

Transitioning from a Model of Cultural Competency toward an Inclusive Pedagogy of “Racial Competency” Using Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

The United States continues to transform into a diverse multi-racial and multi-ethnic society in which variables such as race, ethnicity and culture are both relevant and pressing variables to integrate and examine within pedagogies of education, practice and research. Fields of study such as social work, nursing, psychology, black studies, women’s and gender studies and the medical field amongst many others have constructed educational missions and professional agendas recognizing the importance of valuing cultural and racial diversity, along with addressing the needs of marginalized communities, and justly and fairly serving racial and ethnic populations. Largely, social work, nursing, psychology, healthcare and nursing fields have adapted the Cultural Competency Model as a dominant paradigm to advance the cultural competency amongst educators, practitioners and researchers. The Cultural Competency Model highlights several standards essential for producing a framework that better serves and understands individuals of differing cultural backgrounds and identities. A few standards of the Cultural Competency Model includes: ethics and values, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skills, service delivery, empowerment and advocacy, diverse workforce, professional education, language diversity, and cultural leadership (NASW, 2001). It is important to note the aforementioned standards are vital components of the Cultural Competency Model, however much of cultural competency pedagogy within the fields of social work, nursing, psychology and healthcare emphasizes a model highlighting cultural knowledge, cultural skills and cultural awareness.

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The Conceptual Framework of the Cultural Competency Model

Numerous fields of study such as social work, nursing, psychology and healthcare utilizes the conceptual framework of the Cultural Competency Model to enhance education, practice and research. The concept of cultural competency evolved around the notion of “cultural diversity,” defined as “the differences between people based on a shared ideology and valued set of beliefs, norms, customs, and meanings evidenced in a way of life” (Wells, 2000).

Cultural competency involves a process where educators, practitioners, and researchers encourage respectful and beneficial interaction among all individuals regardless of culture, race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status and religion. Essentially, it is vital for one to recognize such distinctions; more importantly they should affirm and value these individual differences. Gallegos (1982), defined cultural competency as “...procedures and activities to be used in acquiring culturally relevant insights into the problems of minority clients and the means of applying such insights to the development of intervention strategies that are culturally appropriate for these clients” (NASW, 2001, p. 12)

Cultural competency encompasses a set of congruent values and beliefs beneficial to the understanding and recognition of diverse cultural populations. Fundamentally, cultural competency involves the development and integration of “cultural” knowledge of the individual’s “cultural” differences and behaviors into education, practice and research. There are several identifiable elements significant for the development of cultural competency among educators, practitioners and researchers. In order to develop cultural competency one should value diversity, possess the ability to conduct culturally-informed assessments, remain conscious of the dynamics regarding interactions of cultures, institutionalize cultural knowledge, and develop programs, services & education reflecting the understanding of cultural diversity (NASW, 2001).

The Cultural Competency Model provides educators and practitioners with a “culturally sensitive” framework from which professionals examine cultural attitudes, values and beliefs, gain knowledge about individual’s cultural heritage, along with developing skills to effectively provide interventions to diverse cultural populations (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler, 1996).

The Cultural Competency Model provides a space for educators and practitioners to examine their personal cultural values, attitudes and beliefs. This space also allows educators and practitioners to gain awareness, appreciation and acceptance of clients' cultural heritages, values and beliefs. Although the Cultural Competency Model outlines significant aspects meaningful when serving cultural populations, much critique centers on challenging and confronting its unintentional depiction of a color-blind society. The Cultural Competency Model emphasizes the extreme need for professions to develop "cultural" knowledge, skills and awareness to fairly and fully serve diverse populations. This model, however, fails to acknowledge and address issues examining the "racial being." Consequently, the Cultural Competency Model lacks the recognition and discussion of race and ethnicity essential in the conversation about service provision among marginalized and underserved populations. Imperative to the discussion of race and service provision among marginalized communities and populations is the obligation to explore and address experiences of oppression, inequality, discrimination and social and "racial realities" minority populations are more likely to experience in their daily lives. Therefore, without the integration of a theoretical framework or pedagogy incorporating components of race and ethnicity, educators and practitioners cannot fully acknowledge the oppression, inequalities, discrimination and "racial realities" experienced by cultural, racial and ethnic minority populations. Abrams and Moio (2009) suggests educators and practitioners lacking an understanding and awareness of race and its implications fail to recognize the multiple forms of oppression racial and ethnic minorities experience, instead educators and practitioners are more likely to form an "equality of oppressions" perspective.

