

Critical Race Theory and Adult Education: Critique of the Literature in *Adult Education Quarterly*

Silvana Ianinska, Ursula Wright, and Tonette S. Rocco
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the assumptions and paradigms used to discuss diversity and equity in adult education literature using critical race theory as a lens. Five themes emerged from the critique that may initiate an innovative dialogue about the realities and subjectivities singling out racial and ethnic minorities in the USA.

Adult education is given public support in order to maintain economic stability, social order, and a competitive edge in a global economy (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This implies maintenance of an educated, informed, and efficient workforce and the reduction of illiterate, unemployed, and underemployed adults who are a potential threat to a stable social order. Because the mission of adult education is to satisfy the needs of individuals, institutions, and society (Knowles, 1985), adult educators have mistakenly interpreted this as a need for preserving the status quo of the American democracy. The status quo cherishes “individualism, independence, equal opportunity, and a Protestant-capitalist work ethic” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 74) actually making adult education elitist and exclusionary (Guy, 1999) and contributing to the problem of social injustice, which continually marginalizes the racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority populations of the United States.

Why Critical Race Theory?

Contemporary adult education is enlightened by various philosophies and theories, including critical theory, Marxism, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and feminism. Missing is the potential of critical race theory (CRT) for examining and giving insight to adult education theory and practice (Peterson, 1999). Critical race theory is a legal theory which maintains that racism is endemic and systemic. Critical race theorists allege that radical approaches are needed to overcome existing racial tensions (Peterson, 1999). CRT not only tries to understand the relationships among race, racism, power, privilege, and oppression, but to challenge and transform these relationships. Racism has not been eradicated through legislation. It has produced “no more than temporary peaks of progress” which become irrelevant once “racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance” (Bell, 1992, p. 12). An integrated and interracial society cannot be the solution either. The race neutral standpoint, which presumes a homogenized population of immigrants in the US to celebrate diversity, has left African American, Indigenous, and Latino/a students pondering why they have not been able to rise above their immigrant status (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the assumptions and paradigms used to discuss diversity and equity in adult education using critical race theory as a lens. To represent the field of adult education we chose to examine one journal, *Adult Education Quarterly*, because “this journal is committed to the dissemination of research and theory in adult and continuing education” (AEQ, 2003) and is widely accepted as the top journal in the field. We decided to use CRT as a lens to examine work on diversity and equity issues because (a) adult education continues to maintain and support the dominant white Western-European culture and serves as a

weapon for social control rather than for empowerment and emancipation of individuals (Cunningham, 1988); (b) racism continues to negatively affect the lives of people of color no matter what their socioeconomic status (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); and (c) CRT “has promise as a means of creating a richer dialogue regarding culturally relevant adult education” (Peterson, 1999, p. 84).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged in the late 1970s as an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a leftist legal movement, which questioned, analyzed, and exposed the traditional legal ideology, which has legitimized America’s class division and the hegemony of oppressive structures in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1999). However, CLS failed to include racism in its critique of the liberal paradigms prevalent in American society (West, 1995). Critical race theorists question “the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3) and propose radical, sweeping changes to fight racism and social injustice.

Although a variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines (CLS, radical feminism, Marxism, conventional civil rights thought, and nationalism) inform CRT, there is not a single set of tenets to which all critical race theorists subscribe. There are six “propositions” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) most of them can agree with. First, racism is an ordinary, permanent and persistent component of American life, culture, and social order, “the common, everyday experience of most people of color” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Second, the effect of interest convergence does not motivate the white elite to end racism because the upper classes benefit from racism materially and working class people benefit from it physically. Third, race is a socially constructed category based solely on the physical traits that people with a common origin share, ignoring higher-order traits, such as intelligence, personality, and moral conduct. Fourth, differential racialization exists to racialize and stereotype different minority groups at different times to satisfy changing economic interests. Fifth is the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism, positing that no person has a unitary identity. On the contrary, “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9). Sixth is the unique voice of color or racial stories, a product of experience and imagination, which are an indispensable part of the identity of people of color, and which whites do not share. Communicating these stories is “a first step to understanding the complexities of racism, and beginning a process of judicial redress” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p.16). These propositions are not new to adult education but rarely are they joined as a coherent theory of oppression.

Method

First, we established a list of descriptors, which represent areas important to CRT propositions and tenets. These descriptors were race, racism, ethnicity, culture, diversity, multiculturalism, gender, women, feminist, power, privilege, oppression, and equity. Definitions of the descriptors were set. A total of 185 articles in 48 issues of AEQ were hand-searched. Thirty-seven articles contained our descriptors in their title or abstract: *power* (10) *gender/feminist/women* (21), *culture* (5), *privilege* (1), and *oppression* (1). For the descriptors *race, racism, ethnicity, diversity, and equity*, no articles were found.

Boyatzis’ (1998) approach to interpreting qualitative data through thematic analysis and code development was used. We used the deductive, theory-driven approach beginning with a

preexisting theory, CRT, and used four tenets discussed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) as themes. The first tenet maintains that racism is ordinary and pervasive and “appears normal and natural to people in this society” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 264). The second tenet employs storytelling to analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the dominant view of race. It is also a way of infusing the voice and experience of subordinate groups into academic discourse to explain shared notions of race, racial experience, and marginalization. The third tenet of CRT demands radical, systemic change. The fourth tenet argues that the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation have been whites, specifically, white women. The coding categories were derived from the four tenets.

