Reconceptualizing the Knowledge Base: The Imperative for Critical Theories and Perspectives in Social Work Education

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As the U.S. continues to grapple with the need for a racial reckoning, and with a growth of progressive voices and movements—especially those lead by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color—now is an important time to re-examine social work’s knowledge base. Students, researchers, and practitioners need the tools to challenge hegemony, inequity, injustice, and White supremacy from a structural position. Critical theory is an important tool for such work, yet it is not well integrated into social work textbooks, and many students still have limited exposure to it. In this paper, we explore critical theory’s roots and evolution and discuss theories and approaches from this lens that have relevance to social work, including critical pedagogy, Foucauldian theory, queer theory, Critical Whiteness/
Critical Race Theory, critical feminisms, and intersectionality. We discuss how these approaches can inform social work practice and education.

Keywords: critical theory, critical race theory, intersectionality, critical feminisms, critical pedagogy, queer theory, social work

In this moment in time when the U.S.—and, indeed, many parts of the world—is recognizing the need for a racial reckoning, some are calling for social workers to replace police as a means of mitigating the harm that has been perpetrated against those who are most marginalized and most vulnerable to violence at the hands of the State. At the same time, social workers—led in large part by social work students across the country—are beginning to recognize our complicity in engaging carceral logics (punitive approaches) in social work practice. Kirk (2020) and others have expressed how COVID-19 has amplified global disparities to such a degree that they can no longer be ignored. In this vein, Kirk cautions us not to bypass this moment, and instead reconcile the historical dissonance that exists between social work values and social work practice. This would look like interrogating and uprooting social work theory and praxis that uphold and perpetuate White supremacist, capitalist, cis-heteropatriarchal, ableist, and carceral logics. Critical theories and perspectives can help guide social work students, practitioners, and educators in this work.

Critical theory (CT) and its offshoot, critical social work, relate to neo-Marxist ideas that emphasize concepts like power, oppression, systems-level critique, hegemony, and White supremacy and provide tools for critiquing inequity and questioning the social order. It does this by deconstructing hegemonic structures, including knowledge, as well as concepts that allow the dominant group to define normativity. Rather than advocating for incremental change, CT seeks solutions that support transformative change (Dominelli, 2010; Fook, 2002; Habermas, 1984).

Critical theory is regularly taught in many schools of social work outside of the U.S., but far less within the U.S. (Brady et al., 2019). In the U.S., social work continues to emphasize clinical practice and working with the individual, rather than focusing on broader change to the environment that affects the person (Krings...
Reconceptualizing the Knowledge Base (et al., 2020), leading some to argue that social work largely maintains the status quo (Brady et al., 2019). Most critical scholars agree that if social work is to embody a progressive role, then students and practitioners must be able to theorize injustice from a structural position. In this article, we seek to support this direction by offering an overview of CT's roots and evolution. We then provide several exemplars of critically oriented theories and practices. In our discussion, we explore the relevance of these exemplars and their implications for social work practice, research, and education. Given the unequal attention given to CT across social work, we have geared this discussion towards readers with little background in CT.

Overview of Critical Theory

CT can be challenging to understand, as it is an umbrella term used to describe two traditions of critical thought that crisscross through the eras of modernity and postmodernity and within the traditions of structuralism and poststructuralism (Agger, 1992). CT began during the start of the 18th century in response to modernity and the major changes it brought to the areas of science, culture, religion, and politics; these changes led to a shift in worldview from spirituality and metaphysics to ideas involving objectivity and scientific inquiry (Kuhn, 1996). While philosophers of the Frankfurt School (including Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, and recently Habermas) are credited with its development, CT's two distinct branches are rooted in Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche (Agger, 1992).

