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Identity and cultural competency : critical race and postmodern perspective

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical thesis explores how racism is unavoidable in social work because of the weight of systemic influences. It looks at how the use of cultural competency could be unethical, by using both critical race and postmodern theory. The use of critical race theory in thinking about cultural competency seems to allow for a passive acceptance of a system which has continued to be un-critical of its racist origins and assumptions. Furthermore the enacting of cultural competency through a postmodern view could at times be considered a micro aggression and as such unethical. This paper hopes that by acknowledging that racism is unavoidable, with or without cultural competency, the awareness of it is heightened and by extension failures to address it are as well. Perhaps ultimately that acknowledgement might lead to the design of better, more ethical, interventions.

IDENTITY AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY: CRITICAL RACE AND

POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

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       And finally I'd like to acknowledge the words by Jay Z that got me to finish this thesis: "Life is but a dream to me/ I don't wanna wake up/ Thirty odd years without having my cake up/ So I'm about my paper." Time for me to go get me a beach chair.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The Implications of Cultural Competency

Social workers are charged with the task of reaching out to, engaging with and helping

people across culture, social class, gender, and religious backgrounds (CSWE, 2001). In the

pursuit of providing the best possible aid in ethical ways, individual workers are taught to

educate themselves about the community or communities they work with and within.

Practitioners of social work believe that once social workers equip themselves with specific

knowledge of a culture, they are in a position to provide aid that protects against offending or

hurting a population. This form of knowing is referred to as the ethic of cultural competency.

The Council on Social Work Education (2001) sets the standards for cultural

competence. Cultural competency is an ethical standard that all students of social work are

taught to seek. Undergraduate and graduate level students take notes in class lectures, read,

discuss, and contemplate the best ways to provide aid to people beyond the contexts of their own

personal cultural/class/gender/religious experiences, through this ethic.

The framework of cultural competency suggests that an individual social worker, for

example, a white man who grew up in Jersey City, will be able to serve an immigrant woman

from Nigeria, for example, more effectively if that social worker has explored and studied some

of the religious, ethnic, social practices of Nigerian people. This suggestion is backed up by

social work texts. Tews and Merali (2008) outline how workers should approach working with

Chinese immigrants who have children with disabilities. They posit that Confucianism (an

achievement-oriented teaching) has created a cultural divide in the ways that parents from China

will approach children and as such, there several ways a worker should approach working with a Chinese immigrant family. Tews and Merali posit that because of the teaching of Confucianism, Chinese immigrant parents expect their children to show respect through achievement in school. Therefore a child with a disability may be seen as disrespectful. The therapist's challenge is to reframe a child's struggles as being something other than disrespect without disregarding a long-standing cultural understanding of the immigrant parents.

Blackwell (2005) also writes about the importance of learning about the context of a culture before starting work with refugee populations. He suggests that a focus on very specific aspects of cultures will lead to more effective outreach. By drawing on structures already in place within a community, Blackwell suggests that social workers can provide help that is not only more effective but also reaches more people. Blackwell describes how the most effective strategy in the wake of a disaster work comes from taking note of what of that culture has survived. Community structure that was already in place can lead communities in connecting with its historical sources of resiliency. For example, a community that turns to music through a religious context may experience their own strength through practices that draw on traditions that grow out of their singing together. That community can use strong cultural roots/ identity and connect to a shared experience of expression in times of hardship. This expression removes the focus from the feelings of loss (home, friends, and family) to those that aren't vulnerable to annihilation (song, history, and those around them) because the individual and the group still share a tradition that is meaningful and lasting.

Striving for cultural competency may be necessary given that social workers come from all different backgrounds and abilities. Even with cultural competency, however, a worker's community of origin may allow that worker to be much more versatile with some communities

than others. With the use of cultural competency, workers still struggle to connect with clients. Engagement can at times be difficult regardless of a worker's understanding/ knowledge of a community.

This paper will explore the ethic of cultural competency. When looking at the failures of social work to affect change in certain communities, the question becomes whether cultural competency might negatively influence the way aid is given by social workers and social work agencies. The discussion will consider the cycle racism systemically and individually within the United States, as well as consider the ways cultural competency could be damaging when social workers affirm identity for some groups of people whose social norm has become poverty or incarceration.   Perhaps it should be a social worker's responsibility to call into crisis the cultural norms of populations when those norms lead to failure. When thinking about spheres of society where social workers operate within schools, prisons, child services, and even in the private sector, which groups are failing to thrive? One group that can be found failing at high rates are black men. Can social workers be implicated in perpetuating a dead end system for black men by imposing "cultural competency" in ways that trap rather than providing models of success and sustainability?

Black Men Working with Non Black Social Workers

Literature on relationships between social workers and black men and/or non black society and black men suggest two parallel phenomena, racism and internalized racism, that can be used to explain how cultural competency can be dangerous for the black male population in the United States. Internalized racism is a phenomenon that occurs when an individual within a minority group begins to believe that racist opinions of their identity are true (Miller & Garran,

2008). The point of intersection between racism and internalized racism is consistently present in a dynamic relationship. These two structures intersect and operate below the surface to create potentially damaging circumstances for black male clients of social workers. Racism and internalized racism help to create a narrative of identity that can continue to reinforce patterns of inequality. In 2006, blacks living within the United States had the highest rate of poverty of any race group. (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2007). Black men have higher rates of crime than their white counterparts (Hill & Abu-Jamal, 2012). They also have a low life expectancy when compared to any race group and even when compared to women of the same race (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Educational disadvantages are extreme and especially for black men (Simson, 2014). Culturally competent nonblack workers may perpetuate negative patterns through internalizing expectation of failure.

Wingsue (2007) writes, "White therapists are members of the larger society and not immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears (Burkard & Knox, 2004; D. W. Sue, 2005), they may become victims of a cultural conditioning process that imbues within them biases and prejudices (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993) that discriminate against clients of color." Biases and prejudices come out through a perceived understanding of how society operates and an acceptance of "inevitable" outcomes present in data.

Hill and Abu-Jamal (2012) write about internalized racism. Abu-Jamal comments on how he, as a black child growing up, conceptualized the prison industrial system. If Abu-Jamal didn't see a man in his community for a few weeks, he wouldn't assume the person was on vacation, home sick or just failing to cross paths. Abu-Jamal said he would assume the man had been put in jail. The prison industrial complex in the United States wasn't a place someone would be sent

if he were to break the law; rather it was an inevitability that every male person within his community was likely to face.

It is well established that racism and internalized racism are detrimental to nonwhite individuals and society at large. Perhaps what is missing from the paradigm of practice is that many social workers, by being responsible to ideas of "cultural competency," perpetuate social norms of poverty and incarceration. Furthermore, when social workers consider the ways upbringing impacts an individual's understanding of race and masculinity (Wingsue 2007; Hill & Abu-Jamal 2012), being competent within a society that is racist poses difficult hurdles for a worker. Couldn't the idea of being competent then be suspect because it in some ways requires an individual worker to affirm racism and internalized racism?

Connection to the Field of Social Work in the U.S.

The connection to the field of social work is clear when asking if social workers can be implicated in keeping that system in place for black men by imposing "cultural competency." Furthering an understanding of the ways constructed identity (constructed through a desire to reach cultural competency) might influence a social worker's or agency's approach to a case could be crucial when striving to provide more effective (and possibly more ethical) aid. Critical analysis of the issue of how identity is constructed will be relevant to social work as a whole because insight on these matters could further the understanding of individual community's dynamics.

For individual communities, this exploration of black male identity and work related to it could lead to better understanding of how people within a community understand their positioning as well as how a worker comes into the community understands their work there. By

understanding some of the factors that create identity through racism and internalized racism, the root causes of the perpetuation of counter-productive aid in some communities might be better understood. This theoretical questioning of cultural competency could lend itself to the development of studies that might help to dismantle the cycle of racism and re-imagine practices more beneficial to struggling individuals and communities. Furthermore, by acknowledging where there could be deficits in one of the ways social work is being carried out, social aid can be placed with a more intentional focus on what a community needs, rather than what they currently have. If being culturally competent is going to remain one of the main tenets of social work, it seems important to better understand the ways that identity is constructed and then, by extension, operate in a more culturally conscious and generative way.

