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**Colorblind Racism:**

**The False Promise of a Post-Racial Society**

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**Colorblind Racism: The False Promise of a Post-Racial Society**

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Education**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2011**

## **Dedication**

For my husband who inspires me...

And for my son, whom I hope to inspire someday

May 04, 2011

## **Abstract**

# **Colorblind Racism: The False Promise of a Post-Racial Society**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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Since the 1970s, racial progress in the United States has stalled and in some ways, even regressed. There continues to be vast disparities between racial groups, pointing to serious inequities and systemic racism within our institutions. White privilege, a product of institutional racism and white supremacy, is a collection of unearned social benefits and courtesies that are bestowed upon a select group of people by virtue of their being white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This literature review examines the dynamics of white privilege and power using the tenets of critical race theory to explain how they are both protected and perpetuated by liberal colorblind ideologies, particularly in education. Naming and examining whiteness, as opposed to ignoring and/or denying its significance, is the first step toward transforming the existing racial hierarchies in society.

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## PREFACE

This project began as an exploration of the word “culture.” My thesis revolved around the idea that there are problems associated with defining culture to be too closely related to race or ethnicity. I felt that viewing culture as coherent, integrated and stable patterns of thought was problematic in that it did not acknowledge the dynamic nature of culture. In the United States, various ethnic groups engage in cultural borrowing (Boufoy-Bastick, 2001) as a result of urban mixing, mixed marriages and multicultural perspectives implemented through educational policy and practice. Specifically, I wanted to explore the impact that this multiculturalism has had in American society. The influence of minority groups on the dominant culture cannot be ignored. Just look at our most popular restaurants, music, fashion, catchphrases, and slang vocabulary and you will see why “American culture” is often referred to as a hodgepodge of many origins. That being said, I quickly realized that my work was biased by my own ulterior motives, not to mention naivety. While I was focusing on the details of culture, I was trying to prove something about the nature of race. The two concepts do not go hand in hand and yet I was doing what many others have done before me; I was using the dynamic and changing nature of culture to disguise (or perhaps excuse) what is the static and unchanging nature of power as it relates to race relations in this country.

When I began this project, my husband (fiancé at the time) and I encountered a certain amount of opposition toward our intentions to marry. Some people expressed concern that we came from 2 different *cultures* (he is black and I am white) and that those sorts of differences could become problematic in a marriage. My immediate

reaction was this: “My fiancé and I both come from a Christian background. We grew up with the same values and beliefs about education, family, raising children, communication, work ethic, and even financial responsibility. We enjoy many of the same activities, food, and music, and we even share a similar political ideology. In my mind, while we don’t share the same *skin color*, we do in fact share a very similar *culture*.”

What I wanted to find in my research was tangible proof that skin color did not matter so much and that regardless of race we were culturally very much alike. To put it bluntly, I wanted to say, “I told you so” to all those who had doubted our decision to marry. My naïve and idealistic nature wanted to demonstrate what many scientists have done, that race is virtually meaningless and that we need to get past this socially constructed idea of racial difference and learn to focus on everything that we as Americans have in common.

Instead, I came face to face with the reality that despite our obvious similarities, my husband and I do in fact experience the world in very different ways. There are times that society in both subtle and obvious ways treats us differently because I am white and he is black. There is a certain amount of privilege and opportunity that I have enjoyed and taken for granted that he has not, simply on account of our respective skin color. As I walk through the grocery store, I am seen as just a person. As he walks through the grocery store, he is seen as a black person. Race rarely enters the equation when someone sees me but for him, there is an immediate label and assumptions that follow. White is seen as average and normal; black is not. It was in trying to understand ordinary day-to-day situations such as this that I came face to face with my own ethnocentrism and

began to confront the meaning of whiteness and white privilege in my own life. I specifically say *began* because I have come to realize that this will continue to be a lifelong struggle. My research has since turned to understanding the current state of race relations and power structures that are so hard for many white people to see, and to attempt to discover the ways in which I can help dismantle the system.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The United States has been deeply divided by racial matters since colonial times. There is profound agreement among contemporary race scholars that white racism has always been and continues to be endemic to American society (Bell, 1980; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Jensen, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The past 50 years has undoubtedly witnessed huge gains in regards to civil rights (the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Housing Rights Act of 1968, and the birth of Affirmative Action Policies). Since the late 1970s however, racial progress has not only stagnated but in many ways regressed as a “new racism” has evolved and taken hold (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ali, Huezo, Miller, Mwangi, & Prokosch, 2011). Political backlash from whites has stalled, blocked or reversed many efforts toward racial equality, crying “reverse discrimination” in response to what they view as threatening race-conscious remedies. Instead, they emphasize colorblindness as both fair and ideal (Bell, 1980; Bell, 2007). Today we continue to see enormous social and economic disparity between racial groups that ironically can only be legitimately explained by the fact that white privilege continues to thrive, fiercely protected within our society and its institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Council of Economic Advisors, 1998; Jensen, 2005; Ali, et al, 2011).

### **A LOOK AT THE STATISTICS**

The shame of our nation’s history in regards to race relations, along with an understanding of race as a socially constructed myth, has contributed to a strong desire for colorblindness and a belief that now things are different. An historic event marked the beginning of 2009, the inauguration of the first African American president. Many people saw this as tangible proof that the playing field had indeed been leveled; that we

could finally stop dwelling on the past and move on to a post-racial society (Wise, 2010). However, the playing field is far from level and the election of Barack Obama is by far, the exception and not the rule. A report written by a council of economic advisors to President Bill Clinton in 1998 showed that by the end of the twentieth century, whites were more likely than people of color to:

- Attend schools with smaller class sizes and access to computer technology.
- Attend 4-year colleges and universities.
- Earn higher salaries and retain employment during economic downturns.
- Have health insurance and therefore access to health care.
- Live in more favorable housing conditions with better public services.

