Critical race theory and white racism: Is there room for white scholars in fighting racism in education?

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Critical race theory (CRT) offers educational researchers a compelling way to view racism in education by centering issues of race and using counterstories to challenge dominant views in both research and practice. This article provides an overview of CRT and illuminates the dilemmas for white researchers wishing to incorporate CRT into their work. The author argues that while CRT may not be fully open to white researchers, their strategic use of CRT can help legitimize its use in fighting racism in educational settings. Building on her participation in CRT discussions in a mixed-race setting, the author suggests that white researchers must work to center race in their personal lives and work, engage in the strategic and sensitive use of CRT, and join in the effort to legitimize research that utilizes alternative methods such as CRT.

Introduction

Today I received an email from an aunt interested in knowing if I had been offered a faculty job for which I recently applied. She is particularly attentive because the university is located near the town where she and my mother were raised. In her message, she asked if I think one of the reasons the university is taking so long to notify me is that it might be one of the Midwestern universities involved in a federal affirmative action court case. She expressed concern about the minority quotas and other "subtle" things this case addressed, and how this might affect my status as a candidate. "Where is this coming from?" I asked myself as I read the message. My aunt, well meaning, is obviously under the impression that affirmative action stands to diminish my chances of being offered the position. I am a white woman, and I believe I benefit from affirmative action policies.

The dilemma of my aunt's message is one I think about nearly every day. As a white, educated woman committed to fighting racism, I have daily opportunities to talk to other whites about the issues of racism that my friends and colleagues of color face daily. Since becoming aware of my own white privilege and the racism experienced by people of color, I have apprehensively approached these opportunities to share my feelings with other whites, particularly those not considered "allies" in the fight against racial injustice. This apprehension comes from my sense that there are both risks and benefits of confronting white racism. Many other whites will undoubtedly question my interest in issues of race. I must learn how to explain why I believe it is important to talk about white racism in ways

that do not alienate those who do not agree. This, I believe, is my role in the fight against the injustices of racism.

Critical race theory (CRT) has provided me with a foundation from which to develop conversations about race. For the past several months, I have read, discussed, and learned about how CRT explains how little has changed for people of color since the days of the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, while I am attracted to the tenets of CRT, I have struggled with the notion that I may not be able to "be" a critical race theorist. Some of my colleagues of color involved in these discussions introduced the notion that for whites to move into the area of CRT would be a form of colonization in which we would take over CRT to promote our own interests or recenter our positions while attempting to "represent" people of color. Through these conversations, I worked to develop a sense of CRT and related critical theories that I, a white scholar, can use in my work and life that is sensitive to these concerns. Within this paper, I include a brief summary of CRT and its main arguments. Then, I describe the process through which I am working to understand CRT and its importance to my work. Finally, I propose some ideas for how CRT can inform the work of white scholars interested in joining the fight against racism in education.

Critical race theory: an overview

Derrick Bell (1995), one of CRT's most influential voices, defined CRT as "a body of legal scholarship . . . a majority of whose members are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law" (p. 888). CRT's roots are in legal studies, with legal scholars Bell, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Kimberley Crenshaw among its originators. CRT was developed in response to the shortcomings of critical legal studies (CLS) in addressing the legal system's perpetuation of racism. The shortcomings of CLS included a lack of formalized structures for addressing racism, its focus on revolutionary reform, and the concept of false consciousness (Tate, 1997). The main arguments behind CRT address these concerns. I will discuss three of CRT's main tenets in the following overview: centering race; skepticism of liberal approaches to racism including neutrality, colorblindness, and merit; and emphasis on the voices and experiences of people of color.

