I wish I knew the answer to that question. Even if I knew, would my reality be the same as hers? I don’t know. For now, listening and understanding her way of making meaning and questioning these encounters will have to suffice.

### *Self-Care*

For Bell, self-care meant learning and understanding her environment as well as teaching and sharing with others. This was how she ensured she was taking care of herself as she

navigated the work environment. She also acknowledges the mentors in the field who support her to continue to do the work she is doing and her hopes to achieve her dreams in the future. She marvels at opportunities of sharing with other minorities these struggles so that they in turn can be aware and learn from her experiences. The thought of sharing is both self-care and other-care for Bell and it contributed greatly to her mental wellbeing. Reflecting on the importance of learning from experience and sharing that learning, Bell says:

*My experience comes from learning from other people... just learning from experience...like not even learning in school or anything like that. Obviously, I went to school, but a lot of the things that stick, I should say, umm...came from learning either from someone else or from experience and I've always said that a lot of things that I struggle with, it's because I had never heard that story before or umm I'm just not familiar with someone who has ever dealt with this before. So, if I can make it one less story for somebody else then great - let me share, right?*

This was an interesting take on learning within the environment. The fact that Bell was learning from within her environment spoke volumes to how she was making meaning of her experiences with positioning self. It also spoke to her response to the mispositioning of others and her repositioning of self to tell a different story for other racialized workers and clients. The other message here is that past experiences do play a role in how she positions herself now. Like self-awareness, sharing is also intentional and even funny for Bell, as she reflects:

*So, I used a lot of these difficult moments. I just kind of shared them as a funny story to go like, "guess what happened? Remember so and so and so that I met at...I met at so and so? ...Ya they didn't recognize me this time round. But they recognized so and so!" Right so we, it...it became kind of like a funny thing.*

Within this extract I started to connect the dots of what sharing meant for Bell. She was learning from her experiences but she did not want to be positioned as powerless. By sharing she was repositioning herself and telling her story in a more powerful way to others. She wanted these moments to display strength and inspire others to learn and to be strong in the face of such difficulties. Bell was sharing from a place of hurt I could tell. It would seem over time she recognized how she had grown and how her response differed now. She went on to say,

*You develop a thicker skin...that's...my way to respond to it... I develop a thicker skin so I don't internalize it too much, but then I come and talk to the youth about it. My hope is that when they encounter something similar, they too are able to develop a thicker skin about it.*

Perhaps developing a thicker skin is perseverance and resistance. Strength that pushes her forward instead of hurt that pulls her down. Repositioning from a place of hurt and powerlessness to one of confidence and feeling accepted, is the epitome of self-care.

There is a refreshing way in which Bell articulates the challenges she experienced around positioning. Her reflexive persona made it more engaging. It comes as no shocker then that she calmly recounts one poignant realization in taking care of herself: *"I've done what I can. I've given as much of me as I can. And I can't give anymore. So, I left. It was time."* This was powerful and loaded with meaning. For Bell, sometimes taking care of yourself is realizing when to let go when the environment is no longer working for her. I sensed that she had transitioned from a previous position and reflected on what she had experienced, how she coped and how difficult it was to make that final decision to take care of herself. This realization was very powerful and inspiring for me. When things don't work, it hurts. Let go! That is self-care.

### *Staying Motivated for the Clients*

Having high hopes, being confident in the environment, feeling represented, working hard and doing it for the clients were some of the threads woven into Bell's meaning of staying motivated in the face of the challenges she experienced. These threads were a part of her coping strategy of feeling comfortable in the environment. Describing how she was excited and passionate about the work she did with youth and how she never let that suffer, she says:

*So, in my previous work, it was definitely the youth. Like the clients themselves... Literally I would wake up every morning and I'm like "I don't feel like going to work today!" I'm like, oh but no I need to check up on this and this person. I need to make sure that the team has this and this because if they don't then that's not good...ok fine I'll go.*

This demonstration of struggle she shared here was enlightening for me. I felt that here I could see the tension between one's internal struggle imposed by the environment but also the passion and connection to the work being done. I felt here that Bell had to put those feelings aside and put her clients' service above what she felt in response to these challenges. What kept her going is how much she was aware that the clients needed her. Perhaps this is an awareness that she needed the clients too for her own professional identity. However, she was driven by their success and this pushed her to work harder, as she expressed this in further detail:

*How it impacts them was a HUGE motivation for me. It would be like if I developed a program that was for umm for youth who have been involved in drug dealings to develop entrepreneurial skills and just even talking about it to some of the youth before we even launched the program and how excited they were and how they could like tell you straight up how it's going to affect them was like, ok fine this is literally why I spent two weeks of sleepless nights trying to put together that grant.*

Her caring personality really came out here and I saw her passion for serving the vulnerable youth. There was no doubt after this statement that her dedication to client success and outcomes were a part of keeping her motivated in the environment despite her challenges. Her tone spoke volumes as she shared these reflections. I couldn't help but wonder how painful it is when she feels misrecognized, yet continues with high hopes.

### **Positioning Race**

Positioning race was a common theme in Bell's stories and it is connected to how race was implicated in her encounters. Positioning race meant that stigmas attributed to Bell being a black female worked against her being accepted in the environment. Race first appeared in our conversation when we spoke about social interactions and the environment and how Bell felt like she was always trying to prove herself. This was also connected to being black and young. Where age and race intersected and influenced both how Bell positioned herself and how she was positioned by others.

### *Repositioning Race*

Bell shared how aware she was of the racial stereotypes that followed her and how they were interpreted or misinterpreted in social interactions even in simple expressions of everyday affect:

*I don't want to start irritating people with my laugh [laughs] so i'm like, ok no, watch yourself...but umm...maybe I don't know...it's because I don't want to be known as the loud black girl... Because you do know that you're a black woman. You know that...so how you see yourself as a black woman is different from how somebody else would see*

*you as a black woman. So what you don't know is how somebody else is seeing this black woman. Right?*

This is a hard place to be. Bell was repositioning herself in her interactions and her actions complimented this position. She was aware of the stereotype of how Black people laugh, as if there was a formula for laughter. Bell attempts to bust the stereotype by watching herself and refraining from laughing. By doing this, she repositions race and redefines the meaning of how Blacks laugh or not laugh.

Bell shares another frustrating experience at being singled out because she is black during a social event she attended along with two other racialized colleagues. The conversation was going well until a White woman began to question who they were and why they were there at the event in a suspicious way that left Bell silenced.

*Why are we so interesting? Right? I noticed that as we were talking to her and I realize I stopped talking and I let the other two people just continue most of the talking and I just kept looking at her face.*

It was clear that in this encounter Bell exercised great self-restraint. I thought, by repositioning her racialized self differently as the self-restrained calm black woman, she busted the stereotype of the angry black woman. Busting stereotypes for her is not being who the environment wants you to be, as she explains, *“Cause you don't want to be that rude black girl.”* This is exactly how presenting as the calm self-restrained black woman was repositioning race for Bell. She was frustrated in the moment but she was also very aware of the power dynamics in that encounter as she looked at how her racialized colleague and herself were positioned by the White woman.

### *Inspiring Role Model*

On a positive note, Bell mentioned how being a role model for the youth she worked with was an opportunity for her to position race positively. In positioning herself as a young Black woman and manager at the time, she described how she inspired youth as a role model:

*I worked with youth who looked like me ... clients who looked like me...so black youth. A lot of female youth..I started using my position almost as a motivation for them. Because they haven't seen someone that looks like them in that position doesn't mean it doesn't exist. So, I kept reinforcing that it exists. It happens - you can do it. You are just as smart, you are just as talented, you are just as skilled. Don't let anyone question your skills but know that those questions will come and prepare yourself to respond to them. Be sure of who you are.*

I found this inspiring as I listened. I could hear Bell's sincere dedication. She had discovered a way to reposition herself with a focus on those that were looking up to her. Her narrative provided insight into how she hoped to be positively positioned as a racialized worker and how she would like this to inspire Black youth who are looking at her. Once again, despite her own challenges she had a client-centered focus that was evident throughout her work.

### *Appearing Young*

When Bell felt race was at play in encounters, she felt it went along with her age at times. She saw within her environment advantages of positioning herself as young and black. Appearing young meant that her others positioned her as someone with less experience and qualifications in the field as well as not having attained the maturity that is expected in her role. Appearing young also spoke to Bell's physical attributes connected to race that she felt made her

look younger. She felt more connected to the clients, as she was just a few years older in age and felt that it worked in her favor to connect with them and better serve them. Positioning as young, she didn't feel challenged with her age. She noted:

*I was like about 10 years older than most of them, so they made me feel old, [Laughs]...it actually worked in my advantage because I was slightly closer in age to them than the other managers were so I was able to connect with them a lot more.*

As Bell made the connection here with her age and how it positioned her in relation to the youth, it made me think of the vulnerable populations that are served in social work and how at times workers can feel far removed from the clients' circumstances. In Bell's case, she was leveraging the opportunity of her appearing young to positively position race. Here, race and age worked in an intersectional way, creating an opportunity for Bell to inspire the youth she worked with.

### **Positioning Gender**

Gender was paramount in our conversation on how Bell experienced and made meaning when positioning herself. This theme spoke to times when gender was implicated in how Bell was unfavorably perceived in relation to her male colleagues in the workplace. There was a comparative way in which male versus female roles were favored in her workplace that caused her to feel misrecognized and overlooked because she was female.

#### *Unfavorable female*

Feeling challenged by the gendered role of the manager that positions the female gender unfavorably, Bell found herself repositioning the female manager by dressing up like her male co-manager to enhance her compromised female position. She reflected:



*I really just thought it was something that I wasn't doing enough to put myself out there. So I tried to maintain my appearance a certain way ...and like he was always in a suit so I always had to be dressed up even on days when I didn't feel like it. I was like no you have to, you're a manager, you just have to, right? ... I had to do it because he was always in a suit and a tie...so those were the things I would think about...to make sure that I am keeping myself up there.*

It became a 'have to' for her when showing up for work and going the extra distance to reposition gender and prove she belonged there in that position of the manager. This statement said it all. It also showed that she felt she was not being positioned as a manager because of her gender. She repositioned by changing her dress to hopefully be granted that same respect that her male colleague was receiving.

### *To Speak or Not to Speak*

In these moments she brought to memory how she would internally dispute how she was responding or not responding to gendered positioning that she felt is steeply skewed against females and minorities. This sub-theme spoke to the times when Bell was conflicted in how to respond to gendered positioning. She recounted in a meeting when her male colleague was very vocal and she felt the need to respond but couldn't in the moment:

*I have this voice in my head that keeps saying "Say something! Say something! Show them that you're smart! Show them that you're here!" But then I would have to silence and be like NO I don't want to speak just for the sake of speaking. Which is what I find he does a lot of. So, he would talk just to talk. And I'm like I only want to open my mouth if I have something valuable to contribute. I always have that battle in my head like, who cares about something valuable right now, just says something!*

Bell is a very reflective worker. As she shared these thoughts, I realized just how aware of herself she has become in these types of interaction. She recognized how her male colleague was positioned within the workplace and when she came face to face with struggling to position herself she was stunned. It was as if her silence was her only refuge in those moments yet her mind was contemplative of acting. I didn't know how to respond to this as she shared. I didn't know what to say. Even if I did, I knew my reality and context would certainly not do justice to hers. It was another listen-and-take-it-in moment for me.

### *Complexifying Gender*

Bell's positioning of self around gender was complex. She realized soon who she connected more with and who less. She described this as being obvious in her social interactions:

*So why is it different for some and not for others? Maybe I am not getting something right. I had stronger connections with women partners than with men. Women of color partners actually, than with men...especially white men. I still had good connections with even white women but white men was just like...yeah.*

Gendered positioning for Bell seemed two-fold. At times she felt questioned by others as to how she got to her role as a female and she was also feeling in competition with her male colleague. Truly past experience has brought her to this stage where she still anticipates how she will be challenged by gender.

### **Intersectional Stories**

The theme of intersectional stories depicts Bell's simultaneous experiences of age, gender, and race. This theme was present throughout our conversation and in many of Bell's encounters. For example, here is what she expressed in one poignant example:

*I have also even had umm someone straight to my face questioned how I got to management and they umm they made insinuations of a sexual nature and I wasn't offended surprisingly enough because it wasn't the first time someone has jokingly said something like that. I was like I know how I got where I got, I know my skills and my experience got me there. I wonder when that person questioned me directly...umm I asked them back, "Did you think of my male co-manager how he got where he got?", and she was like well yeah! He is smart no?*

Bell felt that she was being compared to her male co-manager in a way that demeaned the credibility of her professional growth thus far. The assumption was that he is smart and she is dumb; he became a manager because he is brilliant whereas she climbed that ladder by using her sexuality. It is the sexualized and racialized young Black women that complexify race, gender, and age and call for intersectionality. These intersections were affecting the way in which she was being positioned by others. Being a young female Black manager was an uphill battle, it seemed. Bell didn't feel as challenged with her age alone. Her youthfulness was a bonus as she connected with the clients and felt she had an added edge in working with racialized youth. She went a step further and saw herself as a role model and provided support for youth. Bell repositions within these intersecting experiences in ways that propel her forward.

## **Chapter 5: Becky's Story**

In this chapter I present Becky's story in five (5) themes. Becky is a Black woman in her late 20s who has been in the field for over 5 years. Becky has worked in many areas primarily with the most vulnerable of populations as a frontline worker. She sees herself as someone who empowers her clients and is motivated by their success. She is a hard worker and is committed to climbing the ladder of success within the social services field as a role model for other racialized workers coming into the field.

The five themes of her story are: Positioning Race, Intersectional Stories, Positioning Gender, Positioning Self and Staying Motivated. Positioning Race has three sub-themes: Repositioning Race, Busting Stereotypes and Always Adjusting. Positioning Self has two sub-themes: Self-Care and Self-Doubt. The final theme, Staying Motivated has two sub-themes: Doing it for the Clients and Finding a Place.

### **Positioning Race**

Race was the common theme that ran through our conversation and was connected to Becky's meaning of positive and negative racializing experiences. This theme also meant stigmas of being Black. This theme was highlighted clearly from the onset of our conversation. As a general response, Becky, thought it is always a factor in the reality of racialized workers. Positioning race for Becky was also connected with the stereotypes of racialized minorities experiencing challenges around stigmas and assumptions of a racialized worker. Race for her is always at play in how she positioned herself. She says, *"I unfortunately see race play out in a lot of different spaces and not in the favor of those that are racialized or marginalized."*

The underlying message here is that positioning around race was inevitable for the racialized worker. Racialized workers' encounters are dictated by race which creates unfavorable outcomes and Becky sees it as unavoidable. She is implying this based on her past experiences and what she sees in the environment. For her, race figures not only face-to-face interactions, even telephone meetings in the workplace are not immune to race, as Becky remembers: *"You can't necessarily tell am I black or am I white. What am I? So, there's always the anxiety going into meetings. Like do you know I'm black."*

Becky expressed this in the context of a telephone meeting with a community partner she was meeting for the first time. This was frustrating for Becky because she gets asked about her ethnicity, which has nothing to do with her professional expertise, but it gets in the way of her ability to create work relationships and community partnerships. This was creating anxiety before planned interactions and Becky gets nervous going into meetings. She reflects on how, after getting to know her and her work, colleagues would vocalize their thoughts of how they positioned her in the past: *"Oh yah the first time we met I thought you were going to be some white girl."* It was clear from Becky's tone that these reflections, while funny to look back and laugh, were not funny at the time and created anxieties around work encounters. Even as she positions herself as professional, Becky admits that she cannot enter working relationships without being aware of how others will position her racially. This awareness shapes how she sees race, how she is positioned by others, and how she positions herself in response. It is noteworthy to note here how race is complicated by ethnicity and how race and ethnicity work interchangeably in positioning race.

### *Repositioning Race*

For Becky, repositioning race means to cut through the all the racializing stereotypes and the unfavorable positioning of others. It means to stay true to her authentic self. More importantly, it also means acknowledging the inevitability of racism but working hard to minimize the risk. As she notes, *“I am already black, I don’t need anything else to work against me. I always have business cards when I go into meetings - I need to feel official.”*

This is a pre-emptive act in which Becky repositions race by pulling out the privileged card of her professional status. Race augmented by professional status breaks the stereotype. By this pre-emptive act of repositioning race, Becky also gets by design what she was denied by default. The extract suggests that race was inevitably working against Becky and she needed to ensure that she was presenting in a way that minimized the risks of potential disadvantage.

Becky goes further in repositioning race by changing her appearance to influence how she is accepted in her workplace encounters. She recounted changing her hair to a lighter color one summer. Although she was not happy with it, her colleagues seemed happy with it, as she reflects: *“I’ve noticed that people feel significantly more comfortable with me.”* Becky notes how this small change to her physical appearance was working to her advantage. In addition to her professional privilege, changing her physical appearance was creating another opportunity of acceptance for Becky as a racialized worker. I note that this change was not Becky’s favorite but because of the positive response she received she was inclined to keep it.

Becky went on to compare her hair changes to how complicated or appealing positioning race can be. Commenting on how people respond to her noncolored hair, she says, *“They can be standoffish like “what kind of black are you?”* Her remarks about repositioning race with her blond hair highlights are complex and fascinating:

*We're ambiguous black. With the afro you are black panther black. It's exactly what I called it, ambiguous black. So, you look at a black person and you're not sure what they are. I think people feel like there's this compliment of "you look mixed". I find it really offensive. I can be black and have curly hair and whatever else it is. So that was something I definitely noticed with strangers, with clients, with employers, with partnerships.*

For Becky, this ambiguity was working to her advantage. This also shows the social and fluid nature of race and how racialized social workers can position and reposition race to make it work for them or to minimize their disadvantage. Here I believe that Becky was speaking to the complicated aspect of race and how physical traits of ethnicities were being lumped and or compared preferentially. By making a radical distinction between "black panther black" and "ambiguous black" Becky is also radically repositioning race by placing "ambiguous black" closer to privilege. Although she is offended by people's comments, she does not shy away from taking advantage of the privilege.

### *Busting Stereotypes*

The challenges that Becky experiences daily in her profession and life is backed by resilience and a focus on "busting stereotypes". By busting stereotypes, I am referring to how Becky responds to the stereotypes and perceptions of blackness imposed by the environment as she seeks to be recognized for the skills and passion she brings to the field of social services. For her, being a superhuman, picking her battles and working hard are all aspects of breaking those stereotypes. How she holds up every day in the face of challenges is important for her and her confidence shows as she remarks:

*Regardless of what I am going through within an organization, personally I have a responsibility to the clients and again it's like that superhuman black girl power...black girl magic, that we constantly have the weight of the world. We feel like the weight of the world on us...so it would be hard for me to let my clients down...even if I am not being supported.*

For her, moving past these challenges is not just a must, but it's also related to an unspoken strength of who she should be as a black female. Repositioning was burdensome, I gather. As Becky sought to bust stereotypes, she was fueled by invisible pressure and her responsibility to clients. I was curious about the superhuman Black girl power, this assumed way of being a Black female with strength. I can imagine how Becky was feeling very pressured to bust stereotypes and exceed the expectations placed on her because of being at a disadvantage. She is focused and I admired her strength as she transported me with her story. Doing good work is without question a professional ethic that Becky holds. She admits she is concerned about how she is accepted and she works hard to not be the stereotypes. Commenting on how she takes on the stereotypes that get thrown her way, she says, *“the one thing that people can't say about me is that I don't do good work. I do great work. So, it shatters some of the stereotypes.”*

Becky was keen on letting her work speak for itself. Working hard and going above and beyond expectations is part of her strategy to go against being positioned as disadvantaged or seen as not being capable. This is not a casual thing for her; it is woven into her professional ethic to always position herself as opposite of stereotypes. As she says, *“you have to pick your battles and let the work speak for itself.”* Her focus for now is on doing her best always.



### *Always Adjusting*

Always adjusting seems to be Becky's way of getting by in the work environment as a racialized minority. Always adjusting meant times when giving into those challenges was the way forward for her. It also spoke the one-sided nature of encounters in Becky's environment where she was expected to adjust in spite of those challenges. She illustrated this as she recounted an incident where there was a dispute with a colleague whom she deemed was being racist in the workplace:

*The response in the meeting was kind of a that's just how it is...that's just how she is and I kind of had to accept it...and it's like she is older - she is from a different ethnic group and it's okay because of those things. Whereas I am younger and newer to the organization. I am also black and blacks are generally known to be a little bit more friendly, more aggressive in the same sense. So, it was okay for her to be that way and I had to adjust to her.*

Becky indicated that this was not an easy thing to do, but she felt that it was something she had to do in the environment when she couldn't control it. I could hear her frustration and how vulnerable and unrepresented Becky felt in this encounter. I couldn't believe what I was hearing as she shared the dissatisfied results of the mediation. How could her workplace be condoning such behavior? Was it that they didn't recognize what was happening? The hurt and pain she must be dealing with amidst all this? Becky's narrative offers me insight into how her identity was being regulated within the context of her workplace. How could this happen? I didn't have the answer but I felt the pain and frustration that Becky expressed as we talked. Always adjusting was recurring in many encounters for her. It was as though there was no choice in the matter in reaching a fair end in her case at times. It's as if the decision was already made

and it is automatic that the racialized worker is the one adjusting continually, as she notes: *“it is unfortunate that I’m the one that has to continuously adjust um to these situations.”*

It was an unfair exchange. There was an imbalance at the depth of positioning race for the racialized worker. This unfair state was not having a positive effect for Becky as a racialized staff. She didn’t feel represented and now found herself in a place of continued compromise and mindfulness that I fear will eventually push her out of the field.

