CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE CULTURAL COMPETENCE DILEMMA IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Laura S. Abrams
University of California at Los Angeles

Jené A. Moio
University of California at Los Angeles

Cultural competence is a fundamental tenet of social work education. Although cultural competence with diverse populations historically referred to individuals and groups from non-White racial origins, the term has evolved to encompass differences pertaining to sexuality, religion, ability, and others. Critics charge that the cultural competence model is largely ineffective and that its tendency to equalize oppressions under a "multicultural umbrella" unintentionally promotes a color-blind mentality that eclipses the significance of institutionalized racism. In this article we argue that critical race theory (CRT) can be used to address some of these noted problems with the cultural competence model. We define the major tenets of CRT and analyze its benefits and limitations for social work pedagogy around race, racism, and other oppressions.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE is a fundamental tenet of professional social work practice. A cultural competence mandate is contained in both the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards and the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics, and it is promoted in numerous practice textbooks. Historically, cultural competence with diverse populations referred to individuals and groups from non-White racial, ethnic, or cultural origins. However, the term has evolved to encompass group differences pertaining to gender, sexuality, religion, age, ability, language, nationality, and others. Knowledge about the complexity of personal and social identity formation as well as the intersectionality of multiple axes of oppression that underscore social work problems, practices, and interventions led to the broadening of cultural competence beyond racial and ethnic categories (Razack, 1999; Rothman, 2008). Scholars note several challenges associated with the dominant cultural competence
model, including the eclipsing of race as a central mechanism of oppression, student resistance, and the unintentional reinforcement of a color-blind lens (Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Schiele, 2007; Yee, 2005).

In this article we argue that critical race theory (CRT) can be used to address some of these noted problems associated with the cultural competence model. We provide an in-depth discussion of challenges associated with cultural competence education, with an emphasis on educating social workers to respond effectively to institutional racism. We also introduce the basic tenets of CRT and apply these central concepts to the challenges involved in delivering effective diversity education in social work. In addition, we pose the benefits and limitations of infusing CRT into the graduate social work curriculum.

Cultural Competence:
History and Overview

The origins and development of the cultural competence (often called “cultural sensitivity” or “multicultural”) model and its role in social work ideology, practice, and pedagogy are documented in published articles and texts (e.g., Potocky, 1997; Rothman, 2008; Schiele, 2007; Spencer, Lewis, & Gutiérrez, 2000). We provide here a brief summary before presenting empirical and philosophical critiques.

Although aspects of traditional social work discourses have long espoused a mission to examine and remedy issues of oppression, including racism, the evolving emphasis on diversity and cultural competence has its roots in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Social workers of color, along with White advocates, challenged some of the long-standing Eurocentric biases in social work teaching and practice, including a predominately deficit-oriented view of individuals and communities of color. This activist pressure led to increased attention to race and racism in social work history, gave a voice to the lived experiences of faculty and social workers of color, and eventually led to CSWE's adoption of standards that mandate content on race, racism, and people of color (Spencer et al., 2000).

Working to meet the CSWE mandate, the 1970s and early 1980s ushered in key educational texts. Pivotal publications on race and ethnicity included Barbara Solomon's (1976) *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*, Wynetta Devore and Elfriede Schlesinger's (1981) *Ethnic-Sensitive Social Work Practice*, and Doman Lum's (1986) *Social Work Practice and People of Color: A Process-Stage Approach*. With variation, these texts generally rethink social work's Eurocentric purview; challenge social workers to become aware of their personal value orientations and worldviews; expose how racism creates structural disadvantages that impact individual and community well-being; and offer suggestions for working with increased competence with racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities in the United States. Race, ethnicity, and, to some extent, culture more broadly constituted the primary focus of this earlier literature.