Marx's false consciousness is a foundational construct of CT. Marx uses the term to explain why the working class did not organize to revolt against the oppressive ruling class, arguing that day-to-day survival left little ability for workers to consider how oppressive structures within production and industry created their inequality and suffering, thus adopting a false consciousness about themselves, society, and their role in it (Marx & Engels, 1848/1967). Critiques of Marxism include the concern that once revolutionary change occurs, it too can become oppressive (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Concurrent with Marxism, a more subjective branch of CT emerged that was based in the study of postmodernism. The field
is loosely defined as an era when absolute truths and widely accepted assumptions within the knowledge base of society, science, history, arts, and culture are critically questioned while alternative perspectives are given increased attention (Fay, 1996). Initially established by the work of Nietzsche, the ideas were also advanced by postmodern thinkers such as Habermas, Freire, and Foucault. Given the theorists’ belief in the need to question what is seen as objective reality, postmodernists work to deconstruct language and knowledge in part by asking which systems of power are affecting interpretation or meaning (Levin, 1993).

In addition to postmodern influences, the evolution of what now constitutes CT was shaped by the philosophical traditions of structuralism and poststructuralism, with the latter attributed to the French tradition of philosophy that included scholars such as Foucault, Bourdieu, and Derrida (Agger, 1992). Structuralism began in the early 1900s and proposes: the totality, rigidity, and certainty of ideas; the use of language to describe ideas; and the belief that ideas are best understood through systems and social science (Harris, 2001). Structuralism places an emphasis on dichotomies and gives attention to language and social structures in terms of binaries. For example, one is either good or bad, male or female (Kirsch, 2000).

Poststructuralists saw no way to locate one singular meaning or remedy for societal oppression that would explain its impact on all groups or individuals because oppression impacts groups in different and intersectional ways (Crenshaw, 1989). Poststructuralism claims that people are not simply subject to the structures around them but can act upon the world to change oppressive structures (Namaste, 2000). It highlights the importance of being able to deconstruct and question language and identity labels and to critique structuralism’s reliance on oppositional binaries (Kirsch, 2000; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Both postmodernism and poststructuralism reject the absolute truths and hegemony found in the scientific traditions of positivism. Instead, they recognize that the systems and strategies producing knowledge are steeped in bias, and this bias is often contained in the language, labels, and previous “findings.”

Although the interconnectedness and difference within the evolution of CT can be confusing, with little definitive agreement among scholars, we see CT as an umbrella term to describe a variety of theories and perspectives that seek to unsettle dominant
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discourse and narratives. Utilizing the ideas of Agger (1992), Dominielli (2010), Mullaly and Dupré (2018) and Webb (2019), we also have identified the following common threads in CT: (1) an explicit acknowledgement of societal oppression and marginalization; (2) an analysis of the roots of oppression and inequality; and (3) an oppositional stance to the scientific traditions of positivism and functionalism (the belief that all aspects and institutions of society serve a purpose).

Exemplars of Critical Theory

There are many CT exemplars and scholars that lend themselves to social work. We have narrowed our discussion to authors and theoretical perspectives that we view as providing an important foundation for social work students and practitioners to critically explore and transform the status quo in support of justice.

Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

In her aptly titled article, “Paulo Freire: Neglected mentor for social work,” Hegar (2012) shows the virtual absence of Freire in the social work literature and the importance of his ideas to social work. Born in 1922, Freire was an educator and revolutionary thinker whose work brought together emancipatory pedagogy, liberation, and social change. His life included imprisonment, exile, and a visiting professorship at Harvard University (Freire, 1970). As an educator, Freire’s strategy for liberation and social change is pedagogical, which he explores in all his books, most famously in his 1970 Pedagogy of the Oppressed. His philosophy and pedagogy are expressed in his belief that the oppressor and “the oppressed must see themselves engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (1970, p. 66). Freire argues that one must remove themselves from false consciousness in order to become more fully human, and once fully human there is almost an innate imperative to work for transformative change.

