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Start with the Self: Modelling Constructive Self-Statements and Growing with Others

Benedicto Borja Llave

I explore in this paper the importance of starting with the self to model constructive self-statements and create both individual and collective healing. My intended audience within this paper is student affairs professionals of color who exist in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. I ground this paper in my lived experiences as a queer and 1st generation student affairs graduate student of color at a PWI. Within my writing, I detail practices that help me manifest constructive self-statements, to share with other student affairs professionals of color to practice healing self-statements for themselves. Lastly, I conclude with the ways practicing constructive self-statements implicates social justice as student affairs professionals.

Keywords: self-statements, student affairs professionals of color, predominantly white institution, social justice, healing

“The person you spend the most of your life with is yourself”

When I read this quote on social media, *omgggg* went through my body, mind and soul. I thought about my self-worth as my eyes widened while looking at the screen, and I had to take a pause. As someone who does his best to reflect constantly, I took a moment to consider how my self-perception could impact the ways I engage with students. I thought, *damn, I better start liking myself so I enjoy my company!*

I define self-statements as the voice of my thoughts that only I can hear. Self-statements are the voice talking me through things, talking me out of things, the voice telling me *slow down* when I am tired, the voice that I am learning to shift in becoming an affirming presence. I hear my self-statements telling me *You fucking got this!* I listen to my self-statements tell me *Benedicto, listen to your body or Benedicto, one thing at a time*. My self-statements impact me every day. They are the ever-present voice I hear, spoken softly aloud to myself or in my mind, always manifesting through my actions. As a result of my self-statements, I can be hypercritical of myself. Choosing to practice self-statements that operate from a deficit-based mindset can damage my self-worth (Yosso, 2005). On the other

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end, practicing self-statements from an asset-based perspective can support my self-worth and overall well-being (Yosso, 2005).

My self-statements relate to my practice in student affairs when I think about my previous and current experiences with students. I feel responsible as a supervisor and student affairs professional (SApro) to model the behaviors that I expect of my students. By shifting my self-statements, I feel better about expecting my students to identify and shift their self-statements. Self-statements can influence the affects students experience when carrying out their work responsibilities, and self-statements can hopefully create existences that feel healing.

I write this paper for SApros of color who exist in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. As an SApro of color at a PWI, I am passionate about practicing constructive self-statements to move towards liberation as a person of color in white systems. Constructive self-statements help empower me to thrive in and embrace my brownness, while existing in hxstorically¹ white spaces. Higher education prioritizes productivity, and I have found trouble existing with pressure to produce while trying to honor my needs to slow down and feel. Reminding myself that *I am worthy* helps me embrace my full spectrum of emotions, feelings and existences in the classroom, at work, and holistically. Remembering my inherent self-worth helps me stay grounded when I feel I do not have any more capacity to think, write emails, or be fully present when listening to others. Practicing vulnerability and showing up in ways that feel healing for me helps me model the change I want to see in higher education as best I can.

I write this article to support SApros of color at PWIs in our self-empowerment, to remind ourselves that we are enough. Examining self-statements and best practices provided in the article can pertain to all SApros with marginalized identities; however, I consider my thoughts more relevant to SApros of color because of the hxstories and current realities of PWIs in higher education. I choose to center SApros of color because we experience diversity fatigue and compassion fatigue as students of color look to us as mentors in higher education, advisors for student organizations of color, and community away from home (Lam, 2018). Through sharing my narrative, I hope to make space for and with SApros of color at PWIs to (re)connect and (re)examine ourselves to exist as our best selves in higher education and holistically.

Characterizing My Self-Statements

My identities affect the way I view and treat myself in a perfectionist manner. My self-statements can be self-deprecating with underlying notions of feeling that I [1] I use an 'x' in hxstory to challenge patriarchy in the normative spelling of the word, and to uplift intersectional existences: past, present, and future.

have to prove myself. As queer Chicana feminist writer, Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) shares: I change myself, I change the world. My identities, and the ways I align my perspectives related to my identities, can shape the way I view the world. As the son of immigrants and specifically as a Filipino American, I grew up with the value of *utang na loob*, a Tagalog phrase for internalized indebtedness (MacDonald, 2013). The indebtedness I feel stems from my parents immigrating from the Philippines, feeling that I owe so much to them for their sacrifices in creating opportunities for me and my siblings. *Utang na loob* can shape my self-statements in that I often expect a lot out of myself, to excel and try to be “perfect.” My self-statements can manifest in the following ways: *Why didn't you call home* to stay in touch with my family, or *Damn, I could've prepped for that meeting better* as I learn to show up as my best at work.