For Becky, always adjusting was not only about handling work challenges. It was equally important in managing how she was positioning herself in other instances such as attending work meetings. Making others comfortable and feeling accepted was a priority as she so boldly stated in our conversation when asked about experiences across work encounters:

*I am constantly having to think of who I am meeting with and who do I need to be to make this a good interaction...which is unfortunate...so you know when you want to look older I wear a suit. When I want people to be comfortable I wear my hair down..It’s a constantly...a chameleon act where I am going.*

This extract from our conversation said a lot to me as I reflected on my own experiences and how I was positioned. As Becky described her actions as being that of a chameleon, it spoke volumes about how often she was adjusting. It made me feel very sad in this moment. I could instantly relate with Becky and I empathized. However, even as she felt that she had to adjust and go with the flow, Becky was still busting the stereotype of the aggressive Black woman and the black panther black woman. And there was no escape, as she shares, *“if you don’t accept you are aggressive, you’re troubling, or you’re all these different things so I’m still jaded.”*

This statement made me realize that Becky’s feeling like she had no choice in response to challenges is not a sign of weakness. Listening to her say, *“I’m still jaded,”* I cannot help but

wonder how complex this is for her. Her description of feeling jaded, despite all the actions she took, said a lot about just how hard the realities of racialized workers can be.

### **Intersectional Stories**

This theme was consistent in our conversation and showed how age and race were grouped in many of Becky's encounters. Appearing young intertwined with the stories and values instilled in her from childhood was how Becky defined the intersections of being young and black.

Even with her "bubbly personality", as she described herself, in sharp contrast to her consistent and strategic quest for professionalism, and with her courage of busting stereotypes daily, she is constantly reminded of her youth and her blackness, and she says, "*there's no winning being in this in-between age.*"

She was reflecting here on her current age and the challenges she experienced working with younger clients as well as older clients. She may have an advantage at times with younger populations but she receives push back from the older population she worked with. Throughout our conversation, she would refer time and again to: "*It's again being young and black*". This showed that she attributed the push backs she received to these two factors in her professional experience. For Becky, age was an advantage and a hindrance at the same time. She was convinced that being older in this instance would make a difference. In terms of values instilled in her from childhood, Becky reminisced how being presentable was always something she was cautioned about as a child, where her mom would say, "*Look like you are somebody's child.*"

Being presentable was a value taught to her from a young age and it stayed with her into her professional life. This instilled way of being as a racialized professional did not come out of thin air. I gather as a child Becky was seeing this push back in her everyday life that pointed to

these intersections. As a Black child growing up in a White society, she was taught basic survival skills. These values were instilled in her from childhood, as Becky pondered:

*Again, it's something that a lot of black kids are aware of. Like you always must be your best in any space. I am not allowed to get angry. Like there's all these things that you go through that you're constantly aware of. My mom's already told me and my sisters, you're already black, don't give anybody anything else to talk about. So, again, that starts at a really young age. You're already black, you're already black, make sure you're this, make sure that you iron your clothes, speak correctly, sit up straight, like, be on time. You don't know why you're doing it but now that you're in the real world, it's like, umm, ya, this is why my mom was crazy about time. This is why my mom taught me to iron at 3.*

These were powerful reflections that captured the childhood reality and the reality that Becky now lives in her professional career. Many things she learned as a child were now having expression or making sense as she is experiencing these intersections. For Becky, the passion that her youthful self brings to the organization is a huge bonus, so she shrugs off the negative reactions saying, *"I am young and I am passionate and so a lot of people feel uncomfortable... but I have learnt that's not my problem."* Becky is repositioning her deeply ingrained values and intersecting identities in positive places in ways that minimize the risks in her encounters.

### **Positioning Gender**

In Becky's stories this theme spoke to challenging encounters she had with being a woman. These challenges were in the context of creating community partnerships for her organization. Positioning gender was also connected to the disparities she saw when it came to women in management position in social services. Becky recalled how poignant gender was at

one point when she transitioned to a more masculine role in her career. It was almost as if being a woman in her position meant she had to prove that she was capable of the job when she says it is like *“going into businesses, going into meetings and always having to prove that I am a female, that I can hang with the boys...I can do all the same things like the boys or the men.”*

Becky needed to prove herself by working hard, going above and beyond to prove she belonged as a woman in that role. Becky felt that she was being positioned in a devalued way as a woman in these encounters. She felt that the male partners at time were prejudiced towards women and she had to toughen up and reposition herself. This experience in building partnerships in the community spoke to the challenges women and racialized workers experience. I believe because Becky was in a position that required her to create partnerships with predominantly male partners that she experienced this. I relate to this experience when I worked in a similar role and partners would jokingly say how surprised they were that I was doing such work. It was as if once again women were not capable of doing their job. I found those encounters very patriarchal and felt I was positioned in a condescending way. I refuted such positioning by becoming very task oriented and driven to succeed.

Becky acknowledges that the profession of social work is dominated by females and that positioning gender was different in other male-dominated fields where the playing field is skewed against women. Women must constantly fight against the stereotypes of their work being less important and serious in comparison to males or their work being overlooked and taken for granted because they were in social services. For Becky, perhaps the limited representation of women in management roles in the field was also a factor limiting her growth and impacting the way she was being positioned. She observed this in the past and expressed that perhaps this too was limiting the view of females in social services.

## Positioning Self

This is another major theme that runs throughout our conversation. For Becky, positioning self was inseparable from self-awareness and mainly, it spoke to the chameleon self described above. Positioning self meant the need to change her appearances and present differently in different contexts and this was fueled by her awareness of societal injustices filtering into her professional encounters. Early on in our conversation, Becky remarked: “*I’ve noticed that people feel significantly more comfortable with me.*” Here, she is referring to her observation of how a change of hairstyle at one time worked in her favor. Commenting on how detrimental constantly thinking of how she is positioning herself in the work environment, she said:

*It takes away from the validity of the work that we do because we have to think about who do I need to present myself to be...to make like partnerships happen, to make this happen, and it's unfortunate. And it's just a part of our industry.*

This was a very unique connection of how her constant positioning of self was impacting her work. Becky was relating this as the reality of racialized workers. Was the work of the racialized worker not given the equal weight in comparison to non-racialized workers? Becky had this awareness of how she was being positioned and being placed at a disadvantage. Thinking of and anticipating this way of positioning self was an everyday experience for her. Whether she is meeting with individuals in the community, working with clients or relating to her work colleagues Becky relates how she has developed a strong sense of positioning herself:

*I think in all of them...in every instance, I have to play a role um...In terms of who am I meeting with...it's the ED. So I need to be this person...I can't always say exactly how I want to say...I have to be politically correct in what I want to say even when I am having*

*an issue with a colleague... which I am having it as we speak...there is a lot of things I want to say but I can't say it.*

I sensed that Becky was also being limited in these encounters that were having an adverse effect on her. Feeling like her voice as a racialized worker was not welcomed or were being restricted was underlying her narrative. Her awareness of how she positioned herself was clear throughout our conversation as she articulated how her appearance changed encounters. She described her thinking process in how she was positioning as sort of a checklist before and after encounters. She expressed the thoughts she would have in some interactions as:

*How was my tone? How was my look? How was this? So just being totally aware of your body language at all time. It's usually one of the first things because I'm black, but then you've got to go through maybe I said this, maybe I did this, maybe this. A lot of times, it is what it is at face value, so it's always trying to not use the race card.*

Becky articulated this process well in how she was making meaning of being positioned. She was checking within and out of what she was doing but also at who she was as a racialized worker. Her tone said that she knew the answer most times but was giving those encounters the benefit of the doubt. This checklist that she spoke of represented the internalized effects of how she was positioning herself in encounters.

Her awareness of who she is comes with her everyday into the work environment and she is constantly negotiating that as she explained later in our conversation: *“I think people would be shocked to hear the level of preparation that black people go through to go to work, to go to meetings, how to conduct yourself on the bus and the train.”*

Becky cares about the people she works with and is always concerned with making a good impression. This preparation speaks of the internalization of these negative experiences that

were now shaping how she navigates the workplace. Because she is aware of herself, she must make every effort to make others feel comfortable with her. I believed that this preparation she spoke of was also strategic. The strength she displayed as she spoke of her self-awareness was immense. She was able to share her frustration, but there was a calmness and a positive way in which she embraced the changes and routines that have shaped her daily interactions. I could not grapple with this at first but I understood it better by the end of our conversation.

### *Doubting Self-Doubt*

For Becky, the subtheme of doubting self-doubt meant it was defined by the experiences of frustration in many ways. For example, when she is misrecognized or when she is overlooked, this frustrates her and causes her to doubt herself and think of how her work was being undervalued and how she was not taken seriously. However, even in her moments of feeling self-doubt, Becky also shows how she refutes those feelings by doubting back those doubts. When I asked her if she ever experienced self-doubt, her response was “*of course*” with a heavy sigh. I could tell that this was not something she liked to express but felt it was inevitable. She said:

*It is again the presentation. But when I know I have to meet clients I am a little bit more dressier. If you ask my other peers here I am the most dressed up person ever but that's because of who I need to be in this space.*

Becky was changing her appearance to make others comfortable but she was also boosting her own confidence as a racialized worker in the workplace. Another relatable experience for me as I reflected on my experience and how appearance was a part of how I repositioned myself but also boosted my confidence and doubted my doubts. Her strength was contagious. Listening to Becky inspired me and I admired her for sharing such strength of



showing up for her work in such ways that were unexplainable in the face of feeling those doubts. It's as if she doubts her doubts and shows up anyways to serve her clients.

Presenting certain ways and being recognized was important to her. She described the dread of her work being questioned and how it made her feel:

*I always have business cards when I go into those meetings. I need to feel official. I went to the grocery store to get funding donations and I didn't have business cards and I felt just the dread that they are not going to believe me. I don't know what to do...you know...Like I felt such dread and again I think it's that I am black and I am young.... But having those cards is you know, I am real, I am somebody.*

At this point in her narrative I realized that how complex positioning was and how it translated into tangible day to day activities that showed how racialized workers are repositioning and pre-emptively positioning to be recognized within their professional identities. Recognition was screaming in Becky's narratives. Recognition that was not based on gaining power but that was grounded in respect and belonging in the workplace.

### *Self-Care*

For Becky, self-care has much to do with feeling supported in her work environment. It also means teaching and sharing with others how to overcome similar challenges when it comes to being a racialized worker in the field. She took the time to educate the volunteers she worked with so that they understand these struggles and what they mean as part of her self-care strategies. She thought: "*So I am figuring out that middle piece of being great but also being good to myself.*" As part of her self-care strategies, teaching others to understand the context of the environment comes across clearly when she says:

*My volunteers are all budding social workers, and so it's really important for me to give them the right information right off the bat so when they do go into another organization, they hopefully don't create the same experiences I've had.*

This sense of empowering volunteers comes from Becky's experiences in the field. In a way she is paving the way for these workers to be aware of how they might be positioned. This also signals how being a role model is also a strategy of self-care inspiring her to continue her work. Becky enjoys creating a safe work environment for sharing with volunteers every chance she gets as part of her self-care. When it comes to external sources, she enjoys supports from family, friends and other mentors who are women of color. As Becky notes, mentors provide a great outlet for her to vent and share stories: *"Well I do have really great colleagues that I do talk to, but then again they are other black people who are sharing the exact same stories so."*

I can imagine how supportive it would be when she is in an environment and she has other workers that identify with her challenges. In addition to these tangible supports and self-care actions, Becky also has a counsellor. She said that her decision to have a counselor is not common among Black women but she felt it was necessary. She values in it and recommends it for others as a self-care tool. When it comes down to the wire with self-care, Becky asks workers: *"You have to pick mental wellness or this position...is it worth it?"*

### **Staying Motivated**

For Becky, staying motivated means the joy of the work she does with clients, the confidence in which she serves clients, the fellowship she enjoys in the workplace with other black managers and frontline staff. All these infuse her 'why' for continuing in the field and lifting her head high every day. When asked about what keeps her going despite the challenges, Becky says, *"I have made it very clear in almost every organization I have been at that I have*

*high aspirations.*” While her aspirations keep her going, working for clients and seeing advancement in her field are also key factors that keep her motivated. She seeks a place where she feels accepted for her skills as a racialized worker.

### *Doing it for the Clients*

For Becky, doing it for clients means, giving the best herself the service of vulnerable people. It means taking her responsibility for them to heart and giving it her all. It also means the ultimate motivation that keeps her going despite all the challenges she faces. When I asked her, how she remains so confident within this environment, she responded:

*I do it for my clients. But that's just really the pure motivation I work with. Incredible women that have been through hell and back ...We are talking about rape, abuse, we are talking about abandonment, we are talking about addiction we are talking about all these crazy things...so it's not fair to them if I am half-assing it. So regardless of what I am going through within an organization...personally I have a responsibility.*

Clients also see her as an influential and inspiring worker. Somehow, Becky manages to not let her own challenges influence the quality or focus of her work in serving clients. This narrative speaks a lot to the environment and perhaps where the most pressures were coming from. Clients are not the source of her stress. This was very clear as she reiterated just how she focused on her work with clients as a means of staying motivated. This leads me to believe that her major challenges came from colleagues and superiors.

### *Finding a Place*

For Becky, finding a place meant creating an ideal work place and work situation where the challenges she now experiences will be minimal, where she can focus on her work and

professional development rather than being pulled down with the stresses of positioning and repositioning. This sub-theme is worth highlighting in relation to self-employment because Becky saw it as a venue where she can create her ideal work place. This was not a common thread in our conversation, but when asked about career plans and moving up the ladder, she had this to say: *“It's like there's just no way to slum it if I don't get the opportunity... unfortunately how much I love this organization or the next one...I have to go; there is no place for me.”*

Becky was feeling out of place. She didn't feel she totally belonged in the environment and it was clear her actions were aimed at gaining the acceptance and recognition she was not receiving. One thing for sure is that a non-diverse environment is not where she wanted to be. She made it clear that working in a predominantly racialized organization was not her end goal. She did not want the challenges of social positioning to force her into an environment that recreated those inequitable conditions. Change is scary, she admits, and I agree with her. For her, making a leap or change is difficult but she is hopeful that she can take it on when she says:

*I don't want to go but if you don't value me the way that I want to be or if you don't see a future for me...you are moving my hand to go. I absolutely must create my own path, create my own place.*

As she seemed prepared to move on to a new place, I asked her if she could find such a place where she can be herself and a bit more at ease. Her response was not what I expected. She said, *“I think the only way I can see it for myself is to start my own business.”* This was new but it is worth noting that entrepreneurship is that path to creating a place of her own. I am curious if there are other racialized workers who have considered this. I have never contemplated this but I suppose being your own boss does put you in a place to create your own path.

## **Chapter 6: Caroline's Story**

In this chapter I present Caroline's story in four themes. Caroline is a young Black woman in her early 30s. She is currently employed as a frontline worker who has been in the field for over 5 years. Caroline presented as very confident person and aware of the struggles in her professional encounters. She portrayed a level of confidence that did not come from any of the other participants as she shared her stories and how she navigates in the field. She struck me as someone who has experienced a lot in her professional career so far. I could tell from the way she shared that her years of experience had a role to play in the confidence in which she presented as we spoke. She was very optimistic about her growth so far and is focused on moving ahead despite the challenges. I admired her boldness throughout our conversation.

There are four main themes from our conversation: Positioning Self, Managing Emotions, Feeling Supported and Positioning Race. Under Positioning Self, there are two sub-themes: Self-Doubt and Busting Stereotypes.

### **Positioning Self**

In Caroline's story, positioning self meant how she presented herself in her work interactions, how others saw her and how she responded. Positioning self is deeply connected to the sense of self-awareness she has developed overtime from past interactions. Caroline was very aware of the positions she held in various encounters in the workplace. Time and experience had taught her a sharp awareness of how she positioned herself around age, gender, race and whatever professional title she had. Her professional roles have always seen her as the first point of contact in any workspace. She was the one clients met as they first entered the office.

Earlier on in dealing with the challenges in social interactions, Caroline realized that she did not accomplish much when she stooped to the same level as the individuals with whom she was in conflict. She reminisced on how her repositioning self became second nature overtime,

*I have learned that because before, I wouldn't smile, I would frown. And then I would begin to you know...kind of be on their level in terms of their rudeness. I have learned to do the complete opposite and then somehow it dismisses whatever tension that's going on.*

In this extract, Caroline sets out by positioning herself as rude in response to others' rudeness and learns how being "on their level" is unproductive. She repositions herself in the opposite and learns how that dismisses the tension. It has taken her some time to come to where she is in her professional positioning and how she navigates it reflects her learning through past encounters. This tells me that past experiences are implicated in the way Caroline was positioning and repositioning herself. It was as if certain scenarios repeated themselves time and again and she knew just how to position herself to not get hurt.

Dress was not a challenge that Caroline experienced in her work. For her, it was her hair changes that were impactful in social interactions. Her hairstyle changes were not all negative but were positive as well at times. According to Caroline:

*For me it was about my hair [laughs]...I love to change my hair. I go from braids to twists sometimes I do afro...sometimes I do bantu knots as they say now and funny enough I have done bantu knots real often when I am going to the center. But when the bantu knots came in it's like they were like [facial expression] " Who are you?" ... Like they did not recognize me...some of the parents you know were nice...some of them were like "oh what's that called in your hair?"*

These opportunities of learning and seeing the effects of her hairstyle changes were golden for her and she used them to teach others to become aware of other lives and life styles. I could tell that the acceptance she received in moments like these were important to her confidence in the workplace. I mentioned this aspect of appearance since this appeared in previous conversations with other participants but had a different response in Caroline's case.

### *Self-Doubt*

This sub-theme was connected to Caroline's self-awareness and came out indirectly in our conversation. Initially, when asked about self-doubt, Caroline shared that this was something she did not experience, as she explained:

*For me I don't have that self-doubt...because where I was before my manager was black and that actually boosted my confidence. I was like ooh she is black...I am black, so I can be where she is. It motivated, it encouraged me. And the fact that she was the type of person I can speak to about anything or ask her any questions she was able to understand me more cause we both were black. We both share the same struggles. Now where I am working my manager is also black.*

Wow! This excerpt almost brought me to tears as Caroline spoke. It wasn't what I expected. A racialized worker in the field that is aware of how they are being positioned but experiencing self-doubt? I stepped back as I took in all of what Caroline said here. I realized that not doubting herself in this moment was connected to feeling like she could be herself because her confidence was boosted by the support from her racialized managers. Having a racialized manager was giving her permission and affirmation to be herself and that made a difference for her. Later, self-doubt surfaced when Caroline referred to times when she sought support from her manager:

*Sometimes I doubt myself...sometimes I wonder...am I saying it the right way you know...like what is it and then I speak to her about it and then she is like " no you are doing everything right, I mean you are doing what you are supposed to do...if they have a problem then you just call me.*

Caroline communicates her doubts here by taking me into her moment of thought. I thought this was powerful because previously she stated she did not express feeling self-doubt. Was this subconscious? This was very eye-opening for me as Caroline reflected on her self-doubt in that moment only and she didn't think it was something she experienced. This tells me that she was subconsciously positioning herself in a moment of self-doubt in another encounter before she quickly repositioned herself as the self-confident professional. This also tells me that self-doubt might not be easily recognized and articulated for everyone.

### *Busting Stereotypes*

For Caroline, busting stereotypes means striving not to respond as expected label. It means being and staying professional in her daily goal to treat all fairly as they access services at the center at which she works. This is very important to Caroline. When she feels she is not treated fairly or is being labeled as a stereotype, she strives to not respond as expected. I could tell by her responses that she has had many difficulties in dealing with stereotypes in her professional career. She volunteered to comment on some of those challenges throughout our discussion but I could tell there were more that she did not want to go into. Her sighs and deep breaths as she responded spoke volumes. Caroline was focused on not conforming to those pressures of being Black. Her self-awareness made her conscious of the stereotypes that were placed on her and she strived daily to not be labelled. This viewpoint of not wanting to be label was interesting as it made me think of my own experiences and how at the core of my attempts at



repositioning was not wanting to be labeled. I think this says a lot for the experiences of racialized workers.

Caroline illustrates just how she repositions herself in moments like these: *“I think just staying professional and not giving them what they expect...Which is attitude, or disrespect...or act...you know acting any kind of way that they expect you to respond.”* Staying professional was more than just the way she acted but it also spoke of her internal processing of positioning and re-positioning herself in encounters. In her own way she has come to an understanding that she will not be the stereotypes imposed on her. As Caroline navigated the work environment, she discovered that her responses during these encounters were important. I think this response of repositioning speaks to an unspoken tension in the work environment that seems to be at work. I say tension because I could tell from Caroline’s tone that her actions came out of intense struggles, although it put her in control of the situation and proved to be what kept her going. I think, once again, past experiences were influencing how she was adjusting to every situation and repositioning herself. Busting stereotypes is also the force driving the resistance that Caroline fought for. Clearly, she understood who she needed to be:

*Because I defended myself it was seen as I was giving attitude or I was being disrespectful and I guess that's why now my coping mechanism is now just a smile. Cause it looks like I can't even respond. Because then if I respond I am being disrespectful or I am giving attitude...so let me just smile.*

Caroline’s account here is powerful as she described this vulnerable moment that paints the picture of the powerless worker on one hand and on the other the worker that is fighting against the grain to regain their positioning. Within this narrative I see how positioning pulls the worker into a to-and-fro scene of who she needed to be and who she knew herself to be. I relate

to this struggle very much here as I reflected on my own discomforts and feelings of defenselessness that were evident in my day to day work.

