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Future Scenario: Praxis in Critical Race Theory in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Payne Hiraldo

Critical Race Theory (CRT) evolved as a response to the lack of change in racial disparities within the United States jurisprudence. This article provides a historical understanding of CRT, beginning with a synopsis of the tenets that form part of CRT. The article will then give an understanding of what leadership style supports the implementation of CRT. Finally, it will provide the reader with strategies to apply CRT in the work environment through self-work, intercultural competence and restorative practices.

The structure of higher education in the United States (U.S.) reinforces the dominance of Whiteness and reproduces a society that is inherently inequitable. Historically, indoctrination into society revolved around going to college. As a first generation, Black Latina college student, my journey in higher education was not easy because I was not academically prepared to become part of the college classroom. I struggled to navigate the social and academic environments of my college campus. My experience navigating higher education as an undergraduate student led me to become part of the system in hopes of changing it and making it better for others who are trying to achieve their dreams. As a change agent, it is important for me to create a higher education experience that is more equitable. However, as administrator and doctoral student it sometimes feels like I am being conditioned to operate in a broken system which consistently works to reproduce inequality.

No matter how much higher education aims to be inclusive and members of the institution aim to break down and do away with White supremacist ways of operating and being, the structure itself is inherently exclusive. Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001) did a great deal of work concerning White supremacy culture; their work revolved around how organizations, regardless of who is leading them, can perpetuate a culture of White supremacy specifically with regard to which characteristics and ways of leading are valued within the organization.

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To dismantle systems of oppression, everyone must invest in the process of working towards social justice. This unity is difficult to achieve because those who identify with dominant identities (ex. White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, or male) do not see themselves having a role in social justice or are paralyzed by shame when engaging in difficult conversations.

Critical Race Theory

Scholars developed Critical Race Theory (CRT) in an effort to provide a voice for folks from marginalized identities through a framework to analyze Whiteness in the context of the U.S. CRT emerged from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement in response to the role race and racism plays in U.S. jurisprudence (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billing, 1998; Decuir & Dixson, 2004). The purpose of CRT is to examine the role of race, racism, and privilege in upholding the dominant narrative of exclusion in the U.S. The U.S. was founded under the premise of inequality, specifically when it came to engaging with others who did not fit the dominant White paradigm. The genocide of Native peoples in this country is one example of how the U.S. was founded under the notion that folks who are non-White are considered inferior.

A second example is how European settlers enslaved Africans and brought them to the U.S. against their will. African Americans were enslaved in the U.S. for 300 years, during which time they were seen as three-fifths of a man and treated as property. The U.S. was built by the blood, sweat, and tears of African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans. CRT operates with the underlying premise that the U.S. was founded on and operates within a system that is designed to serve White, heterosexual men. Therefore, the systems in the U.S., including higher education, are inherently racist, sexist, and ableist.

Critical Race Theory Tenets

When CRT was first developed, it consisted of the following five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). However, some CRT scholars would argue that there are seven tenets. The two additional tenets added to CRT include intersectionality and commitment to social justice (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In this section, I overview the key tenets of CRT.

Counterstories provide a voice to stories that do not fit the dominant paradigm. This tenet provides folks of color and other marginalized identities opportunities for their truths to be heard and validated, thereby exposing and critiquing the dominant narrative. The second tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism, argues

that racism is an inherent part of U.S. society and therefore controls the political, educational, and economic systems. The permanence of racism acknowledges both White privilege and systemic racism as natural experiences in the U.S. The third tenet of CRT is Whiteness as property, which acknowledges that White folks are the only ones who can benefit from Whiteness and are the only ones who can possess it. This tenet supports the presence and dominance of a system of White supremacy. Interest convergence, the fourth tenet, “is grounded on the premise that People of Color’s interest in achieving racial equality advances only when those interests ‘converge’ with the interests of those in power” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p.9). The fifth tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism, which acknowledges the harm of the phrase “we are all created equal,” and contends that when it comes to legislation or policies, there is no such thing as neutrality in American society. The sixth tenet, commitment to social justice, affirms the importance of creating a society that supports the process and goal of equity. This tenet acknowledges that social justice is always evolving and that people never reach a tangible finish line because society is always changing. In the context of CRT, social justice aims to eradicate racism and other forms of subordination that intersect with race, such as gender, class, sexual orientation, language, religion, and national origin (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; McCoy & Rodrick 2015). The last tenet, intersectionality, addresses how social identities intersect to create a particular social experience.

The U.S. operates along binaries (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015). Therefore, anything that does not fit the established binary is excluded from the dominant narrative. CRT places race/racism at its center, and provides a way for folks to understand how other identities like gender, sexuality, class, and ability intersect with race (Crenshaw, 1991; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). It is important to keep in mind that when using CRT as a method of analysis, various tenets may fit the criteria. This is important because CRT provides an opportunity for situations to be analyzed from different angles while still unearthing the primary issue - racism.

Critical Student Affairs Servant Pedagogy: A Support for the Use of CRT

McCoy and Rodricks (2015) provided student affairs professionals with specific action steps to use CRT. The authors called for the use of critical pedagogy and servant leadership as a way to build upon CRT. They highlighted the importance of self-awareness, particularly related to the ways that student affairs professionals contribute to systems of oppression.

