



## TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION: NEW INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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## Use of Self in Social Work: A Critical Race and Social Identity Perspective

*Anita R. Gooding*

In their latest analysis of social justice curricula from 27 social work programs in the United States, Mehrotra et al. (2019) found that a key assumption of Master of Social (MSW) diversity and social justice classes was that social workers were from dominant identity groups, and that their service users were not. For instance, course descriptions positioned marginalized groups as “other,” and did not challenge or discuss dominant identities like Whiteness or maleness. Badwall (2015) also contends that Whiteness is so embedded within social work identity, values, and knowledges that many racialized social workers doubt their professional abilities, and/or experience others questioning their skills. This doubt begins in the classroom, where lessons on working with diverse clients assume that the practitioner is White, and do not explore or name what it means to experience racism while practicing social work as a racialized person (Badwall, 2015). In other words, because social work centres Whiteness, the profession struggles to accept that race and racism are central to the practice experience of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) social workers. Thus, when social work content erases the practice insights and knowledges held by marginalized groups — that race is a part of practice — it hides perspectives that may provide a more nuanced societal view.

In this current moment, where American society is continuing to grapple with the murder of Black and Brown bodies at the hands of police, alongside an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, it comes as no surprise that bodies also factor into use of self, because they are often read through social scripts. Therefore, if use of self is truly about relationship, then there must be an understanding that relationships do not live outside of societal constructions of race, and that social worker bodies become a part of use of self. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) help illustrate the need to discuss race as a component of use of self.

The social work literature has only a few articles that explore social work practice from the perspective of BIPOC social workers, and none that specifically examine how these practitioners use self. However, scholars have looked extensively at the student-field instructor dyad. Broadly speaking, students report that supportive relationships with their field instructors are associated with greater satisfaction in their field practicum (Fortune & Abramson, 1993) and are a critical component of their learning (Bogo, 1994, 2015). Moreover, students gave field instructors positive evaluations based on the frequency and amount of supervision they received (Knight, 2000; Lefevre, 2005). Clearly, students value time with, and attention from, their field instructors. Since field instruction is a role that is central to social work education, and students who have been supervised by BIPOC practitioners have reported feeling prepared to work with racial groups other than their own (Black et al., 1997), it is important to learn more about how the supervisory relationship and use of self are affected by racialization.

## Race and Use of Self

Use of self describes social workers' intentional exercising of their "motivation and capacity to communicate and interact with others in ways that facilitate change" (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003, p. 69). In other words, use of self is how social workers selectively use aspects of self in their work to facilitate client growth and student learning; these tools include personality, self-disclosure, and application of theory to practice (Reupert, 2007). Yet even though we know that race affects social work practice, it has not been considered a component of use of self.

In one of the few social work articles to consider the implications of race in professional social work practice from a non-dominant perspective, Ashley et al. (2016) shares their experiences doing transdisciplinary social work as women of colour. Despite their initial excitement, the transdisciplinary meetings quickly became tense, and one of the authors shared the rejection she felt when her 20+ years of practice insights were ignored around a particular client case. She states:

I felt that my years of experience and recommendations were ignored by my teammates in lieu of others who seemed to have little insight into this case. My professional pride was bruised, and my personal self was hurt and enraged. Painful questions surfaced in the back of my mind. I wondered if my expertise was viewed as insignificant next to my White counterparts. While I knew I was the most competent one on the team to address these concerns, it seemed that the team didn't realize or respect that. I tried to rationalize that they were ignorant regarding the role of social workers, but their outright dismissal of my input gnawed at me (p.11).

The authors' experience highlights how race can affect the way one is perceived and, thus, the way they use self. As much as the authors tried to "communicate and interact with others in ways that facilitate change" (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003, p. 69), race stood in the way. Since use of self is a tool for social work practice (Heydt & Sherman, 2005), an examination of use of self that engages both CRT and SIT offers an opening into how race may affect a practitioner's understanding of use of self, and their ability to use who they are to advance student learning.

