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Coloniality and Intersectionality in Social Work Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

The history of social work education is deeply entangled with the structures of White supremacy and coloniality. Through an analysis of coloniality, the system from which social work operates, this article outlines an alternative framework of intersectionality, which decodes the dominant discourse in relation to power, privilege, White supremacy, and gender oppression. The framework of intersectionality moves professional social work pedagogy and practice from the trenches of coloniality toward decoloniality. The concepts of intersectionality and critical consciousness are operationalized to demonstrate how social work education can effect structural and transformational change through de-linking from its white supremacist roots.

KEYWORDS

Social work pedagogy; coloniality; decoloniality; critical consciousness; white supremacy

In a clip from *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (Maysles, Lucy, & Thorsen, 1989), Baldwin breaks down the concept of equality to its most simple and profound form: “From my point of view, no label, no slogan, no party, no skin color, and indeed no religion is more important than the human being.”

This paper is written at a time when the United States has elected Donald Trump as president and a major player on the global stage. The ideas put forth could not be situated in a more relevant time. In the aftermath of the election, social work has been scrambling to offer both an understanding of our current sociopolitical climate and space to deconstruct and discuss the issues at hand. Social work has always been poised to address sociopolitical concerns,

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particularly those that affect the most vulnerable. However, it is also a product of its time and socialization process. To deconstruct social work as a Western psychological project and an arm of coloniality, we need to delve into the system of coloniality as a remnant of colonialism (Almeida, 2018).

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.¹⁴ Thus coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath [*sic*] coloniality all the time and everyday. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243)

Subjugated knowledge about social values and life experiences of marginalized populations is rendered invisible or at best, controlled. Gathering knowledge about the lived experiences of those who reside at the intersection of the colonial wound requires a deep understanding of the powerful structures that create such relegation to form pathways for emancipation and liberation. Establishing a surface-level understanding of people's lived experiences, most often referred to as cultural competence, avoids attending to the accountability of those who structure dominance and participate in the global oppression of others.

The fluidity of intersectionality overcomes the challenge of compartmentalizing learning sites of the classroom, practice sites in the field, and related institutions that are the pillars of privilege, domination, and oppression. It reflects the complexity of lived experiences along multiple trajectories of hierarchies. Most importantly, it challenges discourses whereby oppression is sourced through cultural representation rather than social, political, and economic realities. These lived experiences travel in the space of coloniality – a new form of domination that controls and exerts power locally and globally through significantly different structures of exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2011; Quijano, 2000).

Coloniality

Quijano (2000) described coloniality as manifesting in at least three interconnected and interdependent forms:

- Systems of hierarchies: racial division and classification as the organizing principle of White supremacy
- Systems of knowledge: privileging of Western or Eurocentric forms of knowledge as universal and objective

- Societal systems: reinforcing hierarchies through construction of the state and specific institutions to regulate, segregate, and diminish decolonizing systems of healing and lived experiences

Contributing to the discourse on coloniality and Africa as an illustration, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argued that through the project of Enlightenment, Europe and America have appropriated human ideas of progress, civilization, and developmentalism as exclusive virtues of Western modernity that had to be exported to other parts of the world. This process destroyed not only alternate forms of modernity but alternate imaginations of the global order not necessarily influenced by the civilization of the Enlightenment, which included the induction of Christianity. As a consequence, the making and meaning of knowledge is structured in dominant-subjugated relations. The knowledge project of social work firmly embedded in the social sciences continues this tradition of universality.

