



## **Critical Social Work**

School of Social Work  
University of Windsor  
401 Sunset Avenue  
Windsor, Ont.  
Canada N9B 3P4  
**Email:** [cswedit@uwindsor.ca](mailto:cswedit@uwindsor.ca)

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# Critical Race Theory in Social Work Education: A Framework for Addressing Racial Disparities

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Monique Constance-Huggins

University of Pittsburgh

### *Author Note*

Monique Constance-Huggins is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. She obtained Master's degree in Public and International, and Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. Her areas of interest are poverty, welfare use and racial economic disparities. She is also interested in the use of Critical Race Theory in social work education

### Abstract

The multicultural approach is the hallmark of social work education. It pushes individuals to develop awareness of their own perspective and to acknowledge the legitimacy of other cultural views. Yet, it does not provide an opportunity for students to address the striking persistence of disparities between different cultures in the United States. Scholars contend that failure to directly and seriously address the striking inequality in a society leads to a divided society with self-destructive tendencies. In this paper I postulate that fully embracing critical race theory (CRT) in social work education can help to overcome the shortcomings of the current multicultural approach in addressing disparity in the United States.

*Keywords:* critical race theory, multicultural, social work, education

Many years after the Civil Rights Movement, racial inequality remains woven into the fabric of American society. For example, Blacks lag behind Whites in education (Ryan & Siebens, 2012), wealth (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011), income (Hegewisch, Williams, & Henderson, 2011), and accessing government contracts (Bangs, Murrell, & Constance-Huggins, 2007). These disparities can have severe implications for racial minorities. For example, they are an important source of violent crime (Harer & Steffensmeier, 1992), and can lead to diminished opportunities in education, health, and other areas of well-being (Mishel, Bernstein, Shierholz, 2009). Children from wealthier families have more access to quality education relative to those from poorer families. Further, if quality health care is more accessible to the haves than to the have-nots, then individuals from disadvantaged groups will continue to experience a vicious cycle of disadvantage (Deaton, 2003).

The persistence of these racial gaps is an area of concern to social workers. Social work is based on a tradition of helping individuals, especially those from disadvantaged populations, to improve their well-being (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2008). For example, the profession's early and seminal association with settlement houses centered around recognizing and addressing unmet needs created by economic, demographic, and policy changes (Koerin, 2003). The deep disparities that exist mean that many individuals from oppressed populations have poor quality of life fueled by unmet needs. Therefore, in keeping with this tradition of working with and for people in need, the profession should be keenly concerned about the disparities that exist. Further, social work is based on the ethical principle of challenging social injustice both with and on behalf of oppressed populations. The persistent racial gaps are suggestive of the cumulative effect of race-based social stratification and the resulting institutional arrangements that disadvantage Blacks (Ortiz & Jani, 2010) and hence a matter of social injustice.

Despite social work's concern for racial inequality, this topic is not always addressed within the multicultural approach used in social work pedagogy. The multicultural approach evolved in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and redresses the marginalization of non-dominant groups (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Its main areas of focus are content integration, prejudice reduction, and equity pedagogy. In this vein, the multicultural approach has great value in social work education, but Schoorman and Bogotch (2010) suggest that it may overemphasize group differences instead of the underlying processes that create these differences. As a result, this could render the mission of pursuing social justice elusive. Fundamental to this goal of promoting social justice is having an awareness of the existence of racial inequality and the role of race in shaping disparate outcomes for individuals. In this vein, the multicultural approach is inadequate.

In this article, I suggest that the integration of critical race theory (CRT) into social work education is needed to fill the gap left by the multicultural approach in addressing racial inequality, thereby promoting social justice. First, I provide a summary of the multicultural approach and highlight some of its weaknesses in addressing racial inequality and social justice. I then introduce CRT and emphasize its relevance to social work education, particularly in educating students about racial inequality as social and economic injustice.