Examining the Cultural Competency Model

The Cultural Competency Model incorporates a process concentrating on providing awareness, knowledge and skill among professionals for the purpose of becoming better equipped to offer effective services to diverse cultural populations. Although cultural competency models may slightly differ across disciplines and professions, there are three distinct components of competencies identified within all cultural competency models: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cultural skills. Sadowsky, Taffe, Gutkin and Wise (1994) show that cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and cultural skills are meaningful components of cultural competency, overlapping and interconnected.

Cultural Awareness. The Cultural Competency Model integrates three vital components significant in the cultural development and comprehension among professionals working with diverse populations. The first component, cultural awareness, focuses on the professional consciously exploring personal biases, stereotypes, prejudices, assumptions, and constructs about racial or ethnic marginalized populations who are culturally different from the self of the professional (Campinha-Bacote, 2009). For professionals, the conscious evaluation of cultural awareness involves self-examinations focusing on the exploration of questions such as: "Am I aware of any biases, stereotypes, prejudices or assumptions that I have toward African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans or Latino populations?"

While it is valuable to explore the consciousness of professionals' cultural awareness, it is equally important to discuss professionals' unconsciousness regarding biases, stereotypes, prejudices and assumptions toward cultural and racial populations and communities. Unconscious assumptions may involve personal constructions regarding about cultural, racial and ethnic minority groups pertaining to the distinctive and varying dialect and language among marginalized communities. There is a tendency for professionals to develop bias, prejudices and assumptions toward marginalized racial and populations. White professionals are more likely to develop biases, stereotypes and assumptions pertaining to the differing dialect and language of racial and ethnic minorities, as happen to the African American community, resulting in prejudice and discrimination against this group. Biases and assumptions regarding racial and cultural dialect contributes to professional misinterpretation which associates differing dialect to racial and ethnic individuals lack of education or knowledge. Sociolinguists have identified several distinct dialects among African American communities within African American English (AAE). The African American English (AAE) dialect consists of varying dialects of "Black Speech" such as: Black English, Ebonics, Black Vernacular English (BEV) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Campinha-Bacote, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary for professionals to develop not only cultural but also "racial" knowledge pertaining to racial and cultural dialect, language, speech and verbal cues to avoid developing biased assumptions conscious or unconscious toward marginalized groups using dialect differing from "Standard American English."

Aside from recognizing biases, stereotypes and assumptions pertaining to a differing cultural group, professionals must also explore their own cultural heritage, experiences, values and beliefs. Developing an understanding of one's cultural heritage, values and beliefs is essential for the professional to skillfully identify differential sources of discomfort that may affect interactions with individuals of another cultural, racial or ethnic identity. The professional further develops the ability to become consciously aware of personal feelings, emotions and behaviors elicited toward differing marginalized communities.

Cultural Knowledge. The second component of the Cultural Competency Model is cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge involves the process of obtaining cultural education and information pertaining to diverse cultural populations (Campinha-Bacote, 2009). Education focusing on a specific cultural group's family structures, norms, values, beliefs, customs and perspectives constructs cultural knowledge. In order for the professional to produce a complete understanding of cultural knowledge, one explores personal cultural identity, norms, customs and heritage. This exploration of the cultural self creates a professional that understands the impact cultural knowledge has on psychological processes, interaction and engagement with others, deconstruction of stereotypes and biased attitudes toward differing cultural and racial groups.

