

Critical Race Theory: A Content Analysis of the Social Work Literature

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Abstract

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is both a theoretical and practical framework, which promotes a space to deeply engage in discourses of race. CRT highlights the importance of conceptualizing race, racism, power dynamics and structural inequalities. Although the social work profession emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural and racial diversity into social work education, practice and research, the integration of CRT within social work will promote racial competency essential for social work professionals. This article reviewed 14 social work peer-reviewed articles exploring the need to integrate Critical Race Theory.

Keywords: Critical race theory, Social work, Race

1. Introduction

The social work profession has developed a mission focusing on the need to integrate social work education, practice and research valuing cultural and racial diversity. The social work mission also highlights the importance of examining the social, political and economic inequalities marginalized populations face (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). The profession's current concentration on constructing a racially and culturally inclusive initiative resulted from the significant increase in racial and ethnic minority demographics in the U.S. To address current needs, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) published the "Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice," while the Council of Social Work Education published its "Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards" (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; National Association of Social Workers, 2015). While both publications outline approaches to improve the cultural competency of social work professionals, both lack an in-depth, precise theoretical framework incorporating the components of race, ethnicity and oppression. This highlights the need for the profession to develop a racially inclusive framework addressing social workers' understanding and sensitivity towards marginalized and vulnerable communities faced with societal and racial experiences such as oppression, discrimination, and inequality, in order to effectively address societal, institutional and structural inequalities experienced by racial and ethnic minorities.

There is an increasing need for the profession of social work to closely conceptualize and understand how variables such as race, ethnicity and culture are intricate factors shaping client's experiences, and social work practice, education, and research. Cultural competence continues to be a dominant conceptual framework within social work education and practice to promote racial and cultural diversity within the profession. Cultural competence is conceptualized as the development and integration of cultural knowledge, differences, and behaviors useful to social work practice, education and research (Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin and Wise, 1994). Cultural competence promotes the importance of valuing individual diversity, conducting culturally-informed assessments, being conscious of cultural interactions and the significance of developing culturally diverse social work education, practice and research (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Campbell, 2015). Cultural competence emphasizes the need to develop culturally sensitive social workers able to effectively provide services to diverse cultural groups. Cultural competence remains a useful framework for the profession of social work, however, there is an imperative need to integrate a framework deeply examining racial and ethnic minorities experiences of oppression, inequality, discrimination, social and "racial realities" experienced by marginalized communities (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Campbell, 2015, p. 11). The integration of a conceptual framework incorporating a holistic examination and conceptualization of race, ethnicity and culture is vital to the production of social work professionals that can fully understand societal, structural and institutional systems of inequalities.

1.1 Situating Critical Race Theory in the Field of Social Work

During the past several years there has been an increase in social work literature focusing on the integration of critical race theory (CRT) in the field of social work. Historically, defined

as a form of oppositional scholarship, challenging the narratives of whites as the normative standard, CRT became recognized as a tool of social justice addressing racial and institutional inequalities (Taylor, 1998). CRT creates a platform, positioning the variable of race in the center of analysis. Such an analysis is fundamental to the deconstruction of current ideologies promoting a race-neutral society.

Essentially, CRT focuses on significant aspects such as acknowledging racism as endemic to society, deconstructing problematic analyses of race, and the legitimacy of recognizing the personal experiences and narratives of racial and ethnic minorities (Campbell, 2015; Coello, Casanas & Rocco, 2004). Critical race theory provides a useful lens to explore contemporary agendas promoting racial, social, legal and institutional equality. Critical race theory encourages in-depth investigations and analyses to understand historical and contemporary narratives of race, racism, power and oppression. Essentially, CRT has proved to be a valuable theoretical framework fundamental to the deconstruction of race-related inequalities and injustice.

2. Methodology

A content analysis of the social work academic journal literature was conducted to determine what extent critical race theory was being researched and integrated into academic social work journals. The researcher examined peer-reviewed academic journal articles published from 2007 to 2015. A secondary goal of the study was to use content analysis as a method to examine the content of articles and construct themes to code information. Content analysis has been established as a useful, versatile methodology to explore information, construct themes and examine symbolic content (Marshall et al., 2011; Neuendorf, 2002).

The following electronic databases were used: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, MEDLINE Complete, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full Text, and Social Sciences Full Text. Articles were searched within the social work discipline. Articles published from 2007 to 2015 were searched using critical race theory *and* social work as the subject terms. Search results were limited to scholarly peer-reviewed, and available full-text articles. All scholarly academic articles were reviewed. Sources such as editorials, book reviews, news, magazines and conference material were excluded. The literature was reviewed to affirm that articles included both critical race theory and social work subject terms.