In addition, the report showed Blacks and other minority groups as more likely to:

- Be exposed to environmental pollution or other hazards and suffer from chronic diseases.
- Be victims of violent crimes, including homicide.
- Be convicted, imprisoned, and even put to death at higher rates than whites who have been arrested for the same crime.
- Suffer with hypertension as the result of personal experiences of discrimination.
- Experience discrimination in mortgage lending and/or other unfavorable treatment in the housing market.

(<http://www.access.gpo.gov/eop/ca/pdfs/ca.pdf>)

Little has changed in the decade since those statistics were reported. United for a Fair Economy (UFE) is a group that addresses issues such as fair taxes, the racial wealth divide, corporate accountability and the global economy. The group publishes an annual report on “The State of the Dream” addressing particular topics or issues prominent in that year. In 2004, it focused on disparities between Blacks and Whites and found that Black infants were two and a half times more likely to die before the age of one. The report also found that compared to their white counterpart, Black high school graduates would earn an average of \$300,000 less throughout their working years and Black college graduates, \$500,000 less (Muhammad, Davis, Lui, & Leondar-Wright, 2004).

Reflecting on hurricane Katrina and the evacuation nightmare, the (UFE) 2006 report highlighted issues facing households that owned no vehicle, which includes only 7% of white households but 24% of Black and 17% of Latino households. The report noted that car ownership provides not only a means with which to evacuate during an emergency, but greater access to many of the ingredients of prosperity including a wider choice of jobs, education, health care and entrepreneurial opportunities (Lui, Dixon, Leondar-Wright, 2006). In the midst of a crisis in the sub-prime mortgage industry, the (UFE) 2008 report found that people of color were 3 times more likely to have been targeted for sub-prime loans. According to the UFE, the fact that if these loans had been distributed equitably, losses would be 44.5% higher for white families and 24% lower for people of color is in itself, evidence of systemic prejudice and institutional racism (Rivera, Cotto-Escalera, Desai, Huezo, & Muhammad, 2008).

In 2009 (UFE), 24% of Blacks and 21% of Latinos were in poverty compared with 8% of whites. The median household income of Blacks was \$38,269, \$40,000 for Latinos, and \$61,280 for whites (Rivera, Huezo, Kasica, & Muhammad, 2009). At the

beginning of 2011 (UFE), the unemployment rate was 15.8 percent for Blacks, 13 percent for Latinos and 8.5 percent for White (Ali, et al, 2011).

Despite the reality of these statistics, racism in its contemporary forms, especially racial power and privilege, are notions that are fiercely controversial and their existence continues to be denied by those who hold it. A major goal of this paper is to examine the mechanisms of white privilege and colorblind racism through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. This literature review presents research findings suggesting that a colorblind ideology actually ensures the continuation of a racial hierarchy, protects the nature of white privilege, and continues to produce inequitable outcomes in virtually all realms of social and economic existence. I critically analyze the literature, presenting evidence for the deleterious effects of a colorblind attitude and the impact that white privilege has on the education and development of children of color. I conclude the paper with some suggestions on how educators can engage in anti-racist activism with a commitment to addressing racism in the classroom.

## **WHITE PRIVILEGE**

Robert Jensen (2005) makes what many would consider to be a bold statement, “The United States of America – a century and a half after the end of slavery, four decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act – is a white supremacist society.” (p. 3) How can that be true of a country that boasts of a colorblind constitution, a country where merit is rewarded and hard work is touted as the ticket to success? The truth of the matter is, while hard work gets you far, being white gets you farther (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Jensen, 2005; Mahoney, 1995; Manglitz, 2003; McIntosh, 1988; Wildman & Davis, 1996; Wildman, 1996).

The disparity that exists between racial groups in this country is well documented (see statistics and citations noted above). A more controversial topic however, is the debate over why those differences continue to persist in what is supposed to be a post-racial, colorblind meritocracy. That debate must necessarily encompass a discussion of institutional racism and white privilege that is legally, culturally, and psychologically ingrained in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Institutional racism can be understood as a collective failure on the part of an organization or government entity to provide a suitable service based on race, or any other type of group affiliation. Its actions or lack thereof, which disadvantage minorities, can be identified in discriminatory processes, attitudes, or behavior (Gillborn, 2006). White privilege, a product of institutional racism and white supremacy, is a collection of unearned social benefits and courtesies that are bestowed upon a select group of people by virtue of their being white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This privilege serves to place them at decisive advantage above other groups.

By far, the most difficult aspects of facing the existence of white privilege is first of all, admitting that being white also equates to being racist in some capacity, and secondly, that part of what a person has is unearned. In the simplest of terms, by benefiting from privilege, whites participate in racism (Bergerson, 2003). Despite one's best intentions, it is virtually impossible to exist within a racist society as a member of the privileged group and not participate in it by reaping the benefits of that privilege (Jensen, 2005). White privilege simultaneously perpetuates the inequitable distribution of resources, power, and opportunity while conveying a powerful sense of entitlement on its recipients (DeCuir-Gunby, 2006).

### **THE DYNAMICS OF PRIVILEGE**

In general, most whites have what is a very limited understanding of racism: hateful voluntary acts committed by terrible people, and they spend a considerable amount of time attempting to convince each other that they are not racist. While most do not deny that racism and racist practices put minorities at a disadvantage, it is far less common for them to acknowledge the existence and role of white privilege (Wildman & Davis, 1996).

An important element of white privilege is that the characteristics defining the privileged group are also considered to define the societal norms. The normalization of privilege means that all members of a society are judged to have either succeeded or failed, based on how they measure up to the characteristics of the privileged group (Wildman & Davis, 1996). Ironically, white privilege can be a very difficult concept for white people to understand and accept, simply because it is such a normal and ordinary aspect of every day experience. In other words, that which is normal is also invisible to the beholder of privilege (Jensen, 2005; Manglitz, 2003; McIntosh, 1988; Wildman & Davis, 1996).