Since the mid-1980s the tone and character of “ethnic-sensitive practice” has expanded beyond race and ethnicity to promote awareness of multiple forms of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. This trend responds to the postmod-
ern emphasis on the intersectionality of multiple categories of identity (Williams, 2006), and awareness of the existence of multiple forms of oppression that affect individual and community functioning (Schiele, 2007). CSWE’s (2001) revised standards for cultural competence reflect these discursive developments by identifying 14 axes of difference as potential sources of oppression and diversity. In keeping with these trends, contemporary “cultural competence” texts now include chapters on women; disabilities; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual issues (e.g., Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2001; Rothman, 2008), and earlier works are now expanded or modified to reflect this broadened view (e.g., Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Lum, 2003).

Although the cultural competence model has diverse epistemological interpretations and curricular applications (Williams, 2006), two major ideological underpinnings can be discerned: self-awareness and skills development. The cultural sensitivity framework as it is used in social work and related fields (such as education and counseling) understands that all people, including people of color, possess values, beliefs, and assumptions that they bring into the helping relationship. Social work students are encouraged to undertake a process of becoming aware of the origins and development of their personal values and worldviews with regard to differences so that their deeply rooted and perhaps unconscious beliefs can be recognized and subsequently set aside, or “bracketed,” in the helping exchange. Yan and Wong (2005) critique this bracketing process as unrealistic and argue instead that the social work exchange is mutually influential and intersubjective, rather then morally neutral. Nevertheless, cultural competence frames self-awareness as a lifelong endeavor, because issues of difference and value orientation are context specific and constantly in flux. In addition to this process-oriented work, cultural competence focuses on a skills-based component that includes building knowledge about specific ethnic or cultural groups and developing practice techniques that accompany this knowledge (Rothman, 2008). This population-specific piece entails a set of practice skills that build on a standard helping relationship yet are modified according to the needs, styles, worldviews, and customs of the focal group.

Critiques of Cultural Competence

Scholars adopting a critical lens toward the cultural competence model often contend that the framework’s focus on individual attitudes leaves social workers unequipped to deal with institutional racism and oppression on all of the levels where it permeates—individually, structurally, and globally (Pollack, 2004; Razack, 1999; Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Yee, 2005). In historically tracing social work’s various movements surrounding diversity, Potocky (1997) notes that the “cultural sensitivity” model targets change at the level of social workers’ personal beliefs and agency practices, whereas the “antioppression model” works toward change across individual, agency, and systems levels. Hence, an overarching critique of the cultural competence framework is that it does not reach far enough in addressing systemic and institutionalized oppressions. Additional critiques of cultural competence emerge from philosophical angles as well as limited empirical evidence.
In the following sections we organize these critiques thematically, paying specific attention to the preparation of students to grapple with enduring and systemic race-based oppression.

**Pedagogical Pitfalls**

Challenges raised regarding the delivery of effective cultural competence education include student readiness, teacher preparation, and possible resistance from both groups. Lee and Greene (2003) and Razack (1999) argue that the teaching of diversity content in social work education is often hindered by a lack of student readiness to deal with difficult or contentious discussions about race or other oppressions in the classroom setting. Related to this lack of readiness, a common reaction to discussing racism, structural disadvantages, or oppression is resistance to the material, particularly when the conversation turns to issues of privilege, and White privilege in particular (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). Resistance in this context means that students tend to deny their own role in occupying privileged or more powerful social identity positions, and it may even take the form of outward anger, resentment, or an overwhelming sense of guilt (Julia, 2000). Although resistance to locating the self in the privilege-oppression spectrum can occur for any individual, most empirical research has specifically examined White privilege. Garcia and Van Soest’s (1997) study of 43 MSW students enrolled in a mandatory cultural diversity class lends some support to these philosophical charges. They found that 71% of White students reported that their own privilege acted as a barrier to learning about or accepting the existence of oppression. In addition, Le-Doux and Montalvo’s (1999) national survey of 75 deans and directors of accredited graduate social work programs and 45 social work faculty teaching diversity content (and including a review of 32 course syllabi) found that instructors experienced defensiveness, anger, and denial as common reactions to the presentation of diversity material. The issue is not that these reactions arise, because the literature on teaching about White privilege suggests that these responses are part of a normative process (Abrams & Gibson, 2007). Rather, it is that the cultural competence model may not move students from these more primary defensive responses to a more refined critique of privilege and then to collective social action (Helms, 1995).