One of the most powerful weapons of the colonial matrix of power is hiding crimes against indigenous peoples and erasing the fact that the very economic foundation of wealth in the United States was built by the enslavement of African peoples. Today's continued aggrievement toward indigenous peoples is the continuous passing of environmental damage on native lands. The state's position of honoring the oil industry in opposition to the rights of the water protectors of indigenous tribes and others invested in the safety and preservation of clean water is a clear example of the dominance and subjugation of knowledge and resources. This evidence of environmental racism is only worsening as the capitalist doggedness toward cheap resources continues. The control of history, knowledge, health, and justice are features of the colonial matrix of power, or coloniality (Quijano, 2007). The representation of different social identity groups in any given society is created and controlled by groups that have greater social, economic, and political power. In general, the category of *other* is ascribed to individuals who belong to underrepresented, marginalized, or oppressed social identity groups. This is carefully constructed to differentiate these groups from the more valued, more powerful social groups that set the stage for normative lived experiences in a given society. For instance, viewing Black-on-Black crime in impoverished neighborhoods as a result of poor policing rather than economic decay keeps these communities locked in Jim Crow policies. Myriad policies of structural violence destroy the fabric of safe housing, environmentally safe food and water, employment opportunities, and decent standards of education. Police funding is readily available yet dollars to rebuild these communities are unavailable. These powerful groups install and legitimize the dominant societal norms that are more familiar in a given society.

Contours of white supremacy shape coloniality

White supremacy is a mechanism of social control that originated in European imperialism (Alexander, 2010; Martinot, 2010; Painter, 2010). The construct of race and the White supremacist ascription of racialization originated in the creation of social hierarchies through divide and-conquer strategies that reinforced poor Whites' alliance with ruling-class Whites (Alexander, 2010; Battalora, 2015; Martinot, 2010). Whiteness in the United States was enacted through law. Battalora describes how the patriarchy kept White women as objects and created the institution of marriage to protect the economic independence of White families. The laws prohibited White women from marrying men of another race. This system offered contiguity with the pillars of Enlightenment as the source of historical superiority, knowledge, and humanity.

Race emerged in the United States “as a means of reconciling chattel slavery – as well as the extermination of indigenous peoples – with the ideals of freedom preached by Whites in the new colonies” (Alexander, 2010, p. 23). Subsequently, immigrant labor replaced slave labor in keeping the White supremacist and capitalist foundation intact. Exploitation became legitimized by replacing human ownership with compensation lesser than the value of an individual's work and worth. However, this occurred only for the White labor force; aforementioned slaves and their descendants became enduringly associated with immorality and having less than human status.

The historical legacies of White supremacy exposed by scholars like Haney López (1996), Martinot (2010), and Battalora (2015) detail how White supremacy was codified into law in the framing of the United States, often referred to as the racial contract (Mills, 1997). These scholars described the beliefs, values, and behaviors that translated Whiteness into social capital and identified how White supremacist normativity became a master narrative in social work practice, research, and education. A quick review of Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells regarding their morally different views on lynching offers a sobering gaze on coloniality (Hamington, 2005). The natural intrusion of White supremacy into the initiative of social work, not unlike other social sciences, requires analysis that has eclipsed the profession for generations. The analysis necessitates inquiry and action on social, political, and economic problems that result from White supremacist manifestations of racialization with all of its subjugated markers of gender and calls for interventions organized around deracializing society. In fact, it is an important strategy to uproot coloniality.

The matrix conceptualization of lived experiences is the reason this paper does not support a single-idea analysis. Smith (2016) has subsequently argued for understanding White supremacy by not assuming that it is enacted in a single fashion; “rather, White supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still

interrelated, logics” (p. 265). These structures and processes have paved their ascendancy to positions of power and status. Although running counter to academia’s often comfortable analysis of single issues, the framework of intersectionality is ethical and best suited to building knowledge about the multiplicity of lived experiences.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality argues that classifications such as gender, race, class, and other signifiers of identity cannot be examined in isolation from one another. They interact and intersect in individual’s lives, society, and social systems and are mutually constitutive. The concept of intersectionality originated from Black and Chicana feminist theory (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1999; Collins, 1990, 2000, 2004, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991, 1994), including developing world feminism and queer theory. As a research paradigm, intersectionality has its origins in Black feminism. It has come to shape research in many disciplines, including feminist studies, critical race theory, postcolonial and coloniality theory, public policy, public health, law, psychology, anthropology, and sociology (Yamada, Werkmeister Rozas, & Cross-Denny, 2015). It requires the analysis of systemic power, privilege, oppression, and social location to be used in understanding multiple identities. Most importantly it is constantly occupied with how the paradigm of dominance and subjugation is being created through knowledge building and acquisition.