Key to becoming more fully human is a praxis of reflection and action that allows people to cultivate a critical consciousness, or conscientização, and “[learn] to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements
of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 35). For conscientização to occur, Freire argues for problem posing education, which occurs in a group as a dialogue-centered process that involves “a constant unveiling of reality” and an unmasking of hegemony and one’s role in it (p. 67). In this praxis, questions are asked and personal stories shared and reflected upon so that individuals gain a deep understanding about their social, economic, and political location and the forces that affect it. For example, the oppressor must engage in self-reflection, also known as reflexivity, that involves seeing one’s participation in dominant discourses and practices and reaching the understanding that true social change must be led by the oppressed (Lavoie, 2012). De Montigny (2005) describes this reflexivity as the transformation of oneself through a courageous and moral dedication to the truth. Problem posing education emphasizes humility, authentic learning, multiple truths about a given situation, and deep reflection.

Freire’s views can be applied to all levels of social work, as his theory supports individual, group, and societal change. Within each of these levels, social workers can take a critical view and question reliance on traditional theories, approaches, and models of practice. By engaging in praxis and moving toward authentic spaces for learning and engagement—such as through problem posing dialogues—social workers can create strategies that name and discuss power differentials and promote transformative change (Boone et al., 2019). Practitioners who are skilled in problem posing education and praxis embrace collective learning and avoid the creation of power differentials rooted in the false notion of practitioner as expert. These practitioners also struggle toward liberation.

Michel Foucault and Foucauldian Theory

Another influential CT scholar is the French philosopher and social activist Michel Foucault. Drawing upon his training in psychology and philosophy, Foucault explored how power and subjectivity are created in society. He argued that power is produced with knowledge about the subject, which in turn influences the experiences of the subject as well as the subject’s access to resources and decision making (Rabinow, 1984).

Foucault approached his work from a postmodern perspective. His critique of modernism led him to explore questions related to
power and the fallibility of theory and knowledge. He argued that theory is based on subjectivities in which people who are not directly affected by a problem develop theories about groups, phenomena, or issues (Foucault, 1980). The subjective knowledge is then disseminated and acted upon as a truth, or a regime of truth, “through a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and functioning of statements” and action (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1976/1990) shows how subjectivities produced knowledge that led to a “science” of deviancy, which in turn created a regime of truth equating certain sexual practices with “deviancy.” Deeply concerned about the creation of these “truths” and the implications for subjectified bodies, he argued for the importance of deconstructing ideas so that their hierarchical position and purpose within the hegemony is exposed (Foucault, 1976/1990).

To better understand the way in which knowledge is produced and its relationship to power, Foucault used institutions including prisons to explore how people/bodies become subjectivities, arguing that the purpose of many institutions is to create docile bodies (compliant bodies), which is done in part by separating people geographically and psychologically from the rest of society due to some perceived characteristics, such as criminal behaviour (Foucault, 1975/1995; Rabinow, 1984). Separating often includes scientific classification, which is the effort to understand the human condition from a myriad of perspectives and isolate elements of human experience into concepts, diagnoses, penal systems, races, classes, sexualities and so on (Foucault, 1975/1995; Rabinow, 1984). Foucault’s notion of governmentality (2010) also feeds into the creation of subjected bodies by focusing on issues of social control. Rather than analysing how government works, governmentality refers to the process by which the state or any governing authority—including a licensing board—constructs citizens/members through mentalities, rationalities, and technologies that produce compliance and support dominant viewpoints.

Foucault also asks us to think about knowledge production and the ways in which specific “truths” guide our practices. For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders has facilitated the oppression and exploitation of LGBTQIA2S+ people by being used to support exclusionary policy and legislation
validating homo/transphobia through scientific discourse and knowledge that has previously treated same-sex attraction and/or gender diversity as mental illness (Eisenbach, 2006; Spade, 2006).