Other scholars argue that the delivery of cultural competence or diversity education in social work can be hindered by instructors’ lack of preparation and training in this area (Petrovich & Lowe, 2005; Razack, 1999). Le-Doux and Montalvo’s (1999) study found a heavy reliance among instructors on traditional methods to deliver diversity education. They suggest that these traditional didactic methods are not appropriate for this course content, which requires skills in facilitating difficult discussions and contending with group dynamics. Moreover, based on their personal or professional backgrounds, educators may not be ready to deal with the type of intense personal or interpersonal reactions that can arise when engaging in discussions about racism or other oppressions. Garcia and Van Soest’s (2000) empirical study of 304 graduate- and undergraduate-level social work faculty found that faculty of color and
junior faculty were more likely to respond with sensitivity to "critical events" (such as conflicts or arguments about diversity issues) than were White or more senior faculty. They argue that faculty must "develop comfort with discussing issues related to diversity in order to demonstrate how to place perspective on heated and strained interaction" (2000, p. 35). Hence, they concur with Le-Doux and Montalvo (1999) that training teachers how to facilitate meaningful dialogues about race and racism is needed to effectively implement a diversity curriculum.

Learning Outcomes

A longstanding, overarching critique of the cultural competence framework is that it lacks the specificity needed to attain any concrete learning or practice objectives (Fumess, 2005; Horner & Borrero, 1981; Julia, 2000; Williams, 2006). There are few empirical outcome studies, however, to support this claim, and those that do exist are typically pilot or exploratory (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Petrovich & Lowe, 2005). Yet the findings derived from these exploratory studies cast some doubt that learning outcomes are actually attained. For example, Bronstein, Berman-Rossi, and Winfield's (2002) study of 57 students in direct practice courses found that students were not learning as much content on oppression as faculty stated they were teaching. Moreover, in a recent focus group study of alumni and current students of an MSW program, both students and alumni expressed the need for a greater level of transferability of cultural competence principles to field and agency settings (Petrovich & Lowe, 2005). In a more removed outcome measure, Green, Kiernan-Stern, and Baskind's (2005) survey of 257 White NASW members found that social workers' cognitive attitudes about race were more positive than their affective attitudes, and that their beliefs about the existence of racism did not differ widely from those of the wider American public. These empirical studies suggest that the transfer of cultural competence learning to practice situations may be an area of concern; however, it is difficult to generalize from these studies given their sample sizes and design limitations.

Diffusion of Racism and Color Blindness

As highlighted earlier, the cultural competence model has increasingly expanded its focus to include many categories of social difference. Schiele (2007) argues that although this broadening was a foreseeable response to emerging knowledge about the complexity of multiple identities and increasingly vocal activism about multiple forms of oppression, this diffusion of information produces an "equality of oppressions" paradigm that tends to downplay racism's persistent legacy and leaves social workers unprepared to deal with the realities of racism, both systemically and interpersonally. Razack and Jeffery (2002) likewise contend that the fundamental problem of approaching racism in the cultural sensitivity framework is the leveling of oppressions, which instructors and students might find more comfortable (and fair) because it avoids a hierarchy of oppressions, but it leaves unquestioned the racialized values and beliefs that drive our fundamental social institutions. Le-Doux and Montalvo's (1999) national survey empirically supports these
arguments about the diffusion of race in the cultural competence model. For example, the course syllabi they reviewed include a “very diluted curricula” that spans many groups with “a little something for everyone” (p. 49).