### **Multicultural Approach in Social Work Education**

The multicultural approach remains at the core of social work pedagogy, practice, research, and policy. It is emphasized both in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) education policy (2008) as well as in the NASW (2008) code of ethics. Further, it is promoted in a plethora of social work textbooks and articles (see Rothman, 2008; Schiele, 2007; Spencer, Lewis, & Gutierrez, 2000).

The multicultural approach is one that allows us to recognize the many influences on a person's life. The approach recognizes that the totality of an individual's existence is underlined by social elements such as values, beliefs, thoughts, language, customs, and action (Garcia, Wright, & Corey, 1991). Patini (2006) surmised that, in turn, these elements are shaped by an individual's group membership. Traditionally, the multicultural approach was seen as only encompassing people of different races and ethnicities. This is partly a result of the efforts of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The efforts were geared towards uncovering racism as a form of oppression, and pushing for ways to mitigate it (Patini, 2006). However, over the years, the term has expanded beyond race and ethnicity to account for other forms of oppression. Today, the multicultural approach relates to broader categories such as sex, religion, socio-economic status, life-style, political views, geographical region, historical experience with dominant cultures, and others (Abrams & Moio, 2009). This broader inclusion is consistent with the realization that individuals are members of multiple social groups, and that the intersectionality of these groups complicates the oppression they face (Collins & Andersen, 2001). In fact, according to Garcia, Wright, and Corey (1991), "most of us can be considered multicultural because we are members of several cultural groups" (p. 86).

The multicultural approach in social work is guided by two general ideological underpinnings – self-awareness and skills development (Abrams & Moio, 2009). The self-awareness ideology is fueled by the notion that individuals bring their own perspectives and worldviews into the helping relationship. These perspectives, in turn, can hinder the helping process if they are different from the worldviews of the clients being served. Social work educators therefore use this premise to encourage their students to become conscious of the basis and development of their own worldviews. Once they have become aware of these worldviews, they are encouraged to set them aside during their work with clients. Yan and Wong (2005), however, argue that the process of setting aside one's perspectives is unrealistic. They believe that the helping relationship is not morally neutral but instead it is mutually influential and intersubjective. Despite this, the multicultural approach pushes for continual efforts to develop self-awareness as one's value perspective is constantly in flux (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

In addition to its focus on self-awareness, the multicultural approach emphasizes building knowledge about different cultures and developing the skills and techniques to effectively work with these groups. Rothman (2008) suggests that although the skills and techniques will be applied within the frames of a standard helping relationship, they are modified to the specific needs, and worldviews of the client.

In view of these ideological bases, the multicultural approach offers pedagogical utility in this current era of increasing diversity. One of the areas of contribution is in helping students

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develop a concern for different cultures. The multicultural approach stresses the need to take into account the unique perspectives of individuals from varying social groups. By so doing, it enables students to go beyond a myopic view of the world and to be more considerate of the differences that exist across cultures. Further, it presents an opportunity for them to become more aware of their own personal value orientations (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

The multicultural approach is also useful in helping to mitigate 'colonial' positioning. According to Tochon and Karaman (2009) colonial positioning refers to situations in which individuals of dominant cultures impose their perspectives on others as the single best way of viewing reality. Such a sense of superiority can lead to the creation of policies that are both invasive and based on flawed assumptions. Further, Korten (2006) contends that colonial positioning is not only amoral, but it is also indicative of an individual having a low level of social awareness. He posits that in extreme cases, this lack of social awareness can be considered psychopathic.

Despite the increased awareness and consideration of different cultures fueled by the multicultural approach, racial inequality in the U.S. abounds. For example, in 2010, 27.4% of Black people and 26.6% of Hispanic people were poor compared to 9.9% of non-Hispanic White individuals (Trisi, Sherman, & Broaddus, 2011). There is also a staggering gap in median income. In 2010, Black families had a median income of 32,068, compared to \$54,620 for White and \$64,308 for Asian families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). In education, White people (30%) are more likely than Black (19%) and Hispanic (13%) people to graduate from college (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). Additionally, there are staggeringly high incarceration rates for minorities compared to White individuals. The incarceration rate for Black men is six times higher than that for White men (West, 2010). Disparities persist in many other areas including wealth (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011) among others.