One's acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural self-identity, along with recognizing and accepting cultural identities of racial and ethnic minority populations will more likely develop the ability to effectively evaluate bias in interventions, assessments, instruments and methodologies utilized among diverse racial minority populations (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler, 1996).

Cultural Skill. The final component of the Cultural Competency Model highlights the professional's ability to effectively provide service to, engage with and communicate with diverse cultural populations. Developing the skill to connect and interact with marginalized individuals is instrumental in providing quality care and treatment among racial and ethnic minority populations. A practitioner demonstrating the ability to effectively engage in communicative cues, verbal or non-verbal, and clearly establish an understanding of the individual's perspectives has demonstrated the cultural skill to effectively communicate and engage with clients.

A culturally skilled professional also demonstrates the ability to retain valuable cultural information about the client, key to extensive assessment of the client's life, presenting issue and coping mechanisms (Campinha-Bacote, 2009). To become a culturally skilled professional requires one to actively pursue additional resources such as educational advancement material, consultative alternatives and specialized training to further expand competencies and skills.

Advancing cultural education and awareness allows the professional to become skillful in selecting the appropriate intervention, technique and/or methodology best for the cultural client. Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler, (1996) assert that a culturally skilled professional utilizes "traditional" assessments, instruments and intervention. It is essential for the professional to have the ability and expertise to modify or adapt tools to fit the cultural client. The Cultural Competency Model continues to dominate education, practice and research, addressing and recognizing the need to advance and enhance the education, skills, practice and research committed to serving marginalized and underserved populations. The Cultural Competency Model's confined lens and analysis of cultural factors contributes to multiple shortcomings and critiques imperative to address in the discussion of service provision among cultural, racial and ethnic minority populations.

Continue to Foster Stereotypes. This next section will address the shortcomings of the Cultural Competency Model. The Cultural Competency Model is a conceptual framework suggesting the importance of developing cultural knowledge. This often contributes to the cultivation of stereotypes of cultural identities among individuals of racial and ethnic minority populations.

No single theoretical or conceptual framework provides professionals with the most accurate or "best" cultural knowledge that applies to all cultural, racial or ethnic populations, due to the heterogeneity of cultural, racial and ethnic communities. The Cultural Competency Model focuses on the professional obtaining the appropriate cultural knowledge of distinct racial and cultural populations. This production of cultural knowledge is often accumulated from academic fields such as anthropology or sociology, which continue to encourage stereotypes and assumptions of cultural, racial and ethnic groups (Patterson, 2004). There is a tendency for education to focus on teaching professionals "expected" cultural behaviors, attitudes, norms and values of specific cultural and racial populations.

Because the Cultural Competency Model leads to the professional making assumptions about all individuals identifying with a specific cultural, racial or ethnic community, the heterogeneity within these communities, as expressed by individual members of the community, is not acknowledged. The Cultural Competency Model tends to highlight and educate professionals on the “unique” cultural characteristics of racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, the Cultural Competency Model teaches “unique” cultural characteristics ascribed Native American communities. The “unique” cultural characteristics focus on Native Americans communicative skills depicting Native Americans as “passively nonverbal” communicators, who do not possess the ability to actively engage in therapeutic dialogue (Cardemil & Battle, 2003; Jackson & Samuels, 2011; Patterson, 2004; Sue, 1990). This kind of cultural knowledge contributes to racial stereotyping. The professional develops expectations or assumptions that all Native Americans are passive communicators. Professionals then become more susceptible to perceive Native American clients’ silence as attributable to lack of education or inability to actively engage in the therapeutic process. Practitioners are continuing to learn cultures through phases referred to as the four F’s “*fairs, food, festivals and folktales*,” which does not provide the professional with a holistic understanding of race, power, privilege and oppression (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008).