### **Managing Emotions/Resistance**

In Caroline's experience managing emotions/resistance meant creating balance between feeling down and beaten and feeling the surge of resistance and confidence in challenging encounters. It speaks to her experiences of vulnerability and power in positioning and repositioning herself. The moment we started our conversation, Caroline's confidence was so tangible I was drawn to her. Although at times she felt challenged and misrecognized, she endeavored to stay motivated, do her best and hope to be a role model through teaching and educating others.

Caroline struggled at times with feeling disrespected and hurt when she was not recognized. She recounted how she felt in one instance with a client who was not taking her seriously as she was doing her job: *"I felt hurt... I felt disrespected... I was just surprised to hear it."* Misrecognition does impact the worker's positioning. These were very deep feelings Caroline reflected that reminded me of that moment when I was misrecognized as the receptionist. There was a very clear connection of misrecognition and her surprise comes across as resistance like response. Managing her emotions and work relationships keeps her at peace within the work environment, I gather. In another encounter with a colleague she recalled how she handled herself:

*I didn't want work to be a tense spot 'cause I enjoy going to work...I enjoy the kids that come by and I didn't want this one person to just kill that mood for me... at that time I felt that it was some kind of racism there.*

There was an underlying assumption here as Caroline reflected on how she wanted to be positioned as well as what she felt was happening around race in that one encounter she had. This challenging encounter demonstrates how she manages the negative emotions her coworker brought up in her and her refusal to let go of the joy she feels with the work she does. Her skills at managing these intense emotions is reflected in how she named the situation as racism and repositioned herself against it by refusing to accept the work she enjoys as a tense spot. Her management skills were also reflected in her ability to sense an escalating tension and making necessary emotional adjustments to maintain the rewards she enjoys from her work. In the following extract, Caroline expresses this refusal and resistance in a powerful way:

*I have a path that I am on and I am not going to let anybody distract me from that path because I know wherever I go in life I might have the same problems but I can't let it discourage me in any kind of way.*

She is confident in who she is and believes that this confidence has earned her some respect at work. I am reminded here of how important staying focused has been for me as I navigated many difficult moments. This internal path of hope that Caroline has created is fueling how she was making steps at influencing the positive climate in her workplace. Comparing how she is treated now to when she started in her new work assignment, she states: *“I am comfortable with who I am. The majority of the families, they are much better with me now ‘cause they see me as...’Ooh she is confident, she is in her own skin and she is happy.’”*

I think it's this acceptance that she gets within the environment that inspires her to wear the happy face and continue the joy and hope on her worst of days. By doing this, she aspires to be a role model for other racialized workers. As she describes in the next extract, it is by doing this that she also hopes to motivate her own daughter:

*I keep it going. I just love my culture and I love my people. I think also because I have a daughter now and I want her to also love herself as well and she also has her struggles too when she goes to school...And I had to be the one to motivate her...so while motivating her it kind of motivated me at the same time.*

Caroline's actions here demonstrate yet another powerful scene. I see her using her confidence to educate others. She is not just concerned about being an example for others but she brings it closer to home as she thinks about her young daughter and I see how she too is motivated by this. Indeed, for Caroline, managing her emotions is also connected to her strategy for resistance and coping. She talked about how she smiles a lot and, when I asked her to tell me more about 'the smiles' she explained: *"The smile...it just keeps me calm. It makes me just relax and realize that this is not going to be forever. It's just a couple of minutes. The person will be gone and this is just about being professional."* While this speaks to her use of smile as a coping strategy in moments of intense internal struggle, she also adds firmly that *"behind the smile is a lot."* This indicates that these smiles are means to an end, the end being her goals of resisting stereotypes the end is also participating in the creation of equitable work places and social justice in society.

This is how she deflects the need to conform to a particular stereotype or to not be professional when she feels misrecognized. There is a processing that is happening internally for her as she considers the context and the individuals she interacts with in these moments. I thought this was a unique disguise of how self-management was happening but also how Caroline was processing and responding at the same time. I was curious about her thinking and the act of smiling and asked her to share another instance where she had done this. She explained her thinking after one such interaction:

*I am like okay...you are being racist right now...you are being disrespectful...you want me to be disrespectful but I am not. I am just going to be professional so here is the smile. I give them the smile. And when they see that the smile is just there, they kind of just go "okay" and they either leave or they end up causing a big scene by being extra real loud. I just continue smiling until they are gone.*

This journey into her thinking was very interesting for me. I also could sense and feel the feelings that were being felt as she recounted this moment. Of course, she was smiling as she recounted this but I could also feel her pain beneath her smile. Her smile was protective. It was as if it was her time out place in which she takes her context into consideration and decides which self she needs to present how to position it to move on. How powerful to be able to step aside in a moment and reposition self! I was intrigued and was not taken by surprise when Caroline later admitted that she didn't realize that this was her means of coping and resistance. Now she knows it's her go-to defense mode. The smiling technique is something I had never heard of. How Caroline articulated what this gesture meant for her was unique. There is indeed a lot behind her smile and I sense that it is coming from a place of being challenged and misrecognized and the learned technique serves her in her professional career today. I admire her confidence in who she is and how she is finding her way and sharing her truth.

### **Feeling Supported**

In Caroline's experiences, feeling supported means being affirmed in who she is and being validated in how she positions and repositions herself within her professional encounters. Caroline relied on the support she received from her immediate supervisors. Coming from environments where her superiors were racialized, she felt she had permission to be herself and was comfortable. The support she received made her do her work well. It's the support from her

previous managers that gave her permission to be comfortable in her roles now and not question race, age, gender or professional positions too much.

This experience of having a racialized manager was powerful and explained for me just where she drew her strength to continue and remain confident. To further show the importance of the role of feeling represented in the workplace, Caroline reflected:

*It is interesting when...certain things that come up between parents and me and how they try to make me feel as I shouldn't know too much about the center...Or as soon as they challenge me...or...they don't follow the rules so then they start to say well then I want to speak to your manager...they want to get somebody else to speak to but then when they speak to somebody else and that person is on the same page as me that's already shocking to some people. And upsetting to some people.*

I can tell from her tone in sharing this example that it happens often and she is comfortable in knowing that she has the backing of a manager that believes in her work and encourages her to keep doing the good work she does in serving the clients. She is more confident when her manager is racialized. I did wonder in this moment whether the same confidence would follow if her manager was non-racialized. It would appear a lot was riding on the coat tails of having representation within the environment to feel supported and motivated. As Caroline reflected: *“But when it’s a black manager that comes by my side and agrees with me and says “yes...she is doing everything that she is supposed to do” It's like some people just can't handle it.”*

Caroline needs this validation and she was proud of it. I deeply felt what the actions described in Caroline’s reflection did for her. She had that backing that made her work with full energy. At the end of the day, Caroline appreciated the support she gets and was grateful for the

fact that she can thrive as a racialized worker in what might have been a difficult environment. It was very encouraging to hear that she could be herself in this scenario but also discouraging to think that only Black managers could provide this safe space. Her reflections in our conversation said a lot about her positive demeanor and the pep in her voice as she confidently spoke.

### **Positioning Race**

For Caroline, positioning race means the flexible ways in which she responds to racializing stereotypes. It also means the complex ways in which race intersects with age and gender in her work place encounters. Caroline is positioned as a Black woman in her workplace. This was a common theme in her narrative. She admits early on in our conversation that this does affect the way she works and how social interactions influence her positioning.

It is comments like *"you kind of sound really intelligent"* during work interactions that influenced her self-awareness of how race was at play in the environment. Caroline felt whenever her experience and qualifications are questioned it is not always coming from a good place. Commenting on how self-aware she is in the work environment, she says, *"very aware... Because I work with different people as well you know what I mean...it's very easy to pick up."* Here Caroline is referring to the non-racialized workers she works with. This was very telling of the subtle racializing way in which others position her in the workplace. Further, Caroline also connects race to appearing young, being Black, and societal injustices. Caroline's challenges in social interactions stemmed from not being recognized and she notes:

*And I received comments like "you kind of sound really intelligent" ..I took that as very offensive 'cause I thought to myself...why...what's the problem with me sounding intelligent? Is it because I am young? Is it because I am black?*

There was an uncertainty in her tone here as she could not place why her professional role was being questioned and the way in which she was being positioned in those interactions. Being appraised as intelligent is supposed to be a good thing but what is behind it that offends Caroline? Another lingering question is also who was she supposed to be if not who she was in her role? Was it really race lurking beneath the loaded statements about her intelligence? Was it gender? Was it age? Caroline doesn't know and I don't know but something connected within me and reminded me of my own encounters and having similar thoughts. I feel deeply convinced within me that it was race but I also question myself as to whether race happens outside intersections. I could tell that Caroline was deeply hurt by this comment. It was as if these incidents are a norm for her. I gathered this from her responses to the prompts I offered in our conversation.

At times she expressed awareness that it's a combination of both her age and race, hence being young and Black. This intersection, she shared, often worked against her. This was very interesting as I considered the intersection of age and race and what that looked like in my own experience. They did intersect in a major way and amplified how I position and re-position race in these instances. I could tell that there was more that Caroline wanted to expound on but didn't. She simply closed the subject firmly stating: *"I would say more but I will hold it."*

This was a loaded statement I thought. It was unfinished and I knew that pushing further was not the best thing to do in this moment. There seemed to be underlying hurt and painful experiences that Caroline is carrying with her that perhaps this was not the place to unpack those. I respected this and saw this comment for what it was, which was that past experiences are very critical in impacting how people position themselves in social interactions.



I could tell by the way she responded that she has developed a sense of awareness as she works with others and interacts with clients. This awareness in many instances causes her to look at her environment critically. She spoke to the fact that her center has predominantly White clients who access services and she sees minorities not likely to stick around after their first visit. Recalling just why this happens, she says:

*There are not many black families that come to the center. I encourage them to stay but I think some of them don't stay because they look at the room and they see the amount of who is in there it's like I think...it kind of make them feel like...that they are not welcomed.*

I could feel and hear the disappointment in her voice when she shared this. It cannot be easy witnessing this in her role. I couldn't help but wonder how what she was experiencing was adding to how she was positioning herself as a racialized person and how she was positioning race in these encounters. Did this low representation of racialized bodies in her workplace and what she experiences in the center influence how Caroline's racialized reality unfolds? Clients didn't take her seriously at times. Feeling this deeply she would question if it was age or race or gender but she leans towards race more, as she narrates below:

*If I am the one to say something they are more defensive. They are defensive...not even more and they are like "why can't I do this...I can do this somewhere else" they tend to give me more of a hard time so I have experienced that...So that's why I say more race.*

Caroline could see this difference as she also observed clients' reaction in interactions with non-racialized workers. For her, it was obvious she was being treated different because she was a Black woman. It was blatant at sometimes more than others. What an unfair exchange, I thought. Here Caroline is this awesome worker there to serve but not being given the benefit of

doing her job of helping and that she can be so publicly shamed. I admired her stance in this moment. She displayed such strength without saying much.

For Caroline, the disadvantage within society for racialized people is a problem when she considers her struggles and the challenges she encounters professionally. It's a bigger picture that she can't be naïve about. In a heartfelt way, she said:

*I think no matter what because of our color already we are already judged already as is...No matter what education you have...No matter what position you are in. You are going to always be judged or looked at differently. As if "wow, how did you get here?" ...Or I don't think people believe...some people don't think that you know...you went to school...you studied you passed...you applied for a job and you got the job...It's like some of them think that ...you have to have known someone to get to where you are.*

Caroline couldn't have said it better, I thought to myself. This hit me really hard. Did this mean that she didn't believe in the actions she was taking now as she navigated the field?

Caroline pushed me to think of the uphill battle and struggle for racialized workers. Am I trying to change the unchangeable? Can we really influence new representations of racialized professionals in social work? Is my repositioning working? I couldn't tell based on Caroline's description above whether or not she was throwing in the towel or just prompting me to see the bigger context within which her struggle was nestled.

## **Chapter 7: Cat's Story**

In this chapter I present Cat's story in four themes. Cat has been in the field for over seven years and is currently in a management role. She is a Black woman in her late 20s. I could tell from the way Cat spoke that she was also a reflective worker and she was not naïve about her strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. She was optimistic about the future and was very proactive in how she addressed her challenges as seen throughout our conversation. I found Cat to be an inspirational worker. She is focused on using her challenges to empower others and not spend time and energy complaining. The four main themes from our conversation were: Positioning Self, Being a Minority Manager, Positioning Race and Teaching and Sharing. Positioning Self has three sub-themes: Self-Awareness, Self-Doubt, Self-Care and Cultural Self. Positioning Race has two sub-themes: Repositioning Race and Working Hard and Adjusting. Teaching and Sharing has two sub-themes: Shifting Power and Entrepreneurship.

### **Positioning Self**

Positioning self, for Cat, is about being firm in who she is, especially in challenging encounters. It is also about having critical self-awareness and changing negative interpretations of others through her actions in everyday life. Cat's perception of how she positioned herself in the work environment stood out across our conversation. This was connected to actions that perpetuated who she needed to be as a racialized worker. Her responses revealed that she was aware of how she was being positioned by others and that how she positioned herself was something she thought of daily in her interactions.

*I think about this daily in life how I interact with others and their perception of me. So, I always make sure the way I carry myself. I don't want to say to a higher standard but I make sure that my behavior must be in line with a manager.*

Cat does hold herself to a higher standard, however. This implies that Cat does not agree with the standard she felt was being imposed on her by the environment. This description of a higher standard points to how Cat was making meaning of her interactions and how she was also repositioning herself as a manager of higher standard. For Cat, it is a vulnerable place to be a minority manager when there are changes and transitions in the workplace. And Cat is a racialized manager in a work place that is in transition. These insecurities compound the experiences of how she wants to be seen by others. These transitions meant that meetings are no longer the same for Cat. She anticipated the challenge that came from walking into a room and ensuring that she was heard and valued.

*I had to lower the tone actually ...so when I realized that when I'm in meetings, I can't talk with a higher tone...because sometimes when people hear that they - they'll attach it to being young and I actually have a colleague who's voice is naturally higher and when she's having meetings and stuff and I witnessed this, I can see people kind of just looking at her and I can see the facial expressions.*

Cat needed to be taken seriously in her role. She observed what was happening with her colleague and did not want the same to happen to her. This was interesting in her narrative. How she positioned herself was influenced by the experiences of other minorities in the workplace. “So, when I saw that, umm I realized... ‘Ok’ you know, I’ve got to lower my tone and everything.” Recounting a community partnership meeting she was attending and how she feared the encounters before she even got there, Cat said:

*I knew the panel was generally mainly white...I was like you know what I am going to go...let me see how it is before I start making assumptions...but because I knew it was going to be so white I was kind of like aww man...and it wasn't like I didn't think I could do things like them or be smart but I felt like they wouldn't... because I am also younger.*

Cat is confident but admits that social interactions make her anxious as she is not able to anticipate how she might be positioned. There was a vulnerability that was evident in her narrative here that spoke to how she was being impacted in these interactions. Cat was down for the challenge. She was very confident as she shared these vulnerable moments. Cat needed to be aware of how these positions influenced her opinions of herself and others in the workplace. In this regard, she recalled a scenario that occurred with a male racialized friend that spoke to why she is so conscious of who she is.

*I had a story of a friend who used to work for like corporate financial world... And he was starting to forget... I am not trying to say that he... ohh we're black we're cursed ...But he was starting to forget that he is a black man and one day he came to work... security guards following him to his desk and the washroom... then he is like... you know what Cat I actually remembered like you know what they see me as the black man and I have to be... I understand... I am like maybe he wasn't even telling anybody... maybe he was just messing with your head... just to bother you... 'cause he sees you coming in everyday... looking nice... wearing your \$1000 suits coming in and it bothers him... and that's why you can't give too much power to that.*

When you are not aware of yourself as a racialized person in the work environment, Cat sees it as setting yourself up for failure. Its stories like these that are influential in how she keeps up her critical self-awareness in navigating the workplace and positioning herself. This spoke to

how layered positioning is and points again to the past experiences that impacts how racialized workers pre-emptively position and reposition themselves through their interactions.

### *Self-Awareness*

By now it is obvious what self-awareness means for Cat. It is connected to social interactions that shaped and influenced how Cat approached work as a racialized worker and this sharp sense of self-awareness was what she developed through past encounters. Cat is very self-reflective and critical social worker. Throughout our conversation, self-awareness was a recurring theme as Cat explored the impact of her social positioning in her professional practice. Here she reflects on an experience working with a White male client that became very disrespectful:

*Now one thing I've learned in life is that changing your emotions for somebody, emoting differently for somebody is too much power to give to that person and the reason why he said the N-word was to get a reaction out of me. And I said I'm not going to give you that power sir.*

For Cat, her self-awareness empowered her to navigate the environment and reposition herself in times like these. This was the first time in our conversation that the issue of power came up. This narrative suggests that there is a shift in power that Cat felt she could control when she was positioned at a disadvantage in encounters. Here the White client used his unearned power of White privilege to provoke her into returning his disrespect in kind. Cat was sharp and witty in identifying his motive through her earned power of professional privilege and refused to give him what he wanted. In this, Cat was also repositioning herself. This was very powerful, I thought. I had never made this analogy of how repositioning self implicated a shift in power.

Cat realized that having awareness was one aspect, but that she had to do certain things to go with what she was seeing and feeling as she reflected. As she spoke, I could tell that Cat was not just concerned with doing her job but doing a great job. She is aware of these challenges and yet she perseveres in the work she does without feeling she must succumb to those pressures. She is not necessarily concerned with proving that others are wrong in their perceptions but she strongly believes she must do something to show that this is not who she is and this is what she can do. I can relate to this feeling. It looks contradictory, yet I understood her point. I sensed this way of articulating her struggles showed how she approached how she is positioned at times. For Cat, self-awareness helps her process encounters and is a way for her to move forward.

### *Self-Doubt*

The theme of self-doubt means almost the opposite of self-awareness in Cat's experience. If self-awareness depicted confidence self-doubt depicted vulnerability. For Cat, self-doubt was also connected to not wanting to make mistakes, feeling like she stood out but not wanting to be the stereotype. Ironically, this is also increased self-awareness. Her increased self-awareness going into certain work meetings created anxiety around how she would be perceived. When she was first asked about whether she experiences self-doubt, she shared: "*ooh yeah...because I don't like making mistakes but it's hard for me to realize.*"

In everything she does, I get the sense that Cat is extremely mindful of how she is positioned in doing it. She keeps her work at a particular standard and this puts some pressure on her. Cat was concerned that she would not be a good example for racialized people if she made a mistake because the mistakes she makes as individual will affect all racialized people.

*I got to make sure I don't make any mistakes so I am even more careful...because I know how it looks...And unfortunately my experience with racialized people one person makes a mistake then they generalize it.*

This misconception that the mistake of one worker represents the reality of an entire group was very interesting. I think a lot of times this happens. This fear of misrepresenting racialized workers was creating the added pressure that Cat was seeking to avoid as she navigated her work environment. It is interesting to note that this drive for perfection comes from self-doubt that is imposed by the environment. It is a repositioning of self in relation to the stereotype of others. It is this invisible burden that racialized workers inherent in addition to the other challenges. No one says this is how you should be but there is a pressure and expectation to be a certain way.

### *Self-Care*

Self-care for Cat is connected to her strategies of changing the injurious things within her environment and staying motivated and hopeful to continue being the best at what she does. You could say Cat was intentional with caring for herself because she understood it was necessary for her survival. As she shared her challenges throughout our conversation there were nuggets of hope that she highlighted in some examples. I could tell that these were very important to her because she felt she had to be a part of the change she wanted to see for herself and for others. To do this, Cat believes that she has to be real with herself.

*You are not being real with yourself at all and it can cause a lot of problems for you. It can also self-injure...dealing with people and you are just taking all this garbage and you are not pushing back anytime somebody's putting that negative energy towards you and because if you don't, your backbone is going to be weakened.*



Taking care of yourself is not being naive in the workplace where you are positioned by others negatively and where you must reposition yourself in a positive light. I agree with Cat in not being naive. What she said about self-injury caused me to reflect. I think this points to the internalized effects of social positioning and what happens when we are not aware of how it is implicated in the way we do our job in social work. In her narrative here, Cat also points to how repositioning empowers the worker and acts against the subtle way in which the damage of the negative energy does to the worker over time. I believed the weakened backbone she refers to is an analogy of the breakdown in the worker's professional identity in such a negative environment.

### *Cultural Positioning*

This was not a recurring sub-theme but is worth mentioning as it influenced Cat's self-awareness of how she was positioning herself. Cat mentioned culture as she related how she treats and respects her older colleagues in the workplace. She attributed this respect to her cultural upbringing. For Cat, then, when she engages in respecting elders in her work place, this is her act of cultural positioning. Indeed, Cat says that, for her, the respect she has for senior colleagues is culturally driven: *"When you have people who are older than you, you respect them highly. So, when I'm dealing with the older staff I always have a respect for them and I think you should because they've been there long."*

Call her old school, but she does consider this in her interactions. Her processing of this showed her self-awareness and the actions that she demonstrates to ensure that she is not being positioned otherwise. Cat is very proud of her background and culture. It was interesting to see here how culture was implicated in how Cat positioned herself in her work interactions.