When CRT began to emerge, it offered a critique of the legal system, based on the experiences of people of color, and incorporating the skepticism of people of color toward a system that repeatedly failed to make good on its promises of social justice. One of the main tenets of CRT is the centering of race and racism. Ladson-Billings (1998) stated that racism is a "permanent fixture" (p. 11). Bringing race and racism to the center of the discussion means not having to explain that racism persists. Bell (1995) argued that more than one-third of all blacks live in poverty, and that those who have reached the middle class have seen their progress thwarted, resulting in the return of many to the lower classes. Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) noted that students of color attend college at lower rates than white students, and that their college completion rates are also lower than those of whites. Underlying each of these illustrations is the notion that despite laws and policies reportedly intended to provide equal opportunity, people of color still face

racism at individual, structural, and institutional levels. The centering of race and racism shapes the central themes of CRT.

CRT is skeptical of neutrality, merit, and colorblindness arguments. According to Solorzano (1998), CRT challenges education's claims of "objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity" (p. 122). Neutrality is a problem because whites consider whiteness the norm; neutrality is perceived as equivalent to whiteness. Whiteness is a "dominant, transparent norm that defines what attributes of races should be counted, how to count them, and who ... gets to do the counting (Mahoney, 1997, p. 654). Whiteness, for example, is the ability to not be aware of one's race. A white person can walk in a white neighborhood and no one questions her presence there. Because we are not aware of our own whiteness, we may think we are colorblind. Colorblindness is another problematic notion for critical race theorists. Proponents of colorblindness argue that decisions should be made without taking race into consideration. The problem is that most whites cannot practice true colorblindness. In fact, whites attribute negative stereotypes to people of color while at the same time espousing their opposition to blatant racism (Brown, 1997). In a classroom, a teacher may say that she treats all of her pupils the same regardless of their race, while at the same time referring to students of color as slow learners or educationally disadvantaged. The idea of colorblindness allows racism to persist in more subtle ways. The result is that the more "white" a person of color appears and acts, the better. Touted by many as a positive outcome of the civil rights movement, in reality colorblindness amounts to a requirement that people of color become more white.

CRT argues that one of the reasons racism persists is that policies and structures built on notions of individual merit and colorblindness perpetuate the dominance of whites. Culp (1994) suggests that Americans have come to equate colorblindness with social justice, noting three reasons. First, many believe that the goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to achieve a colorblind world. Often cited as proof of this is Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech, in which King advocated that people should not be "judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, cited in Culp, 1994, p. 163). Second, Culp argues that colorblindness allows us to "decide difficult issues without discussing the kind of moral system to which we aspire" (p. 163). Issues that complicate this vision are those of morality of assimilation, nationalism, and cultural difference. Because these are difficult issues to face, it is easier to assume that justice is found within the notion of colorblindness. Finally, Culp suggests that because "Americans do not have a concept of justice that can take account of racial difference," (p. 163) the concept of colorblindness is thought to fully incorporate racial justice. The underlying problem is that whites do not want to consider race and racism as everyday realities, because doing so requires them to face their own racist behaviors as well as the privileges that come from being white. According to Sleeter (1993), to discuss "White racism challenges the legitimacy of White people's very lives" (p. 14).

Merit is another problematic concept for CRT. The United States purports to be a meritocratic society, in which it is argued that anyone who works hard enough can achieve success. Because merit is so highly valued, it is difficult to convince whites that people of color are systematically excluded from opportunities to succeed, by individual racism as well as racist structures and institutions. Affirmative action is

one victim of the high value placed on merit. Increasingly, whites are voicing concerns that their "places" are being taken by people of color. One arena in which this sentiment is particularly strong is college and university admissions. Recently, Texas, California, and Michigan have been challenged for affirmative action policies thought to disadvantage white students. Brown (1997) argued that while white "commitment to de jure racial equality has increased" (p. 112) studies show that white support for policies and programs intended to increase equality is actually declining. When people of color continue to be systematically excluded from education and the opportunities it provides, it becomes clear that although merit is an espoused American value, it operates under the burden of racism, which limits its applicability to people of color.