These racial disparities raise concerns about the persistence of racist practices, institutional racism, and ultimately social injustice. Yet, issues of racial disparities are often not addressed within the frames of a multicultural education. First, the current multicultural approach in social work education falls short of fully addressing racial disparity because it emphasizes personal beliefs and attitudes, and not structure (i.e. institutional racism). According to Potocky (1997) the approach essentially targets change at the individual and agency level. Although challenging students to be aware of their personal values and worldviews is important in promoting a united society, this focus overlooks the role of structure in creating racial disparities in society. Furthermore, it ultimately overemphasizes individual deficits, particularly the culture of poverty, as reasons for racial disparity. The culture of poverty posits that the poorer class, which is made up largely of Black individuals in the United States, manifests certain values and behavior which are strikingly different from those of (White) middle class, and the dominant culture (Waxman, 1983). Such a myopic focus on individual barriers to equity serves to limit the policy and program intervention that could be crafted to bridge racial gap in outcomes. By continuing to view things this myopically, social work practice ignores structural barriers and adopt measures that help people to adjust better to injustice.

Second, the multicultural approach also does not provide an avenue for addressing racial disparity because of its failure to prepare students to handle discussion on racism in the

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classroom. Scholars (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Razack & Jeffery, 2002) have noted that students are often resistant to materials on racism, particularly, when it centers on White privilege. For example, students may deny occupying a privileged position at the expense of other social groups. This denial may even take the form of anger, guilt, and resentment (Julia, 2000). Helms (1995) contends that the multicultural model may be unable to usher students from these defensive responses to a place where they can critique their own privilege. As a result, the multicultural approach may not be able to help agents of oppressions counter any false sense of superiority. This is problematic as oppressors are often trained not to see advantages they have gained at the expense of the oppressed (McIntosh, 1989). Accordingly, they do not see the need to respond to current color-coded differences in society.

In a similar vein, the multicultural approach may not fully enable the oppressed to clearly articulate the meaning of race and racism in shaping their experiences. According to Freire (2000), this is critical given that the oppressed are often taught not to see the structural etiology of their oppression. Although the multicultural approach helps the racially oppressed to recognize personal histories and perspective reflected in the makeup of society (Banks, 1989), it falls short of explaining their current reality of lagging behind dominant groups. Further, as Pon (2009) suggests, the cultural competency emphasis of multicultural education promotes a new form of racism by ‘othering’ non-White people and by defining culture without consideration of power.

Neglecting the issue of racial disparities in social work education has serious implications. Tochon and Karaman (2009) suggest that failure to directly and seriously address the striking inequality in a society leads to a divided society with self-destructive tendencies. Given this, the fact that multicultural education may not always challenge social injustice, is cause for alarm. For example, Schoorman and Bogotch (2010), relying on focus group interviews, found that most of the individuals identified multicultural education with demographic diversity and not social justice. Accordingly, it is important to examine closely the current multicultural approach to identify how it fails to address adequately the disparities in American society.

These critiques highlight the limitations of the multicultural approach in addressing racial disparities and the role of race and institutional racism in these disparities. Additionally, it signals the need to incorporate approaches that fill this very crucial gap. The persistent color-coded disparities in this ‘post-racial’ era signal the need to go beyond multicultural education to address the role of race in maintaining the status quo. The use of CRT offers such an opportunity. If educators are concerned about promoting social justice through multicultural education then CRT should play an increasing role in this endeavor.