3. Content Analysis

The researcher conducted a content analysis to identify content themes. First, the researcher reviewed the title, subject terms, abstract and keywords of each article; the content above was used to construct a list of pre-set codes or prior codes. After the initial review the researcher conducted an extensive review of each article. Emergent codes were constructed from the extensive review. The emergent codes or content themes consisted of social work education,

social work practice, social work research and social work theory. The researcher defined social work education as the process of enlightenment, teaching or acquiring knowledge specific to the field of social work. Practice was defined as the application of skills, knowledge, training and interventions within the profession of social work. Research involved conducting experiments or investigation to conclude and explore new findings relevant to the profession of social work. Lastly, theory was conceptualized as ideologies intended to explain something based on underlying principles.

4. Results

The initial electronic search resulted in a total of 57 critical race theory *and* social work subject related articles. After the subject terms, title and abstract review 29 articles remained. After an extensive review of each full article, a total of 14 articles met the inclusion criteria. See figure 1. The highest number of articles was published in the Journal of Social Work Education (approximately 30 percent). The year 2013 (36 percent) contained the most published articles, followed by 2011 (21 percent) and 2012 (14 percent). Refer to Table 1.

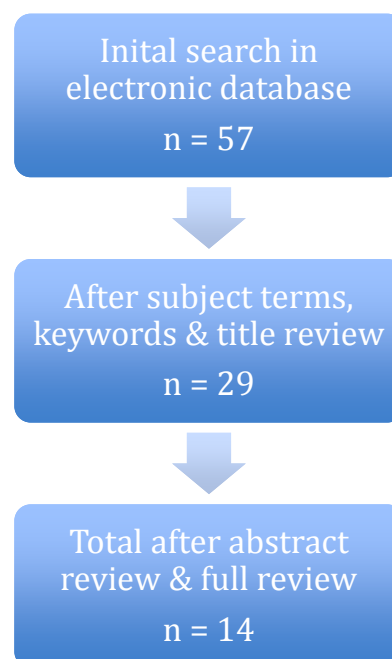


Figure 1. Search Results

Table 1. Summary of Critical Race Theory and Social Work articles by Year

	Year							
Variables	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
# of CRT & SW articles	1	0	1	1	3	2	5	1

Notes: *N* = 14 articles. CRT= Critical Race Theory, SW = Social Work

The secondary review of the 14 critical race theory and social work related articles for content themes found that the majority of articles related to education (43 percent). Twenty-one percent of articles related to research and another 21 percent related to practice, followed by fourteen percent of articles related to theory. Refer to Table 2.

Table 2. Secondary Review of Social Work Content Themes

Themes	n
Education	7
Research	2
Practice	4
Theory	1

Note: $N = 14$ articles

Theme 1: Social Work Education

Seven articles were categorized in the social work education theme. See Table 3. A tertiary content review was conducted to identify content themes within the social work articles focusing on education. Two major themes emerged from social work education: multicultural education and race-conscious education. The multicultural education theme was defined as education, teaching or pedagogy in which content focused on diversity or multiculturalism. Each scholar emphasizes the need for social work education to develop a new, refreshing approach to understanding diversity and multiculturalism. The articles examined the usefulness of integrating critical race theory (CRT) within social work education to further assess the implications of social work diversity and multicultural education.

Ortiz and Jani (2010) briefly examine the effectiveness of multiculturalism and cultural competence models within social work education. The scholars suggest the need to conceptualize diversity and social justice in a framework, recognizing social, institutional and structural contexts and the intersectionality of identities impacting marginalized clients. Ortiz and Jani (2010) emphasizes the significance of integrating critical race theory, a paradigmatic framework into the education of social work to explore institutional, social and individual causes of distress, factors important to promoting transformational change. Similarly, Jani, Ortiz, Pierce and Sowbel (2011) provide an in-depth historical, critical analysis regarding diversity teaching approaches within social work education during the 1960's. The authors provide a useful critique suggesting much of social work education on diversity has been shaped by modernists and assimilationists' theories. Sowbel et. al (2011) argues cultural competence is an important concept adopted by the profession of social work to better understand the role of culture, clients and dynamics between the social worker and client. Yet, the authors' conclude the importance of the social work profession is to recognize the limitations of cultural competence, while embracing the integration of theoretical frameworks better reflecting the realities of marginalized clients. Lee (2013) examines the anxiety, resistance, internal and interpersonal processes social workers and students experience during the process of multicultural education. Lee (2013) suggests the value of integrating the

self-object experience of “twinship” within multicultural education to better advance human connection and relatedness and regulates anxiety contributed to the process of a multicultural education (p. 64). While the aforementioned scholars focused on utilizing CRT to advance multicultural education, previous scholars highlighted the importance of integrating CRT within social work education to construct a space promoting the awareness and consciousness of race.