There are numerous critiques of Foucault's work, including feminist theorists who have accused him of appropriating concepts and failing to fully recognize the role physical violence plays in an analysis of power, as well as his lack of attention to race and gender (Federici, 2004). Despite the critiques, Foucault's work has meaning for social workers. He serves as a warning to social workers who engage in categorization and raises questions about the motivations behind institutions that isolate, such as prisons. His work requires social workers to deconstruct knowledge, examine our participation in conducting research about/on subjected people, question positivism and hegemonic "truths," and begin to explore the ways in which carceral logics—including a reliance on punitive measures and support for state violence—have seeped into society. An example of the latter might be the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare's decision to use "smart decarceration" in its 12 Grand Challenges (Williams, 2016) rather than explore the possibility of prison abolition.

Queer Theory

Queer theory, like Foucauldian analysis, is concerned with deconstructing conceptualizations about who is and is not considered deviant. Historically used as an epithet directed at gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender/nonbinary people, the word queer has been reclaimed by the LGBTQIA2S+ community as a positive, defiant term (Burdge, 2007). Currently, queer "generally refers to any person who transgresses traditional categories of gender [and/or] sexuality" (Burdge, 2007, p. 244). The phrase queer theory was first used as a joke for a conference name by Teresa de Lauretis and was found offensive at the time by many academics (Halperin, 2003).

However, the label has stuck over time, capturing the field of thinking that disrupts the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire...[Q]ueer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. (Jagose, 1996, p. 1)
In using the term “stabilize,” Jagose is calling attention to how dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexual desire are used to center and normalize heterosexuality and, we would add, cisgender (non-transgender) identities. Queer theory also can be understood as paying attention to how attraction, sexuality, and gender necessarily intersect with other dimensions of being, including race and class (Yep et al., 2003).

Falling within the fields of postmodernism and poststructuralism, queer theory emphasizes deconstructing identities, challenging binary conceptualizations (gay/straight), and centering the non-normative (Halperin, 2003; LeFrançois, 2013). Queer theory is a reaction to and destabilizing of gay and lesbian studies (Halperin, 2003) and essentialist understandings of identity (Slagle, 2003), such as thinking that sexuality, gender, and reproduction are fixed and connected (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory confronts heterosexism and heteronormativity (Halperin, 2003) as well as cisgenderism and cisgender normativity (the ways in which dominant norms, values, policies, and practices center and privilege cisgender people and marginalize transgender and non-binary people). To promote queer liberation, queer theory problematizes replication and the adherence to dominant norms (Slagle, 2003).

Despite some critiques about queer theory being abstract and disconnected from the material realities of queer people (Heinz, 2003), scholars have noted the possibilities for how queer theory might be used as part of political advocacy efforts, such as activism that challenges essentialist identities and assimilationist goals (Halperin, 2003; Slagle, 2003). For example, LGBTQIA2S+ advocacy groups have been critiqued for prioritizing and channelling money towards same-sex marriage over other issues that disproportionately impact transgender and non-binary people of color and those living in poverty, such as unequal access to wealth, mass incarceration, and punitive immigration policies (Spade, 2015).

So, what does queer theory mean for social work? There has been some question as to whether practicing social workers pay much attention to the academic field of queer theory, even though we are among the workers who contribute to “actualizing queerness” among the people with whom we work (Heinz, 2003, p. 370). Nonetheless, queer theory is being written about and applied to
several domains and populations of relevance to social work, including child and adolescent health services (LeFrançois, 2013) and practice with women (Burdge, 2007), same-sex attracted youth (Willis, 2007), and transgender older adults (Fabbre, 2014). Queer theory can be used to guide social work practice, such as encouraging critical thinking about who defines the language we use and how identities are being policed (McPhail, 2004) and questioning the privileging and institutionalizing of heterosexuality and cisgenderism (Willis, 2007).