### **An Overview of Critical Race Theory**

CRT emerged in the 1970s as a result of the work of Derrick Bell (African American) and Alan Freeman (Caucasian). These scholars sought to examine the ways in which race, racism, and power continued to flourish even in the years after the Civil Rights Movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They were particularly concerned about the slow pace of racial

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transformation in the American society and about the reversal of many of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

Bell and his colleagues were also critical of the positivist and liberal legal discourse around the Civil Rights Movement. Critical legal scholars had been examining legal doctrines to uncover their internal and external inconsistencies as well as to expose the ways that “legal ideology has helped to create, support, and legitimate America’s present class structure” (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1350). Bell, however, argued that the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) critique of the law had little utility in engineering social transformation because it excluded race and racism from the analysis. He further purported that the voices of those who experienced oppression from institutional racism were not heard (as cited in Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Although CRT grew out of law and legal studies, in recent times the theory has become attractive to scholars from a wide range of disciplines including economics, psychology, political science, education, and sociology. Regardless of the field, CRT scholars (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) postulate that the claims of objectivity and neutrality of the law ignore the structural inequalities in society. In this vein, these claims result in normalizing and perpetuating racism. CRT is therefore rooted in the perspective that racism is enduring and tightly woven into the fabric of the society. It is guided by six key tenets which shape its approach to research and pedagogy.

**Racism is Endemic.** First, CRT asserts that racism is not an abnormal experience, but an everyday occurrence for people of color. It is reproduced in our structures, customs, and experiences. Accordingly, race should be seen as a central rather than a marginal force that defines and explains human experiences (Solórzano & Bernai, 2001). Given this endemic nature, CRT suggests that the functions and effects of racism are often invisible to people with racial privileges.

**Social Construction.** The second tenet of CRT is that race is a social construct. It acknowledges that race is a system that was designed to characterize people based on observable physical attributes. These attributes, it asserts, have no correspondence to genetic biological reality. CRT further acknowledges that this social construction of race is a formidable force in shaping outcomes for racial minorities (Haney-Lopez, 2000). Haney-Lopez (2000) surmised that the dominant groups typically determines race, using means such as the law and empirically based knowledge to protect their interests.

**Differential Racialization.** Third, CRT suggests that dominant groups in society can manipulate and recreate racial groups in different ways at different times to determine who is “in” or “out” of the dominant group. For example, at one point in our history the Irish were an oppressed, unwelcomed social group, but over time, they have become part of a White racial class (Ignatiev, 1995). Similarly, Asians were once demonized in popular discourse when their economic success seemed to threaten the national economy. Today, they are heralded as the “model minority” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). According to CRT, those groups that are considered “out” have access to fewer social resources and opportunities.

A fourth tenet of CRT is that of interest convergence and materialist determinism. This suggests that racism confers psychic and material benefits to the majority race. Further, it posits that the interests of the oppressed are addressed only when they converge with the interests of the dominant group (i.e. Whites) (Bell, 1980). According to Stec (2007), “acts that directly help blacks must implicate white interests because white economic (and other) interests and black oppression are inextricably interwoven and depend on each other for their survival” (p. 2). This means that those in the dominant culture who enact social, political, and economic change on behalf of racial minorities would only support changes if their own self-interest is better served. For example, Bell (1980) argues that the landmark decision of *Brown v Board of Education* was more advantageous for White interests than Black interests. He suggested that the decision provided credibility to America’s struggle with Communist nations to win the support of third world people. Also, Whites realized that the South could transition from a rural, plantation society to a Sunbelt one, while maintaining its potential and profit only by ending the struggle to remain divided by segregation. “Thus, segregation was viewed as a barrier to further industrialization in the South” (Bell, 1980, p. 525).

**Advancing the Voice of the Marginalized.** Fifth, CRT asserts that racial minorities are routinely excluded from the historical accounts given by dominant groups. It suggests that this is an attempt by the dominant group to justify and legitimize its power. CRT therefore calls for the voices of the oppressed to be reflected in any recount of history. It asserts that minorities are best able to articulate the meaning of race and racism because they have experienced oppression and that such experience is insightful and legitimate. Therefore, new approaches must be developed to capture and incorporate their experiences as members of marginalized groups living in existing institutional arrangements (Ortiz & Jani, 2010).