## Critical Race Theory

Several scholars apply CRT principles to social work's mission and values (see Kolivoski et al., 2014); CRT also has been used to frame conversations on equity, inclusion, and diversity within social work courses (see Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Ortiz & Jani, 2010) and social work pedagogy (see Razack & Jeffrey, 2002). They have made it clear that the principles of CRT align with the social work discipline's orientation

toward social justice and advocacy. In addition, the authors indicate CRT's utility in all areas of social work practice.

CRT is an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies, which arose in the 1970s from the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As legal scholars, Bell and Freeman believed that for racial reform to occur, the legal system needed a radical shift. Critical legal scholars analyzed the law as an artifact that maintained the US class structure (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and noted that the legal system needed to centre the unique experiences of marginalized groups to change perspectives. As a related, but standalone concept to Critical Legal Studies, CRT has been used in various disciplines, from education to political science and social work, to examine the relationship between race, racism, and power (Taylor, 2009). Despite its wide application, there are some main tenets to CRT, five of which directly relate to my theoretical assumptions about race and use of self.

The first tenet of CRT is that racism is well established within customs, experiences, and structures, and is central to the human experience (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Solórzano & Bernai, 2001). At the same time, racism's ordinary presence makes it invisible to those who hold racial privilege and, therefore, it is difficult to correct. Ortiz and Jani (2010) go as far as to say that CRT recognizes race as a relational concept whose main goal is to stratify and separate. Through internalization of these racial categories, individuals evaluate themselves and others. Consequently, race becomes one way that society organizes itself, and one way that individuals organize self and other.

The second tenet of CRT is a critique of liberalism that rejects dominant narratives, which assume equal opportunity exists for all peoples. Liberalism as a political doctrine upholds unrealistic ideas of meritocracy, equal opportunity, and colourblindness (Razack & Jeffrey, 2002). Instead, CRT explains that race's ordinary presence in society makes it challenging for racialized peoples to gain access to power; they are often unable to completely step outside the racial categorizations and bias imposed upon them and achieve "equal" status. In addition, the critique of liberalism acknowledges that power has often been granted to dominant groups (Gotanda, 1995; Yosso et al., 2009). For instance, since the early years of the United States, cis men of European descent have been able to serve on juries, thus having power to sentence Black and Brown persons under the power of the

law. CRT recognizes the institutionalized power granted to Whites and the struggles BIPOC communities face to obtain civil rights. Thus, CRT holds that liberalism ignores the historically slow process of extending rights to BIPOC communities (Yosso et al., 2009). Liberalist conversations of meritocracy, equal opportunity, and colourblindness benefit only those who already hold power (Gotanda, 1995; Kolivoski et al., 2014).

Third, CRT holds that race and races are socially constructed by dominant groups to protect their interests (Bell, 1979; Haney-Lopez, 1994). Through the creation of racial categories, dominant groups decide which groups have access to rights and which groups do not. As a system, race functions to categorize people based on their physical characteristics, even though race is a societal, not biological marker (Constance-Huggins, 2012).

The fourth tenet of CRT is anti-essentialism. One of the many downsides of racial categorization is that it ignores other forms of societal marginalization individuals can be subjected to. Anti-essentialism holds that an intersectional approach to identity is necessary to avoid further replication of oppressive structures (Crenshaw et. al, 1995; Hylton, 2012). Since everyone has intersectional identities that may overlap (Taylor, 2009), focusing on one identity replicates the idea that a person can be contained within one category. Thus, while CRT centres race, it also recognizes the effects of other kinds of oppression — for example, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation — on human life (Constance-Huggins, 2012; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). This intersectional approach acknowledges that one's experience is dependent on a myriad of factors.

Finally, the fifth tenet of CRT centres the viewpoints of racialized peoples to rebuild our flawed and racialized society (Calmore, 1995). Based on their varying histories and personal experience with race and racism, racial minority groups have unique insights (Bell, 1995). This is what Barnes (1990) calls “insight racial distinctiveness.” Thus, to contrast master narratives, the final relevant tenet of CRT encourages BIPOC writers to share counternarratives (Taylor, 2009). Through sharing their stories, racialized peoples can teach about racial oppression and translate their struggles into social action (Yosso et al., 2009).