Another important element of white privilege is the ability to be “race-less,” or to ignore whiteness as a race (Wildman & Davis, 1996). In casual conversation, whites typically would describe each other by referencing a person’s height, hair color, and/or body type for example. Whiteness however, does not have to be named because it is assumed. Physical descriptions of non-whites on the other hand, will often list race as one of the first or second characteristics of importance. Race is applicable only to the non-white other and therefore issues surrounding racism are considered to be somebody else’s problem (Pappas, 1995).

Frustrated by men who refused to recognize male privilege, Peggy McIntosh (1988) challenged herself to write about some of the ways in which she benefited daily from white privilege. Her straightforward examples highlight how privilege is so normal that it is taken for granted or even felt as though it is entitled. She identifies privileges and freedoms that she can count on at any given time or place but that her non-white co-workers, friends, and acquaintances cannot. For example:

- Whites can be confident that if they move to a new neighborhood of their choice, their neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to them.
- White children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- Whether using checks, credit cards, or cash, Whites can count on their skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- Whites can accept a job with an affirmative action employer without having their co-workers suspect they got the job because of their race.

Jensen (2005) describes a memorable teaching moment in his classroom during a discussion that followed the viewing of an episode of “Primetime.” During the show, an

experiment was conducted with a hidden camera that exposed the differential treatment of two men that had similar backgrounds in many respects besides race. A white student remarked that the program wasn't balanced because it showed a black guy in a white neighborhood getting harassed but that he would also likely be at risk as a white man walking in a black neighborhood. Jensen countered with two important points. First, white people in most cases have a choice about whether or not they want to go into a black neighborhood while Black people have no choice about interacting with a predominately white world. Secondly, the student's reaction itself was a prime example of white privilege, "the privilege to ignore the reality of a white-supremacist society when it makes us uncomfortable... to deny one's own role in it. It is the privilege of remaining ignorant because that ignorance is protected." (p. 10)

### **THE POWER OF SILENCE**

Privilege and power are intricately connected in a white supremacist society and there is enormous pressure to avoid awareness or articulation of that white privilege (McIntosh, 1988). "Race is a socially and historically constructed ideological system that permeates all social, cultural, economic, and political domains, thus a major determinant of power. Race is especially a determinant of power if ones race is white." (DeCuir-Gunby, 2006) Past research, scholarly debate, and policy addressing the issues surrounding racism have typically focused solely on racism's victims, rather than on its beneficiaries and the complex systems of power and privilege that preserve it (Manglitz, 2003; McIntosh, 1988). It is in large part this silence surrounding the system of white privilege that is the key to maintaining it (Pappas, 1995). "Although the privileges associated with whiteness are often obvious to nonwhites, many whites themselves fail to see the connection between their opportunities in life and their racial identity, much as their race is generally invisible to them." (McDermott & Samson, 2005)

## **THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY**

No discussion of white privilege is complete without mention of the inherent flaws associated with a belief in meritocracy in the United States. Meritocracy was a term coined by Michael Young in 1958 and is defined as “a society or social system in which people attain status or rewards because of what they achieve rather than because of their wealth or status.” (quoted in Pappas & Tremblay, 2010, p. 31) Many of the fruits of the Civil Rights era are symbolic and contribute to the interrelated myths of equal opportunity, meritocracy, and fair and impartial capitalism. These popular views shift the responsibility of difference away from the institution and place it instead on the individual or group, blaming differences in merit (Rousseau, 2006). The myth of equal opportunity, combined with a focus on socio-economic status, justifies continued inequity and diverts attention from the relevant issue of racial subordination (Crenshaw, 1988).

A particularly illustrative example of the myth of meritocracy has to do with admissions policies to colleges and universities. Legacy admissions, referred to by Pappas and Tremblay (2010) as affirmative action for the rich, are policies that give preference to the children of alumni and monetary contributors regardless of merit (Gasman & Vultaggio, 2008). In other words, when it comes to getting accepted into these institutions, money talks. Even for the average applicant, admission boils down to the student’s grade point average and test scores and this supposedly merit based system is problematic in itself. Wealthy families have a distinct advantage in that they can afford to enroll their children in expensive preparatory classes intended to boost their scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT. In addition, basing admissions decisions on merit associated only with numerical rankings ignores the myriad of other merit-based qualifications such as creativity, passion, empathy or humor (Pappas & Tremblay, 2010).

## **CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

Considering the legacy of race relations in the United States, there is little debate about the fact that significant advancements have been made in regards to civil rights. That being said, as demonstrated in the sections above, by virtually every social indicator racism continues to plague the lives of people of color. The many variations of racism however, can be difficult to unveil as traditional civil rights laws serve to protect people from only the most blatant forms of racism (Saddler, 2005).

Legal Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsudo, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, to name a few, developed critical race theory in the 1970s as a response to what they saw was a great problem. Before CRT there were no theories that placed race as the central issue, rather than just one variable among many, to be examined in legal cases, particularly civil rights legislation (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Traditional civil rights legislation falls short in that it operates from a restrictive view of equality. This view seeks to prevent wrongdoing by emphasizing “equality as a process” rather than focusing on the significance of outcomes. CRT on the other hand, operates from an expansive view of racial equality. This view, in addition to considering process, emphasizes “equality as a result” and the importance of evaluating actual outcomes for people of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). To put it simply, critical race theory is a movement that studies the relations among race, racism, and power with an added dimension of activism. CRT seeks not only to understand the manner in which society is structured along racial lines but also to transform the current social situation for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

## **HALLMARK THEMES OF CRT**

There are six distinct themes that mark and unify the CRT movement (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). The first is that racism is a normal fact of daily life, pervasive and permanent in American society (Taylor, 1998). As many liberals tout the value of colorblindness and idealize the neutral principles of constitutional law, the second theme revolves around a critique of liberalism. This critique challenges dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A third theme insists on a contextual/historical analysis of law and revisionist history, replacing majority interpretations of historical events with ones that more accurately represent the experiences of minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Another theme that is important and unique to CRT is “recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). CRT theorists use the power of storytelling or, “counterstories”, in order to give a better understanding of the viewpoint and perspective of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The fact that CRT is interdisciplinary and has been extended beyond legal studies to many fields of research including education makes up the fifth theme. Last but not least, the activist dimension of CRT works toward eliminating racial and all forms of oppression (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