**Intersectionality of identities.** Sixth, CRT recognizes the intersectionality of different forms of oppression. Although CRT highlights the role of race in the oppression of people, it does not discount other forms of oppression. It asserts that focusing on race alone can negate other forms of oppression. Therefore it recognizes that religion, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, resident status, and other variables all help to shape one’s behavior and access to opportunities (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). For example, the race, immigration status, and class of a poor Black, undocumented immigrant from the Caribbean reflects several layers of oppression which could be more devastating than any single aspect of his or her identity. CRT contends that the absence of a multidimensional approach to analysis could result in replicating the same patterns of oppression that it seeks to rectify (Hutchinson, 2000).

These tenets imply that race is a significant factor for determining inequality in the U.S. As cited in Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison stated:

Race has become metaphorical— a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, and spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a

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metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before (p.49).

Since race has such significance, it cannot be treated as an add-on category in social work pedagogy. It should play a central role in the instructing, theorizing, and asking of critical questions about a range of social and economic problems, such as persistent racial disparity. It reflects a commitment to social justice and provides a response to the oppression that racial minorities face. In this light it complements the mission of social work.

### **CRT: A Natural Fit for Social Work**

The tenets of CRT are highly compatible with social work. First, CRT's claim that *race is endemic* and hence an important context in which individuals live is supported by social work's emphasis on context. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), a historical and defining feature of social work is its focus on helping people within their social context. CRT suggests that race is an important context that affects the lives of those who are oppressed. In fact, it puts race, racialization, and racism as central forces of oppression. Whether infused across the curriculum or incorporated in a multicultural class, CRT allows students to recognize how race contributes to the widening gaps in areas such as poverty, unemployment, and education. Embracing this race-based perspective therefore provides an opportunity for students to be more effective as they pursue social change both with and on behalf of oppressed groups.

CRT, like social work, acknowledges oppression of individuals through race and its endemic nature. As a result they both seek to promote social justice for those who are oppressed because of their race. Promoting social justice is a primary mission of social work. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) asserts that

We challenge injustice and pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity (p. 5).

CRT promotes social justice by moving students beyond information on different cultures, to concern for social and economic injustice. CRT encourages social workers to take action to address social injustice at both the individual and system level. At the individual level, CRT encourages students to think critically about the role of race in impacting their own outcomes as well as those of the clients. For example, in addressing a client's problem, students could be encouraged to explore their perceived barriers to accessing care or services. These barriers could include pervasive assumptions and stereotypes held by service providers about the clients' race and social location. The CRT framework allows the social worker to see these assumptions as a manifestation of the endemic nature of race and racism in the U.S. society.

CRT also supports social justice work at the individual level by challenging interventions that oppress the clients. According to Ortiz and Jani (2010), CRT views with suspicion "approaches to interventions that merely assist marginalized persons, families, groups, or

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communities to acquiesce to a racist structure. Rather, CRT-oriented practice endeavors to change structures that are the source of the original problem” (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 183).

At the structural level, CRT helps social workers to see how racism is embedded in the social fabric of U.S. society, thereby manifesting itself in policies and practices. Accordingly, social workers can fight policies and practices that appear race neutral, but in effect perpetuate the racial biases that already exist in society. For example, Constance-Huggins (2011) suggests that welfare policies, starting from mothers’ pension to the current Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), are clothed with racial biases that perpetuate the economic disparities already prevalent in the society. TANF authorizes the termination or reduction in benefits for individuals and families who fail to work or participate in a work activity program. This punitive aspect of the policy disadvantages Blacks as it overlooks the fact they face many structural barriers in the market that prevent rapid employment.

One of the ways that social workers can respond to the structural barriers embedded in such a policy is by campaigning to change voters’ perception of poor people and those who use welfare. Welfare recipients are invariably viewed as lazy and having poor work ethic and therefore undeserving of public assistance. TANF rests on this ‘personal deficit’ view of the cause of poverty while ignoring the structural inequalities in the economy that limits job opportunities (Constance-Huggins, 2011). Social workers have the responsibility to identify propaganda and to provide accurate information about poverty and the impact of policies on poor people (NASW, 2012).