Advancing marginalized voices through counternarratives is a key principle of CRT, for it asks racialized peoples to reclaim their stories and experiences so social change can occur. Sharing counternarratives is one

specific way critical race theorists enact social justice. It allows them not only to collect alternative histories of events, based on non-dominant experiences, but also to use storytelling to directly challenge liberalist notions of meritocracy, colourblindness, and equal opportunity. This paper serves as a counternarrative to colourblind discussions of social work supervision and use of self.

### *Critical Race Theory and Use of Self*

When combined, these tenets of CRT illustrate the ways that race informs use of self in the supervisory relationship. Firstly, as noted by Lopez (1994), race is a relational concept because races exist in comparison to each other. For instance, the construct of Whiteness relies upon the construct of Blackness to exist. Following CRT's first tenet, it can be assumed that if race organizes society, then racial categorizations (and our internalization of them) also impact interpersonal relations; thus, the ways in which society categorizes race affects interactions between students and field instructors. Therefore, society's racial categorizations are not just abstract. Instead, these racial categories affect the ways in which social workers, particularly BIPOC social workers, engage with use of self in their work with students. In sum, if racism organizes society, then race also is present within the supervisory space.

Secondly, those in dominant positions often get to assess what should be considered knowledge and are viewed as knowledge generators by society-at-large (Collins, 2002; Janack, 1997). The same knowledge is then granted power socially and, in the academy, without acknowledgement of minoritized experiences. As a result, concepts such as use of self are understood through colourblind narratives, which assume that dominant narratives are the only narratives. Hence, the second tenet highlights another point — as we do not live in a colourblind society with equal opportunity for all, interpersonal relations and use of self are neither colourblind nor equal across racial groups.

Thirdly, CRT holds that race is socially constructed and, because it is an ordinary part of society, also may affect intra- and interracial relations. Therefore, the social construction of race could impact the supervisory experience of BIPOC social workers, both with members of their own communities and with members of dominant groups. Since race and its effects

continue to shift over time, it is useful to note how current understandings of race affect the student-field instructor dyad. Not only will this benefit current social work practitioners and students, but it also may aid future BIPOC social workers as they compare today's sociocultural practice realities with their own.

Fourthly, while this chapter centres race and use of self, it is worth mentioning that race may be one of many components of use of self that is missing from the scholarly literature. Other identities such as religion, age, gender, and class may all intersect and overlap in BIPOC social workers' use of self. These identities may do so in both explicit and implicit ways. While this is the final tenet of CRT to be reviewed, advancing marginalized voices is at the heart of the theory and is crucial to include in conversations about use of self in social work. I believe social work can do more to uplift the subjugated knowledges of BIPOC social workers. In addition, social workers are called to uphold principles of social justice. The fact that counternarratives exist should be enough to indicate that solo narratives tend to favour those in power. In its stead, a consideration of both dominant and counternarratives will offer social workers a deeper understanding of social structures — the same social structures that the profession wants to change. Therefore, social workers can contribute to social change by paying attention to counternarratives. Through counternarratives, social work can better understand that race may impact use of self.

To conclude, Critical Race Theory is useful to conversations about use of self for multiple reasons: first, because race organizes society, it also presents within the supervisory space; second, since we do not live in a colourblind society with equal opportunity for all, interpersonal relations (like those between students and field instructors) and use of self are not colourblind either or equal across racial groups; third, the social construction of race could impact the supervisory experience of BIPOC social workers; and finally, solo narratives favour those in power, so it is important that social workers contribute to social change by paying attention to counternarratives.

The next section of this chapter explores the principles of SIT, which highlight additional assumptions around race and use of self. While CRT provides a macro view of society, SIT addresses a micro look at social life.



## Social Identity Theory

SIT, considered a preeminent theory within social psychology (Brown, 2000), is well-respected worldwide for redefining intergroup relations (Hornsey, 2008). SIT was developed by social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his graduate student, John Turner, after a series of studies sought a deeper understanding of prejudice and conflict, particularly in the aftermath of the holocaust and WWII (Jenkins, 2008). Tajfel and Turner's research aimed to "establish minimal conditions in which an individual will, in his behaviour, distinguish between an ingroup and an outgroup" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 67). They found, through numerous social experiments, that participants favoured those in their social experimental group, and attempted to achieve maximum difference between their group and the other.

