The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education

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Despite the substantial impact race has in generating inequities in society and educational institutions, race continues to be untheorized (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory (CRT) is an analytical framework that stems from the field of critical legal studies that addresses the racial inequities in society. This article provides an analysis of CRT in the context of diversity and inclusivity in higher education. In addition, this article also draws from the work and research done by critical race theorists who support the use of CRT in education reform and research.

In 1994, critical race theory (CRT) was first used as an analytical framework to assess inequity in education (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since then, scholars have used CRT as a framework to further analyze and critique educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2005). This article will further explore how the five tenets of CRT can be used to analyze the different forms of social inequities reinforced through the institution of higher education. First, I will provide an explanation of CRT. Second, I will discuss how each CRT tenet contributes to inclusivity and diversity in higher education. Third, I will address criticisms of CRT. Finally, I will share how CRT can further benefit higher education.

An Historical Overview of Critical Race Theory

During the mid-1970s, CRT emerged from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were discontent with the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). According to Gordon (1990), CRT originated from the critical legal studies (CLS) movement (as cited

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in Ladson-Billings), which failed to address the "effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26). As a result, CRT analyzes the role of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT's purpose is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege, as well as the profound patterns of exclusion that exist in U.S. society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Therefore, CRT can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. For example, in a predominantly White institution (PWI) simply working toward increasing the amount of students of color enrolled is an insufficient goal if institutional change is a priority. Examining the campus climate efforts to have culturally competent and diverse staff, faculty, and administrators is a more effective way of becoming more diverse and inclusive. Fortunately, the various tenets of CRT can be used to uncover the ingrained societal disparities that support a system of privilege and oppression.

The Relevance of the Five Tenets of CRT within Higher Education

CRT's framework is comprised of the following five tenets: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). Counter-storytelling is a framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). DeCuir and Dixson stated that counter-stories are a resource that both expose and critique the dominant (male, White, heterosexual) ideology, which perpetuates racial stereotypes. Counter-stories are personal, composite stories or narratives of people of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

The use of counter-stories in analyzing higher education's climate provides faculty, staff, and students of color a voice to tell their narratives involving marginalized experiences. Counter-stories can assist in analyzing the climate of a college campus and provide opportunities for further research in the ways which an institution can become inclusive and not simply superficially diverse. This goal is important to keep in mind when institutions work toward creating a diverse college community. An institution can aim to increase the diversity of the campus by increasing the number of students of color. However, if the institution does not make the necessary changes to make the campus climate inclusive, the institution will have a difficult time maintaining diversity. In many cases, counter-stories support the permanence of racism, which is the second tenet of CRT.

The permanence of racism suggests that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society. In CRT, racism is seen as an inherent part

of American civilization, privileging White individuals over people of color in most areas of life, including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In higher education, racism may be analyzed through a lens that examines the structural impact. When higher education ignores the existence of systematic racism, diversity action plans become ineffective (Iverson, 2007). Instead, these initiatives work to propel and reinforce structural and institutional racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate). Therefore, it is important to consider how well intended institutional processes and procedures can potentially promote racism when working toward improving an institution's plan for diversity and inclusion.

The third tenet of CRT is Whiteness as property. Due to the embedded racism in American society, Whiteness can be considered a property interest (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As a result, this notion operates on different levels. These include the right of possession, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to disposition, and the right of exclusion (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Historically, the idea of Whiteness as property has been perpetuated as an asset that only White individuals can possess (Ladson-Billings & Tate). During enslavement, African men, women, and children were objectified as property (Ladson-Billings). This historic system of ownership and the reverberations from it further reinforce and perpetuate the system of White supremacy because only White individuals can benefit from it.

Particularly in higher education, the division between student affairs and academic affairs perpetuates the notion of race as property rights (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). This is evident when research shows how the majority of African Americans who earn their Ph.D. in education earn them in education administration, therefore continuing as practitioners and rarely becoming faculty (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result, the majority of African Americans do not become part of the driving force in higher education: faculty. Professors are seen as owners of the curriculum. Therefore, they have the autonomy of designing courses according to their own understanding of their philosophy of knowledge, which can work against students of color (Patton et al.). This institutional power further reinforces the notion that being White is more valuable and important than being a person of color (Patton et al.).

This systemic reality works against building a diverse and inclusive higher education environment because it supports the imbedded hierarchical racist paradigms that currently exist in our society. Diversity tends to be more visible within divisions of students affairs, although the power of the institution tends to be centralized within academic affairs where there is less representation of women and people of color (Patton et al., 2007).