CRT emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge, recognizing that the "knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education" (Solorzano, 1998, p. 122). This knowledge is often presented in the form of counterstories. Counterstories are narratives that challenge the dominant version of reality. Delgado (1989) stated that for outgroups, people whose experiences have been marginalized, counterstories create bonds, and represent "cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings" (p. 2412). The ingroup, or dominant group, also tells stories, which according to Delgado (1989) "remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (p. 2412). Outgroup stories challenge this reality, thus threatening the status quo. Bell (1995) suggested that while people might not listen to his opinions, they were often willing to "suspend their beliefs, listen to the story, and then compare their views . . . with those expressed in the story" (p. 902). Thus, counterstories not only have a positive role for outgroups in creating bonds and legitimizing their experiences; they also subvert dominant views of reality by expressing the experiences of people of color in ways that whites may be more willing and able to hear.

The use of counterstories is based in a social constructivist paradigm, which argues that reality is constructed by individuals. Within this paradigm individual perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding the reality of a given individual. Because of the use of narrative, some scholars have tied CRT to qualitative research methods (Nebeker, 1998; Parker, 1998). However, qualitative researchers "must guard against the connotation that qualitative work represents some more 'authentic' form of research" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 272), keeping in mind the tendency for even qualitative researchers to remain invisible. CRT keeps this concern in the forefront by causing researchers to think intentionally about how knowledge is controlled and produced.

Some CRT scholars (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Pizarro, 1998) have argued that CRT should incorporate epistemologies different from the white, male, positivist ways of knowing that dominate academic research. In his research, Pizarro realized that a Chicana/o epistemology embracing love, family, and social justice, "exists in dramatic opposition to the dominant epistemology" (p. 65). Scheurich and Young (1997) have argued for recognition of differing epistemologies in the fight against civilizational racism. Additionally, Delgado-Bernal (in press) has used an "endark-ened feminist epistemology" (p. 2) to better understand the experiences of Chicana students. This epistemology comes from the experiences that women of color may have at the intersection of oppressions such as racism, sexism, and

classism. Understanding an endarkened feminist epistemology "recognizes students of color as holders and creators of knowledge who have much to offer in transforming educational research and practice" (p. 3). CRT's emphasis on individual experience is also a research methodology and can lead to the development and acceptance of epistemologies that recognize that people of color make sense of the world in ways that are different from the dominant, white view. In Bell's (1995) words, CRT allows us to use "unorthodox structure, language, and form to make sense of the senseless" (p. 910). Those arguing for recognition of alternative epistemologies urge educators to consider how racism persists not only in policies and structures but in the very assumptions on which those institutions are based.

Learning to see: viewing the world through a privileged perspective

At the beginning of the last semester of my PhD coursework, I was invited by a professor in our department to join a critical race theory discussion group. He proposed a seminar-style course, comprising selected students, meeting weekly to discuss CRT and how it might inform our work. Professor Villalpando told me that he would invite students to enroll, because he did not want to spend the first half of the semester explaining why racism is a problem. I was flattered to be included in such a course, and responded that I would enjoy participating in the discussions. During this semester, I would complete the data collection for my dissertation exploring the responses of new college students to institutional socialization efforts. A quarter of the students in my qualitative study were students of color, and I expressed an interest in analyzing some of their data using the CRT lens.

On the first day of class, I was surprised to find that only three students from my department were enrolled in the course. All of us were white. From another department in the College of Education were two women students: a Chicana and a Latina. A Native American professor from that same department would join us as well. Professor Villalpando welcomed us to class and asked each of us to talk about ourselves, explaining how our work would be informed by a course in CRT. I told the group that I was planning to use CRT to analyze the data collected from the students of color in my dissertation study. The other two white students expressed similar intent to use CRT to understand students of color in their respective work. The students from the other department both talked about work they were doing with Latino/a students; one exploring leadership in her community, and the other understanding the experiences of high school girls. On the first day, I felt cautious. I did not want to offend my new colleagues by overstepping. I did not really have a grasp of what CRT was or how it could help me in my effort to understand how students of color made sense of their first year of college.