## **ORDINARINESS**

Within CRT, the conversation about race takes on a broader perspective. It helps us to understand that racism is more than overtly racist acts. It is a series of what social scientists call micro-aggressions that impact minorities on a day-to-day basis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This everyday racism comes in many forms, such as institutional policies or practices that, while fair on paper, negatively impact minorities on a disproportionate level. Actions associated with this type of racism can also be subtle,

non-verbal exchanges that are interpreted by non-whites as derogatory slights (Lynn & Parker, 2006). “Like water dripping on sandstone, they can be thought of as small acts of racism, consciously or unconsciously perpetrated, welling up from the assumptions about racial matters most of us absorb from the cultural heritage in which we come of age in the United States. These assumptions, in turn, continue to inform our public civic institutions- government, schools, churches- and our private, personal, and corporate lives.” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.2) It is precisely this ordinariness of racism that makes it so difficult to address.

### **THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THESIS**

CRT emphasizes that in order to understand how and why the dogmatic beliefs and assumptions of racism continue to be so deeply ingrained in our social, political and legal structures, one must recognize the manner in which race as a “concept” is historically situated (Saddler, 2005). The social construction thesis of race revolves around the idea that race categories are invented, manipulated, and ignored by society as convenience dictates. It examines the historical significance of westward expansion during the later part of the European Renaissance, explaining how and why race thinking became such a powerful and pervasive worldview. In particular, it attempts to re-examine the historical record from a perspective that more accurately represents the non-white experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Along with the discoveries of the New World came a desire for a means of classifying new phenomenon, including people, into distinct taxonomic categories and races (Goodman, 1995; Smedley, 1999). While European scientists disagreed about the specific number of racial types and sometimes about the specific traits of importance, there was a consistency in the hierarchy with whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, and various other groups ranked in between. “Race science” predictably became a powerful

political tool, providing Europeans with the moral justification they needed for subsequent colonization and dominance over cultures around the world (Goodman, 1995; Smedley, 1999). The need for justifying slavery, forceful consolidation of Native Americans onto reservations, Japanese internment camps, Jim Crow laws, and various other social practices perpetuating inequality and prejudice, drove the search to find measurable differences between racial groups. Guided by their biases and cultural worldviews, European scientists easily came up with what they saw as evidence demonstrating inherent biological differences between people (Smedley, 1999; Gould, 1981; Tucker, 1994). This so-called evidence was used as validation for assigning perpetual low status to certain groups of people and thereby guaranteeing the privilege of wealth and power to others (American Association of Physical Anthropologists [AAPA], 1996).

As a premise that is useful to a ruling class with control over legislation, the belief that whites are *naturally* superior became deeply ingrained in the social fabric of America (Goodman, 1995). Despite the abolition of slavery after the end of the Civil War, African Americans, and other non-whites, remained largely uneducated and poor. They continued to be treated as inferior, forced to live in dismal conditions, and be subjected to the constant threat of violence (Tucker, 1994), a legacy of inequality that has continued to persist. It is true that important legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of color has been passed, but laws alone cannot “redress present manifestations of past injustice.” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005)

### **INTEREST-CONVERGENCE**

Considering that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been litigating against school segregation for years, CRT scholars have questioned the motives behind the sudden change of heart in the 1954 landmark case, *Brown v. the*

Board of Education. Derrick Bell used the famous Supreme Court decision to illustrate his theory of “interest-convergence” (Bell, 1980). Bell’s hypothesis was that advances in civil rights would only be gained if and when the interests of blacks converged with the interests of whites (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefacic, 2001).

By the end of World War II, the horrendous crimes and atrocities committed by the Nazi’s were becoming evident around the world. The Eugenics movement, largely influenced by American racial ideology and research, had sought to eradicate all non-Nordic elements from the population and to preserve the integrity of the Great Race first by forced sterilization and eventually mass genocide (Tucker, 1994). The international community seemed to be shocked into an understanding of how power and racism are intricately connected.

It was no accident that it was within this historical context that the decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* called into question the validity of the phrase “separate but equal.” The United States had found itself the embarrassing focus of newspaper headlines as they focused on segregation and inequality in America. The hero that helped to end the Holocaust was now at the center of criticism surrounding the Jim Crow laws and the fallacy that was the separate but equal doctrine. The verdict in *Brown v. the Board of Education* that began the forced desegregation of public institutions, and even the Civil Rights Act of 1964, is therefore viewed by some to be a political move, designed to improve America’s image abroad (Bell, 1980; Littlefield, Lieberman, & Reynolds, 1982; Tucker, 1994). The basic civil rights at stake in the *Brown* decision were granted not just for the sake of racial justice but because they also converged with the self-interests of US foreign policy at the time (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Another point made by the interest-convergence principle is that even successful racial remedies will be abandoned when whites fear that the policy is threatening to their

social status. This is evidenced in the post-Brown era by increasingly erected barriers to racial balancing (Bell, 1980), by the subsequent lack of enforcement and by the ambivalence with which it has been treated by the courts (Smith, 2008). Brown promised the hope of equal educational opportunity to future generations of children. Its subsequent ineffectiveness reflects a growing divergence in the interests of blacks and whites (Bell, 1980) as evidenced by the continuing achievement gap.

### **CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM AND COLORBLIND RACISM**

In what would become one of his most famous speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. dreamt that one day this nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident... that all men are created equal.” He dreamt that one day his children would “be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” People often quote MLK Jr. as they profess their own commitment to equality and social justice. Those who cite him as testimony to a colorblind ideology however, are misunderstanding the larger context of his statement (Sue, 2004). The dream he speaks of assumes the existence of an equal playing field which as I have shown, simply does not exist. Liberalism relies heavily on this notion of colorblindness and neutrality in the law which has consequently become the dominant discourse in classrooms and courtrooms alike (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Wise, 2010).