The Well Has Been Poisoned (don't drink)

How can being competent in a culture be an erosive force? Can it even be argued that the more a social worker prepares to work with a community of people, the worse the aid that is provided will be? Perhaps there are risks when a social worker only knows the toxicity and failure of the culture of the community and the surrounding environment: attempting to provide aid within the accepted constraints of that culture might only perpetuate the system in place. For black men living within the United States of America its possible cultural competency could be a system where racism is inevitable and perhaps seen as inescapable. The United States is home to a society that has created cultures and individual identities whose daily lives are affected by systems of racism. One needn't look further than schools, prisons, child services, and the private sector to see which groups are failing within those areas.

Knowledge of how systems of oppression operate is crucial to social workers but perhaps

approaching an individual client using that knowledge could inadvertently cause the social

worker to validate within themselves their client's narrative of identity. In doing so the client

would cease to be an individual and instead become a representation of a larger community.

Engaging individuals with background assumptions based in cultural group patterns may lead the

social worker to provide aid as prescribed by an even larger society's view of that community.

How do white social workers achieve a culturally competent narrative of black male

identity? Outside of scholarly work, there is a whole world of identity creation to be found in

popular culture. Narratives of what it means to be culturally competent working with a black

man can be drawn from personal experiences, popular culture, and scholarly texts.

The Use of Post Modern Theory and Critical Race Theory

In trying to examine the possibility of a phenomenon of a social worker's knowledge of

the black community impacting an individual black man in a detrimental way based in racism,

there are two different theories that will be used to explore that possibility within this paper.

Those theories are Post Modern Theory and Critical Race Theory. Post Modern Theory will be

used to explore the ways in which identity is formed in one on one interactions. Critical Race

Theory will be used to talk about race relations within the context of United States society. The

two theories will ultimately be used together to discuss the ways that a social worker's use of

cultural competency might perpetuate systems of racism.

Next Chapter

The next chapter will focus on the Conceptualization and Methodology surrounding the

idea that cultural competency might have unintended pitfalls and actually perpetuate racism

when used by white practitioners. The chapter will provide analysis exploring why postmodern theory and critical race theory were chosen when looking into the possibility of this phenomenon. In explaining the choice of those two theories, a theoretical framework will be developed for understanding the damaging aspects of cultural competency and its effect on an individual's personal narrative.

Once that framework is in place, specific components of each theory will be introduced. Those components will serve as markers of how the cultural competency phenomenon will be discussed. The basic framework will start with how an individual's personal narrative is formed in the context of both postmodern theory and critical race theory and then move to how social workers might affirm that identity. The value of the practice of cultural competency will then be evaluated/ discussed using postmodern theory and critical race theory to explore how it might interact with someone's narrative.

The writer's personal belief system will also be explored. This will be done in order to understand the potential biases of the methodology used to discuss the questions at hand. This section will be followed by an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the discussion considering those biases and the theories chosen. Lastly, the chapter will transition into a new chapter focusing on the phenomenon itself.

Chapter II

Conceptualization

This chapter will focus on the conceptualization resulting in possible side effects of cultural competency, specifically the perpetuation of racism by white practitioners with black men. The chapter will also explore the interplay of postmodern theory and critical race theory in determining an individual's personal narrative. Focusing on interaction between an individual's narrative and the use of cultural competency becomes a central investigation to the chapter; for example, how does the practice of cultural competency possibly undermine an individual's understanding of how identity emerges through those two theories. First, this chapter will cover the biases held by the author on this topic and in doing so; the inspiration for the topic will emerge.

The Story of Biases

The writer of this paper worked alongside Child Protective Services in Albany County in New York as part of a prevention team for eight months. Through providing family counseling, the team attempted to serve children who were moving into or in danger of entering the foster care network. The goals of the Prevention Department were/are to "effectively address the issues that place children and youths at risk for foster care or residential placement. (Parsons Child and Family Center, 2014)." If a child has been removed from a family or parent by child protective services, the team works to provide resources to help families reunite. Counseling for parents, supervised visits, and connecting clients with other agencies are some of the resources the team works to provide or facilitate.

The families that the writer worked with lived within Albany County, which includes the urban center of Albany, New York, and a large surrounding rural area. While the county has a range of social classes, most clients the team worked with fall somewhere near the poverty line. This demographic does not suggest that middle and upper class families don't experience challenges raising their kids; the difference is that those families can afford to have private practitioners intervene. The team addressed clients' concerns by counseling them as part of a family system. One-on-one counseling took place, but generally there was an effort to involve the whole family system because of the team's intent of reuniting a family and solving problems that might potentially lead to kids being removed from the home again or for the first time.

While working on the team, the writer worked with two young men. The similarities between the two were uncanny. Both were fifteen, both had been arrested for the first time within the past six months, both were refusing to attend high school, both were able bodied, both lived with a single mother, and both came from families that struggled for money. When looking at identity factors that separated the two boys, the crucial divergence was race. Despite the kids' similarities, the work with the two boys was extremely different. It is the writer's belief that cultural competency played a big role in his perpetuation of a system of failure for the young black man.

The goals that were set for the two young men in therapy demonstrate a flawed system. The interventions that were offered to the young black man were well-informed by statistics and knowledge of the pitfalls and road bumps that men of his culture face following the ethic of cultural competency. One might argue that in following that ethic, the interventions were not completely ethical. One set of interventions kept options open while the other, born out of a desire to keep a client out of jail, closed most doors. The interventions offered to the young white

man didn't reflect the weight of probable life outcomes for young men sharing his identity but rather interventions focused on goals set for him as an individual.

The white kid's expectations of success in school were approached as plausible. He could very well complete high school without being subject to further persecution. While it is also possible that the black kid could have completed high school, statistically speaking, it was far more unlikely. And it is an almost certainty that he would continue to be persecuted as he was during the writer's time working with him. In the time working with the two boys, the white one finished his stint with probation within the original timeline. The black kid had his probation sentence extended for "disciplinary reasons." The white kid had come up positive for marijuana on two random drug tests but in the last months of his probation had managed to stay clean. This fact was held up as evidence of improved behavior. The black kid had his sentence increased because of too many missed days of school, something also an issue in the white kid's case, but of the two boys, faulty attendance only mattered for the black kid. It also it bears mentioning that the black kid never came up positive on a drug test.

In order to understand how the ethic of cultural competency may have undermined and eventually dictated the young black man's identity, it's important to understand a bit more about the case. The writer began working with this black teenager because of his parent's illegal activity, involving the sale of drugs and possession of illegal firearms, and shortly after being referred to the prevention team, the teenager committed his first crime. At 15 he was repeating 9th grade and on track to have to do so again. His home was in one of the worst neighborhoods in Albany County.

Because a black kid who gets put into the system after a charge like the one the young black man had has a 70% chance of recidivism (Robin 2012), the primary goal was to keep him

from reoffending. Robin (2012) writes about a connection between high schools in Massachusetts and the penitentiary system; the article shows that many students are arrested for the first time while at school. This was the case with this teenager. On average the United States spends 11,000 dollars per year on each kid in public school (FEBP 2012). The ACLU (2012) calculates the US spends an average of $34,135 a year on each prisoner. These figures speak to the federal government's expectation for this kid. Socially, the expectation is that this kid will offend and end up in prison, setting his identity. Statistically higher heavy police presence in the black kids' school made the goal of keeping him out of the criminal justice system all the more unlikely. All of this knowledge resulted in work that focused away from the school system. 70% of the time a social worker would be validated in focusing their efforts with a black student towards making positive connections in their community outside of school because of the perilous setting of the policed school. But for 30% of students it would be the wrong choice, and would handicap a young man. For that 30%, not having a high school diploma will be a detriment to them throughout their lives, dictating where they live and what jobs they can hold.

With the young white man, the writer shared most identity markers and as a result approached him as an individual. Cultural Competency could be assumed because social worker and client came from similar communities. As a result, the articulated goals reflected the desires of an individual rather than a group. For example, the kid wanted to be a mechanic, and it was easy to accomplish the task of connecting him to a shop teacher who was willing to take him into a class. Ultimately, what this means is the white young man had some agency in the control of his identity where the black young man had an identity that was predetermined for him and perpetuated by working with a social worker who was only focused on what the young man ought not become.