Critical Whiteness Perspective & Critical Race Theory

Like queer theory, Critical Whiteness and Critical Race Theory (CRT) both challenge the normalization of hegemonic thought and White supremacy. Critical Whiteness is informed by CRT and an analysis of colonialism and its violent racialized impacts. It includes an analysis of the ways in which White methods, logics, and knowledge production combine with systemic racism to maintain White supremacy (Beck, 2019a). Whiteness “is nowhere because it is unmarked, and everywhere since it is the standard by which other groups are judged” (Leonardo, 2007, p.63). It ensures the dominance of White normativity and the subjugation of the non-White Other. It determines what space someone can occupy and what they can do within that space (Ahmed, 2007). Whiteness is not neutral; White peoples’ standing exists because pain and suffering are extracted from those outside of it. Whiteness is more than privilege; it is power and control (Spade, 2015; Yancy, 2008).

From CRT, the perspective of Critical Whiteness recognizes that racism is normalized, difficult to eradicate, and based on a sinister social discourse rather than biology (Lipsitz, 2011). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) define CRT as a movement of activists and scholars interested in interrogating and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power. The initial analysis of racism used by CRT scholars was within legal scholarship. CRT called attention to the ways in which legal interventions are based upon a belief in the efficacy of race neutral or color-blind interventions, which CRT argues normalize and perpetuate endemic racism by ignoring structural inequalities (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Instead, CRT
seeks to transmute power based on the racialization of structural inequalities (Su, 2007).

Ahmed (2007) reminds us that Whiteness is also discursive and centers historical, cultural, structural, and social contexts that are embedded in colonialism and its legacy. As the U.S., Canada, and Australia are just a few examples of settler colonial nations in which social work is prominent, it is important to look to postcolonialism theory, a body of research that describes the ways in which the vestiges of colonialism play out in the present context. This includes social work’s complicity in devaluing Indigenous people and knowledge and not focusing on reparations for Native boarding schools, land grabs, and genocide. Toward moving away from colonial vestiges in social work, there is an emerging literature that discusses the need and strategies for decolonizing social work (Almeida et al., 2019; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Gray et al., 2013).

The combination of colonialism and positional superiority helps to explain the enduring nature of Whiteness and White supremacy. Edward Said (1979) presents the idea of positional superiority as one entity holding dominance so that the superiority allows one to make “truthful” statements about a nation, race, ethnicity, etc., as they define the “other.” These “truthful” definitions act as a scaffold for stereotypes and allow for dominance and control. They are also the basis for “White logics” and “White methods.”

White logics and methods are those that are developed from the standpoint that what is White, Western and Northern is treated as legitimate and the global norm. Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi (2008) describe White logics as “the context in which White supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts” (p. 17). It is how the White gaze sorts, categorizes, and intervenes on these facts, often through White institutions such as universities. From here, knowledge production is reinforced and, in many cases, interventions enacted, without the input of those affected. Indeed, social work is based in White logics. For example, Fortier and Hon-Sing-Wong (2019) argue that colonial social service efforts were operationalized for the purpose of supporting colonization and reflected the European values of Whiteness, worthiness, morality, and work. Indeed, social workers participated in the mass removal of Native American children from their families.
and placement into boarding schools and/or adoption by White settlers that supported cultural genocide.

As critical theories, the implications and interrelated ideas of Critical Whiteness, postcolonialism, White logics, and White methods hold meaning for social work. Each of these transdisciplinary and overlapping theories support critical consciousness and praxis, challenge instrumental change and legal reforms, and promote methodologies that are not built on Whiteness and colonialism. Each of the theories ask social workers to engage in critical consciousness to analyze and challenge hegemony (T. Smith, 2012). For example, it is not enough to stop with discussions of White privilege and oppression, but White supremacy needs to be named (Beck, 2019a). This naming allows one to see its logics. Andrea Smith (2012) explains “In this logic of White supremacy, Blackness becomes equated with slaveability. The forms of slavery may change... but the logic itself has remained consistent.” (p. 87). Indeed, forms of enslavement still occur, such as the prison industrial complex. Extending from critiques of mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow, social workers are beginning to draw similarities between the child welfare and prison systems, noting that each involve the police, surveillance, and punishment, and each target Black and Indigenous communities and other People of Color (BIPOC) (Jacobs et. al., 2021). Additionally, students must learn that the slaveability of sharecropping and domestic work allowed Congress to disqualify most Blacks from the landmark Social Security Act through their participation in these sectors (Beck & Twiss, 2018).