Further, by leveling race under the auspices of a “multicultural umbrella,” critics charge that social work’s cultural competence curriculum may unintentionally reinforce a color-blind paradigm that teaches students to ignore racial differences (Schiele, 2007; Yee, 2005). Color blindness is associated with the liberal 1970s ideal of learning not to see race or color in an attempt to eliminate personal prejudices and to promote a “level playing field.” According to Carniol (2005), color blindness precludes analysis of contradictions among claims of neutrality, fairness, and equality, and the below-surface reality of discrimination in everyday practice and policy. Empirical support for these arguments about the color-blind results of social work education is limited. However, Van Soest’s (1996) quasi-experimental study of 222 MSW students, most of whom were White, found that exposure to a cultural diversity class actually increased respondents’ belief in a “just world,” meaning a fundamentally fair and equal society, despite the intent of the class to expose students to the realities of structural disadvantages such as racism and sexism. Similarly, Julia’s (2000) study of 75 students at a midwestern university found a great deal of complacency among students about the existence of racism in American society. Although more rigorous research is needed, these data lend some empirical support to the argument that the cultural competence model’s focus on individual attitudes and its diffuse survey of cultural and social groups may not effectively prepare students to grapple with the realities of racism.

**CRT: An Overview**

CRT emerged in the wake of the civil rights movement as a component of legal scholarship, meaning the study and analysis of the law. Although CRT has grown in its application in many disciplines, CRT scholarship as a whole challenges liberalist claims of objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness of the law and argues that these principles actually normalize and perpetuate racism by ignoring the structural inequalities that permeate social institutions. CRT draws from diverse disciplines such as sociology, history, feminist and postcolonial studies, economics, political science, and ethnic and cultural studies. Its general mission seeks to analyze, deconstruct, and transform for the better the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT unequivocally states that analysis of the law cannot be neutral and objective and stresses that recognition of and voices from standpoint and race consciousness are essential to radical racial reform. Because race is the scaffolding that structures American society, there can be no “perch outside the social dynamics of racial power from which to merely observe and analyze” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii). CRT refutes two principal liberalist claims with regard to the law: (1) that it is color-blind and (2) that color blindness is superior to race consciousness. For example, Gotanda (2000) argues that the concept of color blindness is itself contradictory, because to exclude race from a
decision-making process, the existence of race must first be acknowledged. He concludes that color blindness—that is, the choice to exclude race—is actually racially premised rather than neutral.

Although CRT theorists and practitioners have diverse approaches and emphases, their scholarship and advocacy share common ground in the following six basic tenets:

1. Endemic racism. Rather than accepting racism as abnormal or individualistic, CRT asserts that racism is an ordinary, everyday occurrence for people of color. It is deeply embedded in the social fabric of American society, permeating our social structures and practices. Because racism is ordinary and embedded, its structural functions and effect on our ways of thinking are often invisible, particularly to people holding racial privilege. In turn, this “invisibility” maintains racism.

2. Race as a social construction. CRT maintains that race is a contrived system of categorizing people according to observable physical attributes that have no correspondence to genetic or biological reality. Although CRT regards race as a social construction, it fully acknowledges the force of its meaning and implications.

3. Differential racialization. Dominant social discourses and people in power can racialize groups of people in different ways at different times, depending on historic, social, or economic need. For example, various Asian American groups were viewed as benign, if not favorable, when a large, inexpensive labor force was needed. Over time, when the financial independence and success of Asian American groups appeared threatening to the national economy, these groups were demonized in popular discourse and excluded from citizenship by law. Today, after a third reversal in racialization, Asian Americans are considered a “model minority.”

4. Interest convergence/materialist determinism. Racism brings material and psychic advantage to the majority race, and progressive change regarding race occurs only when the interests of the powerful (i.e., the White majority) happen to converge with those of the racially oppressed (Bell, 1995).