Colorblind racism is a set of post-racial assumptions claiming that there are no longer significant racial barriers to social and economic participation, that equality is a fact of law and that persistent manifestations of racism and prejudice are the result not of institutional failings but of individual ignorance (Freeman, 2005). Colorblindness, both at the institutional and individual level seems innocent and well-meaning on the surface. However, despite its non-racial character, colorblind ideology serves to maintain racial –

subordination (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Ostensibly, colorblindness strips whiteness of its privilege and preferential status, making its policies fair and just (Freeman, 2005). In actuality, it is by “whiting out differences” that colorblindness constitutes a denial of difference, a denial of an unfair imbalance of power, and it denies the experiential realities of minorities (Sue, 2004).

Colorblind discourse, in classroom settings and elsewhere, is simultaneously psychologically beneficial to whites and detrimental to minorities in important ways. Many whites have a deep seated fear of being perceived as racist and go to great lengths in order to avoid appearing prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Jensen, 2005; Sue, 2004). Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008) explored the manner in which people use “strategic colorblindness” as a way to avoid appearing biased in interracial settings. In one of their studies, white participants were paired with a partner who was a confederate in the experiment. When presented with an array of 30 photographs of people varying on several dimensions including gender and race, their task was to ask as few yes/no questions as possible in order to correctly identify the photograph held by their partner. The researchers alternated between whether the confederate or participant asked the questions first. The paradigm purposefully provided a context where race was a relevant diagnostic tool but there was a choice about whether or not to use it.

Results indicated that the likelihood that whites would acknowledge race was dramatically influenced by the standard established by their partner. In other words, whites were more likely to use race as a descriptor when their partner used it first. White participants were especially likely to adopt a colorblind approach when concerned about how their partner may react to the appearance of prejudice. An especially important finding of this and their subsequent experiments is that while whites generally interpreted colorblindness during interracial interaction as conveying a lack of bias, blacks perceived

this approach as actually being indicative of bias and were suspicious of the genuineness of whites' treatment of race. The discrepancy between white and black interpretations of colorblind discourse therefore has serious implications for the ways in which race is or is not acknowledged in classroom settings.

In addition to this tendency to avoid acknowledging race, white people frequently react with anger, denial, and defensiveness to topics relating to white privilege and institutional racism. Recognizing and acknowledging systemic racism often elicits uncomfortable feelings of guilt or shame associated with being a member of the dominant group, as well as from the awareness that some of his/her success in life is not purely the result of hard work and effort but is in fact unearned (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Jensen, 2005; Sue, 2004). There is also a certain amount of fear that creating a more just and equitable society inevitably means giving up or sharing many of those unearned privileges (Jensen, 2005). Therefore, colorblindness is the ultimate in avoidance tactics, essentially giving whites permission to avoid facing these difficult truths and to remain complicit in a system that works for them but causes injustice to others (Sue, 2004).

The fear of losing one's unearned privilege is exemplified by the white public's outcry of "reverse discrimination" in response to affirmative action policies, and an illustration of the divergence in black-white interests (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Affirmative action is intended to diversify certain environments, such as schools or workplaces, striving to increase the enrollment, membership, and participation of minorities within them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Media campaigns, launched by white conservatives in the 1970s, argued that these policies undermined the notion of merit and constituted reverse discrimination. Their arguments resonated with many liberals that equated fairness with colorblindness and equal opportunity as opposed to with equal results. Media campaigns were followed up by lawsuits declaring race-

conscious policies to be unconstitutional and most affirmative action policies lasted hardly a decade before a series of Supreme Court decisions limited or banned their applicability, particularly as a factor to be considered in college admissions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). “Whites simply cannot envision the personal responsibility and the potential sacrifice inherent in [the] conclusion that true equality will require the surrender of racism-granted privileges for whites.” (Bell, 1980)

## **CRT APPLIED IN EDUCATION**

“Education is where it all begins... Through education, one is able to learn about the past in order to cope with the present, while simultaneously planning on how to improve the future.” (Smith, 2008) Unfortunately, despite the responsibility of such a key role, the current educational system as it exists in the United States is designed to cater to a select group of students while neglecting many others. Theories focusing on gender and class have failed to adequately account for enduring racial disparities, significant achievement gaps in education, for example. Critical race theory emerged in the 1970s but Ladson-Billings and Tate are credited with its initial application to the field of education in the mid 1990s. A major contribution to CRT in education was Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) conception of whiteness as property which provided a much needed framework for examining further the inequities that minorities continue to face within the educational system (Closson, 2010). Other scholars such as Claude Steele, Geoffrey Cohen, Julio Garcia and Amanda Lewis have contributed to important advancements in our understanding of ordinary racism, manifested through stereotypes and other microaggressions that make a significant impact in school environments.

### **WHITENESS AS PROPERTY**

Brown v. the Board of Education is celebrated as one of the most pivotal and influential Supreme Court decisions of the twentieth century, ruling that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal and bringing an end to de jure segregation. Over fifty years later, Derrick Bell and other prominent CRT theorists, has argued that that the legacy of Brown has failed to live up to its promise. School districts today are as segregated as ever (Rousseau, 2006) and institutionalized racism means that even integrated school districts are inherently unequal (Bell, 2007).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) draw a direct connection between inequity in schools and what they refer to as the property value of whiteness. An examination of events building up to the development of the constitution will reveal that the government was first and foremost, an entity established for the protection of property. Slaves were objectified as personal property and as so, a government constructed for this purpose was unconcerned about securing basic human rights for African Americans (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). US history is filled with tensions related to property and “the ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central feature of power in America.” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) While the importance of individual and civil rights are largely discussed, property owners are the main beneficiaries of actual social benefits. Property owners continue to be disproportionately white, and therefore whiteness itself conveys a certain property value.

This notion of whiteness as property relates to education in numerous ways. A particularly illustrative example is the way in which the funding of public schools is tied to property taxes. The wealthier, and whiter, the school district, the greater will be the access provided to educational opportunity (Jensen, 2005). The underlying meaning is that those with the best property are entitled to the best schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Differences are manifested in the quality of the facilities themselves, material resources that support the “opportunity to learn,” as well as differences in the quality of teachers and curricula, such as variety of course offerings.