Second, the CRT tenet, *race is a social construct*, and is a major force in shaping outcomes for racial minorities has relevance for social work. Social work endeavors to uncover the mechanisms and structures that disadvantage people (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). CRT suggests that the construction of race and the resulting institutional arrangements is one of these important mechanisms that shape the outcomes for racial minorities, thereby creating disparities. For example, racial minorities have restricted access to resources; this impacts their access to quality education, health care, and quality housing.

The third CRT tenet, *differential racialization*, is also consistent with social work practice. CRT suggests that the way racial groups are characterized by the dominant group at different times determines who has access to resources and opportunities. Addressing the lack of access to resources and opportunities of racial minorities has been an on-going mission of social work. According to the NASW (2012) Policy Statement, members of racial and ethnic minorities struggle for equal access and opportunity. Failure to address this could lead to ethnic and racial rivalry as well as greater social, political, and economic oppression. Further, NASW (2012) calls for action to improve social conditions in order to meet the needs of oppressed groups.

The tenet, *interest convergence*, also has relevance to social work. CRT asserts that the dominant group undertakes efforts to improve the conditions of racial minority only if they converge with their interests. Bell (1980) asserts that this tenet aims to expose White interests (those at the top) while viewing the harms to those at the bottom (Black) in order to make social changes. He suggests that effectively changing the dynamics of this relationship requires a

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holistic approach, rather than a fragmented one. For example, if White interests are not recognized, they can be upheld and possibly morph into stronger forms (Bell, 1980). Taking a holistic look at addressing a problem is consistent with social work practice. The profession emphasizes assessing multiple sources of information when examining the lives of clients. Among these are macro level influences, such as the unequal power that exist in society which results in the domination of some groups over others.

*Advancing the voice of the marginalized* is also supported by the social work profession. Social work is based on valuing the dignity and worth of a person. According to the NASW (2008)

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs (p. 5).

Accordingly, social workers advance the voice of their clients by providing them with the opportunity to express their experiences during the helping process. Social work has been criticized for using interventions that promoting the type of social control and conformity that helps to sustain the social, political and economic status quo (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008). Despite this, social workers are well positioned to fostering liberation discourse with the people they serve. According to liberation psychology, this discourse could include the historical context, and the current life of oppressed groups (Duran, 2006).