Collins’ (1990) concept of a matrix of domination defines the structural and systemic aspects of how power, privilege, and oppression intersect with personal, social, and political identities, creating varied and complex lived experiences. A framework that includes these concepts provides a more comprehensive picture of the current stratification of society based on its social, political, economic, and historical legacy, revealing how social identities intersect.

Intersectionality functions in a variety of realms, including but not limited to the following areas:

- Intersectionality as theory and method
- Intersectionality in institutional contexts (workplaces, schools, family, communities)
- Social activism, social justice, and public policy
- Transnationalism and migration
- Sex, sexualities, and queer studies
- Class inequality
- Disability and embodiment
- International relations in a global era

Intersectionality offers possibilities to decolonize the political and institutional aspects of social location and standpoints (Harding, 2003) of people in their lived experiences in multiple contexts. In the practice and teaching of social work, consideration of social location must include the various and intersecting identities imposed and embraced by various people. Identities come with privileges, advantages, disadvantages, and varying levels of power, some of which are mutable and others not (Garran & Werkmeister Rozas, 2013). Although much has been written about this framework in social work, its potential to delegitimize Western knowledge building in favor of alternate and border thinking is invaluable.

Prudence Carter, an educator, researched schools in postapartheid South Africa in comparison to schools in the United States (Carter, 2012). She found virtually no differences. What students in South Africa who were bused to predominantly White schools were saying was stunningly similar to voices of children in U.S. inner cities. A reoccurring theme in both countries were the voices of these invisible children from border spaces all boldly stating their desires and anger related to not having their lived experiences at the center of the educational project. This desire to share their critical thinking with peers and teachers was lost to Whitestream curriculums. This is what the scholars of coloniality and intersectionality speak to when education across disciplines centers on the Western system of knowledge installed by the Enlightenment over alternate knowledge systems and ways of being.

Operationalizing this analysis requires building critical consciousness accompanied by strategies of empowerment and accountability. Although it is understood that a difficult balance exists between shaming and holding students accountable for their participation in systemic forces of oppression, acknowledging the varying degrees of power and privilege every individual possesses allows for dialogues around intersectional framings of both empowerment and accountability.

Decolonizing social work by building critical consciousness

Approaching the development of critical consciousness for all students from a nonproblematized agenda is crucial. Freire (1970) called for interacting dialogues between educators and students as a method to embrace students as subjects of their own destinies. He posed the idea that critical consciousness is “daring to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Although individuals’ experiences will vary based on their lived experiences and embodiment of the varying social identities constructed by society, this knowledge is the beginning of undoing the matrix of coloniality (Freire, 1999). In supporting this notion that individuals’ understanding their own realities through a reflection of their own social

experiences is essential to liberation, Martin-Baró (1996) argued that psychology has created a fictionalized and ideologized image of what it means to be human, based on its own ahistoricism and bias toward individualism. Individualism is still the major vehicle through which social work is taught and the structure through which clients are served.

Grappling with the matrix of coloniality is critical. Understanding that structural forces affect consciousness is about knowing, recognizing, and controlling all levels of social, economic, and political interaction. Lived consequences are the opus of this endeavor. It is an awareness of both culpability and accountability coupled with a critical sense of how to use individual and systemic agency to intervene in an inequitable system – whether or not we benefit from it. Du Bois (1903/1994), before Freire, first acknowledged the need to free oneself from an “oppressed consciousness” or “double consciousness” to reach a critical consciousness. According to Freire (2000), “attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building” (p. 65). Developing critical consciousness of domination, subjugation, or both in a collective is a powerful learning experience and teaching tool. This allows students in the classroom or clients in a therapeutic context to engage with the collective failures and successes of their own and other lived experiences and histories while working to build solidarity toward collective knowledge on the other side of coloniality. It also offers a fluid channel in which to serve clients. Knowledge building, sharing, and ownership should be the litmus test of erasing the installed project of the Enlightenment and embracing new and alternate histories and knowledge for social work as a branch of the social sciences.