Feminisms

The term feminisms is used to acknowledge that there are many feminist theories and myriad ways in which those theories are enacted. At the core of feminism is an understanding of gender, its enactment, and its relationship to inequality, as well the ways in which patriarchy and gendered institutions affect gender performance and inequality. A central tenant of feminisms is that “the personal is political,” meaning that one’s positionality affects one’s access to possibilities, and those issues of access are political issues that require social action and activism (Dominelli, 2002).
Critical Feminisms

It is difficult to parse-out what makes something critically feminist, as ideas of power, oppression, patriarchy, and social action dominate many strains of feminism, including critical feminism. We see critical feminism as the portion of a feminist lens that centers the analysis of structures, supremacies, and narratives that produce, sustain, and reproduce subjugation related to gender. Critical feminism is also intersectional, as it takes a poststructuralist view of gender, does not privilege positivism or capitalism, deconstructs grand narratives and binaries, and engages praxis. Critical feminism also casts an eye on problematic aspects of feminism, such as exclusionary practices or norms associated with forms of feminism that were articulated by mostly White, heterosexual women with means (Kim, 2020).

Bringing together the above strains are anti-carceral and abolitionist feminism, which seek to dismantle the prison industrial complex. Anti-carceral feminism is a critical response to carceral feminism, which advocated for the use of the criminal legal system and incarceration to address gender violence. As Kim (2020) writes, carceral solutions were constructed by White middle class women who did not fear the police in relation to carceral responses as did communities of color. In response, communities of color have taken the lead in advancing ideas associated with transformative justice, which Kim (2020) describes as collective process for “nonpunitive practices of accountability...violence prevention and intervention that addresses the context of historic and systemic oppression” (p. 319). These ideas ask us to refrain from carceral logics and to view the prison industrial complex as an extension of enslavement and racial terrorism.

Intersectionality as a Movement for Radical Change

Perhaps the most profound implication that critical social work holds for practice is found within the ways that the Black women who constructed intersectionality speak about this framework, compared to how the social work literature does. While social work has largely conflated intersectionality with multiculturalism (Mehrotra, 2010), intersectionality as it was first defined by Kimberlé
Crenshaw (1989) explored the impact of two or more axes of oppression, from which she and others theorized intersectionality as a political tool to disrupt patriarchy and White supremacy, as well as critique the privileged role of Whiteness in discussions of gender (Khan-Cullors et al., n.d.).

While there is not agreement on the exact genealogy of intersectionality, its beginnings are often traced to Sojourner Truth's defiant speech in 1851 in which she definitively declared "Ain't I a Woman?" In so doing, Truth dismantled the cult of true womanhood as framed by White women's experience. Emphasizing her endurance of physical labor, physical and psychological abuse, and the terrorism of slavery, she challenged the passivity attributed toward women (Truth, 1851). She also made clear that when sexism is explored as a single axis of oppression, African American women are erased.

The resistance modeled by Sojourner Truth and other Black women finally entered the academy in 1969 with Frances Beal's (1969) essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." Beal's essay bases itself on a concept of identity firmly associated with structural forces (e.g., race, patriarchy, and class relations). While this essay deserves a firm position in the history of intersectionality, it is often neglected in surveys of the framework's development (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In 1977, the Combahee River Collective published its highly influential intersectional statement in which members of the collective write about their commitment to fighting against racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. They also make clear that, rather than identifying as a "vulnerable population," they see themselves as queer women of color who have been deeply and physically harmed by the systems of oppression, but also ignited in their political work—work that included workplace organizing, addressing violence, supporting health care, and other areas found in social work (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2001).