A shortcoming of the Cultural Competency Model is the model’s tendency to conceptualize culture synonymously with race and ethnicity. Failing to distinguish culture from race and ethnicity in the Cultural Competency Model creates a space where the term “culture” begins to serve as an umbrella term constituting race and ethnicity as indistinguishable. This creates a space that does not fully value or recognize the distinctiveness among culture, race and ethnicity. This lack of recognition further complicates matters for professionals providing services among differing racial and ethnic minorities. Professionals who do not demonstrate a clear understanding of the discreteness of these terms become more prone to develop and uphold cultural and racial biases and stereotypes pertaining to marginalized racial communities. Practitioners become more likely to automatically identify patients of a specific ethnicity or racial identity to a specific set of cultural beliefs and behaviors (Kleinman & Benson, 2006; Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008).

Assuming homogeneity within "same" racial and ethnic groups. Failure to construct a space examining the distinctiveness of culture, race and ethnicity promotes a false homogeneity among racial and ethnic minority populations. The Cultural Competency Model categorizes racial and ethnic individuals into distinct cultural classifications primarily based on one's skin tone. These cultural classifications also rely on the sharing of similar values, traditions and beliefs. Ultimately, there are four cultural groups frequently recognized in the Cultural Competency Model: American Americans/Blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos/Hispanics. By exclusively recognizing these four racial groups as the center of cultural analysis within the Cultural Competency Model, it yields exclusionary classifications negating the acknowledgement of differing racial and ethnic minority identities and communities. Ethnic subgroups such as Nigerian, Ibo, Ethiopian, Haitian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican and many others are often absent within cultural competency's construction and analysis of cultural groups. As a result, skin tone becomes the most essential characteristic identifying one's assignment or classification to one of the four cultural groups. White skin tone becomes the physical descriptor used to assign racial and ethnic minorities to distinct classifications of race. The Cultural Competency Model creates an analysis omitting individuals of "whiteness" from racial and ethnic analysis, thus promoting an "otherness" to identities among racial and ethnic minority populations. This kind of analysis primarily focuses on framing Whites as the implied superior group or race, which then becomes the focus of comparison. "Whiteness" then becomes highly essential in identifying differences among racial and ethnic minorities, for the purpose of cultural classifications.

Additional Critiques. Although the Cultural Competency Model is a conceptual framework that fails to address and acknowledge the significance of race and ethnicity in service provision to marginalized, underserved populations, it offers a useful framework and starting point recognizing the importance of awareness pertaining to individual's identities. There is a need for research to examine how educators and practitioners are integrating and applying conceptual components of the Cultural Competency Model within practice, research, education and training. There are several questions necessary to explore the effectiveness of the Cultural Competency Model such as: "What are the key educational components of the Cultural Competency Model, and how does this knowledge get disseminated in training, research and practice?"; "What are the direct outcomes among practitioners utilizing the Cultural Competency Model with diverse cultural and racial minority populations?"

“Does the Cultural Competency Model hinder the interaction between the client and practitioner, as a result of cultural assumptions and teachings?; and “Is it possible for educators and practitioners to develop “specific” cultural “skills” from the Cultural Competency Model to become “cultural skilled” experts?”

It is important to note the Cultural Competency Model continues to serve as a useful approach for many disciplines and professions, however the continuing racial and ethnic transformation of the U.S. presents many societal and racial challenges, demonstrating the high need to integrate racial and ethnic inclusive pedagogies, modalities and practices. Such racial and ethnic inclusive pedagogies are valuable to the promotion of knowledge and construction of techniques to understand critique, challenge and deconstruct the notion of a post-racial society.

Racial Competency

This author utilizes Critical Race Theory as the dominant paradigm to further conceptualize what the author refers to as “racial competency” (Campbell, 2014). The framing of “racial competency” refers to the educators or practitioners advanced understanding of the social construction, significance and functionality of race in today’s “post racial” society. Racial competency acknowledges the historical and contemporary existing systematic and institutional mechanisms and power hierarchies constructed from race and race relations. Racial competency further recognizes the historical, political and social “racial realities” experienced daily by racial and ethnic minorities. Such realities are constructed from narratives of historical and social inequality, discrimination and racial injustice (Campbell, 2014).