Scaffolding the legitimacy of alternate and border products of knowledge is essential to the process of decolonizing. The foundational system of critical consciousness is one transport to that end. An analysis of oppressors and oppression, of dominance and subjugation cannot be achieved without an understanding of coloniality, with its embrace of White supremacy and gender oppression (Grosfoguel, 2011, 2013; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Quijano, 2000). Classification under this system further heightens the risk exposure for gender identities, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Many global societies historically scrambled gender markers and embraced gender fluidity, such as the Hijras of India, Two Spirit people in indigenous North American cultures, and Japanese men and women who are more androgynous (defined by class and age), until they intersected with Western norms in the late 1800s (Williams, 1994). The framework of intersectionality as informed by the matrix of coloniality is the foundation of this analysis.

Coloniality and intersectionality

Dominance in the United States, for instance, no longer exists in colonization but rather in coloniality. A stunning example is what Michele Alexander (2010) described as the new Jim Crow laws that sanction the widespread incarceration of young Black and Latino men for mostly nonviolent crimes. Similarly, the myriad deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of the police during the past several years accentuate hegemony and coloniality. The recent disclosure of lead in the drinking water of numerous impoverished cities in the United States is another example of coloniality. The global large-scale deforestation by U.S.-based corporations, the destruction of people's homes and lands by the International Monetary Fund, and imposed food insecurity created by big agribusiness, which today is larger than the oil lobby, are just a few examples of current-day structures of exploitation and destruction. This knowledge is essential for students learning to work with socially and historically targeted populations, for which modernity is not a universal experience and postmodernism certainly a far-off reality.

Grosfoguel (2011) extended Quijano's (2000) analysis by applying an intersectionality lens to identify 15 "global power hierarchies" (para. 16) that he referred to as the "colonial matrix of power" (para. 15). In particular, he identified gender, immigration, and Christianity as located in this operating system. Operating from the postmodernist assumption that we are now in a postcolonial period creates a false sense of independence and distance from the experience of the colonial project (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The colonial matrix is an organizing principle involving exploitation and domination of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations to political organizations, structures of knowledge, state institutions, and households (Quijano, 2000). No longer can liberation or decolonization be approached from a reductive standpoint, be it cultural or racial. Instead Grosfoguel's point is similar to Audre Lorde's (1984) argument that "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138). In other words, social work pedagogy must actively and critically examine the matrix of coloniality, which requires an alternative or subaltern worldview of knowledge that views human beings in totality and context. The ascribed superiority of European knowledge in many areas of life was an important aspect of coloniality of power in the modern or colonial world system. Subaltern knowledge was excluded, omitted, silenced, or ignored. This hierarchy of knowledge exists today, beckoning the demand to embrace strategies of decoloniality.

Decentering coloniality in social work pedagogy

This section provides multiple illustrations for classroom educators and practitioners in the field.

It is imperative to name structures of White supremacy and coloniality deliberately and work to interrupt it in interactions that reinscribe power hierarchies and silos of segregation. For many years, social work approaches informed by conceptions of multiculturalism, ethnicity, and cultural competence have couched differences in binary oppositions and within-group homogeneity. As a result, these approaches otherize all while simultaneously establishing a norm that has roots in White supremacy (Almeida, Hernández-Wolfe, & Tubbs, 2011; Martinot, 2010; Pon, 2009). Willie Tolliver (2015) argued that diversity is the “velvet glove” of White supremacy born in the 1960s and designed to appease those demanding an end to White supremacy. Terms like multiculturalism, intolerance, diversity, cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural sensitivity all emerged without an interrogation of cultural imperialism and coloniality, which is the foundational structure of these varieties of diversity. It is also remarkable given the female-populated strength of this field, gender in all of its constructions, expressions, and realities is not centered in social work curricula. Instead of challenging the patriarchy embedded in coloniality, social work has rendered discourse on gender oppression in diluted frameworks of feminist practice that highlight personal empowerment rather than exposing the unseen structural forces that oppress women.

Intersectionality: replacing traditional conceptualizations of psychosocial assessment

A psychosocial assessment, an assessment that by design is steeped in coloniality, is the social worker’s summary of problems to be solved. This process begins at the problematized level of the individual. The social worker considers a variety of factors, which may include psychological tests, legal status, descriptions of the problem(s), existing assets and resources, prognosis or prediction of outcomes, and the plan designed to resolve the problem(s). Descriptors of a psychosocial assessment include:

- Communicate pertinent client information for case, planning, and referral purposes.
- Establish in writing an account of “where the client is at” at a particular moment in time during service provision; the psychosocial assessment account offers baseline information about the client when he or she enters an agency for service.