Simultaneously, with my self-statements I recognize I can be my best cheerleader. Self-statements hold potential to heal. I journal daily to practice gratitude and align my actions with the life I want to manifest, in my process to shift my self-statements in day-to-day life. In my journal reflections, I practice writing in a growth mindset language, which means I view my experiences from an asset-based perspective as opposed to what I may lack. This growth mindset helps me be patient with my learning process and shift my self-statements to operate from an asset-based perspective (Dweck, 2017). For example, instead of writing *I felt tired all day*, I write *From feeling tired, I am learning to listen to my body*. My practice of growth mindset is especially important as I unlearn comparing myself with my peers in graduate school and learn how to focus on me. While I do have the privilege of one parent earning a Bachelor's degree in the States, I am a first generation graduate student of color and the first in my family to earn this level of an educational degree. Furthermore, as a queer SApro of color at a PWI, I root myself in existences that feel restorative for me because this PWI can ask a lot of me – to share my narrative and emotional energy while also expecting me to submit assignments on time and show up in ways that are “professional.” Thus, I am learning to treat myself kindly and ground myself in my truths as I focus energy on myself.

Best Practices for SApros of Color: Learning Constructive Self-Statements

In this section I detail best practices of learning constructive self-statements, denoting my positionality across my identities and experiences. These methods may or may not work for you, in the present and or future. I share these best practices as a starting point to consider how SApros of color can practice constructive self-statements in ways that honor their capacities and in ways that feel best for us as individuals. I intend to provide multiple touchpoints through which SApros of color can enter their process of shifting their self-statements.

My therapy experiences are the main, best practice I identify when reflecting on

how I learn constructive self-statements. In my experience as a queer Filipino American man of color, it felt challenging to open up in therapy about my true thoughts, feelings and emotions because I was so used to suppressing my vulnerability to cope and survive with(in) my realities. Filipinx² American families often uphold cultures of silence, which can result in a lack of mental health wellness. Filipinx Americans seek mental health services at the lowest rate of any other Asian American group, as named by David's (2010) study of mental health-seeking attitudes among Filipinx Americans. For me, this culture of silence manifested as never talking with my parents or family about feeling stress or struggles with my sexual identity, and this silence caused me to communicate passive aggressively until I learned the importance of naming my truths through my undergraduate years (Coombs et al., 2014). As a Filipinx American, I grew up with the value of *pakikisama*, or harmony and respect with others (MacDonald, 2013). Elders in my family can consider direct communication and confrontation to be disrespectful. Therefore, I rarely ever expressed my feelings through speaking aloud until my feelings reached a tipping point. Therapy became a place where I could identify my feelings, give myself permission to cry, and be honest with myself and eventually with others. Currently, I regularly go to therapy every two to three weeks. Therapy helps me unlearn years of being hard on myself, and helps me be more gentle with myself. Therapy helps me recognize the impacts of systemic colonization which caused my parents to immigrate to the States and to place high expectations onto myself and my siblings. Therapy helps me to shift my self-statements, and to practice self-acceptance.

Journaling can be a best practice to shift self-statements, too. I journal daily to envision my life six months from now, name actions that I can take today to align with my vision, express gratitude, and speak into the universe what I am creating today. After my journaling rituals, I write a mantra that resonates with me – recently it has been *I am worthy*. I repeat this statement to myself and engrain it into my psyche as I learn to believe in my inherent self-worth. I can tell myself *I am worthy* when I encounter challenges, and during moments of joy and celebration, reminding myself that it is okay to accept happy emotions, feel and be. Some ways to manifest the self-statements repetition in the workplace could be through placing motivational quotes next to your physical workspace, or in your desktop or phone backgrounds so you may experience the self-statement you are practicing through multiple modes of engagement. Journaling, specifically the act of consistently revisiting my constructive self-statements, has helped and currently helps me shift my self-statements.