Interest convergence is the fourth tenet of CRT. This tenet acknowledges White individuals as being the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; McCoy, 2006). DeCuir and Dixson argued, "early civil rights legislation provided only basic rights to African Americans, rights that had been enjoyed by White individuals for centuries. These civil rights gains were in effect superficial 'opportunities' because they were basic tenets of U.S. democracy" (p. 28). An example of this is affirmative action. Although under constant attack as a benefit for people of color, research shows that the major recipients have been White women (Ladson-Billings). Ladson-Billings argued that because White women potentially support households where White men and children live, affirmative action ultimately benefits White individuals in general. Therefore, White individuals benefit from a structure that was initially implemented to offer equal opportunity to people of color.

Diversity initiatives provide another example of White individuals being the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. Recruitment efforts at PWIs can be seen as a form of interest convergence. Given that many international students do not qualify for financial aid according to U.S. regulations, institutions place strong efforts in recruiting students of color who have the financial means to pay for their education. Colleges and universities benefit financially from bringing international diversity to their institution. Further, their student bodies become more cultured at the expense of the international students, while the insitutions' rankings may increase.

The fifth tenet of CRT, critique of liberalism, stems from the ideas of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and equal opportunity for all (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). However, when analyzing the role of racism within U.S. society:

> Whereby rights and opportunities were both conferred and withheld based almost exclusively on race, the idea that the law is indeed colorblind and neutral is insufficient (and many would argue disingenuous) to redress its deleterious effects. Furthermore, the notion of colorblindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as Other. (p. 29)

Colorblindness is a mechanism that allows people to ignore racist policies that perpetuate social inequity (DeCuir & Dixson, 1999).

The lack of inclusivity in the academic curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and student development theory used by student affairs professionals (Patton et al., 2007) supports the notion of colorblindness that works against dismantling social inequities. In order to take a closer step towards eradicating racism on college campuses, student and academic affairs need to incorporate dialogues around

race throughout the curriculum and student activities (Patton et al.). Institutions of higher education must recognize and work toward dismantling colorblind policies (Iverson, 2007).

Criticism of CRT

CRT can play a key role in revealing the social inequities that exist within the structure of higher education. Although many scholars like Villalpando and Delgado have subscribed to the framework of analysis of CRT, the academy still approaches it with apprehension. One could argue that this criticism is due to the perspective that CRT takes on racism. Thinking about racism as a fundamental part of U.S. societal structure is unsettling when many people are trying to dismantle and work against it. However, doing so is a necessary step that society needs to take in order for society to progress. By acknowledging racism, members of American society could recognize initiatives made by the government as improving the lives of people of color, but still benefiting the dominant. Examples of these programs include affirmative action, study abroad programs, and diversity initiatives. CRT also provides a voice to the people who have been systematically oppressed (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). This is unlike other theories that analyze systemic oppression.

Critics claim that CRT does not include social class and gender as part of its framework due to its focus on race. However, CRT scholars work to address the intersectionality of race and other social identities within their analysis (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Patton et al., 2007). One cannot simply think about race, class, sexuality or gender independent from one another. Acknowledging how these various identities are interrelated furthers the complexity of these social constructions, which, if ignored, leaves questions unanswered. For example, what happens when thinking about social experiences? What happens when these various identities do not align with social norms? Essentially CRT places race at the center of the paradigm; however this does not necessarily mean that other identities are ignored.

Conclusion

Since the introduction of CRT in education, limited progress has been made, partly because CRT is relatively new and many scholars when using CRT only focus on the two tenets of counter-storytelling and permanence of racism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Although these tenets are very important:

> [T]he contributions do not capture all that CRT has to offer...it is essential that we utilize the full power of CRT, including Whiteness as property, in-

terest conversion, and the critique of liberalism. (DeCuir & Dixson, p. 30) Through the use of all tenets of CRT, researchers are able to unmask and uncover the reinforcement of White supremacy (DeCuir & Dixson).

Patton et al. (2007) recommended incorporating critical race perspectives in daily practices within education. Doing so brings awareness about the role of race in producing racial inequities. As a result, faculty, student affairs professionals, and institutional administrators should be aware of the rooted racism in educational settings and acknowledge the systemic complexities that further disadvantage students of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Patton et al.). Reflecting on how campus leaders incorporate racial perspectives in the academy through the construction of the curriculum, diversity initiatives, and institutional policies is essential to the progress of higher education's relationship with racial equality.

Many hope that CRT can be used as a reference for institutions striving to become more inclusive through changes in diversity initiatives, infrastructure of institutions, and analysis of hostile environments. When thinking about these possible changes it is important for administrators to ask themselves how these potential changes continue to promote a racist structure. It is important to utilize CRT's five tenets to help reveal racial inequity. Given that all five tenets address different, yet interconnected themes, they help unearth the various ways in which institutions reinforce racism. In addition, it is necessary for academic and student affairs to work collaboratively. If both sides of the institution do not work together in making the institution more inclusive, all the work will be done in vain.

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