Table 3. Content Themes and Journal Article Titles

Themes	Articles
Education	Critical Race Theory and the Cultural Competence Dilemma in Social Work Critical Race Theory: a transformational model for teaching diversity. Understanding anxiety and facilitating twinship self-object functions among social workers: Psychodynamic contributions to multicultural education. Critical Race Theory and the Cultural Competence dilemma in social work education Aversive Racism and Intergroup Contact Theories: Cultural Competence in a segregated world Using Critical Race Theory to analyze how Disney constructs diversity a construct for the Baccalaureate human behavior in the social environment curriculum. Teaching Obama: history, critical race theory, and social work education.
Research	Outsider-Within: critical race theory, graduate education and barriers to professionalization Structural Intersectionality and Anti-Oppressive practice with LGBTQ Refugees in Canada
Practice	The new politics of social work practice: understanding context to promote change The science of social work and its relationship to social work practice. Why we need a Biopsychosocial Perspective with vulnerable, oppressed, and at-risk clients. Negotiating within Whiteness in cross-cultural clinical encounters
Theory	Inscribed in our blood: challenging the ideology of sexism and racism

Cultural competence remains a dominant paradigm in social work education. Social work continues to utilize cultural competence as a practical and theoretical framework useful to produce social workers equip to service marginalized and vulnerable populations. Particularly, Abrams and Moio (2009) provides a useful critique of cultural competence, while arguing the integration of CRT will be helpful to address a few limitations of cultural competence such as its tendency to equalize oppression and promoting a race-neutral society. Abrams and Moio (2009) provides an in-depth analysis discussing the advantages CRT will contribute to social work education specifically, social work education examining factors such as race, racism, and oppression. Similarly, Rodenburg and Boisen (2013) highlight the importance of improving cultural competency within social work education. Rodenburg and Boisen (2013) provides an in-depth analysis of aversive racism theory and intergroup contact theory, proposing the importance of integrating both theories in social work education to produce students who are conscious of racism, discrimination and segregation, along with helping students to recognize how such factors may contribute to personal biases, prejudices and ability to serve clients. Critical race theory can be a valuable tool within social work education to analyze and develop racial consciousness within film and texts. Cappiccie, Chadha, Lin and Snyder (2012) illustrates the effectiveness of using CRT as a theoretical lens in social work education to critique Disney films such as *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, and *Pocahontas*. To increase racial consciousness and dialogue among bachelor level social work students, students viewed the previous Disney films. Disney depictions were utilized to expose social work students to racial microaggressions and to create a critical conscious environment and discussion among students. Freeman (2011) utilizes President Barack Obama's first autobiography, *Dreams from My Father* (2005) in the classroom setting to promote racial consciousness among social work students. Using CRT as a practical tool, Freeman (2011) suggests the importance of encouraging students to understand significant themes of race and identity in a post-civil rights era.

Theme 2: Social Work Research

There is a lack of research in the social work field promoting the usefulness of critical race theory as a practical model, however, there has been a few research studies contributing to the social work and critical race theory scholarship. Daniel (2007) conducted qualitative interviews with fifteen African American and Latino graduate social work students. Daniel (2007) used CRT as a point of analysis to closely examine the individual narratives of African American and Latino students experience within a social work program and institution. Daniel (2007) concludes racial and ethnic student's experiences are often shaped by experiences of conflict and marginalization, which further creates negative complexities for student's personal development. The author suggests the need for the social work profession to use racial narratives to deconstruct and promote change within social work programs and institutional structures. Lee and Brotman (2013) conducted a community-based qualitative research study examining the narratives of queer and trans people with refugee experiences in Canada. The study also consisted of interviews with social workers and community organizers to gain perspectives useful to the development of anti-oppressive practice models, along with addressing and identifying implications for services and practice.

An integrated lens incorporating intersectionality, critical race theory and queer theory was employed to explore factors of heteronormativity, cisnormativity and racialization.