5. Voices of color. The dominant group’s accounting of history routinely excludes racial and other minority perspectives to justify and legitimize its power. This silencing of alternative experiences serves to minimize and obscure the interplay of power and oppression across time and place. CRT advocates a rewriting of history to include the lived reality of oppressed groups from their perspectives and in their own words. Bringing these narratives into account challenges liberalist claims of neutrality, color blindness, and universal truths (Delgado, 1989).

6. Antiessentialism/intersectionality. CRT acknowledges the intersectionality of various oppressions and suggests that a primary focus on race can eclipse other forms of exclusion. For example, the marginalized race, sexuality, and class of a poor, gay, African American person presents a far more complex social location than any single aspect of his identity alone. In fact, CRT theorists contend that
analysis without a multidimensional framework can replicate the very patterns of social exclusion it seeks to combat and can lead to the essentializing of oppressions (Hutchinson, 2000). The essentializing of oppression is a political choice and problematic from a strategic perspective. Although it may be clear that all marginalized people share the experience of oppression, it is less clear whether reform efforts should target oppression from a particularized (antiessential) or a communal (essentialized) perspective. Coalitions have greater power to effect social change; however, addressing broad concerns over individual experiences can force people into choosing a singular identity, leaving other aspects of their oppression unaddressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Ambivalence surrounding this dilemma drives much internal debate in CRT scholarship.

**CRT Applications**

Drawing on the six core principles described in the previous section, the academy has formed specific subdivisions of CRT, such as Latino Critical Race Studies (Perea, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), Asian American Critical Race Studies (e.g., Gotanda, 1995; Matsuda, 1995), Queer Crit (Arriola, 2000; Valdes, 2000), and Fem Crit (Carbado, 2000; Hernández-Truyol, 1997). CRT has also been applied to professional disciplines such as policy studies (Limbert & Bullock, 2005) and education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). In the field of education, CRT has been of particular value in exploring the challenges of integrating cultural competency into professional teacher-training programs. CRT highlights the ways in which teachers are ill prepared for the realities of their increasingly diverse student learners. Critiques include the explicit avoidance of race (Lopez, 2003), the ad hoc nature of multicultural modules (Zeichner, 1992, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1999), and the lack of integration of diversity issues into all classroom and field experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Infusing CRT into teacher training curricula has had some success in challenging the Eurocentric “difference as deficit” or “minority education” frameworks. However, the lack of standardized requisites for cultural competency, the numerous course requirements to be met within rigid time frames, and the persistence of a “race neutral” ideology all hamper broader application of CRT in teacher training (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lopez, 2003). Although CRT has been incorporated into the scholarship and practice of multicultural teacher training, existing literature contains very limited applications of CRT to social work theory or pedagogy.

**CRT and Social Work Pedagogy**

Social work has its own traditions of critical scholarship that challenge some of the historical practices of the profession and the larger society that serve to perpetuate institutionalized oppression, including racism. Radical, critical, structural, Afrocentric, and feminist social work frameworks have widened the social work knowledge base by introducing and centralizing particular issues and offering a more politically radical (left-leaning) social work agenda (Evans, 2000; Gil, 1998; Piven & Cloward, 1993). Although varying in emphasis and focus, these various forms of social
work scholarship offer some basis for critical engagement with questions of power and exclusion; as such, they comprise components of antioppression practice. Antioppression is a term loosely applied to models that identify exclusion and oppression from within and outside of the profession.

Social work scholarship contains some integrated antioppression features (i.e., structural analysis of oppression; how it is created, sustained, and justified), offering methods and classroom technology to challenge or add to the cultural competence paradigm (Potocky, 1997). Yet, although the various antioppressive frameworks have advanced thinking and curriculum in many ways, critics within the discipline still maintain that they have not sufficiently addressed race, racialization, and racism as centralizing forces of oppression (Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Yee, 2005). For example, Yee (2005) suggests that although antiracism and antioppression are similar, only antiracism positions race as a central mechanism of oppression. Furthermore, antiracism explicitly defines White as a racial category, as the normative identity, and as the group holding the greatest ideological power. From Yee’s perspective, an antiracist pedagogy would incorporate identifying exclusionary practices, locating the source of these practices within structures, identifying the racist nature of the structures, and exploring how they are maintained and reproduced through the social construction of race and privilege.