Article Critique

Five themes emerged from examining the literature. First, systems of oppression affect the lives of people who are on the other side of the racial divide due to race, gender, class, and color (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Joyappa & Martin; Rocco & West, 1998; Sparks, 1998; Tisdell, 1993). Second, when diverse socioeconomic and ethnic populations are excluded from research, generalizations about the dominant class are incorrectly projected onto marginalized groups. The experiences of all adults are measured against whiteness as the norm (Aiken, Cervero, Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Hayes & Smith, 1994; Inglis, 1997). Third, adult educators should create learning environments where people understand that reality is socially constructed in a society of unequal power relationships based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Tisdell, 1993). Fourth, story telling is a powerful tool for understanding the experiences and realities of women (Kilgore, 2001; Stalker, 2001). Fifth, the rejection of the race-neutral multicultural perspective positions minorities as deficient. The new trend is toward culturally relevant adult education in which adult educators examine the cultural identities of themselves and their students, allowing racial and ethnic minorities to challenge the dominant culture and to understand the values of their own cultures (Guy, 1999; Jacobson, 1996; Sparks, 1998). Although the tenets of CRT are present in adult education, they are not explicitly tied together as a theory of structural and organizational oppression and racism. The following paragraphs will discuss the issues of power and program planning; women and learning; and culture and learning that intersect the five themes.

Power and Program Planning

Program planning is a social activity in which people construct and negotiate programs based on personal, social, and organizational interests in contexts inherently embedded in social and power structures (Yang, Cervero, & Valentine, 1998). “Little is known about how program planners exercise their power in program planning practice” (Yang et al., 1998, p. 227), but the group who possesses more power and influence directs the planning process to satisfy their interests thereby neglecting the interests of the less powerful. Program planning legitimizes injustice, inequality and perpetuates the status quo. Since adult education’s primary goal is to democratize society by making power negotiable, understanding the guiding forces of power relationships by employing a CRT lens is essential to challenging and resetting structures of power and bringing about political progress and social change.

Women and Learning

Articles on women and gender were the most prevalent in *AEQ*. Authors examined women’s historic invisibility regardless of race and ethnicity (Hayes & Smith, 1994; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Kilgore, 2001; Stalker, 2001). Research and publications about women have positioned them as marginalized, as deficient, and as coping with their new social roles

(Hayes & Smith, 1994). The adult education classroom is perceived as neutral territory, where the educator serves a generic audience, ignoring the historical weight of race, gender, class, and color as factors that influence women's learning and educational initiatives. (Johnson-Bailey, 2002). Privilege is granted to those who come close to the Caucasian norm of skin color, hair type, and facial features. Therefore, race, gender, class, and color are systems of oppression that pierce the lives of Black women (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996) because they embody all the negative societal identifiers of privileged groups: they are black and are women. Their experiences, background, and intellectual capacities are devalued and neglected. To protect themselves and resist the systems of oppression, they use strategies of silence, negotiation, and resistance. Thus, the primary discouraging factors with which Black women struggle as adult learners are grounded in societal norms driven by race, gender, and class hierarchies.

The effects of culture, identity, race, and social class on the career development of ethnic minorities has also been ignored. Little is known about what contributes to the successful career progression of Black women as adult educators and what strategies they use to stay on the cutting edge. The stories which Black educators share reveal that a Black female teacher "can never enter the classroom unmarked by her social position in society" (Brown et al., 2000, p. 286). Black women, disadvantaged by their race, gender, and marginalized experience are challenged to prove their credibility in a society where the credible are males, especially white males. Alfred's (2001) study on five successful black tenured female faculty in a predominantly white research university demonstrated that these women knew and met the expectations of the academic culture and possessed a "fluid" White and Black life structure, which helped them to successfully navigate among different socio-cultural groups. Acknowledging Black women's shared experiences about the socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic factors they face as learners or as educators can offer new direction toward inclusive and emancipatory adult education theory and practice.

Culture and Learning

Social structures impact adult learning, educational needs, and participation in educational programs. The extent to which race, ethnicity, and class intersect with structural and cultural constraints determines the extent to which marginalized individuals are able to engage in successful learning activities and to be treated fairly in the society (Sparks, 1998). In the early 1930s, through cultural pluralism, Alain Locke envisioned an American culture inclusive of ethnic European immigrants and the American Negro (Guy, 1996) and adult education for Black people that was based on practical, cultural, and racial interests. He realized that cultural identity and self-knowledge were essential to the progress of the Negro race in America. Racism and segregation, however positioned their needs as different, especially in terms of adult education. Locke's proposal was not supported by the white philanthropy, which were and still are incapable of seeing that culture is inseparable from the context in which it occurs- that it is embedded in everyday life. Few realized and advocated the idea that capable Black people should be given the opportunity for higher education. Today, biased and misguided beliefs continue to oppress, dominate and limit access to resources for particular groups. Black people often turn to the church as a place of spiritual worship and as a refuge from oppression (Isaak, Guy, & Valentine, 2001). They are forced to seek learning and nurturing environments away from the larger social framework because hegemonic institutions are limiting and threatening to their educational development. Examining these issues through the CRT lens uncovers elements of racism and power in the American fabric and gives insight into the cultural and social terrain where marginalized groups engage in survival behavior.

Implications

Liberalism has raised the dilemma between its stated goal of racial equality and its reluctance to confront white privilege (Taylor, 2000). “Adopting and adapting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that [adult educators] will have to expose racism in [adult] education and propose radical solutions for addressing it” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 27). Crenshaw suggests “the development of a distinct political strategy informed by the actual conditions of Black people” (1988, p. 1387). Crenshaw (1988) contends that liberal ideology has visionary ideals that should be developed because more often than not triumph comes not from insurgency but from resistance and perseverance. To do so, race, racism and the historic and social context in which they operate should always be at the center of the debate. Adult education may lay the foundations for the achievement of educational equity by questioning its own assumptions and privileges, by critically examining the racial context in which it functions, and by resisting stereotyping and profiling within its realm.

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