Theme 3: Social Work Practice

The content analysis resulted in four articles categorized in the social work practice theme. Two of the four articles focused on redefining the practice of social work while two contributed to further advancing clinical social work practice. Reisch and Jani (2012) discuss how political-economic, demographic, ideological and cultural factors have contributed to the change of social work practice. Reisch and Jani (2012) situates social work practice in an increasingly industrialized and politicized context, which the authors confers this new political environment creates implications for social work practice at the micro and macro levels. Specifically, the authors conceptualize this new political environment as one consisting of “relationships and activities that reflect power and value differences and which influence critical decisions about the distribution of resources, rights, access, opportunities and status” (Reisch & Jani, 2012, p.1133). Conversely, Anastas (2014) suggests the need for the field of social work to develop a practice closely tied to science. Anastas (2014) proposes a rapprochement between social work practice and science creates a valuable platform for social work practitioners and scientists, which advances practice, improves services, embraces methodological pluralism, constructs sustainable structures and allow practice-relevant research collaboration. While the aforementioned articles focused on redefining social work practice in relation to politics and science, the last two articles centered on enhancing clinical social work practice to better serve marginalized and at-risk populations. Berzoff (2011) underlines the significance of integrating psychodynamic theories and CRT into the clinical practice of social work. Particularly, Berzoff (2011) provides an in-depth analysis exploring drive theory, ego psychological, objects relations, attachment theory, self-psychology and relational theory, connecting the social, biological and psychological contexts, which continue to impact client’s development and experiences of neglect, trauma, and abuse. Such an analysis is valuable to understanding social and psychological identities, experiences of disenfranchisement, and structural inequities. Comparably, Lee and Bhuyan (2013) examine the encounters racial and ethnic minority clients experience within clinical settings with white therapists. Lee and Bhuyan (2013) suggest social and cultural contexts remain important factors contributing to encounters between the racial minority client and the white therapist. The authors utilize video and auto recorded clinical sessions between immigrant clients and white therapists in an urban community mental health center in Canada. The authors examine the encounters between the client and therapist using poststructural theories of discourse and conversation analysis, concluding how “whiteness” manifests as an oppressive discourse for racial and ethnic minority clients, positioning clients in subordinate positions. Discursive strategies such as topic control, sequential organization and interactional asymmetries are explored. The authors suggest strategies to de-center the operation of “whiteness” within clinical settings.

Theme 4: Social Work Theory

One article was categorized into the social work theory theme. Sewpaul (2013) suggests

society continues to consist of social institutions constructed by androcentric and patriarchal ideology. Employing emancipatory theory, intersectionality and Black Feminist Theory, Sewpaul (2013) emphasizes the significance of engaging in an ideological critique to examine and deconstruct systems of oppression and privilege, which creates gender and racial inequality. Such an ideological critique is vital to the process of degendering and deracializing cognitive and social processes, along with addressing implications for the social work field.

5. Discussion

Based on this review of critical race theory literature, social work educators and researchers have written little about CRT as it relates to social work education, research, practice, and theory. However, current social work literature suggests the need to integrate theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory to reflect the racial realities of marginalized individuals. Much of the CRT literature within social work education explored the importance of constructing a space promoting race consciousness and awareness. Such components are essential to the production of social workers conscious of racism, discrimination, and institutional inequality, and who are capable of recognizing how such factors may further complicate interactions with individual clients. Critical race theory proves to be a meaningful framework in social work education, increasing race consciousness and dialogues of race. CRT has been used as a practical, effective tool to critique and analyze social work films and texts. The review of literature also noted the importance for social work to redesign research and practice situating CRT as a practical tool positioning narratives and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities within research agendas and clinical settings, in order to deconstruct systems of inequality and promote social change.

5.1 Strengths and Limitations

Although the review of literature was comprehensive, it is important to acknowledge the fact some journals and article have been excluded from the review. For instance, critical race theory *and* social work were used as subject terms; articles that did not include both subject terms were excluded. However, such limitations do not outweigh the strengths of the study. For instance, the author conducted extensive review of 14 articles both electronically and in print, and there were numerous computer databases utilized. To the author's knowledge, this study is the only comprehensive examination of social work's scholarship to the knowledge base of critical race theory.

6. Conclusion

Understanding the significance and functionality of race is imperative to the profession of social work. Social work continues to be profession largely serving racial and ethnic diverse minorities. Therefore, it is essential to integrate a theoretical and practical tool such as critical race theory within social work practice to produce educators, researchers and practitioners

cognizant of racial inequalities and race relations in the U.S. CRT provides a framework which allows social workers to engage in racial discourse, expose color-blind ideology, legitimize racial narratives and deconstruct unjust policies and practices. CRT strongly proposes the need for social work collaboration, activism and community participation amongst social work educators, researchers and practitioners, for the purpose of actively engaging and deconstructing social and racial inequalities.

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