At its core, SIT is about inter- and intra-group relations: how people categorize their self-defined social group in relation to other groups (Brown, 2000). Arguably, the most central aspect of SIT relates to social categorization, which posits that humans organize their social environment into personally meaningful categories or groupings (Tajfel, 1982). Groups are loosely defined as individuals who share an identity — for example, a shared gender identity or shared profession. The consequence of these social categorizations is an accentuation of in-group similarities, alongside an accentuation of out-group differences (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within social categorization, it is important to note that groups do not exist in isolation, but rather interact with each other. Thus, when one category exists, it inherently creates another (Tajfel, 1974). For example, the gender binary forces the idea that the category male should only exist next to the category female.

In SIT, any characteristic can be used as a categorical tool (Cox & Gallois, 1996), from shared heritage to one's neighbourhood. Because SIT holds that the self is reflexive — meaning that it can position itself relative to social categories or classifications — individuals can elect (or not) to move through social categories. Hence, a person's social identity is not static, but may shift over time (Tajfel, 1974). For instance, at one point in time a social worker may be a student yet, at another time, a field instructor.

Most important to self in social identity is that social identity facilitates social categorization. By placing ourselves into groups, humans

automatically create an in-group and an out-group, where the in-group belongs, and the out-group does not. Furthermore, social identity theorists note that individuals evaluate a group positively when they become a group member (Stets & Burke, 2000). The positive evaluation results in increased self-esteem, which validates one's self-understanding. In essence, SIT demonstrates that through upholding differences between groups — which may or may not exist — individuals gain a stronger understanding of where they fit into society (Tajfel, 1982).

Social identity theory was the first social psychology theory to recognize that different groups occupy different levels of a hierarchy of status and power, and that intergroup behaviour is driven by people's ability to be critical of, and to see alternatives to, the status quo. (Hornsey, 2008, p. 207)

Therefore, racial prejudice and stereotypes are about individual desires to align themselves with social groups that appear superior to enhance their self-esteem. Consequently, members of one's racial in-group, for example, are evaluated positively, whereas out-groups, or those of other racial identities, are considered different and are therefore evaluated negatively (Nesdale, 1999). Hence, self-categorization allows individuals to develop social identities, and these social comparisons facilitate positive self-esteem (Cox & Gallois, 1996).

Because social categorization is motivated by self-esteem, one's social categorization depends on the assessment of which identity category is most salient to the specific context (Jenkins, 2008). In SIT, a salient identity is an activated identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, a person's context dictates which identity would be considered salient at what time. In this way, context becomes key to understanding social categorizations, as context shapes who we consider in-group and who we consider out-group. It allows people to "self-categorize themselves differently according to the contexts in which they find themselves and the contingencies with which they are faced" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 112). Notably, individuals with multiply marginalized identities (e.g., queer, Latinx, disabled) might find it harder to develop self-esteem through group membership because of negative

reactions to their other identity categories. For instance, they may feel included in queer spaces, but excluded in Latinx spaces.

About race, Tajfel (1974) states “whatever its other uses may be, the notion of ‘race’ has become in its general social usage a shorthand expression which helps to create, reflect, enhance and perpetuate the perceived differences in ‘worth’ between human groups or individuals” (p. 75). He understood that race, although arbitrary, became a categorical tool that allowed one group to claim dominance over others, through evaluating their group positively and other groups negatively.

### *Social Identity Theory and Use of Self*

Two components of SIT directly relate to race informing BIPOC social workers’ use of self in the supervisory relationship. The first is racial categorization. Since humans cognitively categorize themselves and others into groups, and race is certainly a social grouping (per CRT), then it is possible for racial differentiation (out-group) and racial similarities (in-group) to impact a social worker’s use of self. It also may affect how they are able to use self to affect student outcomes. A student’s identity, as well as their perception of the racial group their field instructor belongs to, may change the ways in which a student and field instructor engage with each other. Therefore, racial categorizations may affect how social workers use self, both intra- and inter- racially. For instance, one may develop stronger relationships within their racial group, but struggle to engage cross- racially, or vice versa. Not always because of bias, this may be because of the discomfort of interacting with an unknown social group. Hence, race could impact use of self.