Canadian scholars Razack and Jeffery (2002) argue that CRT and social work are highly compatible, and furthermore, that diversity or cultural competence training without a rigorous race analysis provides students with less than adequate perspective and tools to locate and act on exclusionary and oppressive social practices. They also offer the only published and explicit application of CRT to social work pedagogy to date.

Drawing on CRT, they design and propose eight basic tenets for integrating critical race discourse into diversity education in social work. The organizing feature of their 8-point model is race, and its prime directive is an interrogation and deconstruction of racism and all associated contingencies. The first six tenets are (1) whiteness as normative and non-racial; (2) the silence of marginalized narratives; (3) liberal principles of neutrality, fairness, and meritocracy; (4) color blindness; (5) the inextricability of race, power, and privilege; and (6) the legitimizing of race scholarship within the social work field. This tenet speaks to what Delgado (1995) calls the “studied indifference to minority writing on issues of race” (p. 51), which Razack and Jeffery suggest marginalizes antioppression and antiracist scholarship and pedagogy as areas of questionable value. The seventh tenet, legitimizing the voice of minority scholarship on race and oppression, invites alternative perspectives that are needed to “counter a curriculum that only engages the dominant group” (Razack & Jeffery 2002, p. 267). The final tenet of their model speaks to the need for social work to acknowledge and understand the implication of race on a global scale. What they call “globalized understandings of race” broaden the structural critique to encompass racism within and across societies outside the United States. Economic and political restructuring of countries persistently
trigger massive flows of displaced persons across borders. A disproportionate number of these immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers are people of color (Martin, 2001). Many are poor and most are denied access to resources necessary to fulfill their daily needs. Whether social workers are based nationally or internationally, Razack and Jeffery (2002) argue that effective practice includes a critical understanding of how racism has impacted the lives of displaced individuals at the personal, institutional, and global levels.

**CRT and the Cultural Competence Dilemma**

Razack and Jeffery's CRT model of social work diversity education differs from the cultural competence paradigm in its explicit and aggressive critique of the larger structures and ideologies around race that often remain unexamined and intact. In the following sections we propose how CRT concepts and pedagogy can be used to address some of the empirical and philosophical challenges associated with the cultural competence curriculum framework.

**Contending With Resistance**

As noted in existing research, student resistance may be a normative part of the cross-cultural learning process. It is our contention that this resistance becomes problematic when it results in a closed posture to the material or a denial of existing problems concerning race, and that CRT offers innovative ways to handle this phenomenon. First, in its focus on systemic and historical forces, CRT can alleviate personal resistance stemming from self-blame and guilt. For example, when students tend to deny they are "racist," CRT provides the perspective that "passive racism," or participation in a racist system, is different from acting consciously with racist intent. In this sense, students can understand their own role in institutional systems of racism without feeling personally responsible for historical legacies of violence, genocide, and oppression. Second, by providing concrete direction about social agency toward dismantling racism, CRT can help to alleviate the guilt, fear, and sense of paralysis that often follow the realization of participating in a racist society. Although CRT cannot prepare students in advance to contend with difficult subject matter or intense classroom discussions, we argue that CRT offers concrete ways to understand and contend with resistance, denial, and guilt as barriers to student learning about racism and the significance of racial differences.