Cultural Competency demands that when social workers operate within a community outside their community of origin, they inform themselves of cultural norms of that community in order to better serve (CSWE, 2001). As can be seen in the example above with the two young men, this can remove the agency of an individual. The writer, a white clinician working within this ethic and the expectations created by it, approached one person as an individual and the other as a statistic. The fact that this kind of work is replicated by other social workers in the United States may result in the potential for perpetuation of unintentional but nonetheless damaging racism. This phenomenon is all the more sobering when considering that the majority of social workers are whites and the people being served by social workers in systems like failing schools, the criminal justice system, disability supports, and Child Services are disproportionately segregated by race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

A Theoretical Framework: Why postmodern and critical race theory create identity

Ross (2009) outlines how white students push back against issues of race in the classroom settings where social justice is part of the core curriculum. Understanding that this push back exists makes it even more important to delve into this subject. Why choose postmodern and critical race theory for this paper? When the two are blended together they can be used to explain ways identity might be constructed for people. In doing so this paper can explore the possible phenomenon of a social worker's knowledge of the black community reflecting back onto an individual black man in detrimental ways including affirming and creating an identity produced by racism.

Postmodern and critical race theories lend themselves to a discussion of narrative construction through cultural competency. For the purposes of this paper, it's important to

evaluate the ways that social systems as well as individual, one on one, interactions create a narrative within a client that potentially leads to an understanding of who that client is by both the clinician and the individual client. These two theories allow readers to examine both the internal workings of identity, as well as the way the larger systems within the United States help to create identity. For instance, thinking back to the narrative of the two boys. The white boy was encouraged to join a shop class affirming his ability to better himself. With the black boy, there is the statistical expectation that he will go to prison and the knowledge of that expectation may inform the approach chosen by the social worker, perhaps affirming or creating a negative identity for the young man.

Specific Components of Postmodern and Critical Race Theory

Postmodern theory allows us to understand how influences like popular culture can help to construct identities for a society; for instance it can show how those identities are formed across gender, race, and class lines. Best and Douglas (1991) suggest that individuals are not free to determine their identity but rather society does it for them. When you draw from narratives within pop culture, a general picture of black masculine identity begins to form. Postmodern theory suggests that those identities can become a part of someone's narrative about who they are. Furthermore, pop culture can be used as a source from which to draw information to become culturally competent. This results in those images, along with scholarly works, creating the means by which a worker first relates to a client. In the case of black men the formation of a perceived identity by a white worker can be a detriment. Looking back again to the young black man, the worker draws parts of the boy's identity for him. The worker was aware of and had exposure to media and popular culture. Images and narratives from those sources became a

reflection of who the boy was, perhaps without even having to meet him.

Critical race theory suggests that while one-on-one interactions participate in perpetuating racism, the problem is so systemic that even the best of intentions are undermined by a history of racism (Delgado & Stefancic 2012). Ultimately what this means is that in order to address the systemic problem of racism, it isn't enough to attempt to become knowledgeable about a community (become culturally competent.) It would take a system overhaul to keep individual workers from perpetuating systems of oppression. In other words, it's not just family and friends who dictate who an individual is, or who is relating to that individual outside of their community of origin, but rather hundred of years of systemic racism. Given an understanding of these theories, cultural competency is at best a measure taken by social workers to convince themselves that they are acting thoughtfully and ethically. Perhaps cultural competency impedes a worker from nurturing individuals in ways that allow for divergence and growth.

Critical race theory becomes important to help explain how racism works on a larger scale if the understanding, from postmodern theory, is that identity is formed by a mixing of social interactions by members within a community and external sources. This helps to illustrate the nature of the narrative between the author, a social worker in training, and that young black man. Critical race theory helps to demonstrate the ways negative narratives get affirmed through a history of oppression. It does this by demonstrating how systems of racism perpetuate themselves and can lead to an internalization of that racism.

How to Discuss the Phenomenon

The phenomenon at hand is the possibility of a social worker's attempt at gaining cultural competency of the black community impacting an individual black man working with that social

worker. The possibility exists that a white social worker's insight into patterns of black culture may affirm an identity produced by systems that are necessarily racist. This paper will ultimately discuss how that phenomenon plays out. The discussion will explore analysis of how postmodern and critical race theory combines to create an individual's identity. Then the discussion will turn to how that identity is maintained, not only through overt systems of oppression, but also possibly through the good intentions of social workers and their attempts at cultural competency

Strengths and Limitations

Ultimately the writer left his position on the team feeling he had failed to view the black kid as an individual and as such did the kid a disservice. The bias analyzed within this paper comes from that feeling of failure. Perhaps had the situation improved drastically for the youth due to the writer's interventions, the idea for this paper may never had come into being. Strength of this paper comes from what the writer has experienced and what he sees as the downside of cultural competency. By extension, a limitation of this paper is the writer's personal connection to the material.

Next Chapter

The following chapter will focus on an overview of the phenomenon, the possibility of a social worker's knowledge of the black community reflecting back onto an individual black man and in turn affirming an identity that is wrapped up in racism. The chapter will delve deeper into looking at the scope of this phenomenon. If cultural competency is held as an ethic by social workers in the United States, how far might the negative implications extend? Looking deeper

into previous writings, the possibility of perpetuation of racism by white social workers with

black men will be further explored.

Chapter III

The Phenomenon

This Chapter

This chapter explores the possibility of a dynamic relationship between a social worker's knowledge of the black community and the formation/ affirmation of black identity. For example, could a social worker's "knowledge" of cultural patterns, stereotypes and social statistics inadvertently reinforce the parts of black identity precipitated by racism? The assumption of a dynamic grounds this chapter: without affirmation of statistics and stereotypes on a social worker's part, the possible negative implications of cultural competency go unexamined.

By beginning to delve deeper into the scope of this phenomenon, the hope is to begin to highlight the possibility of unethical and potentially damaging effects of cultural competency. The question becomes this: if cultural competency is held as an ethically positive standard by social workers in the United States, how far might the negative implications extend? The short answer is the negative implications, if they exist, would extend to every community served by white workers who attempt to work with cultural competency. Those negative implications could exist while utilizing cultural competency even when attempting to do so in a positive, uncomplicated way. At the very least there is room to also explore negative aspects within this standard.

This chapter will limit the scope of the paper to a focus upon the impact of the use of cultural competency on black men. The chapter further narrows its focus by only looking directly at the possibility of perpetuation of racism by white social workers with black men. It is possible

that minority clinicians working with other disadvantaged groups could anticipate the side effects of cultural competency better than white social workers, but this paper will not explore that possibility.

Overview of the Phenomenon

Working with groups from different cultures, backgrounds and identities is usually inevitable for a social worker from the United States. In almost any job within the profession, workers are going to interact with people outside of the context in which that worker grew up. As a result, when people are becoming social workers, graduate programs have to address ways to work with people outside of an individual's spectrum of experiences. Cultural competency is widely taught as a way to help workers navigate diverse communities. As such, the scope of this issue is significant. It is at the foundation of social work teachings and in turn gets carried out by workers all over the country. Assuming cultural competency is, in fact, a flawed tool, it is almost certainly a widespread one.

In the beginning of the creation of social work, most practitioners were white affluent women. The boarding houses created in 1889 by Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams, to help new immigrants find community support in order to assimilate them to American culture provide one clear instance of affluent white female social workers being in an authoritative role with a disadvantaged population. The boarding house example illustrates the phenomenon of multiple cultures meeting and eventually creating new identities for the residents. Immigrants became members of the boarding house communities. They learned new skills and restructured their lives to assimilate within the constraints of the ideals set forth by their benefactors, often privileged white women (Popple & Leighninger 2001).

From its inception, social work has characteristically intended to help at risk populations, and as a result has often reformed them, i.e., helped to create or give new identities to clients. In some cases, reconstruction was to the population's benefit. People in boarding houses, for example, had an improved quality of life over the average United States immigrant (Popple & Leighninger 2001). But in cases where populations benefitted from changing and adapting by learning to work within the structure set up by social workers, there is no way of knowing if that same population might have been better served in other ways. In other words, just because an intervention worked, that doesn't make it the most effective and/or ethical approach for providing support.

The Council on Social Work Education (2001) sets the standards for cultural competence. The ethic of cultural competency is intended to prevent social workers from potentially offending, ignoring cultural norms, and possibly contributing to the loss of culture in the rush to help people. Preventing possible ignorance/ cultural arrogance on the part of social workers seems on the surface to be a positive goal. However, the intent doesn't necessarily match up with the execution and there might be a better, more ethical solution. The possibility of a more ethical solution is a worthwhile pursuit but not the focus of the paper. First the question that is being posed needs to be answered: What could the possible unintended side effects of cultural competency be?