Critical Race Theory: Historical Development

Essentially, Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholarship largely focuses on several important components: recognizing racism as endemic to social life; the need to deconstruct and confront historical and social analyses of race; and, the inclusion, recognition and legitimacy of racial and ethnic minorities lived experiences and narratives (Coello, Casanas & Rocco, 2004). CRT has become described as a “*hybrid*” theory, incorporating material from a wide range of fields such as sociology, humanities and education. Initially, CRT provided a lens exploring the idea “law cannot be neutral and objective.”

Also, the incorporation and "...recognition of voices from standpoint and race consciousness," are valuable in the transformation and deconstruction of racial, social and institutional inequalities (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 250). CRT constructs a linkage examining the role of law in "propagating and maintaining racism" (Hatch, 2007). CRT encourages an in-depth investigation and evaluation of contemporary agendas promoting racial, social, legal and institutional equality. CRT highlights the importance of such contemporary agendas to explore dynamics of power between racial groups, focusing on the intersectionality of historical, social, economic and racial contexts beyond the traditional discourses of race and civil rights (Coello, Casanas & Rocco, 2004). CRT provides a space to analyze and explore race, racism and fundamental elements essential to understand historical and contemporary social experiences, social and legal institutions and systems. CRT has presented a theoretical framework to challenge issues ranging from educational desegregation, affirmative action, equality within institutions of higher education, racial discrimination, power relations, social/political/economic inequality among other controversial race related issues.

Examining Critical Race Theory

As defined by Taylor (1998), Critical Race Theory is a "form of oppositional scholarship, CRT challenges the experiences of whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color" (p.122). CRT is viewed as both a theoretical framework and interpretive model as well as a tool of social justice (Campbell, 2014). CRT is also described as a tool useful in a critique of racial reform, while also recognizing CRT's effective approach of incorporating mixed strategies (i.e. interest convergence), research methodology (i.e. counter-narratives) and conceptual understandings to address racial and structural inequalities of power and privileged (Closson, 2010; Cole & Maisuria, 2007). CRT "challenges liberalist claims of objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness...and argues that these principles actually normalize and perpetuate racism by ignoring the structural inequalities that permeate social institutions" (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 250). CRT is a valuable framework creating a space promoting an in-depth racial analysis examining possibilities of deconstruction and transformation of past and current social, economic and institutional inequalities racial and ethnic minority's experience. CRT places race in the center of analysis recognizing "race is the scaffolding that structures American society" (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 250).

CRT's standpoint and positioning of race constructs a space challenging the notion of a "color-blind" society, indicating "color blindness is superior to race consciousness" (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 250). CRT acknowledges race as a social construction, essential in maintaining the racial hierarchy, which situates racial and ethnic minorities into confined and restrictive locations. CRT transitions from the simplistic Black-White ideology and Essentialism of race, by recognizing and examining the lived experiences and "racial realities" of individuals belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups (Closson, 2010; Trevino, Harris & Wallace, 2008).

CRT also produces a platform that can be utilized by practitioners, researchers and educators as a way to become cognizant of racial inequalities, oppressions and racial relations in the U.S. CRT is both an operational and theoretical framework. Ultimately, CRT offers a framework which: identifies and includes the discourse of the pervasiveness and reality of racism; exposes and deconstructs color-blind and race-neutral ideology, policies and practice; legitimizes and recognizes the experiences and narratives of racial and ethnic minorities; critically examines civil rights laws and liberalism; and provides tools to transform and challenge racial inequalities (Stovall, 2005). These functions are imperative in acknowledging and understanding the integral roles of race within systems of inequality. CRT further provides educators with a theoretical framework which allows a space for professionals to deeply engage in discourses of race, inequality, privilege, power and oppression. CRT also provides educators with strategies and tools to deconstruct and challenge processes, systems, policies and ideologies contributing to divergent experiences of marginalized communities. CRT strongly proposes the need for collaboration, activism and community participation amongst theorists, researchers and practitioners, in order to effectively engage and deconstruct current race and racist ideologies.