**Reframing Outcomes**

One of the primary noted problems with cultural competence pedagogy is the absence of clear outcome goals and essentially nonexistent measurement tools. Moreover, the few studies that do exist generally show that courses are falling short of reaching their intentions. CRT scholars post an alternative view of learning outcomes, suggesting that the social work "toolkit mentality" be supplanted by critical thinking skills in regard to teaching about racism and related oppressions (Jeffery, 2005; Razack, 1999). Jeffery (2005) suggests that the critical race project is incongruent with the social work "competencies" mentality that drives the traditional pedagogy. She argues that if social work wants to
move toward an antiracist stance, then the profession likewise needs to rethink or reexamine its stated goals regarding cultural competence. Thus, rather than addressing the stated problem around clarity and measurement, CRT reformulates the problem by asking social workers to clarify what the results of antiracist education might look like. We argue that quantifiable skill outcomes suggest a set of fixed techniques that can be performed outside real-life context with predictable outcomes. Yet racial awareness is a formative process that involves cognitive, affective, and action-oriented changes that may not result simply from exposure to one or two courses. Although not denying the need for better empirical measures of cultural competence teaching outcomes, we suggest that these goals and measurement tools be carefully reconsidered in relation to the multiple dimensions and processes involved in antiracist pedagogy.

**Overcoming Equalization of Oppressions and Color Blindness**

Philosophically, the cultural competence paradigm has sustained allegations of diffusing a focus on race and thereby minimizing the significance of racism in social welfare and in the larger society. Integrating CRT into courses on diverse populations obviates the tendency in these courses to conflate culture and ethnicity with race, or to equalize sources of oppression under one multicultural umbrella (Park, 2005). This occurs because CRT begins with the premise that our society is far from race neutral in our laws and basic social structures, and in turn these larger social entities influence our everyday individual thoughts, actions, and interactions. This macro-to-micro view fits well with social work's systems perspective and draws the focus away from cultural neutrality and toward race consciousness. From that purview, students can then move on to understand other forms of oppression beyond racism. Yet race remains central and does not get lost in a "level playing field." CRT also explicitly challenges color blindness and accounts for its origins, meanings, and implications. Thus, teaching CRT or infusing CRT into diversity curriculum does not run the risk of unintentionally producing social work students who are trained not to "see" color or who are inclined to deny racism's persistent legacy.

**Moving to Action and Antioppression Practice**

Increasingly, students in the social work field are pressured to use clinical interventions conforming to principles of evidence-based practice or managed care guidelines, which translates into directing energy toward individual rather than systems change. These pressures exist in tension with social work concepts of social justice and action-oriented models and highlight the challenge of bridging social work theory and practice. Antiracist and antioppression workers in the policy and management arenas are similarly constrained by frameworks informed by liberal color-blind principles. CRT helps students move beyond mere description and understanding of systematic racism and answers the call for concrete action guidelines in everyday practice in any arena (Callender et al., 2007).

These guidelines operate for the worker at both the personal and institutional levels.
At the institutional level, rather than accepting the task of encouraging or passively supporting client adjustment to systems of oppression, CRT skills foster worker opposition to institutional oppression through, for example, identifying and analyzing the problem from the client’s perspective, providing emotional and/or political support, challenging the individualism underlying much policy and practice, reframing problems through critical consciousness, and critiquing institutional structures of oppression within agencies or policies and advocating for change (Carniol, 2005). At the personal level, CRT demands an ongoing critical reflection, as well as vigilance for unearned privileges that flow to the self at the expense of others. It demands critical attention to defensive denial and worker responsiveness to resist or disrupt the links between unearned privilege and its harmful consequences (Carniol, 2005; Yee, 2005).

Challenges to Implementation

Although we believe that an integration of CRT across various facets of the social work curriculum has the potential to move social work students toward critical thinking, informed practice, and action around racism, privilege, and oppression, we also recognize its limitations. The major limitation is making space or time in an already crowded curriculum to include CRT readings and applications. Ideally, CRT readings would be used throughout various courses, rather than segregated into one specific class (such as a “diversity” or “race” course). Yet the tendency for faculty to be overwhelmed by expanding their already packed 2-year MSW curriculum will pose some practical barriers to implementation. Even if faculty create space to include CRT content, issues of faculty preparation and teaching methods remain. We acknowledge that most faculty are not familiar with the lexicon of CRT or its applications to social work, and that teaching and applying this material requires a specific set of knowledge and skills. We view this absence of faculty preparation as probably the greatest barrier to including CRT in courses throughout the social work curriculum, as well as in specific courses promoting an appreciation for diversity and cultural competence skills.