Two weeks into the course, we met to discuss counterstories. Our readings included different forms of counterstories, illustrating how they create identity for people of color as well as challenge the status quo (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Villalpando, 2000). After conversing about the stories in the articles we had read, one of the other white students asked if it was possible for her to write a counterstory. We all paused to consider the question. The other white student said that he thought it was; that we could take the words of students in our studies and build a composite voice that expressed a reality different from the dominant or

"stock" (Delgado, 1989) story. A while later, I returned to the point and expressed my opinion that a white person could not write a counterstory in the way that it is used in CRT, because "whites cannot speak validly for people of color, but only about their own experiences as whites" (Grillo & Wildman, 1997, p. 623). The problem I saw was that counterstories must be told from the perspective of the oppressed person or group. As a white person, I cannot provide this perspective. In fact, there is a risk that my counterstory would actually co-opt the words of the "other" into a stock story, thus taking away their voices. For over a week I struggled with this idea. If I could not write counterstories, then it seemed I could not consider myself a critical race theorist.

In another two weeks, it was my turn to lead the class in discussion. I selected readings addressing whites' role in conducting research involving people of color (Laible, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Young, 2000). Other readings informing our discussion were found in Delgado and Stefancic's (1997) reader on critical white studies. Having read Grillo and Wildman's (1997) piece entitled "Obscuring the Importance of Race," I felt self-conscious about having a discussion of whites' role in CRT. The authors argued that part of white privilege was our placement at the center of inquiry. In fact, they suggested, "so strong is this expectation of holding center stage that even when a time and place are specifically designated for members of a non-privileged group to be central, members of the dominant group will often attempt to take back the pivotal focus" (p. 621). Additionally, questioning her role in the multicultural education movement, Sleeter (1994) stated: "we [whites] nevertheless get in the way and deflect attention away from primary concerns of people of color" (p. 5). Like Sleeter, I was afraid my interest in exploring whites' role in CRT would be perceived as an attempt to deflect the conversation away from CRT's attention to racism and the issues of people of color.

Nonetheless, the discussion led us to ask whether a white person could be a critical race theorist. One professor argued that although some whites are allies, he was concerned that CRT would be colonized by whites using it to further their own interests. Critical race theory, he continued, is a theory developed by people of color to better understand their experiences and to revolutionize the current system in ways that could ultimately be viewed as costly to whites, and beneficial to people of color. I agreed. At this point, my sense was that, as a white scholar, I could not write counterstories, and now I sensed that I was not welcome as a critical race theorist. However, I suggested, perhaps I did not need to call myself a critical race theorist to further the cause of social justice. Perhaps I could still use the tenets of CRT to inform my work.

Professor Villalpando encouraged me to explain what I meant by this. I reflected on two incidents that had occurred as I wrote my dissertation proposal. I had proposed to study how students from different backgrounds experienced and made sense of their college's efforts to socialize them into institutional norms and values. One aspect of the study was to attempt to understand how students of color experienced these efforts, which, I argued, came from a white institution. I suggested that because the foundations of higher education were built upon white, male, upper-class norms, racism is still a part of colleges and universities. Some of the faculty on my dissertation committee suggested that I would need to provide a historical context for this statement, because I could not simply assume that racism exists in higher education. Critical race theory,

however, allows me to make this statement, because it argues that racism continues to function at all levels of society. Thus, while there might not be room for me within CRT, its arguments nonetheless support my research examining racism in higher education.