[2] I use Filipinx American with an x to practice gender inclusivity for and with Filipinx Americans who identify as gender non-binary. I use Filipino American when referring to my lived experiences as a cisgender Filipino American man.

Lastly, practicing restorative yoga helped me listen to my body and learn to live in the present in relation to my self-statements. I began practicing yoga during my work experience at San José State University, with my Filipina American supervisor who I look up to as a mentor and friend. She taught free yoga sessions, and my first experience with yoga is something I will never forget. Practicing yoga for me means unplugging, breathing, and centering my body (Daut, 2016). Centering my body helps me identify what I am feeling, accept my feelings, and reminds me: *I am worthy* in my growth across identities, self-confidence, and life. What I heard during yoga became my self-statements while practicing yoga, and beyond the yoga studio: *Breathe in, breathe out...you are enough...challenge by choice*. Each of these statements encourages me to center myself, prioritize my body and feelings over externalities, and feel the present moment. Yoga can be a best practice by surrounding the self with nurturing voices and spaces, while learning constructive self-statements. In the next section, I detail macro-level implications for student affairs to bridge best practices of learning constructive self-statements for SApros of color in higher education with larger scale takeaways.

Starting with the Self: Implications for Student Affairs Social Justice Practice

Practicing constructive self-statements as a person with marginalized identities can be challenging. Practicing constructive self-statements as a SApro of color can be even more challenging because of institutionalized systems of oppression within higher education. Oppressive experiences for SApros of color can include existing in a predominantly white space, in an individualistic Western institution promoting white supremacy via perfectionism, competition over resources, and more. Beginning with the self is key for the professional responsibility we carry as SApros. As SApros, we must build self-awareness about when we may project our experiences onto students, which can deter their development (Burke et al., 2017). Starting with the self through self-awareness is key to making both individual and collective change. As Anzaldúa (2009) reminds us, self-awareness must come prior to inner changes, which can then translate into collective change.

Another implication of constructive self-statements for SApros of color is the growth and creation of collective social justice. Namely, when an individual practices constructive self-statements, their impact can carry over to others. These self-statements are our thoughts; thoughts become words, and words become actions. Thus, self-statements can affect others when they manifest through actions. If I tell myself *I am where I need to be*, that self-statement becomes my thought. My *I am where I need to be* thought, supported by my journaling, becomes my words I utter to myself when I face a challenge. Those “I am where I need to be” words become the words I share with others. The “I am where I need to be” words I share with others become my actions. These actions manifest as keeping perspective while

I learn new programming strategies, sharing the mantra with my students, and in the classroom as I challenge myself to share aloud my thoughts that coexist in conflict with my peers' thoughts. Going from my introspective *I am where I need to be* thought to myself verbalizing in class to share my perspective implicates the collective, because I am sharing my individual contributions with the group. Thus, beginning with the self in examining self-statements can extend and impact others I work with in student affairs to empower multiple perspectives to be verbalized and validated in a space.

My *I am where I need to be* self-statement also manifests through actions in my holistic life: accepting that I am learning how to prioritize my energy as a first generation graduate student, and giving myself grace as I grow. Examining self-statements to build social justice as an SApro with marginalized identities not only holds opportunities for self-growth, but also opportunities with others to grow in their self-worth through constructive self-statements. Self-statements can be a powerful tool as people of color learn to embrace our full authentic selves and thrive in white spaces like higher education.

Conclusion

For me, social justice starts with the self. Reflecting on one's self-statements can be a start to practicing socially just student affairs, especially for SApros of color at PWIs. As SApros of color, we have the opportunity to make our world a more socially just place by building ourselves up, and modeling this hopefully contagious, grounding energy alongside our students, both in our respective PWIs and beyond. We hold opportunity to support both individual and collective healing because we interact with so many folk in our work: students, staff, faculty, families, community members, and more. As SApros of color in higher education at a PWI, we can build ourselves up through constructive self-statements, but also bring our students with us in manifesting individual and collective healing. We are enough. We are exactly where we need to be in this moment.

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