One way that the property value of whiteness is demonstrated is through the absolute right to exclude (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Historical methods of exclusion included first, the outright denial of education, and later the establishment and maintenance of separate schools through de jure segregation. More recently, de jure segregation has been replaced with de facto segregation (Bell, 2007) resulting from white

flight to private schools of choice. Re-segregation has occurred within integrated schools via tracking. Advanced placement classes and other types of “gifted” programs are comprised of mostly white students to the extent that black or other minority students are often made to feel like outsiders attending with special permission (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

### **RACIAL STEREOTYPING AND DEFICIT THINKING**

Obviously, of great concern to CRT scholars in education is the racial achievement gap that persists beyond what can be explained by differences in opportunity or quality of schools. Regardless of social class and the wealth of their school, students of color are forced to confront an ordinary, everyday sort of racism that white students are privileged to ignore. One way to understand how the educational experiences of non-whites differ so dramatically from those of whites is by examining how ordinary racism is manifested through the maintenance and application of racial stereotypes.

Stereotypes are a prime example of microaggressions, “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously.” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) They are commonly used to justify attitudes such as having lowered expectations, curricular practices such as “tracking”, and an overall “dumbing down” of the curriculum (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Racial stereotypes originate from traditions of deficit thinking that blame unequal outcomes on individuals themselves, claiming the existence of genetic and cultural deficiencies, rather than blaming society and institutionalized racism (Lewis, Chesler, Forman, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Steele (1997) first developed the concept of stereotype threat and explained how it could dramatically influence academic performance. Stereotype threat is essentially the threat of being negatively labeled based simply on the preconceptions of others. His

research was based on the theory of domain identification which assumes that sustained success in school is dependent upon identification with academics. Among his assertions are that historically targeted groups, such as women and African Americans, disproportionately face barriers to school achievement as a result of stereotype threat. Steele proposes several strategies, referred to as “wise” schooling practices and policies that can be implemented in order to reduce this effect. He states that while internal states are difficult to modify, implementing a situational design that gives students security in the belief that they will not be negatively stereotyped can be widely effective.

Collective threat is directly related to the concept of stereotype threat. It originates from the awareness that the poor performance of one individual may be interpreted through the lens of a stereotype and generalized into a negative judgment of the entire group. Cohen and Garcia (2005) examined collective threat felt by minority and women students as they are faced with negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of their group. Based upon the role of group membership as a source of self-definition, they argue that a student feels threatened when there is a possibility that a fellow group member will perform poorly and reinforce negative racial or gender stereotypes. Their studies found that the potential poor academic performance of a group member proved threatening and that stereotyped minorities in general faced higher levels of collective threat. Collective threat was shown to undermine academic performance and contributed to an avoidance of intellectual challenge and lower self-esteem as they developed an “I am us” mindset.

Lewis, et al (2000) built on previous research on stereotypes but also incorporated a discussion of the prevalence of colorblind ideologies. They explored the dynamics of white-nonwhite interactions on college campuses and identified two main categories of racial stereotypes: academic and behavioral. Academic stereotypes convey a

predetermined sense of a person's academic ability or intelligence that is based solely on their race. Behavioral stereotypes apply general assumptions about a person's character, style, hobbies or life experiences and are often equated with visions of poverty. Like Steele, these researchers found that when applied in educational settings, racial stereotypes had particularly detrimental effects on students of color as they created distress and led to struggles about identity and competence. An important element of their research however was the finding that colorblind ideologies inhibit white students from recognizing their own color-conscious and stereotyping behavior (Lewis et al, 2000).

### **MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION**

From a very young age, children are exposed to racial and ethnic ideas as they observe and participate in the social world. In fact, the majority of children are found to have solid conceptions of racial and ethnic distinctions by the age of six (Ramsey, 1991; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). A major goal of multicultural education is to change damaging attitudes about others and reduce bias. Ideally multicultural perspectives should generate respect, combat racism, and foster cultural understanding and harmony as students are provided the opportunity to understand themselves and others through a variety of cultural lenses (Banks, 2002). The implementation of multicultural education however, has more often than not, been less than ideal. In order to truly begin to disrupt the systemic racism that is embedded in dominant ideology and reflected in patterns of speech, behavior, policy, and practice, multicultural education must be more than a superficial celebration of differences (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

There are four distinct approaches to multicultural education, outlined by Banks (1994) that incorporate ethnic and cultural content into the curriculum on varying levels. At the lowest level, the contributions approach focuses on incorporating non-white heroes