Conceptualizing Race, Ethnicity and Culture

Critical Race Theory provides a valuable theoretical approach highlighting the significance of conceptualizing and understanding race, ethnicity and culture. CRT presents material important for educators to develop a clear distinction among the concepts of race, ethnicity and culture. Conceptualizing race continues to be a challenge for many professionals, due to its fairly recent emergence and establishment as a concept and its historical and institutional connection with racism (Campbell, 2014).

The concept of race remains a truly complex and multifaceted idea, which meaning has changed nationally and historically. It would be very difficult to limit the meaning of race to one single, concrete definition, due to its constant transformation throughout history. Critical race scholars suggest a clear conceptualization of race recognizes that race remains a product of human creation, which racial meanings and associations are constructed by social interactions and institutions (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012). Omi and Winant's (1994) "racial formation" is a concept referring to the sociohistorical construction of race. Racial formation acknowledges the historical processes and social organizations through which racial categories are produced. Racial formation highlights the significance and function hegemony has in the social construction and organization of race. Racial formation also examines the concept and significance of race in relationship to forms of inequality, oppression and differences, along with exploring the perplexity of racial identity and racial categories.

Inherently, race functions as a social phenomenon rooted in social interactions and definitions situated within a social order structured along the lines of inequality (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Omi and Winant (1994)

"Race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies; the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (i.e. phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process" (p. 55).

Omi and Winant's conceptualization of race provides a key definition for understanding that race is socially constructed. Associations and meanings of race are consistently transformed by political, social, economic and historical processes. Omi and Winant (1994) highlight the integral role societal institutions and political systems such as the government, federal legal system, criminal justice system and educational systems; have in shaping our understanding of race. These political and institutional systems serves as powerful agencies which define race and designates which individuals can be classified and belong to distinct racial groups. Race as a social construction suggests the concept of race developing from historical and social institutions and practices through which racial and ethnic minority groups (races) have experienced exploitation, inequality and oppression.

Recognizing race as socially constructed posits the classification, associations and meanings of race as the product of human conception. The emergence of human racial classification has resulted in the formation of economic, social, institutional and political privileges and advantages which racial and ethnic minorities groups do not experience.

It is essential to understand race has been utilized as a tool to group or classify individuals on the basis of perceived biological or physical differences to signify racial superiority and inferiority among individuals, hence recognizing the construction of "races" produced from a system of dominance. According to Higginbotham and Andersen (2012) the key concepts in this conceptualization of race incorporate perception, belief and social treatment, thus factors such as biological differences are not core concepts. Hence, race is understood and learned through socialization and interactions in which specific characteristics, perceptions and assumptions are ascribed to distinct racial and ethnic populations. Race does not serve as a fixed or objective variable. Nor can race be understood as a mere illusion or ideological construct, due to its continual fundamental and functioning role in institutional, political, social and economic systems. Defining race as an ideological construct alone denies the "racial" experiences and realities of racial and ethnic minorities, resulting from a racialized society. Still, race is often associated strictly with biological and physiological features such as skin tone, hair texture, eye color or skin complexion. Historically, scientific research relied on such biological and physiological distinctions to construct racial classification among humans.

During the 16th century scientists attempted to link biological differences among racial and ethnic groups such as skin tone, bone structures and brain sizes, in order to develop claims of moral, social and intellectual inferiority of racial and ethnic minority populations (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2011). Although such racial claims were never validated by scientific research, these claims became socially accepted. Conversely, scientific research indicated there is no such existence of a "race gene," along with demonstrating there is not much genetic variation among human beings. Even so, race continues to be defined on a biological perspective. Much scientific research on race indicates there is only one race, the human race, however historical attempts to categorize race have contributed to current discrepancies and failures to understand race.