## Being a Minority Manager

For Cat, being a minority manager meant being subjected to additional invisible requirements to function and be a manager. It also meant that there are additional challenges associated with race and age that confound the professional status of the minority manager. Throughout our conversation, Cat indicated how being a racialized minority manager who appears young affected her professional positioning and her interactions with colleagues and clients. Cat didn't allow her age to be an issue but she recognized when it was implicated in her professional interactions. She felt that age was implicated in the ways she was received as a manager but she chose to reposition herself by not seeing her age as an obstacle. This also meant that she was working hard and adjusting from a survival mode and that she would feel misrecognized from time to time.

As a minority manager, Cat felt at times she was positioned stereotypically by colleagues. It was as if being Black meant that she understood certain slangs that Black people used. In other words, individuals were addressing her at times very informal in her opinion that was contrary to how she identified or behaved. Cat felt humbled to speak to these stereotypes that positioned the few racialized workers in her environment. She remembered one such incident:

*I remember one manager they see I am black like..." hey, yo...What's up yo" I am like... [Sigh] Lord have mercy..."Yo yo" ...I could be petty and bring it back to them like say something culturally related or something stereotypical to them but I said no. I am just going to correct them.*

Cat was not afraid of standing up for herself. This moment I believed also captured how she was being positioned because of being a black woman. Encounters like these happened often in her professional practice. She recalled one such incident where a senior White manager

overlooked her concerns on a staffing decision that eventually backfired. Cat was forced to address the issue as it started to get out of hand and all eyes were on her. She reflected: *“I don't want to be insubordinate...but if you're not going to respect me and listen to me, I cannot do the same for you. I also questioned... I wondered though if I wasn't black...”*

I could tell even as we spoke of it in the conversation that the latter part of this extract was a thought she still held. I also saw how she was overlooked in this big decision as a sign of disrespect. As she questioned herself in the afterthought of this encounter I related my own moments that ended like that, moments I still question and do not have the answer for. Although Cat acknowledges that she can't be like everyone else, there are strong commonalities in our distinct experiences.

### **Positioning Race**

In Cat's narrative positioning race means being aware that racism is everywhere, refusing to be naïve and identifying how racism enters everyday professional encounters, and combating it through hard work and refusing racial stereotypes. As Cat asserts, *“If you are coming into the workforce saying that there is no racism, there is no bias, there is no discrimination then that's a joke.* Race was a common thread in our conversation as Cat explored how she was positioning herself and being positioned in her professional practice. She was aware of how positioning race impacted her work and she focused on not being those stereotypes and combating the dialogue on race by repositioning herself in her encounters with clients, colleagues and partnerships.

When asked of a time when she might have felt misrecognized because of race, Cat reflected:

*I think sometimes people think about it but especially with white people, I find that umm they always have this kind of like this fake smile sometimes like [mimics smile] until they warm up to... you they say "ah, actually she's not a threatening black woman.*

Here Cat is referring to a specific type of racializing misrecognition where she is positioned within the stereotype of the threatening angry Black woman. What happened between the initial misrecognition and the later recognition is open for questioning. How initial suspicion yielded to recognition can be a shift on both sides. However, here, I attribute this shift to Cat's courageous fight against racializing stereotypes. It is Cat's breaking out of the pigeonhole into which they forced her and repositioning her racialized self that changed White workers' misperception. However, though Cat acknowledges race as a major factor in how she is positioned, she says it is not always the first place she goes: *"I always try not to assume that but then they always go and say something that confirms it and you are just like "Ohh ya...well...It's why I got to come harder."* Cat gave the benefit of the doubt to those she encountered until she felt that they were positioning her opposite to how she presented. I could tell that the higher expectation in which she held herself was echoed as a reminder of why she pre-emptively positions herself.

### *Repositioning Race*

Cat repositions race as she repositions herself favorably both in response to others' racializing stereotypes and to preempt such stereotypes in her professional encounters. She says that the small steps she takes give her an edge: *"So I dressed up more... I am not going to be quiet... I am going to talk up and ask them how their day was... what am I tiptoeing around?"* I gathered that past experiences were also affecting her working relationships at times. Cat felt like she was skirting around interactions because of how she might be perceived.

In Cat's view, because racialized workers will experience racism, they need to be aware of it and think of how to respond. She also calls on racialized workers to keep talking about it, to keep the race conversations alive despite all the pressures to disengage from such dialogue:

*There's a lot of black people trying to distance themselves from that talk of oh we're dealing with this so we're so cursed or we've got so many problems we're dealing with...because they do that they don't acknowledge these things.*

This was very powerful and, I must admit, this is a reality for many racialized workers who are making meaning of these experiences. Acknowledgement is very difficult when you don't understand why you are feeling different and why you are responding or not responding to the pressures. However, if there is no conversation around race, how will racialized workers learn how to position or reposition race in their work place encounters? It is easier to avoid disagreements and hide behind the appearance of harmony. In my own experience, I had real fears of how my challenges and my positioning of race would be interpreted. Cat admits that this is not an easy thing to deal with. However, she also asserts that it is these challenges and fear of conflict that affects us even more than the racializing stereotypes themselves. According to Cat:

*Nobody likes conflict and in this case, this is a conflict..having to deal with that...uneasiness and accountability of the whole situation and how to address it properly and still communicate properly but still maintain the power and maintain the appearances...you know?*

Being real with yourself I think comes from understanding and awareness. Cat's narrative here points to the underlying internalized issues for racialized workers when they are positioned as disadvantaged. This internalization is key and implicates how social positioning affects workers at a deeper level than what might be seen in encounters. Recognizing these effects is a key factor that cannot be dismissed or overlooked.

### *Hard work and Adjusting*

For Cat, the sub-theme of hard work and adjusting means repositioning race in very specific ways to work hard, do more, and overcome the given disadvantages that racialized workers encounters daily. Cat feels that, from the get go, she starts from a disadvantaged position as a racialized minority manager. This meant she needed to work extra hard and prove that she belonged. Working hard was repositioning her to make up for the given disadvantage to influence the way she was being perceived as a racialized worker. Cat feels the pressure to do more because:

*I always feel like you need to do more. It could also be the assumption I just have. The reason why is because I always feel there is always some doubt in your abilities and skills because they see your appearance first before you open your mouth.*

I related very much to this extract. Being a racialized worker was the first thing people saw and they immediately positioned me at a disadvantage. Everything about their actions spoke to the way in which they positioned me. Cat was referencing this same idea in her experience and how it pushed her to work harder as she felt she had to dispel this stereotype and reposition herself.

Cat tries not to compare herself to other non-racialized managers but she says she just knows she must be different because she knows she cannot be judged on the same scale. *“I see other managers who are white and I say they are mediocre and so passive and that's a problem ..but I know not to become like that.”* She believes in ensuring that her work speaks for her to prove she belonged there. Cat’s observation of her work environment said she needed to work harder because she was not assessed on the same level with her non-racialized colleagues. She laughed as she explained more:

*If I'm the only black person then I'm going to work. What the heck? I'm going to make sure I work and show these people up. I might not be taken seriously. I can't just come and dress anyhow. They can wear their jeans and stuff. I can't come in doing that,*

It is clear that the playing field is not as plain as it seems and she is aware of that and she adjusts towards standing out in a positive way. Cat is a confident young woman who wants to make a difference and so she works towards doing just that. She is very motivated in the face of these challenges and I admired this throughout our conversation.

### **Teaching & Sharing**

For Cat, the theme of teaching and sharing means tactful intentional strategies of calling out and correcting negative stereotypes in her encounters with colleagues, staff, partnerships and clients. Teaching and sharing came out of her many of experiences. Her context as a manager put her at an advantage and she used it to promote teaching and sharing. Cat illustrated this by recalling an interaction with a White male client that was frustrated with being unemployed and accused immigrants of taking all the jobs. *“In this environment I'm going to try and teach him...give him some knowledge because I'm in this environment...So definitely I will teach.”*

Cat took this opportunity to inform the youth and explore what was the real challenge. She said this was an opportunity to not get angry because of what was said but to inform the client. She also recalled another encounter that was a bit more direct and how she handled it.

*I had to take him out of the group...they're disrupting the group...being rude to the facilitator. Ok let's have a talk. Let's have a good chat in my office and he's grumbling. He's like “You know what you're just a...a...a...a rude nigger rich bitch” Now one thing I've learned in life is that changing your emotions for somebody...emoting differently for somebody is too much power. I said well you are right actually. I do have more money*

*than you. And you are right, I have a job and you don't. That's why you're here...you're right that I'm a nigger, because I'm black, right? And he just started pausing, like whoa what the heck? But I don't consider myself that but I'm a black woman.*

I was awed by her interaction with this client. She exercised such tact, strength and intentionality to still help this client despite the way the conversation started and how she was positioned in that conversation. She was more concerned about teaching and informing the client on why they were there instead of focusing on the verbal attack from him. She repositioned herself as a teacher and took the moral high ground. She wanted to help this client either way. Cat acknowledged she was hurt in moments like these with clients, despite the strength she displayed. For her, patronizing clients in this context was not an option. It was a necessity. Just what impact did this teaching have on this client? Cat saw the client a few months after he completed the program and this is what she said: *“Hi Cat I just wanted to say thank you for everything and I really appreciate you putting me in line that day’ he was like ‘I never used that word again.’”* This left me in awe of how Cat is going the distance in sharing and teaching.

### *Shifting Power*

For Cat, the sub-theme of shifting power means the daily struggles to shift the balance of power towards creating fair working relationships. For her all our work interactions are rooted in everyday power relationships. Therefore, for Cat, shifting power means dealing with power differences that come to throw us off our footing and gaining our power back. This struggle to shift power is connected to those actions she takes to resist negative stereotypes and that is why she teaches and shares information. She sees power at the root of all struggles:



*Another mindset I am coming from is to gain the power back for myself so all these situations especially in the workplace. At the basis of all the race, gender, age...it's the POWER that people are vying for and are dealing with.*

This is a very profound critical analysis from Cat. Her claiming her power back is tied to repositioning her racialized self and, therefore, shifting the power imbalance. Cat seeks to shift power with an intentionality I found admirable. I can see how taking the power back is at the root of her resistance against stereotypes. I can see how shifting power is the goal of her intentional teaching and sharing information with others. Here is what Cat says about intentionally shifting the power by dispelling the stereotypes about her being Black:

*Because of the stereotype that you will just get angry. Some people will be like ooh well now they are going to control you in that way because you are now trying to dispel the stereotype. I am like but at which point are you to just ignore that and just react. You got to just get over that and react in a smart way. I am also trying to show them that they are wrong.*

Cat's words illustrate her internal processing that influences her actions when addressing stereotypes. This was also the way in which she was repositioning in these instances. This narrative also spoke to how she felt about those who saw her as a people pleaser. Cat clearly disregards these assumptions and keeps her eyes on the big picture to disprove stereotypes: *"I am not living to prove people wrong but I need to show them wrong because I want to show them. That's another mindset I am coming from."* Cat was focused on shifting power to reposition herself and change the narratives. By taking these actions, here again, she also holds herself up to a higher standard of responsibility and takes the moral high ground.

## *Entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurship was not a common thread but was noteworthy as it came out as a unique portion at the end of our conversation. I could tell how Cat loved what she did and how she did it with such commitment and high standard that she held herself accountable. As we discussed aspirations and growth in the sector and whether she saw herself going higher despite the challenges she faced, she had this to say:

*I would like to...and I may not necessarily be in non-profit. Because I also do my own thing on the side like in \*\*\*\*\* so whichever way I can do that and still empower people... whatever work or job I do, I want to share that power.*

## Chapter 8: Tristan's Story

In this chapter I explore Tristan's story in six themes. Tristan presented as a confident young biracial male in his late 20s. He is passionate about personal development and about being a role model for other racialized individuals in the field. Tristan demonstrated a strong sense of self-awareness as a worker in social services. He is conscious of how he is positioned as a racialized male in the sector and the steps he must take to make his presence known and appreciated by others. There were six main themes from our conversation: Being a Minority Manager, Positioning Self, Intersectional Stories, Positioning Gender and Staying Motivated. Being a Minority Manager has three sub-themes: Working Harder, Appearance and Being Professional. Positioning Self had three sub-themes: Blaming Self, Growing up and The Environment. Positioning Race had two sub-themes: Busting Stereotypes and Teaching and Sharing. Staying Motivated had two sub-themes: Role Model and Feeling Supported.

### Being a Minority Manager

From Tristan's experience, being a minority manager translates as the challenges of being misrecognized, working harder than others, proving he belonged, working on appearance, seeking acceptance and maintaining his professional excellence. Being a minority manager was a major theme that dominated our conversation. There were many occasions when Tristan felt misrecognized in his professional role. Describes how he is sometimes mistaken for a student and other times for a client, Tristan says:

*Sometimes they thought maybe I might have been a student. It was just always me having that thought in the back of my mind. I needed to speak in a way where they can recognize there is a difference between me and the client.*

Being a minority manager, especially for a young Black man, is a tough call. Even though he is the manager, the thought that he may be mistaken for a student or a client is always at the back of his mind. The mental energy of his brilliant mind that got him to the management position is spent on these internal struggles. This is an unfair burden that being a minority manager places on his shoulders. For Tristan, space and context are factors in instances of misrecognition. This was interesting as I considered my own example of being misrecognized as a receptionist when I was the manager. I wondered if I was in my office if I would have been misrecognized in the same way. I think not. Yet, this is the inevitable fear of being a minority manager.

### *Working Harder*

For Tristan, working harder means a path towards earning respect for what he does. It means a way of compensating for the unfair disadvantage he is dealt as a racialized minority. Hard work is also a strategy of combating the unfair burden of being a minority manager and earning respect for his work. As a racialized manager, Tristan feels he must earn his way to respect whether or not the playing field in his professional environment was fair and level and fair:

*If it's an even playing field or not an even one, you have to know that you earn your respect...you earn what you get so if you are just caught up on being yourself it's not going to work and that's something I learned a long time ago.*

Here Tristan underscores the importance of earning respect and he emphasizes the role of transaction where there is a give and take. He has learned from experience that he cannot just be caught up on being himself. To earn respect for himself, he must give respect to others, even if the playing field is not even, he insists. This demonstrates the unfair burden of a minority and

Tristan seems committed to the hard work. This sub-theme of hard work reminds me of a common saying among racialized workers: You must work twice as hard to get half as far. This shows the unfair burden on minorities and unfair advantage of dominant groups. Tristan's narrative speaks to another layer of unfair hard work, which is earning respect. As a minority manager, Tristan must earn his respect through hard work when dominant groups walk around freely with unearned respect.

Working harder, for Tristan, was shadowed by the feeling that he was not taken seriously. The work environment comes with much skepticism for him as a racialized male and so he feels the pressure to work above average to fit in. He explained:

*It creates a lot of challenges 'cause now skepticism comes into play, so I'm fighting that, trying to always continuously validate myself given my age, how I look, what I wear, so I'm constantly trying to do that and the way I do that is...how do I associate myself...how do I speak to people...I need to feel in my mind that I need to know twice as much as them so then I earn their respect by being someone who can be a coach and a mentor.*

Tristan must know twice as much as them to be able to overcome skepticism and become a mentor. He has worked hard to be able to achieve such growth in such a short span of time and relates working hard to his success. He was aware of how he was positioned as a racialized young man and working harder is a way of repositioning himself favorably and making sure that people knew he was where he should be. I could tell that he felt challenged in this many times and ongoing self-validation was important to his success.

Another aspect of working harder for Tristan is preparing ahead of time and doing his ground work before certain interactions. Reflecting on some of these added things he did to ensure he was presenting his best self, Tristan said:

*What am I going to talk about? Do I have my business cards? Cause that's maybe like the easiest icebreaker. Do I know who is going to be there? Can I research this? So, I am mentally preparing. If I go to Queen's Park... I know that 90% of the people I am going to see is probably going to be older Caucasian people...so I know first and foremost like how am I going to sell myself...so what I do is I just talk a lot and I'll have some jokes and I'll make them feel comfortable and I'll compliment them and stuff because I am trying to you know...make that impression.*

Tristan felt the pressure of stereotype connected to being a racialized worker that complicates things. The many layers of how he was pre-emptively positioning himself in interactions was astonishing. This also speaks to the internal mental processes of how this was affecting him. I deeply related to his preparation prior to his encounters as this reflects my own experience. According to Tristan, there is an internalized pressure when you are racialized:

*So, there is an internalized pressure...and because you know like...they know that at the end of the day we are the minorities so we have to work maybe a bit harder to solidify who we are as opposed to someone else.*

This shows Tristan's sharp awareness of the implications of working harder in his professional environment. This internalized pressure comes from the unspoken way of being unfavorably positioned as a racialized worker. It is what Tristan observed in his interactions within his work environment. His commitment to working harder is forged within these experiences.

*I needed to adapt to my environment in order to succeed, to propel myself. I had to you know...move in certain ways and maybe I wasn't too comfortable with in order to ensure that I am meeting the expectations of my superior what is required for this position.*

Working hard at times, meant he had to conform because he felt uncomfortable. The underlying message in this extract was that Tristan felt that he had to compensate for the disadvantaged way in which he was being positioned.

### *Appearance*

In Tristan's experience, appearance means all the unique physical attributes that contribute to his being a minority manager. These attributers include his biracial looks, his youthful looks, how he is dressed, and how he carries himself. Tristan always stood out as he started his career. In reflecting on his growth over the past years he recounted how his age and the fact that he was biracial were parts of how he was positioned in interactions. He seemed to be the youngest in his work teams. He felt there was a pro and a con to this. He also considered other aspects of social positioning such as race in conjunction with his age in this context. Tristan felt that his appearance was very influential in how he was positioned in interactions. Reflecting on when he started, Tristan said: *"When I first started my manager at the time always commented on the way I was dressed."*

Challenges with his appearance influenced his actions to ensure that his presence was known and that he was taken seriously. Knowing that he was the youngest on his team he was always focused on how he spoke in meetings attempting to give the impression that he belonged:

*I am going to speak up and I am going to make sure my presence is known. I am going to have a voice. I might be wrong sometimes...but I am not going to be afraid to admit I am wrong. So, then you see past my age.*

There was a level of self-awareness that Tristan had about entering his workspace that influenced how he acted. This extract spoke loud and clear at how he was navigating around his appearance and how he presented as a racialized manager. He was always thinking of how he is

being positioned and what he needs to do to make that positive, even if it means he must adjust his dress. I could tell it was not an easy transition and he continues to work things out but he is in a more confident place when it comes to presenting who he is and what he can do as a worker.

*“They don't know where I'm coming from and they just see what's in front of them,”* he says. For him, adjusting and seeking to come out on top of the challenges he experienced with his appearance was done because he cares about the work. So, when he got his first promotion, Tristan made changes so that appearance would not hinder his excellence at his job.

*It affects multiple areas. Once I got offered the manager role, I went straight to the store and bought three blazers and dress pants because I felt I don't want my appearance to be the reason why I can't do my job.*

My heart sank as fast as these words left Tristan's lips. I have been there. I had these thoughts and did the exact thing for fear that with the new professional role came another level of questioning and positioning that I needed to anticipate. It was clear that there was a relationship between how he was positioned and credibility of the work he would produce. This is another connection that spoke volumes in the context of this research.

### *Being Professional*

How was he supposed to act? What was the requirement for acceptance? How to adjust and how to stand out? These were things that Tristan considered as being professional in his work environment and they directed how he approached his work. From the beginning, he felt he was being directed to be and act a certain way because of how he was positioned at times around age.

*I was told before I got in my role that certain things I needed to ensure I do that are correlated with my appearance and my age...but at the same time I didn't look at it in a*



*bad way. I respected it 'cause I understood that you know with more responsibilities and with a higher role, I have to make some sacrifices on the way I carry myself so I was okay with it.*

Tristan took well to feedback based on his responses as we spoke about this particular instance. For him, climbing the professional ladder meant he had to tow the line at times. I could relate to this earlier in my career when the focus was on fitting in as much as possible. This was my reaction until I realized that how I was being positioned was not changing and the fact that I worked harder did not change that experience totally.

For Tristan, there seems to be an unspoken rule on what he can do or cannot do as a young racialized worker. These unspoken rules dictate that being professional is being well dressed for Tristan. Comparing the privilege of dressing that is afforded to a White male manager and a racialized manager, he said:

*Anyone mid-thirties or late thirties Caucasian male that's a manager they typically just dress like that or they walk around like...that's fine...right...but if I were to do it I feel like it would be seen differently and I don't know...maybe I have set a standard because of how I already appear but there is a distinction there of what is acceptable and what isn't based on how you look and what your ethnicity is...it's an unwritten rule no one is going to directly say it.*

This was very interesting and powerful. Tristan was connecting how he was being positioned in comparison to his non-racialized colleagues. Whether or not this was his assumption because of previous experiences, he was experiencing this pressure within his environment. It was a factor and a challenge for him as he processed this internally for himself.