Another aspect of these conversations has important implications for my work. After talking about counterstories, and my lack of ability to fully understand the experiences of students of color, I realized that I could still theorize about race. The second incident related to my dissertation involved faculty who wondered if I could talk about race with only four students of color in my sample. From the CRT discussions, I realized that even if my sample had no students of color, I could and should still explore issues of race and racism. Whiteness is a race. The inability or unwillingness of whites to see our whiteness as a race is one of the most harmful aspects of supposed neutrality. Whiteness is neutral, and all other colors are considered relative to whiteness. In fact, if white as race is taken into consideration it is impossible to ignore the privilege that comes with this race: the privilege to not think about race. This privilege "allows whites to ignore race, even though they have one, except when they perceive race (usually someone else's) as intruding upon their lives" (Grillo & Wildman, 1997, p. 623). The perspective provided by this conversation helped me formulate my role in CRT.

Later in the semester, another discussion clarified what I see as my role in CRT. We started the conversation with Professor Villalpando, who asked, "What can we do?" I agreed that this question had been nagging me all week. While we all felt that our understandings of CRT had deepened, and that CRT would in some way inform our work and our personal lives, these were questions of frustration. How would our discussions lead to change? Bell (1995) stated that one goal of CRT was resistance, with the hope that "scholarly resistance will lay the groundwork for wide-scale resistance" (p. 900). Williams (1997) discussed the need for "critical race practice." Our conversation turned to the pressures upon scholars to attain tenure. We were all discouraged by the thought that we may have to write about neutral topics using traditional methods to get tenure, at which time we would be free to follow our passions in research outside of traditional scholarship. Williams's notion of academic vampires going to great lengths to achieve in the academy illustrates these pressures. After he achieved tenure, Williams realized it was not enough to write about race from a theoretical perspective, and began engaging in community action that moved from theory to practice.

Throughout this discussion, we talked about the risks of doing nontraditional scholarship. The negative impact of utilizing a nontraditional framework was illustrated by the comments of Lopez (2001) in his recent review of the CRT reader, *Race is . . . Race Isn't: Critical Race Theory and Qualitative Studies in Education*. Lopez expressed his concern that the authors of the book might be "chastised in the academic community for their lack of 'objectivity,' or perhaps even ostracized for daring to engage in 'ideologically driven' research" (p. 32). I realized that it would probably be easier for me than for my colleagues of color, faced with the dilemma of "having been trained in this dominant tradition and needing to break out of it" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 267). There are, nonetheless, risks for me. On a professional level, I can anticipate questions regarding why I choose to advocate for marginalized populations using alternative methods. In a field where neutrality is assumed in research, there is danger for those whose passions drive their questions and methods. Sleeter wrote of more personal risks growing from the "deviant"

behavior of discussing white privilege, including losing the approval, friendship, or company of other whites (1994, p. 8).

I asked myself repeatedly where the "rubber would hit the road" for me. I longed for the opportunity to try out my new ideas on someone who I was not sure was an "ally." I sat in a lunch conversation with two friends and debated whether to bring up the uncomfortable topic of racism. Too many times before taking this course, I had allowed racist or homophobic comments to pass by me without response, my silence making me complicit in the persistence of racism. I realized I was a "liberal" white woman, perhaps exhibiting the "false empathy" Delgado (1997) suggested is harmful to people of color. I wanted to step out of this role and into a more active one. Bell (1995) argued that whites using CRT were "usually cognizant of and committed to the overthrow of their own racial privilege" (p. 888). I appreciated the comments of one class participant who stated that he understood that there were risks involved for white folks who committed themselves as allies of people of color.

My aunt's email presents an opportunity to demonstrate my commitment. Will I respond with a message simply telling her I did not get the job, or will I take advantage of the chance to tell her why it was important for this department to hire a person of color for this position? In my mind, her question of minority quotas does not even apply to a department that previously had no faculty of color. I do not know how my qualifications measured up to those of the new faculty member. If I tell my aunt that a person of color was selected, she will probably assume that a quota was the reason I was not hired. Others will certainly think the same. White privilege means I do not have to face this query. No one will ever question whether I got a job based on my race or my qualifications. Being aware of this privilege obligates me to help other whites see how asking this question hurts both people of color and whites.