In fact, geneticist Richard Lewontin's 1996 research study concluded that any two distinct racial groups share approximately 99 percent of genetic similarities, therefore discrediting the biological claim of race and illustrating the physical and biological similarities among racial groups (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012). Definitions that conceptualize race as solely biological or physiological characteristics and traits fail to explore issues addressing racial and structural inequality. For instance, the fifth edition of *The Social Work Dictionary* defines race as "the major subdivisions of the human species whose distinguishing characteristics are genetically transmitted," while the majority of social work's generalist social work texts indicate "...race refers to physical characteristics, with special attention to skin color and facial features" (Coleman, 2011, p. 92). The biological conceptualization of race fails to acknowledge the "racial realities," or real life experiences racial and ethnic minorities are most likely to encounter. The biological stance of race further ignores the fact that race functions as a way of "comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world," which "...race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized..." (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 60). Hence, the importance of recognizing the true definition of race does not rely on biological features, yet the historical, social and institutional treatment of racial and ethnic minorities remains significant in the understanding of race.

Ethnicity, similar to race, has been conceptualized by identifying biological and physiological characteristics among individuals. Cardemil and Battle (2003), however, suggest a complete definition of ethnicity incorporates the "...historical cultural patterns and collective identities shared by groups from specific geographic regions of the world" (p. 279). Ethnicity "represents a people hood based on common physical appearance, language...homeland, and on norms, traditions, values, and history that make up the content of culture" (Ashton, 2010, p. 130). Other shared identities such as religion, nationality, music, art and customs serve as elements defining ethnicity. Often there is a shared sense of group unity, fulfillment and belonging which members' experience (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012).

Race and ethnicity continue to function as mechanisms used to explain and organize social differences, while also maintaining social order among racial and ethnic populations. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed, primarily by members of the dominant racial group as tools to further protect social, economic, and political interests.

Historical conceptualizations of these terms have become accepted as common knowledge, impacting multiple aspects of racial and ethnic minorities' social interactions, opportunities and experiences (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Fundamentally, race and ethnicity are social constructs, sharing several commonalities; however the construction of such terms continues to promote separation and stratification among distinct racial and ethnic populations.

Deconstructing Color-Blind Ideology

Scholars argue the Cultural Competence Model fosters a color-blind approach which CRT aims to deconstruct. The color-blind approach has been critiqued as a framework which tends to discount the significance and relevancy of race within social interactions and systemic structures. (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Closson, 2010; Schiele, 2007; Yee, 2005). Similar to the color-blind approach the Cultural Competency Model has been critiqued for neglecting to provide an in-depth conversation demonstrating the significance of race, ethnicity, oppression and inequality. The color-blind approach continues to be associated with four main assumptions: individuals of non-white identities receive privileges based on merit; individuals in society no longer are attentive to race and skin color; social inequity results from cultural deficits of marginalized groups; and, as a result, of the items above, there remains no systematic intervention to address existing inequalities (Forman, 2004).

According to Neville (2000), the color-blind approach elicits a problematic, perplexed philosophy that promotes the thought "race does not matter" as opposed to indicating "race should not matter," in the determination of individual's treatment, freedom, equality and, access to opportunities in life. The ideology of color-blindness "...constitutes an ideological confusion at best, and denial at it very worst" (Williams, 1997). The proposition "race does not matter" encourages a discourse promoting a space contesting the current existence of race, race relations, racial differences and inequality. This discourse of color-blindness overlooks the undeniable fact: race incontestably functions as an indicator determining one's access to education, housing, employment, health and treatment in the U.S. Furthermore, the color-blind approach fails to recognize race as an indicator shaping one's social interactions and daily experiences. Consequently, the color-blind approach fosters a space which contributes to systems of inequality, oppression and discrimination.