If cultural competency were detrimental, it could impact any minority/disadvantaged population served by social workers. For the purposes of this paper, the population being explored is limited to only black men. This population was chosen for two reasons. The first reason is that there is plenty of historical documentation of systematic racism with that group within the United States. The second reason is that the author of this paper has worked directly

with this population and observed the possibility that social workers may be negatively

impacting clients' identity because of their professional use of cultural competency, a framework

created within a system of racism and oppression. There may be devastating costs for clients

when white social workers use a tool that does not break the system down but rather continues to

perpetuate it.

The Phenomenon

If a social worker's knowledge of the black community reflects back onto an individual

black man and in turn affirms an identity that is wrapped up in racism, the question that has to be

posed is: how is cultural competency of a given community "achieved" by a social worker?

cultural competency asks a worker to inform themselves of a community but doesn't necessarily

stipulate the best way to go about that. This section of the paper will explore three places a

worker might draw from to help understand their work within a community: personal

experiences, popular culture, and scholarly texts.

Personal Experience

The first place a worker might draw from when trying to become competent in a

community is from their own life experiences. Harro, B (2010) suggests, that workers socialized

by a dominant perspective would carry that perspective with them into their work. Essentially

what Harro suggests is that we are all products of our upbringings and can't divorce ourselves

from that entirely. If a worker grows up in a mostly white community, it is likely he/she will

bring that perspective into the work. Harro, B (2010) suggests that a phenomenon of grouping to

others like oneself (for example growing up in a mostly white context) is due to historical

socialization within sections of population. The perspective born of that socialization within a dominant culture can be damaging when one looks at that perspective's ability to silence other identities. Johnson (2001) outlines just how easy it is for a white person to dominate a space. What this means is the very act of being white in a situation starts the process of other identities adapting to you. Miller and Garran (2008) suggest a similar view of the power of privilege. In a chart they provide within their book, Miller and Garran outline where power is held in society and how a worker's identity might create power imbalances within work dynamics.

It seems imperative for workers to learn to disrupt cycles through elevating their awareness. "By participating in our roles as agents, and remaining unconscious of or being unwilling to interrupt the cycle, we perpetuate the system of oppression" (Harro 2010, p. 50). Essentially Harro suggests that being unaware of privilege can lead unintentionally to a continuation of a racist society. An awareness of privilege allows for some disruption of the systemic problem. One goal of cultural competency should be to break the cycle of imbalanced power and privilege.

But what if cultural competency isn't actually a form of awareness of privilege but rather serves to distance a worker from his/her own identity? Ultimately it is possible that the roles created by the carrying out of cultural competency by workers is just as damaging as not using it at all. That is because cultural competency was created within a system of oppression and as such doesn't do enough to actually break out or "to interrupt the cycle" any more than completely ignoring cultural competency might.

Popular Culture

A worker might seek to create cultural competency by intellectually/imaginatively connecting the lives of their group of clients with images and narratives of from popular culture. Popular culture is part of a worker's socialization (Harro 2010). Therefore pop culture is a piece of what determines how social workers interact with a given population, even if they aren't actively seeking it out to inform their cultural competency. Popular culture has potential to paint a general picture of a culture while making broad sweeping assumptions about people living within it. Furthermore, popular culture often depicts the extraordinary or glorified version of cultural phenomena. For example, Barbie depicts a white woman and a standard of beauty. A person might look at that doll and be able to describe a white woman accurately, yet the specifics of Barbie's anatomy are wholly unrealistic. Without a doubt, popular culture helps to create and influence identity but, at times, in damaging and distorted ways.

Pop culture is often created by the dominant culture adopting art forms that are traditionally created and performed by a minority class. A dominant class will adopt a style, appropriate and recreate it to fit within an aesthetic that appeals to that dominant class. For example, the standard twelve bar blues is used to create the basis for rock and roll, an art form more marketable to a larger class of people. By reworking an art form and incorporating aesthetic preferences of a dominant culture, artists can sell their compositions to a larger market. Although the initial culture's expression of the art may be maintained or alluded to, the new expression is often mixed with dominant cultural images, sounds, and consequently, new meaning.

Within the United States, black culture has been exploited for large scale entertainment repeatedly. Whether it is Elvis Presley performing the blues or a vaudeville minstrel show, black

culture is depicted for white dominat culture consumption. Imani Perry (2004) writes about the mainstream take over of Hip Hop.

> [In the 1990's Rap] became the most popular musical form in the United States. Even if one were to more generous about newest popular rap music, some of which proves aesthetically pleasing even if it does not seem especially good within the standards of evaluation for hip hop head, there can be no doubt that it constitutes a simplistic, less innovative, and softened version of original hip hop, meant to cater to a broader listening population, driven and shaped by markets… Hip Hop is in the process of reformulating itself in the face of mainstream co-optation of many of its elements and widespread separation from its ideological cultural context (pp. 191-192)

Perry is suggesting that rap music in its onset was a form of counter culture used to disrupt a system of oppression or at the very least, provide an outlet for the oppressed to express themselves. By becoming mainstream, rap/hip hop loses its ideology and instead begins to fit into the dominant perspective.

A rapper's lyrics may serve as an exploration of violence within a fictional narrative. When consumed by the dominant culture, the rapper embodies that violence and then black men begin to embody that same violence. Jay-Z, Nas, The Notorious B.I.G, Tupac, Two Chains, Kendrick Lamar, DMX, Lil' Wayne, T.I., and other rappers all depict violence within their music. Rather than being read as a narrative of frustration at a larger system of oppression, those lyrics can be transformed into an understanding of what it means to be a black man. Is a polarized image of a black man packing guns any more realistic than Barbie with her enormous

breasts and pin sized feet? By using popular culture to inform cultural competency, a social worker not only makes assumptions about an artist's voice/ message but also removes individual identity from the equation and instead creates sweeping generalizations about the people within the culture they are serving. In addition, a social worker risks using "culturally relevant" texts that are actually appropriations or reductions of texts created by groups of oppressed people.

Scholarly Texts.

The third place a social worker might draw from to create cultural competency is in the reading of and discussing scholarly works. Tews and Merali (2008) and Blackwell (2005) both stress the importance of learning about the context of a culture before starting work with a population. Both texts give models of exactly how to do so. The implication of those texts is that, by extension, a model for working with a black youth can be developed by using knowledge of the society in which that youth lives.

A worker could look at the disproportionate rates of black men in prison against the census data for population size. As discussed in the previous chapter, a quick study of United States culture reveals that there is 70% chance of recidivism for any offender in the United States. A student is most likely going to be caught with their first offense on school grounds, linking high schools and the penitentiary system (Robin 2012). A worker might look at the $11,000 spent per year on each kid in public school (FEBP 2012) compared with the average of $34,135 a year on each prisoner (ACLU 2012) within the United States. With this knowledge the worker could easily draw the conclusion that there is more government investment in a black kid going to jail than a white kid. Cultural competency might then dictate that the number one priority is to keep a kid out of the penitentiary system.

There are more texts that substantiate this view of the prison pipeline for a worker. In the chapter "Black life in the age of incarceration," (Hill & Abu-Jamal 2012), Mumia describes growing up in a community where he assumed absence of a member of his community indicated that the person was incarcerated. Mumia talks about how incarceration became a part of his identity. Hill and Abu-Jamal (2012) outline how mass incarceration creates a narrative for a young black man as inevitable as death. These works explain how prison gets ingrained in a culture in a way where it becomes the norm rather than the exception. With those understandings what is the danger of validating clients when attempting to keep statistics about who will end up in prison in mind? Understanding how the inescapability of a narrative, like future incarceration, could shape and be a part of a person's identity will be covered further in the next two chapters.

Quickly Tying the Three Together

Wing Sue (2007) outlines micro aggressions and how workers might be guilty of carrying them out. Micro aggressions are small acts perpetrated by a member of a dominant class onto another person who is not of the same class. Those acts are aggressions and by definition detrimental. For instance according to Miller and Garran's (2008) chart, micro aggressions could be carried by a man to a woman, a straight person against an LGBTQ person, an able bodied person against a handicapped person, and multiple other possible groupings. That includes the possibility of a white practitioner committing a micro aggression against a black client. The truly insidious nature of micro aggressions is that they can be carried out without the offender being aware of what they are doing. In theory, cultural competency should help to minimize these offenses. However, isn't it possible that workers perpetuate micro-aggressions given how "cultural competency," by nature, seems to allow for a passive acceptance of a system, which has

continued to be un-critical of its racist origins and assumptions? Maybe the enacting of cultural competency could at times be considered a micro aggression?