Second, context could influence student supervision when race is activated as a social identity. For instance, when working within a culturally specific agency, that is, with members of their own racial groups, a BIPOC social worker uses self in ways that could look different than if they worked at an agency with mostly White clients. Thus, a social worker of colour in a culturally specific agency may activate race in that context, while, in an alternative context (for example, religion), they may activate another social identity.

SIT offers a unique view into social relationships: namely how social groups relate to each other. As social workers are human beings who

belong to social groups, it is worth exploring how these groupings, especially around race, factor into our practice realities. I believe that racial categorizations (in-group and out-group) could affect how the “self” of a social worker is perceived (insider or outsider). This, indeed, may influence field instructor engagement with use of self to advance student learning. In addition, context might affect when race is activated as a social identity; use of self is dependent on how both supervisor and student assess which identities are most salient to their interaction.

## Intersections: Critical Race Theory and Social Identity Theory

It is useful to briefly note the similarities and differences between CRT and SIT, particularly as they relate to use of self. The primary area of divergence is that CRT provides a macro understanding of social relations, whereas SIT offers a more micro view. Although not inherently problematic, there may be additional mezzo-level factors, which are just as influential to the way BIPOC social workers use self, including agency structure and the communities in which they practice.

At the same time, CRT and SIT converge in very meaningful ways. First, both CRT and SIT acknowledge that race is one of the ways that society organizes individuals, as well as one of the ways that individuals organize themselves. Second, both theories are intersectional for they both recognize that race is one of many categories which organizes society. Third, both CRT and SIT acknowledge that social categories are defined by the societal context. Therefore, categories, such as race, are socially constructed and thus can change over time. Lastly, both CRT and SIT aim to expose power hierarchies within social groupings — hierarchies which influence individual experience and, potentially, influence social worker use of self. As theories, CRT and SIT portray race as a grouping that structures society and factors into micro-level social interaction. As a result, both theories contribute to the explanation of how race may impact use of self, which has implications for social work education, specifically the student-field instructor relationship.

## Implications for Social Work Field Supervision

In their study on how difference is discussed within supervision, Maidment and Cooper (2002) found that students required prompting to think about issues of oppression in their practice. However, when field instructors utilized self-disclosure and questioned students around oppression and difference, many students gained awareness of their biases. Even more so, they were able to think through the ways that their experience informed their awareness of diversity and oppression in practice. Yet for some BIPOC field instructors, use of self is not something they have the agency to use because of societal understandings of what their race signifies. As a theory, CRT explains why race is pervasive. In its explanation, CRT opens the possibility for field instructors and students to explore non-dominant ways of social work practice during supervision. This includes conversations about how race informs and affects BIPOC use of self generally, both within the student-field instructor dyad and within the student-client relationship. When race is included in conversations about use of self, it gives social workers, BIPOC and otherwise, the freedom to bring race into the room explicitly because it informs social life.

Furthermore, the principles of SIT encourage field instructors to consider issues of structural and interpersonal power across difference, as well as within shared identities. Due to socialization within American culture, issues of white supremacy, dominance, and oppression can present themselves regardless of whether someone shares identity groups. While a great deal has been written about cross-cultural supervision (see Estrada et al., 2004; McRoy et al., 1986; Young, 2004), a major gap continues to exist in the ways oppression occurs intra-culturally and intra-rationally, and in its differential impacts on historically marginalized groups. Discussing use of self, both within and across difference, will allow field supervisors to support and challenge students in their development as social workers and facilitate a critical praxis.

## Conclusion

Critical Race Theory and Social Identity Theory help explain the ways in which race informs social life and thus social worker use of self. Naming race as a component of use of self rejects colourblind narratives about

social work practice and acknowledges the real impacts of social identities on supervisory realities. Furthermore, this naming creates an opening for field instructors and students to engage in meaningful conversations about the social construction of race, its dimensions, and the ways a racialized identity informs one's ability to use self to build relationships with clients and to advance client goals.

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