*I need to present myself in a very professional manner to earn the first impression respect...umm so as I said before I'm just constantly working on that...how am I going to you know walk and what am I going to say...what am I bringing to the table because I always felt that I was at a disadvantage because of how I appeared both with my skin tone to my age to facial features and everything...it just came across that I was not the person that they expected to be showing up.*

This was heavy and layered and showed just how being professional in the face of these challenges influenced Tristan's approach to work. Moving on and being professional were connected to not giving into the pressures he was feeling. Being professional challenged how he presented who he was overall and he described just what he meant:

*I can sit here and ponder why things are the way they are and you know get stuck in that tangle of a mess or I can just look at it as well I am just going to prove everyone wrong. So, I try to just always be positive and you know just push through because at the end of the day you know I am the one who has to sleep with these thoughts at night and everything so if I can't deal with it then you know what is the point.*

Adapting to his environment and being professional meant success. I thought the way in which Tristan internalized his experiences and created a response that worked for him was unique. He saw staying positive as being professional and positioning himself counter to what he was given.

### **Positioning Self**

For Tristan, positioning self meant how he presented himself in his work interactions, how others saw him and how he was responding. Experience in the professional environment has given him a heightened sense of self on how he navigates the work environment. This has grown

over time and allows him to look at these challenges with a different lens and respond accordingly. Throughout our conversation, Tristan would mention times when he was reflecting internally and how it affected his actions. This internal processing was beyond mere reflection for him. His challenges with positioning self were causing him to question his identity as well. This awareness of how he was being positioned was important to him and he tried his best to ensure he was not reflecting any negative view that was being placed on him.

In Tristan's story, positioning self as a manager is constantly undermined by others placing him back into the stereotypic position of the young black male out of which he managed to break out. Tristan is very aware of the struggles of positioning self as he shares with cynicism:

*Another challenge too also being in my role is that I feel that a lot of the staff umm see any person who somewhat looks like me to assume that they're my friend. So that's another challenge that has come about where any of the younger black male staff they're probably my friend.*

Tristan supposed that this unwanted attention came from the way in which he carried himself in the workplace but it is also because he was among the small population of racialized males seen there. He was naïve about transitioning to a management role and what challenges would come in that role. He spoke of feeling undermined as older staff engaged in interactions with him in a passive-aggressive manner. This he believed stemmed from the fact that he was racialized and that he was a young manager.

Another layer of positioning self for Tristan is standing out. Standing out is something he cannot avoid and past experience has taught him that how he positions himself can change these interactions in his favor. The more he became aware of what the environment was requiring of him, the better. For him, positioning self is taking control of how he wants to stand out: *“So like*

*even then like it's always a concern of mine... I am always going to stand out...and it's just for me it's internalizing how do I want to stand out."* This idea of internalizing these experiences spoke to a deeper analysis for Tristan. He was very reflective and always contemplative of his response and the changes he needed to make to position himself favorably.

### *Blaming Self*

Blaming self in Tristan's experience means enacting internalized oppression and positioning himself as the problem to be fixed. Tristan often felt that he was a part of the challenges he experienced and so it was unavoidable and he blamed himself. In a sense he seems to circumvent unfavorable positioning by taking responsibility for his part of the problem. However, instead of shared responsibility, blame seems to land on his racialized body. Tristan is very reflective but it is clear that the self-blame is influencing his thought and action. For instance, talking about challenges with being misrecognized, he says, *"I guess it is just the way I present myself. I have to internally defend myself in saying there is a reason why I am here."*

Doing more and making his presence known are ways in which Tristan pushes back. For him, it's within his control to shift and change these perspectives that are seeking to define him. I didn't think this were unusual. In hindsight as I thought of my own experiences and how I positioned myself perhaps there was much self-blame wrapped up in my responses. That internal checklist that comes up of what am I doing or not doing does point to blaming self. This was a difficult moment for me in our conversation as I reflected on my own experience and could see the same being repeated in Tristan's experiences.

## *Growing Up*

Growing up was not a common thread in our conversation but it is worth mentioning. Tristan connects his positioning of self in his work place to his upbringing, culture, and university learning.

*I always think about the social settings that I'm going to be in and what type of me do I need to present there. Well it's deeper rooted from when I was younger, but mainly in university because I had a professor who really called me out on who I am and how I identify myself. And he enforced the ideal that you need to learn to unlearn.*

Tristan liked that he could connect these past learning and experiences to how he works now in a positive way. He regarded those learning moments as when he began to see with different lenses and was questioning things within his environment. Tristan also connected his grooming and how he presents himself professionally as being in line with how he was raised and the culture connected to his family. He laughed as he explained: *“It's a cultural thing too right... because I know when I was brought up I would be disciplined if I didn't iron my clothes before I left.”*

This was Tristan's reality growing up and these experiences go with him into his work life, impacting how he positions himself. I thought of my own growing up and how those values were going against the grain of professional values of the work environment. Were these encounters creating experiences of positioning that were entangled in webs of values and past experiences? I think so.

### *The Environment*

From Tristan's stories, the environment means the various contexts and settings in which his encounters and his positioning of self happened. Tristan shared stories of different work contexts that were both instrumental in his growth and those that were not so positive. Reflecting on a setting that was affirming for the positive positioning of himself, he reminisced: *"I used to work at \*\*\*\*\* and at the time predominately the team I was working with was all black. I felt very comfortable."* The shared experiences of working with other racialized workers made Tristan comfortable. Comparing that past employment environment to where he is now, he recalled not being comfortable initially because he stood out and standing out made it difficult to navigate: *"I did feel a strong disconnect with my colleagues by being that one racialized minority there. I worked at \*\*\* in \*\*\*\*\* and all the staff were white...and sometimes it did feel uncomfortable."*

Tristan's challenges in the workplace are reflections of the broader history of other racialized people. Connecting the work setting to broader historical experience in a sharp critical insight, Tristan notes, *"I understand it 'cause that comes back to colonialism and different things. It's just moving into another work setting I think I am still going to deal with it."*

Tristan cannot consider his challenges without thinking about the societal injustices that are at work. I agree that the wider societal narratives of racialized individuals are implicated in how they are positioned in workplaces. Tristan believes that although he cannot anticipate how well environments receive his positioning of self, he feels that he will always stand out across many environments. The challenge for him is ensuring that he stands out in a good way. He reflects on how he may need to adjust at times depending on the setting he is in:

*Well it's just the way I look. You will never know what I am. So being racially ambiguous, I always feel like I have to establish myself. And I fight with who I am and my self-identity. It's just internally always fighting it and wondering is that what this person might be thinking?"*

Tristan stressed that he will not look like anyone else in these environments and this may continue to be a challenge for him in his career. He understands that his internal struggles reflect broader societal struggles. He knows this is the impact and influence of the society we live in. However, he still believes that in environments, people are looking for individuals they look like and can connect with. Perhaps when people can connect and have a shared experience that practice becomes complicated for the racialized worker. At any rate, Tristan's experience highlights the interconnection between internal struggles and societal struggle, which in turn highlights how much the environment influences the positioning of self.

### **Positioning Race**

Positioning race for Tristan is a layer of positioning self with a focus on racialization. For a biracial light-skinned Tristan, race means an ambiguous identity with no clear boundary to place himself. For him, positioning race means a tricky process full of internal and external struggles hard to identify or recognize as Black or White. It means he struggles with passing internally and with curiosity of others externally. Positioning race brings curious questions from others who could not position him racially. Offering as example, Tristan shares his experience with clients:

*It's interesting though because the majority of the people I interact with within our sector are racialized. So that's where it does make it a bit easier, but for me I think one of the biggest challenges also is clients feeling they need to ask where I'm from.*

He says that not being able to tell what his background is makes it harder for him to be placed in a box. Tristan feels that society is always trying to pigeonhole people into a box. The fact that he finds it a bit easier to interact with racialized people, yet finds his biggest challenge there when asked where he is from speaks volumes about pigeonholing. It is so widespread that Tristan finds it everywhere. I believe that this questioning of a racialized individuals shows the influence of bigger narratives of race in the society.

Tristan calls himself "*racially ambiguous*". When he first stepped into management, he was aware of his new role and how things may change for him. He explained those feelings and how race was implicated in how he presumed he would be positioned:

*I felt actually a lot of pressure because I'm walking into a new team and having to get them to work under me and respect me when I am this young biracial man who's going to be taking over. How am I going to earn that?*

I believe it is natural to feel pressure moving into a new role. However, in Tristan's narrative, it is clear that the added pressure he felt came from positioning himself as racialized and how his staff were going to reposition him. An unfair internalized burden of impression, competence, feeling disadvantaged seem to all present themselves in this moment. I relate to this experience. It is almost automatic, I think. That's exactly how I felt when I was in Tristan's position. It is like that first *go to place* in your mind. Are these thoughts wrong? Are they biased based on past experiences? These thoughts surely are subjective but they have objectivity in societal narratives. I believe Tristan's unique experience is valid and should not be discounted, although this cannot be generalized. Everyone experiences the same societal narratives differently.



For Tristan, social service is much worse when it comes to challenges of positioning race. He already knows that his challenges with race will be with him in any setting and some settings will be worse than others. I found this disheartening but so full of truth when I thought of my experiences and whether these challenges will ever be different in a new setting. Tristan pondered the idea of a new organization in a different field:

*I honestly do get a bit of an anxiety about it because I know it's going to be worse... I know when I go in... like if I go in to private sector I know it's probably going to be way worse because you know for example... \*\*\*\*\*..how many black people are really at \*\*\*\*\* like...there might be a good amount..but there's not a lot...*

As Tristan expounded on his anxiety, I felt there was a disappointment and a genuine fear of organizational changes when he considers the implications of race in those settings. It is scary because you are thinking of how hard you have worked to establish yourself and be recognized as a racialized minority in that setting. It is also scary knowing that you are going into a new setting that will require you to establish new grounds there. I know this may not always be the case but it shows clearly how easy it is to slip into this perception based on past experiences. For Tristan, however, there is the extra pressure of being challenged both within and outside of racialized settings because of his racial ambiguity in a society that pigeonholes individuals.

### *Busting Stereotypes*

Tristan is about seeking knowledge and forging strategy and action when it comes to responding to the stereotypes thrown at him as a young biracial manager. Busting stereotypes was his response in repositioning race favorably in his encounters. He is set on proving others wrong about who they think he is and what they think he is capable of:

*I need to know more and I need to think the way they think to avoid these situations but now I am internalizing how do I avoid those issues...so similar to someone walking in and thinking... like you are the secretary.*

In this narrative, Tristan is focused on learning why he is being positioned a certain way in his setting. He wants to know how he can change the negative narrative of racialized workers and he wants to avoid the issues at the same time. I really admire how Tristan views these challenges and his strategies of changing them but, from my own experience, I don't know if these issues are avoidable. There is still that unpredictable nature of encounters that no amount of preparation can help you control the situation. Another meaning of avoiding issues is that Tristan is avoiding not the issues themselves but avoiding previous mistakes to effectively bust stereotypes and reposition race firmly. This is evident in the way he seeks to learn and know and in his determination to fight injustice against all the odds he is facing. As he reflects, *"I always feel like I have to fight to establish that yes I am the manager down here. So, I'm fighting that trying to always continuously validate myself given my age, how I look, what I wear."*

Tristan believes the skepticism that comes from his environment forces him to fight against it and he is continually focused on validating himself. This fight speaks to always adjusting and always repositioning self in social interactions. Busting stereotypes is ongoing and I do agree that it is tiresome. It is ensuring you are seen in a positive light and that people can see past race and see your worth as a professional and not as a tag of stereotype.

For Tristan, busting stereotypes also comes in the form of making others comfortable around him as he repositions himself. This is one of his strategies ways of dispelling the stereotypes he encounters. Being his best self and having a good first impression are among those things Tristan cares about in his professional environment. He feels that everyone waits for

him to mess up so he must be always on guard. Mindful of this, he works hard to validate and reposition himself in his environment: *They are waiting for me to make a mistake...they're waiting for the young manager to make a mistake...I have to be on my p's and q's."*

This was the fear I had and I believe it is at the root of my extra hard work and the pressure not to up as I felt I was representing all racialized individuals. For Tristan, I can tell how his environment was propelling him forward and holding him back at the same time.

### *Teaching and Sharing*

In Tristan's stories of positioning race, teaching and sharing mean being a coach and a mentor to those he works with him and braving into uncomfortable environments and challenging assumptions by proving people wrong tactfully. Tristan has combined his confidence and practice experiences with his manager's position to validate himself to lead by example and make a difference within and beyond the work environment. Proving people wrong and busting stereotypes seems to come to Tristan like a second nature, even in his DNA. He proves people wrong but he does it tactfully by pleasantly surprising them, making a good impression. In the extract below, he teaches people even outside of his workplace as he feels it is the best way to help them unlearn stereotypes.

*I get a thrill out of proving someone wrong...right? So, it's just like if I'm walking and maybe I'm wearing a hoodie or something and you know I'm going through the subway and I see like you know maybe an older white lady and she's walking behind me...I love the expression when I hold the door for them and they seem surprised that I'm doing that. So, to me, I live for those moments because you're trying to teach people to unlearn.*

Teaching within his work environment is also strategic for Tristan. Here he teaches by sharing experiences and by role modeling. He has different strategies for staff and for racialized

youth. This is when his management skills come out. He teaches and shares by positioning himself as the boss, as fellow struggler or as a role model depending on the context. He does not shy away from sharing his challenges in life and his success stories to inspire and teach. I could tell how Tristan's past experiences have shaped his outlook. In his stories, I noted how his own challenges are reflected in the advice he offers to workers. I could tell how he cared as he engaged with workers to protect them from falling into the pitfalls of stereotypes.

### **Positioning Gender**

In Tristan's stories, positioning gender means dealing with the challenges of being the only male on his team and how gender often intersected with race, age and appearance. Tristan experiences being the only male on the team as difficult because, he says, the expectations placed on a male manager are higher:

*The expectation on males I feel are a lot higher than they are on the female in my management team but I don't know... maybe it's isolated and it's just me... but I think also the expectations are high on me and I like it because there is a belief that I can achieve them.*

Tristan sees higher expectation both as a difficult unfair pressure and as an inspiring push to achieve. The unfair pressure discourages and frustrates him but it also keeps him on his toes and inspires him to achieve. Being the only male on the management team is another ambiguous reality for Tristan's gender positioning. He presents as a very confident male who is invested in his growth within the social services sector. His confidence and growth are supported by male privilege in the society. However, he is also a male in a female dominated field. This diminishes his confidence and growth.

At the same time, positioning gender does not happen alone for Tristan. His positioning gender intersects with his appearance, age, and race. Reflecting on the complexity at the intersection of all these, Tristan shares how appearance is different for black males in the work environment:

*But then at the same time even with black males too like the expectation's you are always going to be well groomed... Like your hair is always going to be on point whereas you know their counterparts... it's fashionably okay for them to not get a haircut for an entire year.*

He recognized that as a male he might have had a more dominant personality that he used to his advantage in how he was able to reposition himself as male. However, he also felt that the challenges of the racialized female were misrecognized more than his. I thought this was insightful and critical perspective, especially coming from the only male in my study. Even though he was challenged, he also saw in his environment how his female racialized colleagues were at a greater disadvantage. This was powerful in the context of my study and caused me to wonder about the explicit or implicit differences in positioning gender for racialized workers.

### **Intersectional Stories**

Intersectional stories weave throughout Tristan's experiences but it is important to mention them here in one theme. For Tristan, intersectional stories mean experiences where he cannot separate race from age or gender or appearance or professional identity, when positioning himself as a manager. Both positive and negative intersectional stories were common throughout our conversation. Although intersectionality often works to his disadvantage, in the following extract, Tristan highlights an example where it is an opportunity to connect with racialized youth in ways that other managers could not:

*I find myself challenged in those areas because people in the same role as me are so disconnected that they don't understand the exact needs... these youth have different challenges now... I looked at [my appearance and age] from a positive perspective cause I was able to engage with the youth so I always had in the back of my mind that the more I can look like them and you know act like them. I know that when I used to walk into other social services I didn't see people that look like me...you know and everyone was a lot older and it just felt so disconnected and even when I looked at some of the staff that worked at our organization a lot of them didn't understand.*

He saw himself as valuable to these youths. It was an opportunity to identify and connect with the demographics he was working with at the time. He could fill a gap in his context even though he was being positioned as not valuable. From the privileged position of the manager, Tristan used his intersectional challenges as opportunities to connect with the youth he served. Tristan thought that people need to be older to be managers in the field: *"I thought in my mind when I was younger to be successful or to be in those type of roles I have to be at a certain age."* His experience has transformed his perspective on managers. Now he believes managers must reflect clients to be able to connect with them and serve them best.

However, Tristan also knows that he is among a very small minority in a service sector where the race, gender, age and appearance of managers are established. He knows that change is coming to the sector because his presence in the manager position is his evidence. But he also knows that the change he desires is not coming soon. He knows that his intersectional identities position him at a disadvantage and that he must adjust. For now, this is reality:

*So, it's a variety of things. I think it's age just because of the traditional characteristics of somebody who works in the social sector. I am basically the complete opposite in these*

*roles right. A majority of the managerial roles in our sector are females. They're usually over the age of 40, where I'm someone under the age of 30 who is a young racialized male and you know it's just a completely different spectrum and I think I do notice it when I go to those manager meetings with other partners because you know at first, they're kind of looking at me like you know...I can tell by just the way they look at me...their body language...it's kind of like who is this guy?*

### **Staying Motivated**

For Tristan, staying motivated means keeping his eyes on personal growth and development, despite all the challenges he faces. He is driven by wanting to grow and is quick to learn as much as he can. When he comes face to face with challenges, he is quick to think through the pros and the cons. He is a quick thinker and is very optimistic. He is always considering how he can be one step ahead and move ahead. The bigger picture is always in front of him when he considers fitting in and he knows the sacrifice it takes to stay motivated. Tristan captures all this in one poignant statement “...to me it's just like this saying that I say to myself: *I need to apply myself to supply my wealth.*”

He observed the shift in the environment with the number of racialized minorities in the workplace and in the social services field in general. And this is a source of inspiration and motivation for him. From his position in the field, he sees himself as being able to play a small part in that change. “*Things are changing and I think being in my role now I am a part of that change in being able to see other valuable skill sets from someone who hasn't had all that experience.*” He is aware of the value he brings to the workplace and he now allows this to motivate him as he creates an environment that works for him. I am inspired that he positioned himself as part of that change within the field. He has come a long way and he feels comfortable

where he is at present. The energy fueling his motivation shows in the confidence he has in who he is: *“I know my value. I know my worth, so if not, I can't truly be who I am.”*

### *Role Model*

Being a role model means that Tristan has an opportunity to make a difference despite his challenges and he has an opportunity to help someone else and support them in their growth. He felt that his position in the workplace was an opportunity to pave the way for others.

*I am now in a position where I can do the hiring and I can put more of an emphasis on certain demographics to work here and I have been able to do that. I have been able to I guess pay it forward by helping colleagues of mine be contributing members. And you know maybe at another time they wouldn't have that opportunity.*

I could tell as he recounted this opportunity he must hire and assist racialized individuals, it meant a lot to him. He clearly didn't want others to experience some of the things he did and he wants to make a difference where he is. Beneath his narrative here was a sense of *paying it forward* and creating a path for others coming into the field. Tristan's small acts are more than role modeling; they are creating change in the face of the work environment, as he notes: *“I think in recent years like there's been a shift on more minorities and younger minorities coming into these roles whereas like before it was a bit more closed off.”* The space is slowly opening and more racialized workers are coming into the environment. It is not hard to see how these shifts keeping Tristan motivated.



### *Feeling Supported*

For Tristan, feeling supported goes hand in hand with his confidence and the growth he aspires to in his professional environment. Feeling supported keeps Tristan motivated. For Tristan, an awareness of who is higher up in the organization makes a difference.

*My superior is a black woman and to me I think that it allows me to be more comfortable with who I am because that person understands the context behind certain things I might say or where I am coming from whereas someone else who was my superior at one point she was an older Caucasian woman and she's not going to understand certain things.*

I thought here Tristan touched on how feeling supported was in some way connected to his identity as a racialized worker and the shared experiences he felt when his superior was racialized. Feeling supported in these ways helped Tristan to stay motivated. There was an underlying assumption of being positioned differently within shared experiences as well as being positioned a certain way by non-racialized individuals. Tristan's story clearly identifies shared experience as a source of support but it also begs further questions. Can people be supported by those who do not share their experiences? On the other hand, can people who share experiences be not supportive?

### **SECTION III: CONNECTING THE DOTS, LOOKING BACK AND THINKING AHEAD**

This section is divided into two chapters. Chapter 9 discusses the findings in relation to my research question and the literature. Included in this chapter are my implications and recommendations. Chapter 10 captures by personal reflections, future research and limitations.

## **Chapter 9: Discussion and Implications**

In this chapter I discuss the findings of my study by connecting the dots from across all the stories of the five participants and pulling out common threads and overarching themes. Further, I also connect the dots between these overarching themes, the literature, and the research questions. I draw on all these connections to validate the findings and highlight the credibility of my study. I also discuss implications and recommendations with regards to social work practice and racialized workers.

### **Discussion**

I start this section by stating that there is a danger in aggregating data. I wanted to do justice to participant's stories and hope that I did just that by capturing the unique findings within each story in the previous section. Here, I move beyond analyzing individual conversations and go into cross analyzing all stories to pull out some recurring themes that appeared in all the stories.