Returning now to the two young men the author worked with: the black kid spoke about the inevitability of his being put into the penitentiary system. The white kid never raised the possibility of incarceration. The author knew the statistics, the dangers of identity and micro aggressions, and was well-versed in popular culture. The author thought of himself as a critical thinker, perceptive about evidence of racism in daily interactions. But when working with the black kid, he focused the plan for this youth intensely on the keeping the youth out of jail as the central goal. As a result, perhaps the author did not address the youth as fully as an individual but rather hid behind cultural competency to justify his methods and priorities.

Next Chapter

The next chapter will give an overview of critical race theory. It will begin by giving a brief working definition, a way to think about critical race theory. Next the chapter will transition into a brief discussion of the history and key figures of critical race theory within the United States. In order to suggest the ways that critical race theory might be used within the context of a study, the author will draw from empirical studies that have been done using critical race theory. Moving from there, the chapter will examine why this theory was developed and its significance. Lastly the author will explore how the theory relates to a social worker's knowledge of the Black community, reflecting back onto an individual Black man and in turn affirming an identity that is wrapped up in racism.

Chapter IV

Critical race theory

This Chapter

This chapter will explore critical race theory and its relationship to United States society. Insight into critical race theory facilitates the author's final discussion chapter, the exploration of the possible pitfalls of using cultural competency in the field. This chapter will begin by giving a working definition of critical race theory. Having that definition in hand provides a means for considering why critical race theory might be pertinent when considering what happens in relationships between clients of different races, again specifically black men, and white social workers.

A brief discussion of the history and key figures of critical race theory within the United States allows the author to explore the importance of the theory from a systemic viewpoint. If cultural competency does indeed lead to a perpetuation of a system of racism, it is important to look at the historical context of a theory that addresses how racism works. This section will also examine why this theory was developed and its significance, focusing on possible biases of the theory.

The author will give evidence of empirical studies that have been conducted using critical race theory as a way to imagine additional future studies that could build upon this paper's theory in order to discover whether there is, in fact, a dynamic relationship between a white social worker's knowledge of the black community and black identity. If there is a relationship between cultural competency and the perpetuation of racism, previous studies may provide models for refining future work. In the future it is possible that empirical studies could be done

to confirm or deny the possible dynamic phenomenon. This look at the theory will lead to an informed transition into how critical race theory relates to a social worker's knowledge of the black community, reflecting back onto an individual black man and in turn affirming an identity that is wrapped up in racism.

A Working Definition: Critical Race Theory

A working definition of critical race theory provides a means to think about why critical race theory might be pertinent in considering what happens in relationships that occur within the explored phenomenon of this paper. Critical race theory postulates that racism is systemic within the United States. It accounts for individual instances of racism perpetrated in one on one interactions, but it does not stop there. The theory explains that one on one racist interaction, between a member of the majority (for the sake of this paper a white clinician) and a member of a minority (again for the sake of this paper a black male client), does not need to be in evidence in order to acknowledge the presence/ perpetuation of racism in the larger United States society.

Critical race theory suggests that the current power structure within the United States is based on privileging white folks, specifically within the legal system. By privileging one class or group of people, other groups must be marginalized or oppressed to maintain that system. In practice, this means that the United States legal system, a system all social workers operate within, actually serves to continue to perpetuate racism with or without quote "racists" (UCLA, 2014) (Delgado & Stefancic 2012).

Roy L. Brooks (1994) describes a simple way to understand the driving force behind critical race theory. He suggests that the theory serves to ask and at times answer how society, specifically the "legal landscape," might appear if roles were switched and the marginalized were

in power, making laws/decisions for the country rather than white people. Critical race theory serves as a way to examine the current climate in society from both legal and social standpoints from a non-majority perspective. In doing so critical race theory can help to disrupt the cycle of racism.

A Brief History of Critical Race Theory & Why Create Critical Race Theory?

Following is a brief discussion of the history and key figures of critical race theory within the United States. This knowledge will contribute to future exploration of the importance of the theory from a systemic viewpoint within this paper. Looking at the historical context of critical race theory eventually leads to how cultural competency operates within a system of racism.

Prior to the construction of the term *critical race theory*, scholars discussed how the privileging of white people forced the continued marginalization of black folks, post slavery. This was being done in order to maintain hierarchy that ensured the continued dominance of whites in a free society. W.E. B. Du Bois, a black historian born in 1868, wrote extensively about systemic racism within the U.S. though he did not coin the term *critical race theory*. He outlined how popular thought by white historians depicted blacks as ignorant and unfit to lead. Du Bois called into question white historians' predictions that black folks would ultimately be responsible for the destruction of white society because of Reconstruction in the South. Du Bois suggested that these systems would serve to continue to oppress blacks (Du Bios 1998). Many influential writers including Oliver Cox, Joyce Ladner, and Robert Guthrie wrote about systemic racism (Crenshaw 2011).

Writings referring to critical race theory began to make appearances at law schools in the 1980's (Crenshaw 2011). Critical race theory was initially formed to combat the race blind

approach to law. In the 1970's a popular approach to law creation was to write a law that in theory did not take into account race. This idea suggested that if race was not central in the creation of the law, then how could race-blindness be racist?

> It was a product of activists' engagement with the material manifestations of liberal reform. Indeed, one might say that CRT was the offspring of a post-civil rights institutional activism that was generated and informed by an oppositionalist orientation toward racial power. Activists' demands that elite institutions rethink and transform their conceptions of "race neutrality" in the face of functionally exclusionary practices engendered a particularly concrete defense of the status quo. These defenses in turn produced precisely the apologia for institutionalized racial dominance that critics of the dominant thinking on "race relations" had voiced both historically and in more recent struggles over the terms of knowledge production in the academy. These institutional struggles presented post-reform critics with the hands-on opportunity to create an affirmative account of racial power and to mark the limits of liberal reform. (Crenshaw 2011, p. 1260).

This led to the creation of critical race theory. Critical race theory has its roots in the exploration of law, though that has broadened significantly and evidence of its use can be found in most social sciences (Crenshaw 2011). Some of the important founding scholars of critical race theory are Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams, among others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In its short history, this theory has been met with opposition from conservatives for its seeming dismissal of an individual's agency. In addition, conservatives object to the fact that its reliance on a systemic point of view makes it hard to prove (or disprove) with studies.

Studies and Critical Race Theory

Focusing on previous scholarship using critical race theory suggests the ways that the theory might be used within the context of a study in order to explore the phenomenon. The possibility of a relationship between cultural competency and the perpetuation of racism may warrant further exploration, including empirical studies on the subject. Previous studies using

critical race theory may provide a point of entrance for future empirical studies that might be done to confirm or deny the possible phenomenon.

Hernandez (2005) uses a subsection of critical race theory combining it with feminist thought to look at sexual harassment. The article begins by suggesting the ways in which empirical research is important to analysis of both systemic racism and sexism. Hernandez posits that using empirical research can assist critical race lawmakers in their attempts to disrupt and reform systemic racism. He shows how empirical research can test theoretical ideas through studies and provide patterns of compelling statistical information. That information can be used to lend weight to laws targeted at correcting social injustices. To demonstrate this, Hernandez (2005) looked at a theory born of critical race thought, the idea that women of color may respond to sexual harassment differently than white women. This hypothesis came from the notion that systems put into place to protect women in the work place must suffer from some of the same systemic racism that plagues larger society. The study found that, "Women of Color were more than ten times less likely than White women to report an incident of sexual harassment to a supervisor" (Hernandez, 2005. p.1255).

Simson (2014) also looks at the usefulness of empirical studies to back up critical race theory. In his study, he looks at punishment in United States school system, and the possibility that a disproportionate number of minority students are being punished. The study finds that black students get punished at the highest rate. He doesn't suggest that teachers are intentionally racist but that rather they are products of systemic racism that promotes stereotyping, which creates imbalanced treatment across groups of students. Not only does this study demonstrate how an empirical study can back up critical race theory but it also highlights the dilemma the author experienced with the young black man in Albany.

The Phenomenon and Critical race theory: Interaction

Critical race theory helps illustrate how racism works within the context of this paper's phenomenon by examining the complexities of interactions within relationships between black men and white social workers. Critical race theory helps to demonstrate the ways narratives of racism/ internal racism have their roots in a history of oppression and current legislation that marginalizes black men. The theory shows how systems of racism perpetuate themselves.