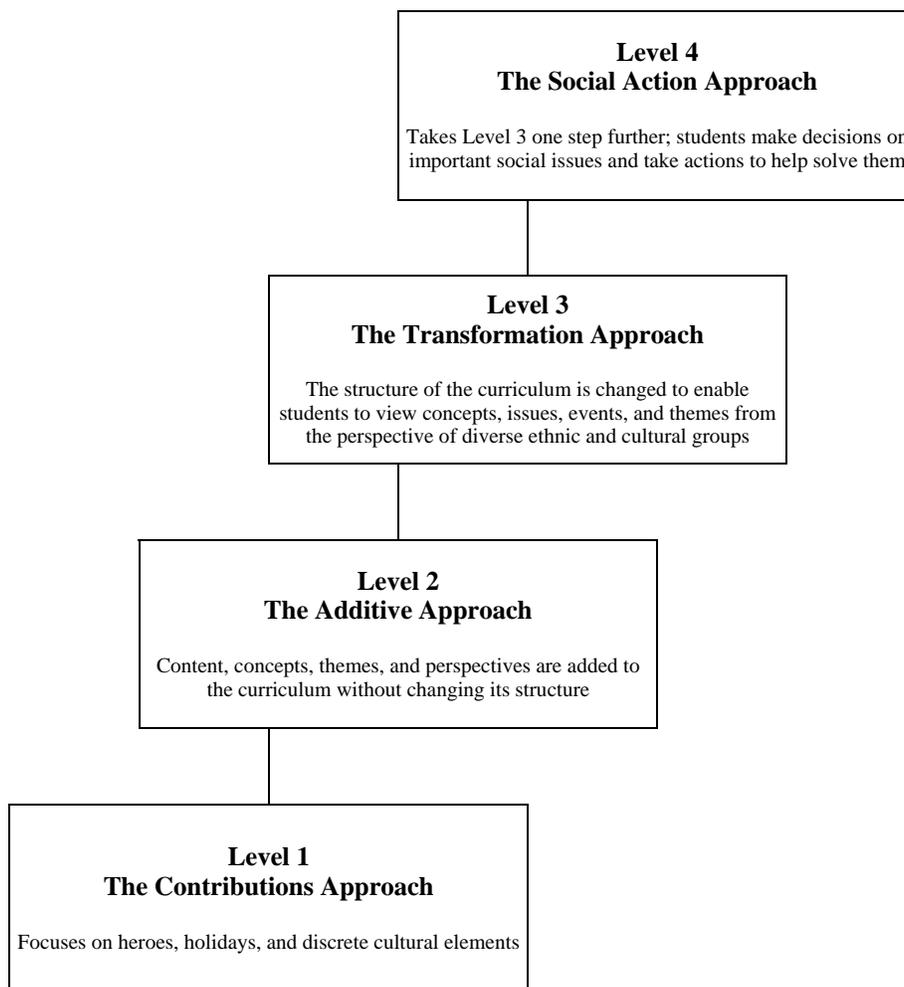
and non-mainstream holidays into the existing curriculum. While it is the easiest approach for teachers to implement, it has serious limitations. Focusing on a specific person or holiday means little time is spent on actually studying the ethnic group. Concepts related to victimization and oppression are avoided as focus is placed on the success and achievements related to certain ethnic heroes. This approach tends to reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions as the unique aspects of ethnic cultures are often presented as strange and exotic.

The next level of multicultural education is what Banks (1994) refers to as the ethnic additive approach. Through the addition of a book or a unit, teachers are able to add content, concepts, themes, and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its overall structure. The assumption behind both the contributions and additive approaches is that racial bias is the result of ignorance about racial and ethnic groups and can be reduced by exposing children to minority groups via symbolic models (Bigler, 1999). However, both approaches teach ethnic content from a mainstream and Eurocentric point of view and fail students' ability to understand the ways in which diverse perspectives are culturally and historically situated (Banks, 1994).

The transformation approach, on the other hand, involves a complete restructuring of the curriculum. The goal is to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. In other words, the transformation approach enables students to put themselves in others' shoes. It does more than simply adding a list of the ways in which minority groups have contributed to mainstream culture. Various perspectives and frames of reference are incorporated into the curriculum with an emphasis on how US culture emerged from the complex interaction and synthesis of elements from all cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious groups (Banks, 1994).

The social action approach takes the transformation approach one step further. Students examine their own values and beliefs as well as make decisions and take action related to the concepts and issues that have been discussed in the class. For example, students analyze social problems such as discrimination in their school and work together in coming up with ways they can actively promote change (Banks, 1994).

Table 3: Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content (Banks, 1994)



The impact of multicultural education has been controversial as empirical studies examining attitude change or inter-group bias reduction after participation in multicultural education and intervention programs has overwhelmingly reported non-significant findings, especially for long-term effects (see Bigler, 1999 for a review of this literature). There are several possible reasons for this. First of all, most multicultural perspectives are introduced to students for only a limited duration. Because of the time and effort required in restructuring existing curriculum, the majority of educational systems adopt a contributions or additive approach that discusses topics related to diversity for only a short amount of time. These curricula also operate from the assumption that students are passive absorbers of information and while students are exposed to cultural symbols, they are given little opportunity to engage in discussion about them (Bigler, 1999). Ironically, these types of curriculum are more likely to reinforce preexisting stereotypes and encourage an “us” and “them” mentality.

#### **COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING RACISM IN THE CLASSROOM**

“Schools operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower.” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) Recent studies with a foundation in CRT have begun to explore the use of critical multiculturalism that specifically places an emphasis on knowledge of oppression and discrimination, compelling students to participate in difficult but necessary conversations about contemporary racism.

Loya and Cuevas (2010) conducted a unique study using pre-test and post-test surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of a “minimester” course on racism and social inequality on students’ racial attitudes. The students were exposed to challenging and thought-provoking classroom curricula and discussions that prompted them to begin exploring their own personal feelings and prejudices about race. In addition, students

attended and then wrote about a number of experiential activities, such as going to a Black church or a local flea market, where they found themselves to be the minority. The researchers found that the experiential activities facilitated honest discussion and seemed to be particularly beneficial for raising awareness in non-minority students. Virtual focus groups held six months after the class had ended revealed that the impact of racial awareness had so far seemed to be supported over time and lent credibility to the curriculum.

Bolgatz (2005) examined how race is talked about in elementary social studies classes. She found that many teachers view topics related to diversity, especially race relations, as controversial, taboo and too abstract for children to handle. This mentality is unfortunate because it is through these conversations that children will develop the skills for thinking abstractly and critically about the topics. Moreover, the seriousness of the concepts makes the classroom an even more important place to develop them where a teacher can provide the appropriate guidance. Avoiding the topics altogether emphasizes the belief that issues of racism and discrimination are only a part of our past. In a fifth grade social studies class, Bolgatz (2005) observed a discussion about slavery and the revolutionary war. She found that 10-year old students were capable of engaging in a sophisticated level of discussion, making important connections between abstract ideas and events in history. Rather than being overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues, children had the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills related to race and other controversial issues (Bolgatz, 2005). Conversation builds ideas, facilitates comprehension of text, encourages cognitive development, and fosters growth in expressive language abilities (Hartman, 1996). If this is the case, perhaps this dialogue about race and racism should be implemented long before the college classroom.