Where do we go from here? How CRT can inform the work of white scholars

Delgado (1997) suggested that the role of whites in lifting the "yokes of oppression that burden both them and us" (p. 616) is working with other whites. Wilkins (1997) agreed, stating that the "best have to save the rest – but to succeed, they have to work at it every day" (p. 663). I propose that CRT can help white scholars committed to fighting individual and structural racism in three ways.

First, CRT reinforces the importance of centering race in our personal lives and our work. For whites, this means seeing the privilege that comes with our race and rejecting that privilege, along with challenging "manifestations of racism that they observe" (Delgado, 1997, p. 615). Critical race theory argues that racism is a salient factor in the daily lives of people of color. Many whites do not believe they are racist and spend time attempting to convince themselves and others that this is the case. Scheurich and Young (1997) argue that this is one danger of seeing racism solely on an individual level: people do not engage in overt racist acts or comments and assume that racism is no longer a problem. I agree with Wildman and Davis (1997) who stated that a "big step would be for whites to admit that we are racist and then to consider what to do about it" (p. 318). The underlying notion behind this comment is that even if whites do not consciously engage in racist acts, they are

racist in that they benefit from the privilege of being white. Seen on a group level, white racism is "the system of rules, procedures, and tacit beliefs that result in Whites collectively maintaining control over the wealth and power of the nation and the world" (Sleeter, 1994, p. 6).

Previously, I named one privilege of whiteness: I will never have to answer for my race when it comes to job hirings, publications, or receiving grants. Another privilege that comes from being white is the luxury of rarely having to think about my race. When I go to the grocery store, or walk through my neighborhood, I do not worry about how I will be perceived by other whites. McIntosh (1997) names many other privileges that come with whiteness. To the extent that whites ignore their race and its privileges, we are racist. To begin to overcome this racism, it is necessary for whites to engage in a discourse on white racism (Scheurich, 1993).

Recognizing the privilege that comes from being white explains why CRT is skeptical of notions of neutrality, merit, and colorblindness. White scholars applying CRT in their personal lives and work need to join in questioning these problematic notions. Part of white privilege is the sense that whiteness is normal or neutral. Centering race and seeing whiteness as a race allows us to understand that white is not the neutral base from which all else is judged. At the same time, understanding how whites are privileged in our daily lives raises concern about the notion of merit. The privilege whites enjoy based on our race places us ahead of people of color in every competitive situation. Simply ensuring that people of color have equal opportunity to have training programs and technology developed to increase their chances for success does not make up for the advantages that white privilege provides for whites. Finally, the notion of colorblindness is simply another way for whites to maintain their privilege. By claiming not to take race into consideration, while at the same time operating from a white norm, policies and structures purported to reduce racism actually perpetuate it.

White scholars committed to centering race and recognizing white privilege have an important role in advancing the tenets of CRT through questioning and confronting the actions of friends and colleagues that perpetuate racism. We must be willing to take risks with other whites and with people of color as we engage in this endeavor. I believe our role is to bring other whites to an understanding of white privilege, where our words may be heard in places that those of people of color are not. In doing so, however, we must not assume to speak for people of color. Our role is to use our experiences as whites to increase awareness of how racist actions, words, policies, and structures damage the lives of our students, friends, and colleagues of color.

Second, understanding that CRT is a framework developed by people of color to understand and explain their experiences, and to move toward social change and racial equality, I believe that white scholars should use CRT strategically. Nebeker (1998) argued that whites can use CRT to the extent that they become critical race theorists. I, however, am more cautious in my understanding of whites' role in CRT. The central arguments of CRT inform how I think about race; however, because I am a white person seeing the world from a privileged perspective, I cannot use CRT as a method for "understanding" the experiences of people of color. I do not believe that this precludes white scholars from conducting research involving people of color. Young (2000) presented several ideas for conducting such research, while at the same time noting that the choice of whether

or not to engage in "cross-group" research resides within each individual researcher. Laible (2000), on the other hand, argued that white researchers should not engage in research focused on people of color. This debate will continue. However, for the purposes of this paper, I argue that CRT is not open for wide application by white researchers at the moment. I believe this framework is too new and still emerging, thus particularly vulnerable to appropriation by whites. Sleeter cautioned against whites' tendency to take over, to set directions and agendas "for things we become involved in" (1994, p. 5). Currently there is too much danger of the power of CRT becoming co-opted by whites in ways that allow racism to persist.