Understanding that critical race theory does not rely on one-on-one interactions to perpetuate racism but instead sees the problem as systemic (UCLA, 2014)(Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) could lead to an understanding of why even the best of intentions can perpetuate racism. This is because ideas to combat racism, like cultural competency, were created within a system of racism and operate within that same system. This means that in order to address the systemic problem of racism it isn't enough to inform oneself and become culturally competent. Problems of racism can't be fully addressed on a worker to client level because individual acts don't begin to address the scope of the racism.

With this in mind, it seems that only a system overhaul could keep individual workers from perpetuating systems of oppression. In other words, it's not just family and friends who dictate who an individual is or a worker relating to an individual outside of their community of origin, but rather hundred of years of systemic racism. We come back to what was brought up in the second chapter: it that seems then that cultural competency might only be a measure taken by social workers to convince themselves that they are acting ethically. But, to take it further, given an understanding of critical race theory, it seems probable that cultural competency is actually an act that perpetuates a system of oppression.

Next Chapter

   The next chapter will give an overview of postmodern theory. The Chapter will begin by giving a definition as a way to think about the theory. Following that, the chapter will transition into a conversation on the background of postmodern theory, i.e. the historical context in which it was developed and key figures in its creation. Next, drawing from empirical studies that have used the theory, the author will begin to take advantage of the use of this theory in studies to further explore the phenomenon. Then the chapter will examine why this theory was developed and its significance for the understanding of how racism influences the ways identity is formed, highlighting the biases of both the theory and how the author is using this theory. Lastly, the author will explore how postmodern theory relates to the exploration of the complexities of interactions within relationships between (white) workers and (black) clients.

Chapter V

Postmodern Theory

This Chapter

This chapter will house a discussion of postmodern theory, specifically the theory as it operates within United States society. Combining the explanation of critical race theory, from the previous chapter, and a new understanding of postmodern theory will lead to a final discussion around the use of cultural competency in the field by social workers. The start of this chapter will begin by developing an accessible definition of postmodern theory. The chapter will use that definition to consider the phenomenon resulting from the relationship between clients, specifically black men, and white social workers, especially the possible negative impacts of that relationship on identity and its formation.

This chapter will transition into a look into the history and key figures of postmodern theory. This theory, in contrast to critical race theory, will allow the author to explore the importance of a worker client relationship from an individual viewpoint. This section will look into the development of this theory and its significance. When considering the possibility that cultural competency does indeed lead to a perpetuation of racism through the lens of a particular theory, it is important to look at the historical context of that theory to ascertain possible biases of the theory. Discussing biases of the theory and the author's use of that theory helps to increase the chances of a balanced exploration of the phenomenon.

Looking at previous scholarship that uses postmodern thought provides an entry point for a possible future study. Future exploration of the phenomenon of a possibly detrimental relationship between a social worker's knowledge of the black community and black identity,

can begin with evidence provided by scholarship using postmodern theory. This is because if there is a relationship between cultural competency and the perpetuation of racism, previous scholarship on postmodern theory may provide evidence of this and give models for useful methodology. This chapter may serve as a road map for a future empirical study that could confirm or deny the possible detriments of cultural competency. The exploration of postmodern theory will lead to how the theory relates to an individual social worker's knowledge of the black community, reflecting back onto an individual black man and in turn affirming an identity that is wrapped up in racism.

A Working Definition: Postmodern Theory

To begin to discuss postmodern theory, a working definition of the theory needs to be agreed upon. An understanding of postmodern theory helps suggest how the theory interacts with the phenomenon. When a white social worker uses cultural competency to work with a black man, is a racist structure perpetuated through the affirmation of negative identity traits? Versions of this question arise throughout the rest of this chapter.

The first thing to consider when beginning to work with postmodern theory in relationship to this phenomenon is that unlike critical race theory, postmodern theory is not traditionally focused on race relations or even human to human relationships. The fact is that an understanding of postmodern theory is difficult to isolate in a single definition because it encompasses a philosophical shift in how human thought is approached rather then being a single cohesive theory on a single phenomenon.

Postmodernism is most frequently used to describe the age we are currently living in. Postmodern theory provides access by which people can connect to, understand, and discuss art

(literature, music, paintings, etc.) and the creation of human landscape (architecture and the planning of urban environment) (Hassan, 1987). That is not to say that postmodern theory isn't relevant to this paper; the theory can be used in the understanding of sociology and human interaction (Klages, 2003).

Postmodern theory is essentially the pursuit of the understanding of meaning through an individual's conceptualization of the world around them. What postmodern scholars do is to look at how perception can construct meaning. This theory suggests that knowledge isn't always in agreement but is in fact constantly contradicting itself. Understanding is created by context as much as prior knowledge. Therefore an individual's belief on a subject can have multiple layers that are in complete conflict with each other (Kilgore, 2001).

A Brief History of Postmodern Theory & What's Wrong With Postmodern Theory?

This chapter will begin to shift its focus to look into the history of postmodern theory. Looking at the historical context of this theory will help to inform and give context to the discussion as this paper continues to consider the possibility that cultural competency does indeed lead to a perpetuation of racism. Exploration of postmodern theory and the biases associated with embracing it provides a lens for discussing cultural competency within an accessible framework.

Postmodernism describes an age in which popular thought shifted away from modernism. Frequently, the postmodern age refers to the 1940's or 50's to present day, though some theorists argue that society is beginning a new age of thought post postmodern. Postmodern theory officially became a mainstream way of thought in writings by Arnold Toynbee (1939). However, prior to its inception as a movement, the term was used in the understanding of art in the face of

imperialism. Postmodern thought is in direct conflict with imperialism because of the focus on and agency it gives to the individual in the creation of meaning (Best & Douglas, 1991). Later, the movement of postmodern thought became central to addressing failings in modernism. This played out in architecture and art in the 1950's.

Postmodernism eventually shifted beyond art and architecture to encompass all human expressions in society. Anderson (1996) lays out in his book the different facets of society where postmodern theorists operate, including the social sciences. Klages (2003) also demonstrates the importance of the theory in the understanding of sociology and human interaction. It is important to note the use of postmodern thought extends well beyond United State's society but for the purposes of this paper, it will be used to explore interpersonal dynamics between white workers and black male clients located solely in the U.S.

When considering possible biases of postmodern theory, one can look at its inception. Postmodern thought was created to give agency to individuals in the face of imperialism and modernist thought (Best & Douglas, 1991). Both imperialism and modernists privilege the viewpoint of a few people, the well-educated and/or the ruling class. Postmodern theory gives credence to everyone. As such, Dybicz (2011) describes postmodern theory as an "anything goes" approach to knowledge. Dybicz argues that when postmodern theorist suggests that knowledge isn't singular truths but is in fact lots of truths constantly contradicting each other (Kilgore, 2001), they are at times simply wrong. The author tends to agree with Dybicz that there are truths.

Scholarship and Postmodern Theory

What follows is a look at previous scholarship using postmodern thought. Future exploration of the phenomenon may rely on or use previous scholarship using postmodern theory. The idea is that previous scholarship could provide a map to explore if there is a relationship between cultural competency and the perpetuation of racism. A future study of this paper's phenomenon may have findings that line up with one of the three pieces of scholarship below; i.e. postmodern theory works; it works in conjunction with another theory, or the theory has no place in the discussion of this phenomenon.

Hansen (2010) compared views on the counseling relationship by clinicians who approached the work from a modernist viewpoint against that of those who used a postmodern one. Hansen was concerned with the how knowledge is developed within the counseling setting. What Hansen found was that the postmodern view allows for multiple perspectives within the session without needing to hold one of those perspectives as correct.

Sampson (2009) also explored postmodern theory as a way to think about needs for a career. He was interested in exploring the best ways to meet needs by an individual when choosing the best job for that person. Using an understanding of postmodern theory, each individual must be viewed separately when thinking of a job pairing because their experiences are different and their knowledge of the world self-created. Sampson posited that broad assessment tools can be used to help an individual make a choice but the individual must also integrate his/her individual perspective in order to make the best choice. Where Hansen (2010) found that postmodern thought was the best approach, Sampson (2009) argues for a hybrid approach using a combination of modernism and postmodernism.