## **DISCUSSION**

The principle concern of critical race theory is exposing “the business as usual forms of racism” that do not stand out as obvious discrimination. The movement was conceived out of frustration with the inability of traditional legal discourse to address anything beyond only the most blatant forms of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In fact, “CRT portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society.” (quoted in Gillborn, 2006) If these liberal discourses do little more than maintain the status quo and provide for no radical change in the existing racial hierarchies, the question then becomes, where do we go from here?

### **CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES AND ANTI-RACISM**

In general, most discussions related to the problems of racism are likely to focus solely on those negatively impacted by racism, without any examination of those who benefit from it or of the complexities surrounding the maintenance of white identity, power and privilege. There has been a growing momentum of interest in the study of whiteness as a racial identity. Critical white studies examine the social construction of whiteness and focus on its relationship with power and privilege. There is general agreement within whiteness literature (Bergerson, 2003; Colin & Lund, 2010; Eichstedt, 2001; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Manglitz, 2003) that naming whiteness as a racialized identity is an important way to “out” the norms of whiteness and white privilege, shifting the focus from the oppressed to the oppressor (Manglitz, 2003).

This “outing of the norms of whiteness” is especially important today considering the current trends toward a colorblind discourse. Naming and examining whiteness, as opposed to ignoring and/or denying its significance, is the first step toward transforming

it, particularly in the classroom. Grounded in critical race theory, a substantial amount of literature has been written that explores the normative nature of whiteness and documents the manner in which it shapes our current worldview and discourse in relation to power, privilege, and racism. Within higher education, there have been various efforts toward addressing whiteness and privilege by creating dialogues with white teachers and students that encourage them to explore their own white identity (See Manglitz, 2003 for a detailed review). The goal of such dialogue is to uncover and disrupt the various ways that whiteness has operated as the standard for comparison and against which others are judged, as well as to unveil the social mechanisms that serve to invent, maintain, and mask white power and privilege.

Students who are just becoming familiar with the concepts of systemic racism and privilege often express a desire to “stop just talking and act.” Interestingly, CRT would argue that action can be counterproductive without first the proper amount of reflection and examination of one’s own complicity in the system (Hyttén & Warren, 2003, Warren & Hyttén, 2004). For many white students this means learning to mediate a problematic identity, one that is racist by virtue of historical significance but coexists with a strong desire to engage in antiracist activism (Eichstedt, 2001). Warren and Hyttén (2004) recommend that in order to be an effective antiracism activist, one must negotiate a balance between cautious action and careful reflection. Specifically, this requires one to re-conceptualize their sense of fairness and justice in the lives of others in addition to making adjustments to their own daily activities and practices.

### **DO WHITE RESEARCHERS HAVE A PLACE IN CRT?**

It is important to note that critical race theory was developed by people of color in order to make sense of their experiences and one premise of CRT is that it is difficult for white people in American society to grasp what it is like to be non-white (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2001). This ignorance contributes to the general lack of awareness about privilege and the tendency to take it for granted. It also contributes to a propensity to dismiss claims of discrimination and to minimize or ignore the every day reality of minorities. Within CRT, there is an emphasis on the experiential knowledge of people of color being appropriate and critical for understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination (Bergerson, 2003). Parables, autobiographies, and counterstories, narratives that challenge dominant views of reality are important tools that legitimize minorities' experiences. Importantly, they help bridge the gap between majority and minority views of reality. The voice-of-color thesis holds that because people of color have different histories and experiences in regards to oppression, they are able to communicate about matters that whites are unlikely to know. In other words, along with minority status is a presumed competence to speak about matters of race and racism. Not only do counterstories function to convey experiential knowledge but are psychologically beneficial as they create bonds between those who have been marginalized and represent shared understandings and meanings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

This particular facet of CRT brings into question the place that white people have in participating in it as they lack that essential power of "voice." Bergerson (2003) explored this issue and noted that counterstories cannot be told by the dominant group as they cannot provide the perspective of an oppressed person. In fact, there is a danger in that whites would potentially "co-opt the words of the 'other' into a stock story, thus taking away their voices." (Bergerson, 2003, p. 56) Grillo & Wildman (1996) state that white supremacy creates an expectation that central in every discourse will be issues of concern to whites. Society has always placed whites at center stage and therefore, they are accustomed to being there. "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.” (Grillo & Wildman, 1996, p. 621) Therefore, there is good reason for concern expressed by Bergerson about white participation in critical race theory and on renewing an emphasis on whiteness. However, while it is important to heed cautions against re-centering the white perspective, it is also imperative that we continue to examine whiteness along with the power and privilege that come with it. As Bergerson pointed out, we do not need to consider ourselves critical race theorists in order to use the tenets of CRT to inform our work as antiracist activists.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars emphasize that CRT embraces an element of activism and works toward the goal not just of understanding racial oppression, but eliminating it in all forms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). However, while the last decade has seen a proliferation of literature identifying the sources of and the existence of systemic racism in American society, particularly in education, it is not quite as forthcoming about how to initiate such change. It remains largely theoretical and is limited in its application in empirical studies and pedagogy. Critical race theory is profoundly valuable as a framework for understanding the current state of race relations and the disparities that persist between groups. The problems inherent in a colorblind approach are clear. However, in order for an ideological shift toward a more inclusive pedagogy and society in general to evolve, there is a need for more studies demonstrating the effectiveness of critical multiculturalism and color conscious approaches. In particular, there is a need for studies that evaluate the long term effects of antiracism or critical multi-cultural education and to determine whether those learning experiences will continue to inform and influence students beyond the classroom.

For those of us that identify as white, it is counterintuitive but also critical that we unlearn the colorblind ideology that we have been taught to embrace. Focusing on the goals of uncovering and disrupting the ways that whiteness has functioned in our lives is an important step toward chipping away at the racism that persists within our policies, institutions, and even our own assumptions. Critical race theory gives us a starting point from which to confront those demons and each of us has a personal responsibility to do so.

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