Moreover, student fieldwork is a critical component of the MSW student learning experience. If awareness of and critical perspectives on racism are not applied to the fieldwork experience, students may lose sight of CRT’s ties to social work problems, theories, and interventions. Furthermore, the increased demand for evidence-based practice and the growing influence of managed care models in agency environments can thwart student efforts toward advocacy and empowerment of clients. The opportunity to apply CRT skills in the field can facilitate social justice actions within such constraints at both individual and systems levels. We recognize this as a great challenge, because students who are taught from a CRT perspective may not find a place to voice their perspectives in their fieldwork. This limitation speaks to the ongoing need for social work faculty and field instructors to communicate about students’ current curriculum so that their field experiences can complement their classroom work and the bridge between theory and practice can be fortified.
Finally, as Schiele (2007) states, there were logical and historically persuasive reasons for diversity education to expand its focus to include social and cultural groups other than racial or ethnic categories. Clearly marginalization and oppression are complex social processes that are found along many axes of social difference, not just race. CRT addresses the central problem of eclipsing race under the “multicultural umbrella” and at the same time fully acknowledges the potential risks and implications of focusing on one form of oppression at the expense of others. By advocating a multidimensional analytic framework, CRT emphasizes the need to explore how the intersectionality of oppressed statuses manifests across individuals, communities, and social settings. However, CRT does not necessarily provide a clear road map for teaching about all forms of oppression simultaneously. Educators with an interest in integrating CRT at this level will have to use their ingenuity to help students make sense of the connections between racism and other oppressions, as well as the impact of multiple and sometimes indiscernible oppressions on clients’ lives.

**Conclusion**

Nearly 50 years past the civil rights movement, evidence suggests that racism continues to fracture American society. Statistics on well-being and life expectancy from 1970 to 2003 reflect substantial and enduring differences across racial and ethnic groups, with people of color carrying a disproportionate burden of mental and physical disease and preventable death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). In 2006, among the 47 million uninsured people in the United States, only 10.8% were White (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2007). Income and poverty rates for the same year ranked Whites as second highest in median income and lowest in poverty, African Americans as lowest in median income and highest in poverty, and people of Hispanic origin as second lowest in both income and poverty. Asians ranked second lowest in poverty and earned the highest income of all groups (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2007). A 2006 survey of 25 cities conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that ethnic minorities comprised 61% of the homeless population; of that number, a striking 42% were African American (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). Finally, various dissimilarity indices used to calculate the extent of ethnic/racial segregation in 2000 (using Whites as the reference group) confirm longstanding patterns of segregation. African Americans were the most segregated group, followed by people of Hispanic origin, Asian Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Native Alaskans, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Although it may be comforting for many to think that we can afford to be “race neutral” in our analysis of social welfare institutions, policies, and practices, the existence of these disparities indicates that a color-blind mentality will not solve some of our most enduring and systemic social divisions and inequities. Social work is ultimately concerned with maximizing the potential of all humans to lead healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives. With this charge, we must continually push ourselves, our training materials, and our teaching practices to address the systemic barriers...
that impede the realization of these goals for all people, both locally and globally. CRT’s philosophical and analytical strategies can advance our efforts in antiracist pedagogy; through new insights and techniques we can better understand and concretely address the noted problems of our standard teaching tools.

Now the challenge of integrating new ideas begins.

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Laura S. Abrams is associate professor and Jené Molo is lecturer at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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Address correspondence to Laura S. Abrams, University of California at Los Angeles, Department of Social Welfare, 3250 Public Affairs Building, PO Box 951656, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656; e-mail: abrams@spa.ucla.edu.