Yet a third article presents the pitfalls of a postmodern approach. Dybicz (2011) argues that postmodern thought can ignore scientific knowledge. He does not argue that postmodern

theory is without its merits, but he suggests that certain scientific facts do not allow for multiple understandings. He argues that because people create scientific knowledge, the inception of a hypothesis is postmodern. But after its inception, knowledge transitions to fact; thereafter an individual's perspective no longer matters. For example, a scientist may conjecture that fire is hot and will burn the skin and another may say the opposite; at that point in the scientific process postmodern thought holds up. Once a hand is thrust into the flames and is burned, multiple perspective no longer matter. Dybicz (2011) would argue that postmodern thought can no longer be applied because there is only one perspective by which to look at the findings, fire burns skin.

The Phenomenon and Postmodern Theory: Interaction

This section of the paper will look at how the phenomenon, the interaction of cultural competency carried out by white social worker's with black male identity, and postmodern theory interact. The paper will continue to use the definition established above for postmodern theory, being the pursuit of the understanding of meaning through an individual's conceptualization of the world around him/her. While thinking about the interaction of the theory and phenomenon, it is important to continue to hold the central tenet of postmodern theory that knowledge of a subject can have multiple layers that are in complete conflict with each other (Kilgore, 2001). The importance of postmodern theory is its contrast to critical race theory. Where critical race theory looks at the phenomenon from a systemic viewpoint, postmodern theory allows the exploration of the phenomenon to take place on the level of the worker-client relationship. This ultimately will allow the paper in its discussion chapter to both highlight the importance of a worker-client relationship as well as trouble the waters of a larger perspective when thinking about the formation and validation of identity.

For an example of how knowledge can be incongruent, consider again the writer's relationship with black youth that he worked with in Albany. For the writer, his knowledge held together and informed his use of cultural competency. That knowledge included the one on one history of the relationship between the two men, the understanding of statistics about that kid's identity, and the context of the larger society that the two experienced. The knowledge of the one on one relationship suggested that the black kid was a smart, caring individual who could absolutely complete high school with the right supports. The author's knowledge dictated that the likelihood of those supports being present was very low but the possibility of future incarceration, high. Therefore, the possibly of graduation and incarceration were both present and true possibilities when designing interventions for the young man. The larger social context of the work together unwound in front of the background of the author's attempted culturally competency. Perhaps cultural competency was constantly subverting the knowledge with the systemic racist undertones of United States society. That knowledge, born of all those pieces and more, may have undermined and possibly dictated parts of the young black man's identity.

The second chapter of this paper began to discuss the consumption of information through media and popular culture by an individual. That consumption informs how that individual thinks about society and themselves. Outside information is synthesized into understanding of how gender, race, and class operate. Ultimately this means that those understandings inform both how an individual sees another person and also how that individual understands his/her own identity. Therefore people always exist within a larger society and by extension are not free to fully determine their identity but rather society helps to do it for them (Best & Douglas, 1991).

The implication then, using postmodern theory, is that when a social worker looks to

draw on information to become culturally competent about a group of people, their ideas are informed by external media sources. While a worker may think they are using scholarly texts to understand a group, they are constantly informing their knowledge with pop culture images just as the author of any given scholarly work was also influenced by the society in which their writings and ideas were created. Therefore, the means by which a worker relates to a black man is informed by the systemic racism that can be found in United States society.

Next Chapter

The last chapter of this paper will be focused on a final discussion of the phenomenon and its relationship to the field of social work. The discussion chapter will begin by recapping the major points of both critical race and postmodern theory. A quick summarizing of the phenomenon in question will follow the recapping of the theories.

Once that is done, the chapter will begin an analysis of critical race and postmodern theory in relation to the phenomenon. By examining and discussing theories together a connection between the theories and the phenomenon will begin to form. Using that connection the author will synthesize how that connection creates and informs identity (negatively at times). By bringing together the analysis of the phenomenon, the paper can highlight a way of understanding of the use of the ethic of cultural competency as potentially damaging and unethical.

Next, the paper will attempt to provide a balanced view of the potential phenomenon by looking to identify strengths and weaknesses of the analysis. Once that is done, the chapter will consider the implications of the use of the ethic of cultural competency on social work practice, policy and research. The paper will conclude with final thoughts on the phenomenon.

Chapter VI

Discussion

This Chapter

This final chapter will focus on a discussion of the phenomenon and its relationship to the field of social work. Using both the critical race and postmodern theories provided in the previous two chapters, the author will attempt to provide an explanation of why the ethic of cultural competency could be <u>unethical.</u> In its analysis the paper will continue to give specific attention to the relationship between white clinicians using cultural competency in their work with black men.

The start of the chapter will provide a quick recapping of earlier established definitions of both critical race and postmodern theory. This will be followed by a short synopsis of the phenomenon that the theories will be used to explore. With those ideas firmly in hand, the analysis of critical race and postmodern theory in relation to the phenomenon will be explored, continuing to form a connection between the theories and the phenomenon. That connection will demonstrate how social worker and client relationships create and inform identity (negatively at times). The author will synthesize the possibility of an inherently unethical dynamic present in adopting the ethic of cultural competency.

The author will try to approach the concepts in question diplomatically by presenting possible strengths and weaknesses implicit in these concepts. The ideas within this paper may be worth further exploration because of the possible implications on social work and more importantly, clients, some of which will be discussed below. Finally the paper will conclude with a last look at the two boys from Albany and their relationship to the author.

The Phenomenon, Critical Race Theory and Postmodern Theory: In Review

This section will review critical race, postmodern theory, and the phenomenon in question. This will serve as preparation for the analysis of interplay between the theories and phenomenon. In preparation for that analysis, brief definitions of critical race and postmodern theory, along with a summary of the phenomenon, are again provided for the reader.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory exists based on the principal that racism is systemic within the United States. The theory looks to the U.S.'s history to provide an account of marginalization of racial minorities. That history includes slavery, Native American relations, ideas of citizenship, the Civil Rights Movement, segregation of society, prison populations and more. The theory suggests that individualism exists and is problematic but in United States society the systemic perpetuation of racism is a more large scale problem. Those systemic issues begin with a legal system that privileges white folks (UCLA, 2014) (Delgado & Stefancic 2012).

Critical race theory says that currently society is constructed to keep privileges intact for the majority by continuing to promote racism and marginalization. The purpose of critical race theory is to look at society from a marginalized perspective as a way to create more balanced laws and social supports that disrupt systemic racism. At the heart of critical race theory, Roy L. Brooks' (1994) question is ever present: what would society be if roles were switched? I.e. how would society look if racial minorities, those that have been traditionally marginalized, were in power instead of white people?

Postmodern Theory

Remember postmodernism is used to talk about an age of thought. It describes a philosophical shift in how humans access, connect to, understand, and discuss the world around them (Hassan, 1987) (Klages, 2003) (Kilgore, 2001). Postmodern theory looks at the understanding of meaning. Where critical race theory looks at systemic implications on a large society and individuals within that society, postmodern theory privileges the individual's conceptualization of the world around them over large scale "truths."

Postmodern theory holds that knowledge can contradict itself. If knowledge is created by an individual's understanding of context as much as prior knowledge of social "facts," then two incongruent ideas can be held at once. Two different people can have different readings of the same interaction. Further, each of those people's beliefs on a subject can have multiple layers that are in conflict with each other (Kilgore, 2001). The interplay of those beliefs forms meaning for the interaction between two individuals. This means that social interactions can reframe a person's understanding of meaning (or identity). The question postmodern theory asks is how does perception construct meaning?

The Phenomenon

This paper looks at the ethic of cultural competency to explore how identity might be influenced by the relationship between a social worker and a client. The focus of the paper is particularly on the interaction between white social workers and black male clients. It bears mentioning that the scope of the phenomenon could probably extend to any pairing of a social worker from a dominant class with a person from a traditionally marginalized group. This paper looks to call into question a basic surface understanding of the ethic of cultural competency as a

tool to help social workers work within communities outside of those workers' community of origin.

In its creation, the intent of the ethic is to minimize ignorance/ cultural arrogance on the part of social workers. This knowledge is achieved through a worker taking time to develop an understanding of cultural norms. Considering how a worker creates cultural competency, the possibility of a detrimental impact on minority/disadvantaged populations begins to surface. If competency is created using personal experiences, popular culture, and scholarly texts within a framework of racism and oppression, then the consequent interactions between worker and client could have a negative implication. Therefore, the phenomenon that will be discussed using critical race and postmodern theory is as follows: a white social worker through cultural competency is committing multiple micro aggressions (Wing Sue, 2007) that perpetuate systems of racism and affirm/ help create negative black male identity.