Race also serves as a salient factor for racial and ethnic minority populations, impacting opportunities, experiences and interactions in the U.S. Fully recognizing the significance and function of race, Critical Race Theory opposes the notion of a present color-blind or race-neutral society. As CRT suggests, to live in a color-blind society indicates the choice to exclude the discussion of race. Inherently, the exclusion of race cannot occur without the complete recognition and acknowledgement of race (Abrams & Moio, 2009). The discussion of race in the U.S. fails to explore an in-depth extensive conversation embracing, valuing and fully acknowledging the significance, role and functionality of race. The Cultural Competency Model continues to be distinguished as a framework encompassing color-blind ideology, due to its exclusionary stance on race.

CRT provides a space allowing professionals to transition and detach from ideas of "race neutrality" and "color-blindness" toward the development of a racially cognizant sense of race, identity and self. CRT presents a critical focus on race, identity and oppression, while also providing professionals with the tools to rearticulate and acknowledge the importance of race, valuable for the process of becoming racially cognizant professionals. Ortiz and Rhoads (2000) suggests white individuals cannot become fully racially cognizant without developing a complete understanding of white privilege and embracing an agenda centering on the deconstruction of whiteness. This process of deconstruction and rearticulation involves an in-depth examination of the significance and meaning of white privilege and white racial identity. Deconstruction promotes an in-depth understanding of the cultural, social, political and economic meanings and advantages of being "white" in the U.S. The process explores the privileges and power associated with "white" skin color and identity. Becoming racially cognizant is pertinent for practitioners to develop into effective social and racial justice advocates, activists, researchers and practitioners serving diverse racial and ethnic minority populations. Without a deeper understanding of personal racial identity, and recognizing how race defines, shapes and structures relations of power, professionals will not be equipped to justly serve marginalized racial and ethnic minority populations. As Reason and Evans (2007) concluded, racially cognizant white individuals are more likely to exhibit attitudes, beliefs and behaviors supporting a racial justice agenda compared to white individuals embracing a color-blind approach. Ultimately, racial consciousness contributes to a willingness to challenge and deconstruct social and racial injustices germane with the social work profession, and society at large.

Foreman (2004) proposes a tendency for individuals to construct a logic of racism in which not actively or physically engaging in blatantly racist behaviors indicates freedom from having racist beliefs, attitudes or behaviors toward individuals of diverse racial and ethnic minority identities. One begins to use such logic to justify potential prejudice behaviors towards individuals of racial minority identities. This color-blind approach maintains unjust and discriminatory practices and systems of inequality. Individuals accepting a color-blind ideology are more likely to believe racism is non-existent, thus failing to recognize racial inequalities in our society. This becomes problematic in the discussion involving the deconstruction and transformation of racially oppressive social, economic, political and institutional structures. Fundamentally, a color-blind approach leads to racial apathy, defined by Reason and Evans (2007) as "indifference to inequality and lack of action in the face of racial injustice" (p. 69).

A framework such as the Cultural Competency Model, which avoids a deeper appreciation and advanced understanding of the complexity of race, cannot fully produce competent professionals equipped to provide effective services to racial and ethnic minority populations. CRT's appreciation and in-depth exploration of race incorporates valuable components providing professionals with the knowledge and tools to combat and challenge racial inequality on both the micro (personal) and macro (systemic) levels. CRT transitions pedagogy of diversity from a lens of color-blindness elicited by the Cultural Competency Model towards a framework through which professionals can begin to develop the ability to utilize race as a lens to better understand social interactions and oppressive systems of inequality.

Critical Race Theory offers a lens extensively exploring the intricacy of race and recognizing the concept of intersectionality, for better understanding inequality and oppression. When working with racial and ethnic minority women populations, CRT provides an approach for professionals to better understand the multiple oppressions which these women may experience. For instance an African American woman may become exposed to multiple oppressions such as sexism and racism, resulting from one identifying as a woman, an African American, hence an African American woman.

As indicated by Pharr (2000), "It is virtually impossible to view one oppression, such as sexism, or homophobia, in isolation because they are all connected: sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism" (p. 53). Hence, the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of oppressions significant to the discussion of power, domination and privilege.

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