McCoy and Rodricks’ call to action requires individuals to question how they uphold the dominant narrative and reinforce systems of oppression. These questions serve as a form of accountability and require honest reflection. Beyond individual self-reflection, work environments, teams, and departments must also

commit to examining and addressing how they perpetuate White dominance. Employing a servant leadership pedagogy supports the use of CRT to dismantle White dominance in higher education.

Servant leadership is about putting others first and serving their needs before attempting to lead them (Greenleaf, 1970), while centering the responsibility of making the world a better place. Based on the work of John Dugan (2017), servant leadership characteristics embody the tenets of CRT. The desire of servant leaders to serve others based on altruistic and intrinsic motivations corresponds to CRT's mission to give voice to the experiences of others with marginalized identities. Servant leadership requires emotional intelligence and a strong moral compass which are crucial for counterstorytelling to be most impactful. The commitment to social justice requires a commitment to helping others and advocating for the marginalized to have an equitable life by acknowledging that racism is at the epicenter of American society. Servant leadership serves as a framework to dismantle systems of oppression. Although servant leadership supports the use of CRT, it is important to acknowledge the process through which this leadership style was developed. Servant leadership as it was developed by Greenleaf (1970) supports the notions of "great man theory" and reinforces paternalistic behaviors and gender norms. Therefore, being critical of these theories is imperative because there is not one that serves as the best. All theories have strengths and weaknesses; they were each created under a particular assumption made about society. Understanding this, the process of infusing critical social theory is helpful in the reconstruction of leadership theories (Dugan, 2017).

In order to meet the cultural needs of an ever-changing society, the deconstruction and reconstruction of leadership theories is necessary. I would like to further explore this topic during my doctoral journey. The following section of this article outlines my future scenario wherein I introduce the concepts of intercultural competence, social justice, and restorative practices as ways for social change to take place. McCoy and Rodricks (2014) address the praxis of CRT through self-work. However, the use of intercultural competence and restorative practices can help further teams', departments', and institutions' work to dismantle oppression.

Proposed Future Scenario

When I first arrived at the University of Vermont in 2008 as a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) Master's program, I had limited knowledge about social justice. During my time in HESA, I saw that many folks had a difficult time relaying their understanding of social justice. This was particularly true of some White colleagues who could not understand that they had benefits based on their identity regardless of how difficult

their life experience might have been. The university's approach to social justice has shifted significantly over the last seven years, particularly within my role in the Department of Residential Life. The Department of Residential Life uses social justice, intercultural competence and restorative practices as frameworks for students and staff to engage with and negotiate difference.

Intercultural competence is one's ability to communicate and connect with individuals who have different social, cultural, racial and language experiences. A person with a strong intercultural foundation has a strong sense of their cultural values and beliefs and is also able to adapt to other cultural values and beliefs without assigning a value to the beliefs or practices of the other. This concept is key when aiming to connect with another person, organization, institution, or a team at a deeper level. When different cultural values clash with one another, communication often ceases when it is actually needed the most. Attaining cultural competence does not mean that "everything is going to be okay," because that is not always possible. However, there is a higher chance of folks connecting and investing in relationships when they engage in a way that makes the other person feel seen. Moreso, the use of restorative practices as a way of engaging and leading can help build a strong foundation so that the hard work can happen.

Restorative Practices provide a wraparound process of getting folks to build relationships, make connections, and repair harm within relationships. One of the leading concepts of restorative practices is the social discipline window. The social discipline window acknowledges that "people (students, teachers, and staff) are happier and more likely to make positive changes when those in authority (teachers, staff and administrators) do things with them, rather than to them or for them" (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010, pg. 8). The social discipline window is important because it refers to how folks lead. For example, when decisions need to be made about work processes that impact my day to day work, I have noticed that, regardless of whether or not I agree with the decision, I always feel good about the decision because I was involved in the process. The concept of circles provides an opportunity for folks to build relationships. Making circles part of meetings can impact how people are seen and how they engage with the team. Making people feel seen also comes into play in the concept of fair process, which focuses on decision making. However, I would argue the most important and crucial piece in restorative practices is engaging affect.

The act of naming emotions provides opportunity for individuals to connect at a deeper level by creating an emotional bond (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2010). Naming emotions is important when trying to break down systems of oppression. Often, naming something as racist will paralyze someone through shame. Shame often makes folks shut down and not engage in conversation. However, if folks are intentional about creating and building the relationship at the

beginning, the possibility of folks being able to authentically engage in difficult conversations increases. Restorative practices provides a platform for difficult work to take place. It is a method of engagement that allows folks to show up authentically.

Conclusion

Overall, I strongly believe that the use of CRT along with leadership styles that place social justice at the center can help address the inequities that we consciously and subconsciously reinforce. This process, coupled with an environment that focuses on building relationships across difference through the use of restorative practices and intercultural competence, will aid teams in having more productive conversations about issues of inequity. I plan to revisit these topics throughout my doctoral journey. I firmly believe in the importance of creating a process in which practitioners and educators can fill in the gaps between theory and practice to create more just and equitable systems.

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