Analysis: Putting it Together

This section will begin to look at how an understanding of critical race and postmodern theories can be used to explore the relationship between the use of cultural competency and identity. Ultimately this will lead to a complex understanding of cultural competency that will problematize its use.

Critical Race Theory and the Phenomenon

In order to bridge the gap between critical race theory and the phenomenon, we need to look at how they intersect. That is, how can cultural competency carried out by white social workers with black male clients be understood using critical race theory? The first point of

intersection is United States society. White social workers have operated and are operating within the very system from which critical race theory was created and is now being implemented. At the same time, construction of the theory relies on a historical narrative of marginalization, the same narrative that black men are born into in the U.S.

Next, critical race theory calls into question current legislation as being unethical and used to marginalize black men. There are numerous spheres of society that social workers operate within. Many of those spheres are federally controlled or funded including: schools, prisons, and child services. Critical race theory says that racism is systemic and by extension policies surrounding schools, prisons, child services, etc. are created/operated within that same racist system. This means that regardless of a social worker's intent, if they work with a black man within one of those systems, it doesn't disrupt the cycle of racism.

If critical race theory isn't concerned with one-on-one interactions, and says that the perpetuation of racism is a systemic problem (UCLA, 2014)(Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), then the use of cultural competency doesn't matter in the scope of the theory. That would be true if only one worker were taught to use the ethic. But cultural competency is an ethical standard that students of social work are taught systematically at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Cultural competency was created, is taught, and operates within Untied States society; it is systemic and therefore falls well with in the scope of critical race theory.

Postmodern theory and the Phenomenon

Now connections need to be made between the use of cultural competency and postmodern theory. In order to make this connection consider a narrative offered by Laymon (2012). In his critical essay about growing up as a black man he describes the challenges to the

formation of his identity. He explores the complicated relationship between his knowledge that he is as much a person as a his white counterpart yet the power that racism holds to silence ultimately winds up making a person hate him/her self. Laymon gives evidence of self-respect along with interactions throughout his life where he was made to feel marginalized or bad. Ultimately, the narrative leads him to considering suicide. Laymon's narrative is reminiscent of Abu-Jamal's description of growing up in a community where incarceration was the norm (Hill & Abu-Jamal 2012). Both men are discussing internalized racism born of interpersonal relationships.

Postmodern theory says that knowledge can have incongruent beliefs (Kilgore, 2001). We see this happen in the two narratives from Laymon and Abu-Jamal. Both men's identity has two parts. The first is that they are an individual worthy of love and compassion with choices. The second is that they are bad and choices have been predetermined for them. This dichotomy is why postmodern theory works well in relation to critical race theory when considering the phenomenon. Postmodern theory allows the exploration of the phenomenon to take place on a case-by-case basis.

Postmodern theory looks at how multiple perspectives come together to create meaning. Personal identity is built through the consumption of information, external and internal. Understandings of how gender, race, and class operate come from the context in which a person lives. When a white social worker interacts with a black male client multiple levels of knowing are in play. The worker and the client both bring their understanding of their own identity. The worker also has ideas about their client's identity created through cultural competency, created with knowledge from personal experiences, popular culture, and scholarly investigation. The client also has preconceived notions about who the worker is. Both individuals are influenced by

the interaction and understandings of identity, their internal identity and the other person's. Each level of identity is reformatted to fit the context of the client-worker relationship. That context of identity formation takes place in United States society, thereby creating the intersection where the two theories meet. The one on one interaction, postmodern theory, is informed by systemic racism, critical race theory.

Synthesis: An Unethical Ethic

This paper has demonstrated to this point how both the worker-client relationship and society create the formation, validation, and expression of identity. The author will now synthesize how that connection, and use of cultural competency within it, creates and informs identity negatively. Bringing together the analysis of the phenomenon with the two theories, the paper will now demonstrate how the ethic cultural competency is potentially damaging and even unethical.

At first glance cultural competency looks like it promotes the expression of different cultural norms. It also appears to acknowledge the existence of racism and attempts to avoid its perpetuation by informing workers of its existence. A deeper look starts to suggest that the ethic might be reactionary and does not address the underlying problems. An analogy might be considered here: A restaurant serves French fries cooked in peanut oil but does not indicate that on their menu. Multiple customers have gone into anaphylactic shock because of unwillingly exposing themselves to an allergen. As a result the restaurant now keeps a stash of EpiPens on hand. This solution doesn't address the problem. It might give a person enough time to get to the hospital but the next person through the door of the restaurant could go through the same ordeal.

A note on the menu also might stall the problem but there is still a chance of exposure. Only when the restaurant changes peanut oil to corn oil is there an actual solution.

Critical race theory demonstrates the systemic nature of racism. Cultural competency was created, taught, and operates within that system. Only system overhaul could keep social workers from perpetuating systems of oppression. Cultural competency is like that EpiPen. Through critical race theory it seems that cultural competency simply makes a social worker feel more comfortable going into a situation but does little to combat racism.

When postmodern theory is introduced to the equation, cultural competency starts to seem unethical as well as impotent. Using postmodern theory to understand how identity is built through the consumption of information, external and internal. With that understanding the relationship between a white social worker and black client has an impact on identity. The analysis above talked about the multiple levels of identity and how identity can be restructured based on an interaction.

There is one last variable to talk about when considering why cultural competency might be unethical, power. Miller and Garran's (2008) chart dominant perspectives in their book and suggest that members of the dominant class do not experience the same assaults on their identity as minorities. When a white social worker is using cultural competency, they are validating positive and negative parts of black man's identity. Those negative parts are repeatedly validated throughout a black man's life. The use of cultural competency can affirm those other instances of negativity thereby committing a micro aggression (Wing Sue, 2007). Ultimately, through a postmodern perspective, this relationship can lead to internalized racism and narratives like Laymon's (2012) and Abu-Jamal's (Hill & Abu-Jamal 2012).

Strengths and Weaknesses

It is important to note the there are some weaknesses to this paper. The first is that author has a direct connection to the subject matter. His feelings about the work with the two young men in Albany are impacted by the nature of those relationships. The author felt impotent to help effect change in the black boy's life and still holds anger at the system for failing. It's also worth noting how much the author liked both of the boys. This attachment could cloud his judgment somewhat when trying to think about the experiences objectively.

Beyond personal relationship of the author to his clients, there is also a chance that the narratives provided could be viewed as circumstantial. Until such time as an empirical study is done to explore the effects of cultural competency, this paper can be seen as conjecture, well-researched conjecture, but still conjecture. The paper's reliance on theories makes it theoretical; further research needs to be done if real change is going to be effected.

The strengths of this paper are two fold. First the author's relationship to material, as well as being a weakness, is a strength. It allows for a deeper exploration of the subject matter than if the theories were pulled out of thin air rather than being born out of experience. The second strength of this paper is that it is pertinent to social work. If the theories within this paper are on target, they warrant further exploration.

Implications For Social Work

The idea is that these theories warrant further thought in order to explore the implications for social work practice, policy and research. This paper is relevant to social work because the ethic of cultural competency is ingrained in the very fabric of the profession. If workers are going to continue to use the ethic continued questioning of its value could prevent the pitfalls.

Ultimately further scholarship could lead to better understandings of how social workers should operate within communities outside of their community of origin.

Furthermore, knowledge of the phenomenon expands the understanding of the factors that create racism and internalized racism. Through that understanding the root causes of the perpetuation can start to be addressed. As was stated in the introduction to this paper, "this theoretical questioning of cultural competency could lend itself to the development of studies that might help to dismantle the cycle of racism." The paper could not do that but at the very least, it gets readers thinking about the kind of aid they are giving and perhaps leads to more intentional interventions based on needs rather than expectations.

Conclusion

Racism is unavoidable in social work because of the weight of systemic influences. Using critical race theory cultural competency, by nature, seems to allow for a passive acceptance of a system which has continued to be un-critical of its racist origins and assumptions. Furthermore, the use of cultural competency could be unethical because it implies that with the right amount of preparation a worker might be able to operate without being racist. In fact, the enacting of cultural competency through a postmodern view could at times be considered a micro aggression and as such unethical. Returning now to the two young men in Albany: the black kid spoke about the inevitability of prison while the white kid planned his future. Cultural competency says they are right to do that. By acknowledging that racism is unavoidable, with or without cultural competency, the awareness of it is heightened and by extension failures to address it are as well. Perhaps ultimately that acknowledgement might lead to the design of better, more ethical, interventions.

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