#### *Overarching Themes*

There are four (4) overarching themes that were common across the conversations capturing shared experiences of positioning for racialized social workers in this study. These are positioning self, intersectional stories, staying motivated and busting stereotypes. These overarching themes also stood out in capturing the relationships among the stories. Here I provide a discussion that connects the dots between these themes and the literature.

### Positioning Self

Positioning self was a recurring theme that threads through the stories of all participants. For some, positioning self is being firm in who they are as they present themselves to others, for others it is the ability to change like a chameleon to adjust to the varying contexts of interaction. For some others it is presenting a positive self in response to negative stereotypes. Across these differences, however, what is common in all stories is that positioning self is deeply connected to self-awareness, relationship with others and the critical awareness of their work environment. For participants, it is the interaction of these three factors that shaped how they practice social work. All five participants had differing roles in social services agencies and therefore presented unique stories of their positioning self, specific to their unique environments. The stories of how participants responded in social interactions revealed heightened self-awareness due to repeated and accumulated past experiences of feeling misrecognized, overlooked, not being taken seriously, or otherwise feeling disadvantaged. This growing sense of how they were positioned unfavorably time and time again in social interactions became part of how participants looked at the work environments and how they navigated these spaces as racialized workers.

This experience of participants aligns with theories of social positioning as expounded by Davies and Harré (1990), Hollway (1984), and Van Langenhove & Harré (1994). Positioning theory emphasizes relational and dynamic aspects of encounters that participants in this study are experiencing in contrast to the static notions of role in the social psychology of selfhood (Davies and Harré, 1990). Social positioning theory emphasizes meaning making that emerge through discourse (Hollway, 1984). The experience each participant shared shows how meaning is derived and how this meaning of their individual experiences is influencing their actions. However, meaning making is not individual action. It is a complex process of positioning that

connects individual meaning and societal discourses (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). This captures the experience of participants in my study and how they positioned themselves, how others position them and how they repositioned themselves in the various contexts of their work environments. This continuous back and forth negotiation also speaks to the relational and dynamic nature of positioning, as both Davies and Harré (1990) and Hollway (1984) argue.

However, the experience of participants in my study also demonstrates rigid and static aspects of selfhood that are contrary to the dynamic theory of social positioning that these authors propose. Participants share experiences of how rigid and static social processes follow them from context to context. Past experiences of positioning self in other contexts have big impacts on their experiences in new work environments. There is some rigidity in social processes that position them at a disadvantage despite their efforts of positioning themselves favorably, as Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) argue. This sense of solidifying structures also validates Wortham's (2004) claim of how identity thickens over time. This discovery that people position themselves in discourses is very telling in the context of racialized workers. What my findings tell me is that racialized workers can position themselves in social interactions prior to the interaction. As participants shared repeatedly, there is often some predictability across contexts. These findings reveal that past experiences were very influential in the racialized worker's reality of how they position self.

Whether or not this positioning of self through awareness of previous cases impacted the interaction for the better needs further exploration and research. However, social interactions are not always shocking in participants' stories as they anticipate the power imbalance in social positioning and position themselves in pre-emptive ways. This pre-emptive way as seen in the stories from participant's supported an intentional lens of looking at positioning as posited in the

literature by Elejabarrieta (1994). Elejabarrieta notes that making sense of positioning is far from random and that positioning is negotiable in social structures, which makes it non-ritualistic and non-static but more intentional. This idea of intentional speaks loudly to the past experiences that influence how racialized workers were intentionally positioning in social interactions although positioning is also subconscious at the same time. Intentionality does not necessarily mean it is a fully conscious activity.

The findings of my study do align with the dynamic notions of positioning within relationships of power imbalance as theorized by Davies and Harré (1990) and Van Langenhove & Harré (1994). However, I feel the need to look for what is missing in understanding the experiences of participants in my study. I believe that this missing link is what Elejabarrieta (1994) achieved in his research on social positioning by linking social identity and social representation. His research examines the relationship between social identity and social representations through the lens of positioning. In Elejabarrieta's (1994) study, social positioning is a concept that is necessary in articulating the connection between social identity and representation. Therefore, I argue in support of this link between identity and representation because participants' positioning of self in my study aligns both with the dynamic and relational as well as the rigid and static notions of social positioning.

### Intersectional Stories

Intersectional stories were an overarching theme from across all five (5) conversations. Participants experienced positioning race, gender, age, appearance and their professional self in intertwined ways in their encounters of their work environments. Although these factors were also experienced separately, there are times when participants couldn't tell which one they are experiencing because at least two or all factors are implicated. This shows how the experiences

of racialized workers are forged in these intersections. This finding proved critical to my study, as it was a common thread in every conversation, revealing factors affecting how racialized workers position themselves in social interactions. Participants spoke of their challenges with being young and black, feeling like age and race were amplifying the extent to which they had to reposition themselves to prove the contrary. This meant that being young and black brought misrecognition at times, not being taken seriously, having their qualifications questioned, being overlooked, not being promoted, and being questioned on how they were promoted. All these influenced how racialized workers positioned themselves in encounters as disadvantaged, powerless, less than others, but also how they repositioned themselves as being able to do the work despite how they were being perceived. These intersections of age, race, gender and appearance were attributed to the many pushbacks participant's experienced when working with clients and colleagues. With clients age and race were at times positive but in other instances they worked against them. In the overall findings, mostly age and gender intersected.

Intersections that put racialized workers at a disadvantage are not new findings that are unique to my study. In fact, my findings are validated by other stories of intersectionality in the literature. Historically, racialized people have been positioned in places of intersectional disadvantage for many centuries and across many settings. Intersectionality is first coined by Crenshaw (1989) to offer a lens through which we can see how power intersects and creates disadvantage in the context of African American women. Crenshaw asserts that people do not experience race here, gender there, class here and sexuality there. Oftentimes, people experience them all at the same time and separating these factors erases the harsh realities of those who are subjected to all these factors at the same time. The stories of participants in my study validate Crenshaw's conceptual framework of intersectionality. Participants did share experiences of

race, gender, age, and appearance separately sometimes but other times they have also lived them at the same time without knowing which experience is which.

Intersectionality is also the reality of racialized social workers whose stories are abundant in the literature. Suffice it to mention the stories of Morrel (2007) and Kumsa (2007) where race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture and professional identity intersect. In addition, the intersectional stories of racialized workers featured in Mandell (2007), Fahlgren and Sawyer (2011), Marcum et al (2015), and Luna (2016), add layers of validity to my findings. My research brought to the forefront the multidimensional nature of positioning for racialized social workers, although these intersections are not unusual. For example, gender is found within the dialogue of sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, nationality and other categories that created power in specific contexts (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011). This explanation articulated here the imbalance of power relations for participants as their intersectional stories indicate. The findings therefore showed that, although it may be possible to experience these challenges in purely one factor, they did in fact intersect in conscious and intentional ways as well as subconsciously.

Further, the intersectional stories of participants in my study are also validated by theories of positioning as expounded by Davies and Harré (1990) and Van Langenhove & Harré (1994). Intersectional stories also reflect intersectional systems in the mutually determining processes of the social realm in the theory of positioning. Intersections of race, gender, age and appearance happen within the intersecting systems of interpersonal conversations, institutional practices and storylines of societal discourses. And this is validated by the theory of positioning in Davies and Harré (1990) and Van Langenhove & Harré (1994). Intersectional stories created and recreate storylines within which participants positioned and repositioned themselves. The creation of such storylines echoes the idea that positioning is contextual and linked to scenarios



of encounters (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011). These storylines and positions were also linked to the narratives participants adopt to cope with situations of disadvantage, according to Fahlgren and Sawyer. Moreover, intersectional stories are also validated by the intersections of positioning between theories of representation and theories of identity as Elejabarrieta (1994) argues. These intersections ring true to and affirm the multidimensional stories participants shared in my study.

### Staying Motivated

Staying motivated is another overarching theme common to all five conversations. How participants stay motivated is different depending on their different contexts. However, the common threads that run through their narratives indicate that participants stay motivated by resisting negative positioning, repositioning themselves in places of strength, and finding joy and fulfillment in what they do with and for others. Participants stayed dedicated to their work and displayed much strength and resistance in the face of the challenges they experience. I was very motivated and encouraged during these moments of sharing in our conversations. There were things in their environment that motivated participants to continue in their work but there were also factors outside their workplace that influenced their dedication. For them, staying motivated focused on the things they did that contributed to their growth and learning in the workplace. Both internal supports and the climate of the workplace were crucial for keeping them engaged. Participants identified internal supports as colleagues they trusted and superiors that looked like them. One participant shared how important it is to have a professional counselor that supports her mental wellbeing and self-care. Overall, participants had varying strategies to stay motivated but they also knew what to do when these strategies failed. For example, one participant spoke of knowing when it was time to walk away, having done all she could. When staying motivated was no longer an option, she recognized that as a time to let go and moved to another job.

Staying motivated reveals that it is a journey for participants. It is a journey in that, they have not yet arrived but have made enough strides in their professional walk to feel comfortable where they are at to pursue their goals despite the challenges. While the pervasive and repetitive nature of the challenges they face is exhausting, it also makes it necessary that racialized workers keep up the struggle incessantly in this journey. Being a role model for others is such a space for continuing the struggle for repositioning -- not just for themselves but also across their peers and across generations. Being a role model meant that participants felt they needed to be positive role models for other racialized workers coming into the field who needed to see individuals such as themselves succeeding and doing what others might say was not possible. This is supported by James (1997) who observes that workers are driven and this drive influences how they react to challenges within the workplace. The challenges they experience greatly influence them to be role models and coaches in their work places.

Teaching and sharing are also among the actions that participants are actively engaged in within their workplace, which is also connected to staying motivated. This is a positive outlook and response to what they experience individually within themselves. Perhaps being a role model and teaching and sharing are connected to the coping and resistance strategies employed by racialized workers in addressing the challenges of how they are positioned and how they reposition themselves. It is a shared perspective of every participant in this study that doing their best work for the clients was always important and it was the number one factor in why they continued in their jobs. Their dedication is beyond belief. It did not matter what changes and challenges they experienced individually; their utmost dedication was to ensure that their work did not suffer. In this too, the findings of my study are validated by other studies with social workers. For example, Morazes et al (2010) explore motivation among child welfare social

workers in a large qualitative study. In comparing those who left child welfare and those who stayed, they find that all social workers remained dedicated to children, their families, and social work values. Their contextual challenges did not diminish their dedication to their work.

Invariably, even when their clients were challenging, participants expressed that it is their dedication to clients and their commitment to good work ethic that keep them motivated. This too is affirmed in a study by Kim, Henderson and Eom (2015) that highlights the effects of worker behavior and its importance for clients. In yet another study, Grant (2008) adds, “Individuals, groups, and communities depend on these workers’ motivated efforts to attend to quality-of-life issues, and social workers thus have a potentially enormous impact on the lives of others” (p. 121). In connecting this literature to my study, it supports the connection of worker motivation to client outcomes. My study revealed how racialized workers were very focused on the working relationship and their work with clients is what inspires them to stay motivated. I believe these workers were in a way buffering burn out by shifting focus and energies in different ways to move forward. There was a sense of hope that came from each one of these conversations and as we closed in on how they stay motivated, defeat is not the feeling that I felt from participants but strength and endurance for what they envisioned ahead.

### Busting Stereotypes

Busting stereotypes is an overarching theme that all participants in my study are engaging in, some more intensely than others. For the most part, busting stereotypes is a conscious and intentional strategy by which participants reposition themselves favorably in the face of challenging stereotypes that position them unfavorably. Busting stereotypes is also an ongoing engagement at the subconscious level because stereotypes also operate at the subconscious level. All participants expressed a high awareness of the pervasive stereotypes that come with being

racialized and they were constantly going against the grain to prove within their work spaces that they were not those imposed negative labels. The stereotypes they encounter are a combination of stigmas related to their physical appearances, race, gender, age, cultural values, behaviors, and attitudes. This consciousness of how they are stereotypically positioned is an ongoing daily challenge that participants faced and a constant struggle they engage in to reposition themselves. In terms of busting stereotypes, participants identified several strategies and actions. Whether it was working harder to prove they belonged, changing aspects of their appearances such as dress and hair or seeking opportunities to encourage other racialized workers, participants found themselves in a fight for acceptance and validation within their workplace. These struggles were clouding the experiences and creating a different reality for racialized workers.

According to Hall (1997), stereotypes are signifying practices of representation that oversimplify, naturalize and fix our differences. Signifying practices indicate that representation is a process of meaning making where stereotype seeks to fix the ongoing process of meaning making. Stereotyping happens in the context of power and difference and intense struggles over meaning where false binaries between Us and Them are created and contested at the same time. Hall identifies several historical strategies where racialized people contested and reversed stereotypes. One strategy is where racialized people join the binary struggle of opposites to reverse stereotypes and claim domination. He argues however, racialized people do not escape the dynamics of the binary by simply inverting the system of dominance. Another strategy of contesting stereotypes he identifies is substituting a range of positive images of Black people, Black life and Black culture in the lives for the negative imagery of the widespread stereotypes. This aligns with his theory of stereotypes as signifying practices where meaning making is an ongoing unfinished process and meanings are constantly contested and recontested.

The stories of participants in my study are affirmed both by Hall's (1997) theorizing of stereotypes and by the strategies he identifies for contesting stereotypes in the ongoing process of making, remaking and contesting meaning in the context of power and difference. Participants are deeply engaged in both strategies of contesting stereotypes. They are passionately engaged in oppositional struggles of proving others wrong at the same time as they are also engaged in substituting positive images for the negativity in the stereotypes. When it comes to contesting stereotypes, participants seem to leave no strategy untried. This is perhaps because, even when they are positive, stereotypes do more harm than good and as such they need to be corrected, as Langenhove and Harré, (1994) assert. Hall's notion of contesting stereotypes as the ongoing struggle over meaning also aligns with the notion of ongoing social processes of positioning and repositioning in Davies and Harré (1990) and Van Langenhove & Harré (1994).

Within theory of positioning, Van Langenhove & Harré (1994) identify several strategies of contesting and changing stereotypes. Can stereotypes be influenced by the actions that workers were taking? For Langenhove and Harré, "people themselves cannot change 'their' stereotypes, but people exposed to the 'right' stimuli might be less given to stereotyping" (p. 361). It appears that the thing that needs to change is outside the direct control of participants and their actions spoke more to self-preservation than changing stereotypes. This is a form of self-preservation connected to their mental stability in my view. It also sounded like the actions racialized workers were taking attempt to influence the perception of others. Was this even possible? I wonder. No one knows whether these efforts are having impact within these social workers environment or not or if they are more for self-preservation than changing others' views. Some may see it as capitulation. I believe that interpretation as seen in the actions of participants in this study shows that they are intentional in their efforts and focused on creating the

environment they believe they can thrive in and that's what is important for them.

Langenhove and Harré, (1994) argue that positioning introduces a different way of changing stereotypes that implicates positioning in the way stereotypes could be changed as opposed to participants thinking they of themselves can change it. As is observed in my study, changing stereotypes cannot happen on its own in isolation from the positioning triangles. It is not impossible but I believe change is dependent on factors outside of the participant's control, factors that involve all three layers of the positioning triangle where change in the interpersonal conversations must be accompanied with changes in institutional practices and societal discourses. Like Hall (1997), Langenhove and Harré (1994) also speak of bringing new representations to change stereotypes. In another instance of change Langenhove and Harré (1994) spoke of changing the rules within conversations as a means of influencing the other person. This was looking at how others position themselves when using stereotypes. Both instances in the literature spoke to actions that participants in my study took in addressing these challenges they experienced. It can be said that participants were both attempting to change the perception imposed by others as well as presenting different selves in contrast to stereotypes. Whether these advances were making an impact would need further research. However, for the participants in my study, these contestations are creating windows of opportunity to present new representations of themselves. I guess then it must have been influencing some type of change.

My findings on how participants were positioning themselves against stereotypes indicate that they also have individually a moral order that was opposed to what was being imposed. This was described by Langenhove and Harré (1994) as positioning in relation to the other where the worker saw him/herself as being in a moral order in which those stereotypes were not accepted

and as such they will reject such labels. This is very powerful as it speaks to what I believe participants in my study are hoping to achieve by their actions signaling self-preservation and refusing to be labelled. I believe that these acts are in fact screams of participants hoping that they could steer the direction of the discourse to one that did not position them as less than or not capable. The literature supported this attempt of control that participants sought as resisting or overthrowing positioning (Langenhove & Harré, 1994). Busting stereotypes as revealed in my study was about how participants were repositioning themselves in response to how they were being positioned. Stereotypes are a part of racialized workers' reality and are therefore seen as characters in the storyline of societal discourses in practice (Langenhove and Harré, 1994).

At the same time, along with these movements of positioning and repositioning, my findings also indicate static tendencies where no amount of repositioning effects change. In this, my study validates the experiences of racialized social workers in other studies in the literature. For example, Mbarushimana and Robbins (2015) indicate the hard work that is required to continue to question assumptions and stereotypes on an ongoing basis. In my own study, I find that participants are in a constant internal fight. By fight, I am referring to the strength participants display as they speak of how repositioning was helping them navigate these imposed barriers influencing how they were being positioned. Overtime, however, it was almost like the workers were preparing for how they would be positioned in certain encounters in the field whether it was with colleagues, clients or community partnerships pertaining to their professional position. I believe that past experiences tell them that changing their identity as racialized workers is not possible and that, if they are to continue in the workplace, they must pre-emptively position themselves to cope and resist these challenges. The participants in this study each had less than 10 years of work experience which I believe made this discovery even

more interesting as they have not all been in the field that long and have already developed an internalized outlook on positioning. These scenarios of encounters have influenced their way of knowing and being as racialized social workers. As such I come back to the common saying among racialized people: we must work twice as hard to get half as far.

### *Addressing the Research Questions*

The overarching research question with which I started this study is: *How do social workers position themselves in practice within their social services organizations?* My findings addressed this question in a broad way. Social positioning was central in the way participants forged their professional relationships with their co-workers, their staff, their clients, their superiors and their community partners. While each worker created work relationships uniquely their own within the context of racializing power imbalance, the common threads from across their stories demonstrate that they all position themselves in favorable ways in relation to others' negative positioning that puts them at a disadvantage. While negative positioning threatened to diminish participants' capabilities as professionals, it also propelled them into active resistance, seeking to make changes in all three processes of the social realm (Howie & Peters, 1996), namely interpersonal conversations, institutional practices, and societal discourses.

Social positioning also impacted the way participants practiced social work within their service organizations in other ways, as Elejabarrieta (1994) expounds, by bringing together representation and identity. This created intersectional space where participants found expression for their simultaneous experiences of race, age, gender, and appearance, which would have been erased if addressed separately as Crenshaw (1989) asserts. Intersectional understanding impacts their practice with colleagues, superiors and clients by adding nuanced layers that race, gender or



age cannot separately address. With this overview of the overarching research question, I now move to examine the four specific research questions in relation to the literature.

1) How does the way social workers position themselves affect the way they practice?

There were many ways in which positioning influenced the way racialized social workers practice. My findings showed how age, race, gender and professional positions were the entry points of work relationships through which workers internalized and made meaning of their social positioning. In response to how workers position themselves affects the way they practice, here I will pull out two major themes for discussion. These themes are disadvantaged positioning and pre-emptive positioning. While I discuss them here separately because each requires a separate space, the rich stories and nuanced narratives of participants show that they move back and forth between these two positions with ease and fluidly.

Disadvantaged Positioning:

All the participants in the study positioned themselves as disadvantaged within the structures of their work place and in the broader society. Participants identified with this as they all agreed that they were not on a level playing field within the workplace and as such felt disadvantaged. This type of positioning was demonstrated by adjustments and changes that were made specifically in response to what was experienced previously or how participants were informed of how they needed to be positioned in a not so direct way. This was captured in the words of one participant who said: *"What do they want me to be? Is there a standard out there that's already set for someone like me that I don't know about?"* Another participant spoke of how this disadvantaged way of how they were being positioned influenced the way in which they responded: *"I moved past it 'cause I had no choice and this is the problem or the challenge of being a black woman. You are a superhuman. And you are expected to accept."* In these

accounts, participants were relating their frustration at times when they questioned how they were being challenged.

Working from disadvantaged positioning impacted on how these workers do their job in very important ways. To begin with, especially initially, workers start from a compromised positioning, whether around age, gender, race, appearance or culture. The emotional energy they pour into fending off the harm imposed on them and the mental energy they pour into repositioning themselves positively limits their capability for practice in important ways. It divides their focus; it divides their energy. Whether they are managers or frontline workers, their ability to be fully present for the job they do is already compromised. Even though they operate from such unfair playing field, they are still expected to give full service if not more. To function at their level best of their work ethic, they must work extra hard and spend extra emotional energy to make up for the energy spent on positioning and repositioning self. This is captured in the saying I reiterate here again: They must work twice as hard to get half as far as their non-minority colleagues. This is extremely exhausting and it comes with serious implications for their health and wellbeing.