The next major development in intersectionality as political analysis came from Audre Lorde (1984) when she stated that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). In so doing, she reconceptualized difference as a dialectical encounter for creative potential that could be used to fight passive exploitation. However, for this to succeed, interdependence must
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be organized around the experiences of those cast outside of the master’s house. The work of hooks (1984) parallels that of Lorde in its legitimizing of Black women’s experiences and exposing the way that White conservative and liberal women appropriate political vocabulary to mask their privileged positions. In her work From Margin to Center, hooks (1984) makes clear that true change must come from those cast to the margins.

Additional developments in intersectionality burgeoned in diverse communities of color including Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987/1999) Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, which seeks to build coalitional power across identities and geographical borders. A plethora of other books written by people representing multiple intersectional standpoints conceptualize the term “women of color” not as ethnicity but as a political concept (Hernández & Rehman, 2002).

In her mandate for radical movements, Carruthers (co-founder of the Black Youth Project 100) identifies intersectionality as a liberating movement in which “none of us will be free unless all of us are free” (2018, p. 10). She describes radical movements of today as using a Black queer feminist lens to engage those most impacted by social inequity: people with varying physical abilities, genders, sexualities, and migrations—those who are often considered to exist in the margins of society. The space created allows people and groups to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling systems of oppression. Using hooks’ (1984) margin to center treatise, BIPOC and queer radical traditions have demonstrated that when we are able to view oppression as intersectional, we are able to use intersectionality as a tool of resistance. Freedom fighters on the front lines of liberation movements have amplified the experiences of those most impacted by oppressive systems to transform those systems, and in so doing, their work has benefited the whole. At the same time, it is important to recognize the toll that this work takes. As Sinead Younge (2021) asks, “While Black women are saving everyone, who will save us?” Her answer: “Us. Black women are envisioning and manifesting a new reality” (p. 15).

Because intersectionality has roots and threads in critical anti-racist frameworks, a deep understanding of intersectionality, to include misogynoir, is well beyond our survey, yet critical to anti-racist pedagogy and praxis. There are intersectional movements
across the globe that often frame principles for action that can be used in social work practice. One example of this type of intersectional organizing is outlined by Carruthers (2018), who highlights Black feminist queer organizers discussing their commitment to develop leadership at all levels of the organization, as well as developing processes for community accountability, restorative practices, and healing justice (p. 139). In his work, Dean Spade (2015) builds on intersectionality and the praxis of Black feminists to call for a movement of critical trans politics. This movement, he writes, must be led by the people most affected, work for transformative change, and involve a recognition that change comes from those who stand to benefit most from the change. The treatment of intersectionality in social work as multiculturalism must also be deconstructed and its more radical roots claimed.

Discussion

As we discuss the implications of CT for social work practice and education, we begin with an exercise in which we ask social workers to think about why social work has embraced intersectionality as multiculturalism rather than radical change. What would a problem posing process bring to educators? A purposeful deconstruction of intersectionality and its position in social work could lead to important developments and help ensure that theory and practice related to structural, transformative change are required in social work education.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Research and Education

Lessons from this overview of critical theory can be incorporated into social work practice in numerous ways. Freire’s (1970) work emphasizes the importance of engaging in dialogue-centered work within communities in which community members (rather than the social work practitioner) are treated as the experts on their lives who can identify real solutions based on experience with real problems. Such work can include recognizing, naming, and challenging structures that uphold White supremacy, slaveability, and colonialism. Also needed is a critical reflection of social work that includes an analysis of the White, colonial, and carceral logics
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found in social work. This reflection can help disrupt oppressive social work practices, such as labelling people with stigmatizing terms or pathologizing them, particularly when we work in the context of an environment in which funding is tied to pathologizing practices (e.g., insurance reimbursement based upon diagnostic codes). There is also a need for being critically reflective about social workers’ status as “expert practitioners” and instead taking up the mantle of being “partners” in change efforts.