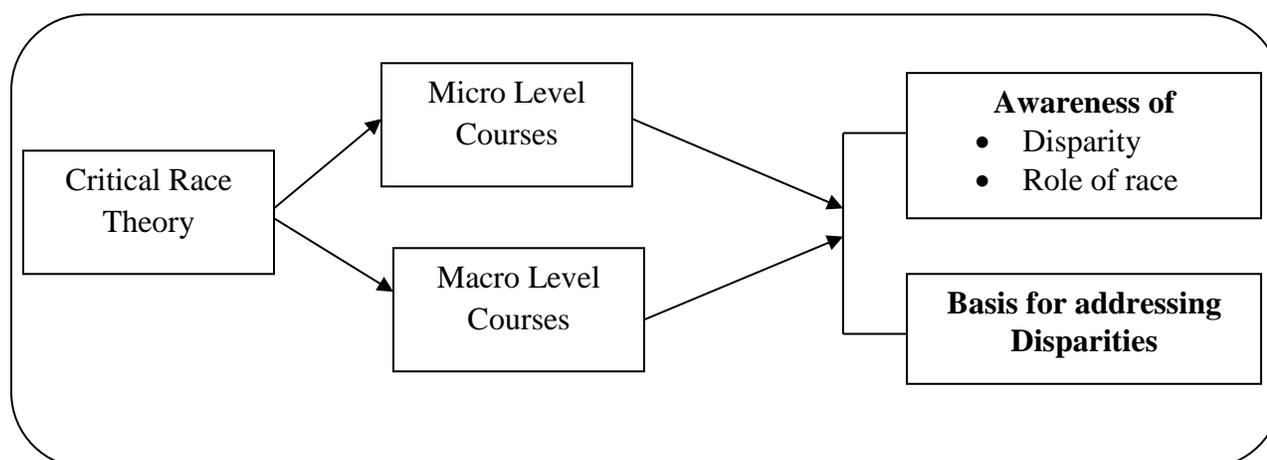
### **Challenges in Applying CRT**

Despite the compatibility of CRT with social work education, there are potential barriers to its application. First, although CRT emphasizes the intersectionality of different forms of oppression it does not suggest how this intersectionality should be addressed. Accordingly, educators are left to craft their own ways of addressing the interplay of race with other layers of oppression. Second, students and educators may resist having race as a central framework for discussing social problems. For example, in a study of 75 MSW and BSW social work students at a Midwestern university, Julia (2000) found a high degree of complacency about the existence and role of racism in the United States. Consistent with the racial make-up of social programs across the United States, the majority (87%) of participants in the study were White people (Julia, 2000). Students and teachers may argue that there are other equally important social classifications that could be discussed. This argument, however, could be tempered by stressing that CRT does not ignore other forms of oppression, rather its focus is on addressing the eclipsing of race under the multicultural framework.

Third, teachers may also be reluctant to adopt CRT because of the additional burden of accommodating it in an already crowded curriculum (Irving & Young, 2004; Mildred & Zuñiga, 2004). Teachers may find that they do not have enough space and time to adequately address CRT in their classes. Further, the lack of application of the theory suggests that many faculty members may not be familiar with the theory. Accordingly, teachers will have to spend the time to develop the knowledge and skill set needed to apply CRT across their courses.

Despite these challenges, the importance of incorporating CRT in social work education cannot be overemphasized. Owing to the pervasiveness of racial disparity in the society and the commitment of the social work profession to social justice, it is imperative that discussions of race be promoted in the classroom. Schools could be encouraged to imbed CRT discussion within existing classes across the curriculum. This could be done at all levels of practice, micro and macro, to highlight the pervasiveness of race and its manifestation in racial disparities. CRT in micro level courses, for example, could allow students to have an awareness of how their culture affect individual psyche (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). This awareness could then provide the basis for students to address approaches that perpetuate the oppression of the people they serve, and hence deepen social and economic disparities (see figure 1). At the macro level, CRT could be used to help students see how agency policies can perpetuate racial disadvantage and hence broaden racial disparity. The incorporation of CRT in social work education will therefore lead to increase awareness of the role of race in creating disparities (see figure 1). It also provides a basis on which social workers can address these disparities.

*Figure 1. Incorporating Critical Race Theory into Social Work Education*



### Conclusion

Deep racial gaps persist in many aspects of American society despite the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and the embracing of a multicultural approach. Blacks lag well behind their White counterparts in many areas, including income (Hegewisch, Williams, & Henderson, 2011), poverty (Trisi, Sherman, & Broaddus, 2011), wealth (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011), and education (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). This deep divide is of concern to social workers given the profession's call to promote the well-being of individuals, particularly those in oppressed groups. I assert that the persistent and widening disparity between minorities and the dominant race is a matter of social injustice as it can block opportunities for social and economic advancement for racial minorities. Therefore, social workers need to fully address the issue of disparity with emphasis on the role of race in shaping these outcomes. This can be done through the use of CRT in social work education. Social justice should not be seen as an option but as an integral part of social work education.

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Although the multicultural approach, embraced by social work, is important in highlighting racial diversity, it does not leave room to address the role of race in creating profound color-coded disparities. It is seen more as a mechanism for expanding the knowledge base of diverse cultures and less as an action plan to dismantle social injustice. Social work educators have the challenge of preparing students to work in an increasingly diverse society (Abrams & Moio, 2009), as well as preparing them to work in a society plagued with growing disparities along racial lines. Embracing CRT raises critical awareness of race as an important force in fueling these disparities. According to the NASW (2008) “fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living” (p.2). Race is one of these key forces that cannot be minimized. Thus, if social workers are to remain committed to the charge of promoting social justice, its education needs to move beyond a multicultural framework to embrace CRT.

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