Critical race theory does, however, have a place in the research of white scholars committed to social justice. The more we insist that CRT is a legitimate method and lens for studying racism in schools and society at large, and the more we cite research using CRT, we add to the collective voice arguing that race is an important factor. I do not intend to say that white voices are necessary to legitimize critical race scholarship, but to emphasize the importance of incorporating CRT's tenets into our work to show that norms and assumptions about racism are changing. For example, using CRT in my dissertation to explain why I believe racism persists in higher education demonstrates my belief that it is a legitimate means for analyzing educational structures and institutions.

Finally, white scholars must join the fight to legitimize research that utilizes alternative methods such as CRT, that comes from the lived experiences of individuals who have traditionally been marginalized and considered unimportant to scholarship, and that grows from the passion of doing research to effect changes that will benefit people of color. Stepping beyond the positivist view of research as neutral requires care. Developing alternative methods and ideologies necessitates creating relationships, and engaging in dialogues, with traditional scholars. According to Lopez (2001) there is concern that non-traditional forms of research have "collectively lowered the quality of educational scholarship" (p. 29). Scholars of color are consistently criticized for conducting research on race issues and using nontraditional methods (Villalpando & Delgado-Bernal, in press). White scholars must join the ranks of those celebrating the experiences of people of color and insisting that the academy recognize these experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Feminist standpoint scholars (Collins, 2000; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987) suggest that epistemologies vary for people with differing experiences. Because the way we see the world and ask important questions about it is shaped by our experience of that world, it is important to recognize, as Sheurich and Young (1997) did, that there are many legitimate ways to construct knowledge. Ladson-Billings (2000) pointed out, however, that the "mechanisms for scholarly recognition, promotion, tenure, and publication are controlled primarily by the dominant ideology" (p. 267). As long as educational research insists that only one way of understanding the world, grounded in the positivist or post-positivist research paradigm, is legitimate, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism in education cannot be adequately addressed. Rather, it is necessary to look at educational structures and institutions through the eyes of all participants, relying on their lived experiences to ensure that our research questions and methods address these difficult issues. White scholars can and should join in the effort to shift the norms for what are considered legitimate epistemologies.

Conclusion

Today I composed the following message to my aunt:

Dear Tante,

Thanks for your interest in my job news. I just found out this week another candidate was selected. He was a visiting professor at this university in this very position last year. I think he will be a great addition to the faculty there. He is African-American. Before now, they have had no people of color on their faculty. I know there is a tendency for us, as white people, to wonder how affirmative action or quotas might have played into this decision, but I urge you not to jump to those conclusions. This professor should not have to answer for his qualifications simply because of his race. I have had many educational and job opportunities that have been positively affected by my white race, and I will never have to answer the questions I am sure he will face as a result of his appointment. I am excited for the students in this department who will finally have someone who will hopefully help both students of color and white students examine how race factors into higher education today. I, too, am interested in these issues, and would love to share more thoughts with you if you are interested. I hope you and Uncle are well, and look forward to seeing you both this summer.

The fight for social justice lies not only in the hands of people of color. Critical race theory is a powerful tool for understanding how race affects all of us on a daily basis. I believe that white scholars have an important role in creating an environment that recognizes the need to ask difficult questions and challenge traditional notions in our personal lives as well as our work in education. I am grateful for the challenge given me by Professor Villalpando to incorporate CRT into my own life and work, and although I acknowledge that my efforts may not always be as strenuous as they ought, I am committed to this fight for social justice.

Acknowledgment

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