Critical analysis can also support strategies that bring social work back to a more progressive and advocacy-rooted orientation that seeks to understand how to initiate and sustain structural change and support strategies like mutual aid (Brady et al., 2014; Kim, 2020). Approaches found in social work practice that reflect attention to positivism—through evidence-based practice, professionalization, and lack of attention to social movements—need to be confronted and exchanged for more transformative strategies. There also needs to be effort to bring into the discussion emergent pockets of radical social work, including those of abolitionist perspectives and an analyses of child welfare that include its links to racism, xenophobia, classism, patriarchy, colonialism, and carceral logics (Bergen & Abji, 2020).

Social workers must explore how they are constructing race as they engage with BIPOC populations. From their interviews with community organizers, Lavoie (2012) and Todd (2011) found that White organizers often described racialized communities in problematic ways that evoked exoticized “difference” and White saviorism. Lavoie calls for a critical praxis that centers oppression, anti-racism, and engages in an anticolonial approach that no longer enacts colonial logics or sorts people into categories (Lavoie, 2012; Todd, 2011).

Social work researchers need to be aware of Du Bois’ (1903/2008) question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” and engage with subjects and participants through methods like participatory action research. Not only does representation on research teams need to be inclusive, but leadership must reflect the population. In her book Decolonizing Methodologies, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) advocates a strategy for research as that evokes bell hooks’ belief that outside of the hegemony are the margins: a site of oppression, struggle, and resistance. Tuhiwai Smith says that researchers should center the margins as a
space for problematizing hegemonic thought and prioritize the creative spirit and epistemologies of those outside of Whiteness.

Social work students at the undergraduate and graduate levels alike would benefit from an infusion of information regarding the role social workers can occupy in dismantling oppressive structures. This can be accomplished by centering the theories reviewed here and bringing in the written and spoken work of BIPOC theorists, practitioners, and community members, while also exploring the role of healing justice work. Engagement with critical theories also involves working with students to identify problem posing questions that can help investigate why and how social structures are situated in a certain ways and how current discourse, including the history and “science” of social work, functions to maintain norms. Social work professors are called to engage students around the requisite theories and approaches that allow them to critique knowledge and power while also challenging their and our own critical consciousness regarding privilege, oppression, power, and social justice. We can look to Yancy’s (2008) description of how he promotes reflexivity in the primarily White institutions where he teaches: inspired by bell hooks and her vision of “laboring toward freedom,” he creates unsafe spaces that give students the ability to question hegemonic assumptions (p. 54).

Curiously, at the time of this writing, at least six states across the country are beginning to regulate how public school teachers educate their students about the impact and legacy of racialized oppression and institutionalized inequity. In Georgia, the State Board of Education recently passed a resolution that would limit the discussion of racism in the classroom, declaring that neither the U.S. nor the state of Georgia is racist. This was a result of pressure from Georgia’s governor, who touted CRT as a “dangerous ideology” that is “divisive” and “anti-American” (Bluestein, 2021). Despite the fact that CRT is not a part of Georgia’s K–12 standard curriculum, this move to legislate discussion around racism in the classroom sends a clear signal that those who hold political power in this country understand the power of a critical pedagogy. And, the more knowledge we have about the roots of oppression, the more likely we are to rise up and rebel against it.
Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to advocate for a greater use of CT. To do so, we recognized the need in the social work literature for a strong overview of CT that includes some of its key principles, as well as examples of specific scholars and subfields that have important implications for social work. Our discussion provides social workers with an understanding of how to integrate CT into a problem posing practice that analyzes power, control, and knowledge. We additionally hope that students, practitioners, and educators further explore the ideas we presented as well as other critical theories that have implications for social work, such as critical disability theory and Native American critical theory. In the most recent draft of the 2022 Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2021), there have been noticeable changes in language that center anti-racist approaches; while that is progress, it is important that students, faculty, and practitioners continue to question standards, practices, and educational models in the field of social work.
References