However, after the initial challenging years of questioning, positioning and repositioning, workers do come to a relatively acceptable position. That means several things. (1) They negotiate an acceptable position around race, gender, age, appearance and professional roles for their optimal practice. (2) They compromise and adjust to unacceptable position. (3) Or they leave the unacceptable work place to find a new employment elsewhere. Participants have done all these. This was what one participant shared about where they were at: *“I know my value. I know my worth, so if...I can't truly be who I am then it's going to hurt them more than it will hurt me 'cause if I leave, I know my value here is really high so they need me almost more than I need*

*them.*” Another participant also illustrated this shift by sharing how she adjusts: *“I develop a thicker skin so I don't internalize it too much, but then I come and talk to the youth about it.”*

Hall (1997) argues that meaning making is an ongoing unfinished process. Langenhove and Harré (1994) argue the same about the ongoing process of positioning and repositioning. As long as power imbalance exists, the struggle to regain power continues. In my study, the stories of participants illustrate how they process their encounters and how they seek to regain power to reposition themselves from less than to position of competence to give their best to the job. As positioning and repositioning continue and as participants accumulate experience in the art, they also lean toward a more intentional and more conscious preemptive approach to positioning, as described in the next identified position below.

#### Preemptive Positioning:

Preemptive positioning is a term I coined to capture my understanding of participants experiences of positioning. Preemptive positioning spoke to the autonomous way in which participants positioned themselves. Honed by experience, now participants anticipate the way they will be positioned and contemplate the way they will position themselves ahead of time. Participants were therefore positioning themselves at times independently without waiting for others to position them. For example, one participant takes out her business card before anyone attempts to position her below her own professional positioning of herself. Once she flashes her card, people have second thoughts about positioning her stereotypically. Participants therefore believed that they could influence/change the way in which they were being positioned in interactions. This unconscious yet conscious way of understanding how they were being positioned was interesting and led me to deem these actions as preemptive. A participant captures this assertion:

*If it's an even playing field or not an even one you have to know that you earn your respect...you earn what you get so if you are just caught up on being yourself it's not going to work and that's something I learned a long time ago.*

My findings also indicate that the preemptive positioning of participants is strongly influenced by past experiences. They interpret their current situations based on their past experiences and navigate the work place in their own way. A participant further illustrates this:

*I am constantly having to think of who I am meeting with and who do I need to be to make this a good interaction...which is unfortunate...so you know when you want to look older I wear a suit. When I want people to be comfortable I wear my hair down...*

This finding was consistent with the literature that autonomous positioning influenced individual authority, positioning participants as interpreters of their own experiences (Genuis, 2012). Such preemptive positioning is a protective way of navigating the challenges of positioning as racialized workers and a way of presenting new representations of racialized bodies in the workplace. Preemptive positioning is also part of the workers tactic in making others comfortable with them and therefore making conversations and tasks less complicated. As a participant who felt singled out and needed to prove herself shared, *“I'm like, oh I'm the only black person here. So? If I'm the only black person then I'm going to work. What the heck? I'm going to make sure I work and show these people up.”* I believe building relationships was an area that grew in the face of preemptive positioning based on participants' past experiences.

Although preemptive positioning seems much more intentional, more calculative, and even more manipulative than disadvantaged positioning, I don't believe that workers are spared of the negative impacts on their practice. A lot of their energy is still spent on anticipating others' moves and calculating their next move like a master chess player. That must take away the

much-needed energy from the work they love and that, in turn, is set to affect their health and wellbeing. These issues turn preemptive positioning into disadvantaged positioning. In fact, my findings indicate that participants moved between these two positions fluidly. These movements were influenced by context, professional roles, professional interactions, and past experiences in the field. The common underlying factor here is the feeling that they are at a disadvantage and that the playing field was somehow not a level one.

2) How do social workers experience their social positioning in the encounters they have at different levels in the workplace?

My findings suggest that participants saw themselves as positioned at a disadvantage, which prompted them to reposition in a pre-emptive way to challenge those imposed perceptions that went against how they saw themselves. This was the same across all interactions at different levels in the workplace whether with clients, staff, colleagues, supervisors or in community partnerships. As one participant shared how she approached these challenges, *“I don't think I would say I approached work differently. I approached interactions with those people differently.”* This illustration captures how all participants approached work. The standard they set for their professional practice did not change whether their encounters were with clients, staff, colleagues, superiors or community partners. Instead, what changed was that their encounters became more intentional through a pre-emptive positioning approach. As one participant shared, she intentionally changed her positioning like a chameleon from context to context of her encounters. She changes her appearance and repositions herself in relation to the context to minimize the interference of stereotypical positioning so she can do her job well. All participants demonstrated a high level of dedication to their work and commitment to those they serve.

Participants' stories also demonstrated a fluid movement between disadvantaged and preemptive positioning in various encounters. These were all based on the context of the interactions as well as the intersection of multiple factors of race, age, gender and professional identity working together. In keeping with the literature, participants forged different kinds of relations of power in encounters (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). They made sense of their positions of power and disadvantage daily, demonstrating that they were not within an organizational or structural bubble (Elejabarrieta, 1994). Factors like race, age, gender and their professional identities were all implicated in how they positioned themselves in their encounters with clients, colleagues and supervisors. Participants' stories also show how these factors intersect and how these intersections influenced how they positioned themselves differently in different encounters.

There is one thing that came across clearly and loudly from across all stories. Although all participants positioned themselves as disadvantaged in the bigger picture of their work environments, they were also acutely aware of their own power and privilege, especially the privilege vested in their professional identities. In positioning and repositioning themselves, they held onto a high ethical and moral standard both personally and professionally, as the CASW code of ethics (2005) demands of them. This was evident in their dedication to the clients they served even when they were disrespectful of their professional positioning. Participants took the moral high ground of teaching and sharing information to prove them wrong and show their professional competence. Another demonstration of participants' awareness of their own power and privilege is in their desire to be good role models. All participants shared this desire not only to boost their own professional positioning but also to use their power and privilege to boost the positioning of others who are disadvantaged. There is a commitment to others and an altruistic

goal of doing this for the sake of others. This is also a demonstration of participants' use of their professional privilege in good ways to promote social justice and human dignity in accordance with the professional code of ethics to which they subscribe.

3) How do social workers experience self-doubt because of the challenges with social positioning in their practice?

From the get go, this question assumes that participants will experience self-doubt. It was an assumption not based on any literature but my own experience of self-doubt in my professional encounters. As it turned out, however, all participants experienced self-doubt when they were misrecognized and unfavorably positioned. Even those who presented themselves as very self-confident betrayed moments of self-doubt in their professional interactions. Self-doubt was consciously and subconsciously felt among participants. These were moments when participants questioned their ability to do their work because of how they were being unfavorably positioned. One participant expressed how she automatically doubted herself when she was misrecognized.

Self-doubt was also connected to not being taken seriously and feeling overlooked. A participant expressed this when she recounted one such incident: *"It had me questioning myself like am I not doing something right? Am I not dressing the part? Am I not speaking the part? What is it? Am I not tall enough? I did wear high heels, so I would like to think I... I was tall but ummm yeah and I couldn't."* Participants also experienced self-doubt repeatedly when they were misrecognized and forced to question themselves and their abilities. Sometimes self-doubt is experienced as inaction and fear of taking initiatives for fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed. In yet another layer of self-doubt, some participants experienced confusion and self-blame and positioned themselves as the location of the problem. This is captured in how one participant responded to misrecognition expressing self-doubt, *"I guess it is just the way I*

*present myself.*” In this way, some participants internalize others’ unfavorable positioning and others’ doubt of them becomes their own self-doubt.

My findings on self-doubt led me to interesting studies in the literature. Carroll et al (2011) adopt the definition of self-doubt as “the experience of general uncertainty about one’s competence coupled with an intense preoccupation over prospective failure and negative evaluation” (p. 190). While this definition validates the experience of participants in my study as I discussed above, Carroll and colleagues also go further in exploring whether self-doubt results from the absence of a strong desired self or the presence of a strong undesired self. The results of their study show, not only that self-doubt stems from the absence of strong desired self, but also that high self-doubt translates to weak performance. This explains the importance with which participants in my study held up a strong professional identity as their desired self. It also explains the inaction and fear of making mistakes that some participants experienced because of self-doubt.

However, self-doubt is not always described in a negative light in the literature. By taking a critical look at broader societal discourses, some studies lament that certainty and confidence have been valued whereas doubt and self-doubt have been devalued and disregarded (Braslow et al. 2012). Others question the linear relationship between self-confidence and performance and argue that some self-doubt does increase performance (Woodman et al, 2010). In the areas of intellectual competence, Hardy and colleagues (2015) argue that individuals who doubt their intellectual competency are ironically those who achieve high intellectual competency despite their uncertainty and self-doubt. Participants in my study have certainly struggled with self-doubt and they are also driven to work harder and achieve their professional goals. However, I cannot conclude that this is the result of their struggle with self-doubt. In terms of addressing this



research question, I can assert that, without doubt, participants have experienced self-doubt because of others' unfavorable positioning of them. In that, my initial experience was validated both by participants' stories and by the literature.

4) How do social workers cope with or resist the challenges of social positioning in their practice?

My study addressed this final question in several ways in the positioning and repositioning strategies participants demonstrated throughout my findings. Despite the challenges in their encounters, participants were actively engaged both in coping and resistance. This was manifested in their daily actions to reposition and adjust themselves or change the narratives of stereotypes that hinder their practice as racialized workers. Busting stereotypes was a strategy of resistance they employed to reposition themselves in encounters. In my findings, resistance and coping are interrelated. It seems that participants coped and resisted at the same time. Both coping and resistance are also connected to staying motivated, teaching and sharing, self-care, and being good role models for other racialized individuals. I see these strategies of coping and resistance as strategies of positioning. As Elejabarrieta (1994) argues, by positioning themselves in these ways, participants are creating a space in which they can express their identities. For him, this is where positioning connects identity and representation. While all participants positioned and repositioned themselves, their individual strategies of coping and resistance are unique to each participant. As Davies and Harré, (1990) note, individuals make choices based on their history and their subjective experiences. In my study, this validates the unique ways in which each participant drew their strength from historical resistance of racialized people and their own subjective experiences to make decisions and take responsibility for their decisions.

My findings about the interconnection between coping and resistance are also validated by other studies in the literature. For example, in a study focusing on how Black Canadians in southern Ontario cope with racial discrimination, Joseph and Kuo (2009) identify three layers of coping responses based on two general definitions of coping in the literature and one alternative cultural definition of coping. The first general definition depicts emotion-focused strategies by which individuals regulate their emotional responses to stressful situations without attempting to change the meaning of the stressful situation or the external reality. The second definition depicts problem-focused strategies. This involves individual efforts to gather information and mobilize actions to change their relationship with the environment either by recognizing their personal strength and making new meanings of the situation or by taking control of the situation and mobilizing to change the environment. In addition to these two general coping strategies, Joseph and Kuo identify a third set of coping resources that Black participants in their study employed in response to racial discrimination. They argue that people of African descent respond to stressors of racial discrimination by drawing on the alternative cultural coping resources they name as “Africultural coping” (2009, p. 81). They created three vignettes of racial discrimination in their research design, namely interpersonal, institutional and cultural to tease out the coping strategies of participants. Based on their findings, they argue that combining both the general and Africultural coping resources is useful for people of African descent because it addresses racial discrimination at all the interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

In my study, Joseph and Kuo’s (2009) argument about the need to address all three levels of racial discrimination tallies very well with how participants were involved in all three processes in the social realm described by Howie & Peters (1996). How Joseph and Kuo connected the interpersonal to the systemic is also evident in my study in ways that participants

invariably used both coping and resistance as interconnected resources. My findings are also validated by other studies that connect coping and resistance in the experiences of racialized minorities. For example, Grier-Reed (2010) explores how Black college students create sanctuaries and networks as counter spaces of resistance to cope with racial discrimination. Moreover, I also found validation for my finding that lived experience is strongly related to how participants both coped with and resisted the challenges of positioning. For example, Scott (2003) examines how socialization and racial identity formation is implicated in the coping strategies of African-American adolescents and argues for a more systemic understanding of coping. Watt (2003) adds another dimension exploring how African-American college women turn to spirituality to both cope and resist the everyday challenges of living in oppressive social and political systems and how they develop strong resistant identities.

Finally, my finding around racial ambiguity is also validated by other studies in the literature. In a narrative study much like mine, Jackson (2012) explores the experiences of multi-racial adults and how the very reality of being mixed-race resists categories of race. She calls on social workers to critically examine multiracial identity to gain an understanding of the complexities of racial ambiguity and the challenges of mixed-race persons around belonging and seeking community. The complexity Jackson (2012) is calling on social workers to critically examine and understand is demonstrated in my study through the experiences of the only male and mixed-race participant where racial ambiguity did add extra pressure to his struggles for repositioning. In general, all participants used both coping and resistance to reposition themselves through teaching and sharing, becoming good role models, and busting stereotypes to make changes in their interpersonal relationships, institutional practices, and societal discourses.

## Implications

After demonstrating how my study addressed the research questions and how my findings are validated by the literature in the above discussion, I now turn to the “so what” question of my research. There was an intersectional way in which understanding social positioning for racialized workers emerged in my study. There were unique challenges that each participant shared that allowed me to comprehend how social positioning was part of their daily struggles and how they navigated the work environment. Here I step back and look at the bigger implications of this study.

Although my study is small and cannot be generalized to larger contexts, my findings have implications not only for racialized social workers in the field and those coming into the field but also for social work agencies and organizations, for the social profession, and for the larger society. The humble research question from which I started my research is: *How do social workers position themselves in practice within their social services organizations?* As it turns out, the experiences of positioning among the participants in my study break out of the limiting walls of their social service agencies and call for multileveled strategies of addressing the challenges of racialized social workers. I will discuss these implications at all three levels of social processes of positioning: interpersonal, institutional and societal.

### *Interpersonal*

Implications of positioning at the interpersonal level are many. If we think of positioning and repositioning as struggles within the imbalance of power relationships, how might that impact interpersonal relationships? Interpersonal relationships can be outside or within social service organizations. Outside, it means looking at the struggles for positioning and repositioning

within our relationships in our families, friendship circles, and communities, including social media and online communities and friendship circles. Within social service organizations, it means our relationships with clients, staff, co-workers, supervisors, board members and community partnerships. All these interpersonal relationships are infused with unequal power relationships. How might we position and reposition ourselves in ways that respect the positioning and identities of those we interact with? How might we reposition our practices with clients in ways that heal and empower? How might we foster self-care and other-care in ways that nurture intersectional identities of racialized individuals and groups? As social workers in a helping profession, how might we practice in ways that support the self-determination of others and promote social justice at the same time?

### *Institutional*

Implications of social positioning at the institutional level revolve around how diversity and difference are engaged in social service organizations and this requires a thorough understanding of the complex intersectional challenges of racialized social workers. There are immense benefits to diversity in social work practice. This calls on organizations to position themselves in ways that leverage diverse aspects of practice and organizational behavior in ways that influence its culture and therefore its outcomes. Just as individual position and reposition themselves, organizations and institutions also need to position and reposition themselves in ways that promote diversity and social justice. What might institutional repositioning look like when it comes to promoting social justice within the organization? How might organizational practice change? How might hiring and promotion practices change? How might policies change to respond to the challenges of racialized workers?

To raise and address such questions, it is critical to understand how diverse workers are experiencing their context when in the minority. These factors influence the functioning of the organization and impact overall program outcomes and job satisfaction. The narratives of racialized workers give clues that speak to factors of governance that are shaping relationships and identities in the field (Badwall, 2014). Thus, understanding the factors that influence social positioning for racialized workers cannot be ignored within diverse organizations. Often, there is resistance to raising intersectional issues of race, gender, age, and professional identity to name just a few. My study highlights why it is crucial for organizations to have these conversations and why it is important to understand how social positioning influences social work practice. Racialized workers experience social positioning differently within social service organizations and these organizations must develop policies that promote equity and social justice within their own organizational practice. Just as they encourage individual self-awareness among social workers, organizations should also promote organizational self-awareness. They must practice equity and social justice within their walls to be able to promote these values outside. Is there a space within social work to explore this? I believe my study has positioned itself to start such a conversation. The more this is explored and workers can express the challenges they experience then the dialogue can develop to influence deeper understanding.

### *Societal*

At the societal level, the implications of social positioning involve addressing broader structures and discourses of oppression and marginalization. There are reasons why social positioning and the struggles of repositioning is an uphill battle for racialized social workers within their service organizations. This is because the injustices that follow them into their work place have their roots in the larger society. At the societal level also, my study calls for the need

to delve deeper and further into understanding the challenges of racialized workers. Just as positioning and repositioning occurs individually and institutionally, this should also occur collectively at the societal level. The collective of the dominant group in the case of racialized workers hands down moral orders and attributes. The idea of mutuality and reciprocity does not exist when looking at positioning from a racialized social workers perspective.

This has led me to think whether racialized workers' experiences are unique minority experiences and perhaps there is no resolution but constant repositioning and advocacy for validation and acceptance. The stories shared by participants in my study has further influenced my thoughts around the impact of small steps at repositioning and whether these can influence the bigger picture dialogue around the stereotypes. If we take our cues from participants as a society and join their efforts of busting stereotypes, perhaps we can achieve some grounds. Busting stereotypes means shifting broader discourses of oppression and marginalization. We have the rhetoric, we have esteemed Charter of Rights in Canada and we have admirable social work code of ethics. We just need to walk the talk and practice our values. At the intersection of interpersonal, institutional, and societal positioning, we have the values of equity, social justice human dignity and service to humanity. What more do we need?

## **Recommendations**

Are racialized workers able to change the discourse around how they are positioned in the field through their efforts? Is the bigger picture pointing to structural changes and influences that cannot be changed? How then are workers supported for success? There seem to be more questions than answers as I consider the recommendations from this study. The findings of this study do draw attention to the complexities of the social work environment for racialized individuals. The study further highlighted environments of power imbalance that adversely

affects the way they are positioned daily. These rich experiences cannot be overlooked even in the absence of research to shine a deeper light on them. It is with this in mind that, like the implications, I articulate recommendations that perhaps can influence the three processes within the social realm of positioning and that also capture the levels within which racialized individuals are impacted.

#### *At the Interpersonal Level*

This level of the social realm of positioning is the most difficult as it is the heart of encounters and represents the person to person daily interactions that workers are challenged within. These are unpredictable. In the face of past experiences, as seen in my study, they can still have adverse effects. It is important to note here that the continuation of these adverse effects within the environment can become toxic for the worker. It is not enough to keep these experiences closeted. I would recommend that social workers be active in the creation of peer support groups within their organizations that are able to influence organizational policies and employee conditions supporting self-care, other care and professional growth. These groups should also involve management staff that are able to carry forward these challenges and recommendations from this group to upper management. Here I must also note the danger that creating peer support groups may put the responsibility squarely on racialized workers. My recommendation is meant to urge organizations to take responsibility for creating equitable workplace and supporting racialized workers in the initiatives they take to create equity.

#### *At the Institutional Level*

At the organizational level, sensitivity training is often times met with cynicism and derision and it becomes difficult to know how effective this can be. However, I would still



recommend this training for social work educational settings and social service organizations with diverse staffing. These trainings should be geared at influencing unconscious biases and stereotypes that enter the workplace. Staff and student participation in such activities should be mandatory and reasons should be expressed to influence learning and the importance of how all workers are implicated. If educational institutions and service organizations are not supporting an equitable work environment for workers and students, the responsibility and burden cannot all lie on the worker and students to influence bigger change. I still believe that racial constructs and stereotypes can be broken down through education.

*At the Societal Level*

There is so much to learn at this level. I believe that research such as this and others have the ability to influence society at the bigger level in terms of education, awareness and dialogue. The societal change that is needed to influence the challenges racialized minorities face in general will happen as education increases and individuals are willing to advocate and stand up for rights and respect due them as human beings and members of society. I recommend research publications, community presentations and advocacy as well as workshops as steps and actions towards influencing public discourse.

## Chapter 10: My Reflections

It was the spirit of inquiry that led me to this research project. My lived experience was an influencing factor but the need to explore further led the way from Day One. I didn't know what to expect and I doubted myself at many points throughout this challenging yet fulfilling process. It was challenging in that I had to learn many complex things as I went and there were many unknowns to begin with. I needed clarity so many times that giving up was on the table almost every other week as I thought of facing this research. I didn't give up. It was fulfilling because I stayed with the process. The process kept me engaged because I couldn't walk away not having tried. Many times, I was dismayed by the shortcomings of feeling alone in the process but also overwhelmed by the thought of "can I really do this?" It was in an emotional roller coaster, to say the least. As much as it was research, it was also my life experiences tangled with those of the participants unfolding before my eyes.

As a racialized individual in social work, I have developed a wealth of knowledge and experience in the MSW program at Laurier that has prepared me for the world of work. I am confident in the education I received and would not have chosen any differently. I believe everything happens for a reason. While I would have embraced gladly a smoother transitioning into the initial supports I felt I lacked at the start of my thesis, I won't allow that to define my overall experience. I would be doing myself and the individuals that have voiced such rich stories a disservice in not pursuing this research. This research was just not for me but also for each one that accompanied me on this journey; from my supervisors to family members to colleagues and most of all the participants who travelled with me on this journey. They made it worth the efforts and allowed me to give expression to my lived reality. This is what made it

difficult from start to end: understanding the lived reality of racialized social workers.

Positioning myself was key and it helped me throughout the experience but it also made me very vulnerable at the same time. Embracing vulnerability is new for me. The conversations I had in the field were priceless. I came alive in those conversations and felt a sense of community and camaraderie with the participants that kept me engaged to not hear what I felt but to hear their felt stories.

### **Journaling**

Journaling came naturally to me from Day One. I had way too much on my mind to not journal the experience. Before and after every conversation, I would write a bit on where I was at and what I got afterwards. Journaling was a good way for me to empty my head of those thoughts that invaded my mind throughout the research process. Even when I was not in research mode, I was still thinking about it. In other words, I don't believe I was out of the research mode for too long throughout the process. Journaling allowed me to streamline initial ideas and themes that emerged immediately from my first conversation to the last. It strategically started the analytical processes by which I would engage with the data as well as draw upon my reactions and responses in the field. Journaling also acted as a neutral space without judgment where I could document immediate feelings and thoughts and prepare anew for the next conversation.

### **In the Field**

The field was not without its challenges. From finding the appropriate venue to the weather, this aspect of my research was not always fun. I had to be very accommodative to last minute changes and cancellations with participants. The harsher reality of the field was not receiving responses of interest from individuals I thought would be interested in participating in

the study. The radio silence of the no responses to the research invitation was crippling at first. My first thoughts were very negative. I questioned immediately whether it was wise to pursue this area of research. This, of course, changed as participants began reaching out and were eager and excited to support my research and share their stories.

### **Data Immersion and Analysis**

As I reflect on this aspect of the work all I can say is “wow”. It seemed impossible to start, and while I was in the middle, I couldn't conceive how I would get to the end, if that makes sense. It was a roller coaster journey; emotionally, spiritually and physically. I was beginning to understand the process of my analysis but I was also creating a tailor-made approach that would do justice to the richness of my data. I was very concerned with ensuring I understood the steps I took to reach my conclusions and findings. I realized that this step could be messy or very confusing if I didn't document the how and what I was engaging in for analysis. I found myself doing and learning at the same time despite the fears I had of getting started.

Immersion and analysis was a thrilling experience too. The back and forth of my relationship with the data was interesting and there were definite highs and lows in this interaction. At times it was very emotional and I had to pull myself away from continuing, for fear that my emotional state would implicate my own biases as I took apart the stories and created themes and subthemes. It was as if every time I approached the data, new things would emerge and my thought process would spiral out of control once again. I questioned what I might have been doing wrong here but as my advisor cautioned me, the step by step doesn't always apply. That feedback was very comforting. I now grasp what that meant. I really had to take the data apart within the context of my own research but I also couldn't ignore what came out as I developed my own process of understanding and documenting.

## **The Write Up**

I am no writer. At least in reality I felt that way. In my thoughts I differed. My thoughts always ran ahead of me. My fingers could not type as fast as the words developed in my mind thereby producing at times not so coherent sentences. The thought of writing gets me excited but my self-doubt was a big factor at this stage of the research for me. I feared not being able to bring those thoughts and ideas together to represent what I discovered. I was patient, regardless. My notebook and journal accompanied me everywhere and when I didn't have one, I would write in my phone notes. This allowed me to write down the senseless grammatically incorrect incoherent sentences and thoughts that would later be transformed for the final piece. Once again, journaling was my way through it. My apprehension in writing really comes from previous feedback I received on my writing. Let's just say they act as hindrances at the most inopportune time, but once I started there was no turning back. This part wasn't meant to be negative. I really wanted to capture the vulnerability and apprehension that invaded my thought process every time I looked at the draft document of my research. I was afraid for this part of my work. At times I just had to start, I started with an outline and the rest was history.

## **Final Thoughts About the Next Step**

I don't take it lightly when I say research changed my life this past two years. The many iterations of this process have truly transformed my perspective of its value in the social sciences and the knowledge building that it offers. Of course, there is always more to learn about a given topic or issue and my research has presented such a challenge. There are so many facets to it that I find myself on a spiral of thoughts around the future research as shared in the previous sections. This project was an opportunity of exploration and understanding. My research revealed more on

the gaps in the literature but also opportunities for research that can add to an ongoing knowledge on my topic. I hope that I can perhaps publish small excerpts from my research that can contribute to journal articles on the issue. Further, I would like to work on my writing and research skills by doing some collaborative research projects to gain more experience in the field of research, writing and publishing.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As I stepped back and looked at what I accomplished with this research, I also saw the limitations. Firstly, I consider the things that were outside of my control getting this research off the ground, such as confirming a supervisor and committee member to start. There were many times during this beginning stage that I was tempted to not pursue this study. This delay in getting set up impacted the time I had to design and complete field conversations. My initial plan was to complete my data collection in the summer of 2017 but that didn't get on the way until late fall/winter 2017/2018 which meant that there were challenges in scheduling interviews around and after the holiday season. There was also challenges around the winter weather. I had to make myself available based on the availability of the interested participants.

Secondly, finding venues that worked for the participants was challenging. Not all the participants were able to schedule our conversations at their places of work. I did not realize that finding a library space in the city of Toronto was so challenging for a non-resident and a graduate student. I was quite surprised that access to use spaces at other universities would be difficult for a graduate student. I was disappointed by this and challenged at the same time as my conversations were dependent on me finding a convenient and suitable venue fast. This was the bane of my existence. I reached out to one community center that was kind enough to offer their spaces for free but I never got the opportunity to use their space as the scheduled participant that

day had a family emergency. Nevertheless, I was grateful that they were kind enough to accommodate me. I was also grateful for the one client that lived on the borderline between Mississauga and Toronto and was willing to come to a Mississauga library. I had to think on the spot and be proactive when I experienced these challenges.

Thirdly, transcription took way too long. Did I need to be that detailed? I didn't know, but I was. The length of my interviews had some bearing on that and the fact that they were manually transcribed took a good amount of time. I would be lying if I didn't say I was thinking about the time every day as I transcribed and thought of my original deadline getting closer and closer. It was stressful but I had to bring myself back to the task so many times that when I did complete the transcription, I was directly on to the next stage. There was no way around it and as this was my first experience, I didn't want to miss a thing. Not capturing the rich data was a concern for me.

Fourthly, it was not planned, but all the participants in the study were within the same age group and were in the field for less than 10 years. I felt this was unique as I gathered the stories and took apart the data. I thought this may be a unique finding but it could also be a limitation as perspectives of another age group and longer years in the field were not captured in my study.

Fifthly, there was a silent fear as I conducted this study that might have acted as a limitation in terms of adding richness to the data generated. This silent fear was the fact that I didn't want to push the participants to an emotional place with my prompts. Who is to say whether those moments would have added to the data in other ways?

Lastly, the richness that came forth from the conversations in the field, in and of itself, was overwhelming. Time and resources did not permit me to explore in depth all the threads that came out of this study. I had to focus on those clear trends and information that were across all

the interviews to narrow in on the findings and analyses. Creating the findings section that individually captured the stories of participants was a way I thought captured the essence of these conversations in the field. However, picking apart in detail some of the themes generated was not done fully, thereby limiting the analysis in some way. This study encouraged me to dig deeper and explore with future research those areas requiring a more in-depth analysis.

### **Future Research**

There is, without question, a lack of literature that addresses the ways in which racialized social workers are negotiating encounters within the profession of social work. I don't believe my study is a comprehensive picture of the realities around how racialized social workers are experiencing being positioned around age, gender, race and their professional roles. There are many unknowns here such as the positioning experiences of non-racialized workers or other minority workers.

Firstly, future research is inevitable in this case as my study cannot be definitive with regards to the issue. Whether or not I will be the one to do this research is another matter. I think taking this project on a greater magnitude would be fitting. I am curious about the experiences of workers who have been in the field for over 10 years. The findings of my research was unique for participants within the same age range that lends itself to investigating these experiences with different age groups, at different levels and across racialized and non-racialized workers experiences. Social positioning among racialized workers and its connection to work performance is another area I see connected to the bigger picture of implications in understanding experiences. Does the way in which these workers position themselves daily affect their work performance? Is there a correlation here? Future research, I believe, can explore this in the context of human resource management in social services organizations to examine



the implications in this area. One area that my study revealed is that a greater understanding is needed at the intersections of race, age, and gender in racialized workers' experiences. Since this was common for all participants, a deeper exploration is needed to understand the inner workings of intersectional experiences.

Secondly, I would like to make this research accessible by way of exploring a journal article publication. This is something I would like to explore in the coming months after the completion of my program. I believe that making this research accessible allows for building and expanding this knowledge.

Finally, I would like to explore an artistic way of engaging in discussion and raising self-awareness of social positioning in social interactions. This is something I initially considered at the beginning of this project when I looked into using a creative cardigan I created. The cardigan is all black on the outside representing the professional self of the social worker and multiple colours sewn in a quilt like way on the inside representing some of the values, beliefs and multiple identities and subjectivities that come into the field with the worker. The cardigan can be used as a way of discussion where it represents who the social worker is and what they bring to the field and how it is impacting their social interactions and their work in general. I see this creative piece being used in community and university settings through workshops and workgroups interactions to generate deeper discussions and self-awareness.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix A: Email Invite Template**

Research Title: Social Positioning and Social Work Practice

Researcher/Student: Utamika Cummings Faculty Advisors: Dr. Martha Kumsa & Dr. Deena Mandell

Dear [Insert Name],

I trust all is well with you. As you are aware I am currently completing my Masters in Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier. As part of my studies I will be completing a Thesis looking at social positioning in social work practice.

The purpose of my study is to explore how racialized minority social workers interpret and relate with their social positioning in practice. A social worker in my research is referring to any one working in the social services field with vulnerable populations. I would like to understand how managers and frontline staff think about their social position in practice and how they are navigating this on a day-to-day basis. Social positioning refers to the construction of identity based on some recognizable category that is applied to an individual. In this research I will be looking at your professional position as well as your positions of age, gender and race within the organization.

Based on our past connection direct or indirectly working social services with vulnerable groups/referral from a colleague, I thought that you would be a great candidate for my research. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

I hope this is something that you would be interested in. I have attached along with this email a copy of the information letter and statement of consent for your review and consideration. Please do not hesitate to connect with me if you would like to learn more before making a decision.

Please call me at 416-876-7461 or email me at [cumm5270@mylaurier.ca](mailto:cumm5270@mylaurier.ca) Thank you in advance for your response.

Regards,

Utamika Cummings

## **Appendix B: Information Letter and Statement of Consent**

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

### INFORMATION LETTER AND STATEMENT OF CONSENT

[Social positioning and Social work practice

Utamika Cummings (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Martha Kuwee Kumsa (Advisor) & Dr. Deena Mandell (Committee Member)]

You are invited to participate in a research study. This research explores how social workers experience social positioning in practice. It examines how social workers position and reposition their subjectivities around age, gender and race through their professional encounters in their work place. This study is being undertaken as part of my Master's Degree in social work at Wilfrid Laurier University.

#### **INFORMATION**

You are invited to participate in a conversation. This is a one-time conversation that will take 60-90 minutes of your time. Including you, there will be a total of five (5) participants in this study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

Once you have confirmed interests, provided consent, and shared a date and time that is convenient for the conversation, the researcher will meet with you at your desired location.

It is preferred that the selected location be one that allows for 60-90 minutes with minimal or no interruptions to ensure the flow of the conversation.

As part of the inclusion criteria participants agree to audiotaping of the conversation as part of their consent. If you do not agree to audiotaping, you will not be invited to the conversation. If for any reason you need a break during the conversation the recording will be stopped. The recording will continue once you are ready to proceed with the conversation.

In the conversation you will be asked to share stories that you feel best captures those

encounters, feelings and thoughts of how you understand and experience the way you are positioned within the organization. This data collected from our conversation will be transcribed and analyzed for themes. In my analysis I am looking for any surprises during encounters, your response during these encounters as well as the internal processing if any that occurred after. My analysis I hope will also reveal lessons you may have learned from these encounters. The final analysis of findings will be compiled into a final report that will form my submission to the faculty of social work as completion of my research.

## **RISKS**

There is the potential for discomfort during our conversation that can be as a result of the questions being asked and your reflection of a personal experience that prompts a reaction. Another potential risk is a disclosing what may affect your position in your organization. To minimize these risks, you are encouraged not to share emotionally distressing issues or issues that you fear might affect your relationships within the organization and community.

If for any reason strong emotional responses arise during our conversation you can ask for a time out and or the question can be rephrased or skipped if necessary once you indicate you would like to move forward. I would also encourage you not to divulge any information that will put you in distress, information that can put your reputation or employment position at risk or any information you will regret later. If emotional distress continues, you will be given community support and contact information of distress centers as well as encouraged to connect with the organizations' employee assistance program if one is in place.

In other circumstances the conversation can be continued at a later date if required.

## **BENEFITS**

This research contributes to knowledge that can inform organizational policies and behavior in social work. The research also serves to motivate social workers in recognizing where they have overcome certain challenges in their professional identity as well as where they may have not focused attention. The research is a good self-reflexive exercise for practitioners to assess the impacts of positioning in the field. Self-awareness to enhance ethical practice and minimizing harm is also a potential benefit for social workers participating in this research.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Confidentiality will be protected to the fullest extent possible even though I cannot guarantee

that participants will not be identifiable. To maintain confidentiality, every effort will be made to keep the identity of the participants anonymous. All personal details of participants will be modified in order to strive for anonymity. Participants will be allowed to see this description to ensure they are in agreement with it.

Information during conversations will be collected through note taking and tape recording. Collected stories will be stored in a locked file on a password protected desktop computer at the Faculty of Social Work. Once recordings are transcribed and analyzed, a summary of the analysis will be shared with participants for review.

Conversation recordings will be destroyed after a year.

The final report and results from this research will be shared at my thesis defense with my committee members, invited members from the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University and other research colleagues within the Masters of social work program. A summary of the findings in pdf will also be shared with participants who indicate interests to receive a copy. There is also a possibility that this research can be published in a professional or academic journal. After my successful defense the thesis will become a public document.

Potential direct quotes selected in support of the data analysis used in the final report will be crosschecked with participants to ensure accuracy and that no identifiable information is contained in it. All quotes will be anonymous. Contact will be made via email for you to provide feedback on the use of information and clarity where needed. Further, pre-selected quotes to be included in the final report will be sent to you for approval. This will be done via email communication.

## **CONTACT**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study) you may contact the researcher, Utamika Cummings, at [cumm5270@mylaurier.ca](mailto:cumm5270@mylaurier.ca) and 416-876-7461. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, at (519) 884-0710, extension 4994 or [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca)

## **FEEDBACK**

Participants will be contacted by email with a summary of the preliminary analysis to provide feedback.

Participants will be provided with an electronic copy of the final report by email once this research has been approved as completed by the University standards and requirements. Final results will be available to participants by September 2018.

## CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study. Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to the audiotaping the conversation in which I participate Yes \_\_\_\_No \_\_\_\_I agree to receive the preliminary analysis to provide feedback Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to be sent pre-selected quotes to be included in the final report for my approval Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_

I consent to taking part in this study but not have my quotations used in the final report? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to receive a pdf copy of the summary of the final research findings by email Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix C: Follow Up Phone Call Template**

Research Title: Social Positioning and Social Work Practice

Researcher/Student: Utamika Cummings Faculty Advisors: Dr. Martha Kumsa & Dr. Deena  
Mandell

Hi there,

Thank you for responding to my request to participate in this research I'll be undertaking. I would like to take this time to explain a bit more about the purpose of my research and what I will be requiring of you. I will also like to take this opportunity to answer any questions you may have regarding this study and set up a time and location convenient for us to meet.

Thank you so much again for your interest. I look forward to meeting with you in a few days.

If you have any other questions prior to our meeting please call me at 416- 876-7461 or email me at [cumm5270@mylaurier.ca](mailto:cumm5270@mylaurier.ca)

Thank you and take care

## **Appendix D: Participant Introduction & Demographic Sheet**

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

How are you? I trust all is well. Thank you so much again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. Before we get started I would like to just give you a brief overview of my research and the information concerning confidentiality and participation and collect some demographic information. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **Research overview**

The purpose of this study is to fulfill the requirements of a Master's Degree in Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. This research explores how social workers experience social positioning in practice. The research explores how workers interpret and make meaning of their positions in interactions based on their age, gender and race.

In this study you are invited to participate in a conversation. This is a one- time conversation that will take 60-90 minutes of your time. Including you, there will be a total of five (5) participants in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality will be protected to the fullest extent possible. Information during interviews will be collected through note taking and tape recording. Collected stories will be stored in a locked file on a password protected desktop computer at the Faculty of Social Work. Once recordings are transcribed and verified by participants and the research is completed, the recordings will be destroyed after one year. To maintain confidentiality those who need it, participants will create their own Identifier/alternate name for the purpose of the research. This will not be the case for participants who would like to be identified.

### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If

you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

### **Risks**

There is the potential for discomfort during our conversation that can be as a result of the questions being asked and your reflection of a personal experience that prompts a reaction.

If for any reason strong emotional responses arise during our conversation you can ask for a time out and or the question can be rephrased or skipped if necessary once you indicate you would like to move forward. I would also encourage you not to divulge any information that will put you in distress, information that can put your reputation or employment position at risk or any information you will regret later. If emotional distress continues, you will be given community support and contact information of distress centers.

### **Demographic Information:**

- . **1) How would you describe your race?**
- . **2) How would you identify your gender?**
- . **3) What range best represents your age? 20-30 30-40 40-50 50 & up**
- . **4) What is your current position/past position in social services?**
- . **5) How many years best represent how long you have been in the field?**

## **Appendix E: Conversation Guide**

Research Title: Social Positioning and Social Work Practice

Researcher/Student: Utamika Cummings Faculty Advisors: Dr. Martha Kumsa & Dr. Deena Mandell

### **My story**

So let me tell you how I got here. One day as a manager in a not for profit organization I was covering reception and encountered two young women that came to see the manager. You could imagine the internal shock I was experiencing since I had no such meeting plans and I had never seen these two young women before. It clearly wasn't me they were here to see. But who else? I was the only manager there. How bizarre I thought. These two young women were not only convinced I was the receptionist but did not think twice of considering me. The fact that they knew who the manager was and totally disregarded my greetings was enough to rule me out as any one of authority. So I thought. As I reflected on what happened I couldn't help but wonder what did these two young women see that ruled me out as the manager? What does a manager look like? Oh the poor Receptionist. What if I was an older woman? Was it my age? Was it the fact that I was a racialized minority? What if I was a man? Or an older woman? Is this the way the receptionist is treated? Oh my! I was asking bigger and deeper questions? I don't know what they saw. All I knew was what I presented, my professional self. The story ended with a staff entering the area and the two young women running to safety by reaching out to her to complain of the receptionist questioning that was delaying their meeting. The staff quickly corrected them that I was the manager and that they were mistaken. In fact the two young women were here to see the staff. That's who they thought the manager was.

So here I am with my research now. Wanting to know what others are experiencing with regards to social positioning. I figure this can't be me alone. My experience was upsetting, I couldn't see it or touch it and worst of all it was hard to share with others what I felt inside for fear of being labeled as amplifying a case of mistaken identity.

### **Conversation themes**

Now that you had an opportunity to hear my story on how I got here. Let's deepen the conversation by exploring your understanding of social positioning and how it affects the way you work. When you hear the term position/positioning I want you to consider your professional

position, age, gender and race in the organization.

Social positions are recognized or not recognized when we have encounters (You may present as a Manager but be seen as a tyrant leader by your staff). It's a combination of how your positions are recognized in a particular encounter. Our presentations of ourselves are influenced by a number of other positions we hold such as our race, age, and gender. These are all at play in our work. So today my focus is hearing from you how you have experienced this in your work. I encourage you to share stories that you feel best captures those interactions, feelings and thoughts of how you understand the way you are positioned and have been positioned in your work. I will clarify and share examples of how I have experienced social positioning in practice so as to enhance our discussion and invite you to ask me questions as well.

**Note:** Based on the conversation these themes will be addressed interchangeably in our conversation and not necessarily in the order as stated below.

**1. Tell me your story** - Examples of when you were misrecognized as a professional in your workplace? - Have you ever felt misrecognized because of your age? - Have you ever felt misrecognized because of your race?

- Have you ever felt misrecognized because of your gender?

## **2. Experiences across encounters**

- How is your experience different when working with clients? Can you think of a time when you experienced an encounter with a client that cause you to think of your positioning and how you responded or felt? - How is your experience different when working with colleagues/staff? Can you think of a time when you experienced an encounter with a client that cause you to think of your positioning and how you responded or felt? - How is your experience different when working with your Supervisor/Manager? Can you think of a time when you experienced an encounter with a client that cause you to think of your positioning and how you responded or felt?

## **3. Self-doubt**

- Have you experienced this? How have you experienced this in your encounters with social positioning?

## **4. Coping or resistance**

- How have you dealt with these challenges in practice? Have you changed the way you work with your colleagues, clients and managers? How do you stay motivated?

*Closing remark:* Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I really appreciate it. As data compilation and analysis occurs I will be checking in with you for feedback on the analysis and selected quotes to avoid any misinterpretation of answers. Thank you so much again. We will be in touch.

## **Appendix F: Pre-selected Quotes Approval Template**

Research Title: Social Positioning and Social Work Practice

Researcher/Student: Utamika Cummings Faculty Advisors: Dr. Martha Kumsa & Dr. Deena  
Mandell

Dear [Insert Name],

I trust all is well with you. As per subject, I am following up with you by email based on your consent to receive and review pre-selected quotes that will be used in the final report. Please see the below identified quotes to be used.

Thank you in advance for taking the time out to provide feedback. If I do not hear from you within seven (7) business days I will assume that you are comfortable with the selected quotes and will proceed to include them in the final report.

Thank you in advance for your response.

Regards,

Utamika Cummings