The very languaging of this process is embedded in coloniality. It is a certified continuation of the Western psychological project, actively problematizing and otherizing the client or person seeking healing. This cannot be more evident than in the experience of a Black mother who loses her son to gun violence. She needs

less consolation for her devastating loss and more of an economic investment in the resource-deprived community in which she lives.

We offer two examples from lived experiences to create processes of assessment to understand better the intersection of seeking help or assistance and strategies for change and healing. One is the dialogue and inquiry surrounding the discourse on health and wellness. Second is the use of the film *Crash* (Reimer, Nunan, Korbelen, Grasic, & Haggis, 2004), a reflection of popular culture in the United States, to interrogate coloniality.

Health and wellness

To understand further the complexity of power, privilege, and oppression, an exploration of the social determinants of health is useful. In examining the role of social determinants in creating inequities and health disparities, the documentary *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* (Herbes-Sommers & Smith, 2008) illustrated that health status and wealth correlate on a continuous gradient from the poor to the wealthy. It explored how class and racism can have a greater impact on an individual's health outcomes than genetics or individual health behaviors.

A case illustration from the documentary presents two men living in Louisville, Kentucky, one in the northern section and the other in the southern section. Jim, a White CEO in his late 50s, lives in an affluent suburb of Louisville, whereas Bill, a Black janitorial supervisor at a hospital, lives in a working-class community. Both have stable jobs, access to medical resources, and live in homes they own with their families. As a CEO, Jim faces many daily challenges not limited to making corporate decisions that are in line with the organization's board and business plan, managing a company of several hundred people, and evolving current policy procedures to correspond with current world markets. On account of his social location of class and race, his ability to control decisions mitigates his stressors and associated cortisol levels. Similarly, when he takes his dog for a run in his neighborhood, he does not have to worry about muggings and drive-by shootings. Even if he does not have inherited wealth, his accumulated economic, social, and cultural wealth provides him with buffers that quickly dissolve the stressors he experiences in daily life. Jim has no health issues. Although there may be exceptions to these factored social determinants of health, the overall picture reflects this analysis.

Bill, on the other hand, a Black man in his early 40s, is besieged by crises throughout the day and has little power to influence his work life. His supervisors are White, better educated than him, and less likely to engage him in ways that make his job less stressful. After a day spent handling continuous crises at the hospital and managing his staff, he returns home only to face the constant fear of drive-by shootings. Although he owns his

home, it is in a neighborhood where crime is prevalent, so he and his wife consistently monitor the play activity of their two children. He is unable to afford the higher mortgages and taxes synonymous with safe neighborhoods. Even while at home, Bill has little control over his life options. His cortisol levels are consistently high, slowly damaging his organs. In his early 40s, he is diagnosed with hypertension and has been warned that he is experiencing prediabetic symptoms.

If a person or client seeks services for health-related issues, developing an intersectional assessment instead of a purely problematized one might better serve the healing endeavor. Although the concept of disrupting problematized narratives is familiar to narrative therapists, it focuses solely on the individual story through a cognitive process. Decolonizing processes require situating the problem in the matrix of coloniality rather than the neutral unnamed context. These narratives reflect how social determinants of wealth and resources define health and wellness. Although the importance of owning health care options as a right cannot be overstated, this analysis digs deeper into the colonial matrix that is responsible for the statistics of health and wellness. An important aspect of the assessment process is the revelation of how a structural analysis of constructs such as race, class, and gender variants are essential in understanding health inequalities. It is a collusion with coloniality to focus on problems of identity development in a system of social relations that are aberrant, alienating, and dehumanizing (Martin-Baró, 1996).

This assessment process which simultaneously raises critical consciousness can be further amplified by using [Figure 1](#), which illustrates the matrix of coloniality, involving dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression in the United States. It facilitates the dialogue and inquiry surrounding the intersectional identity markers of each of these men to inform an individual's (not always static) position in this sociopolitical hierarchy. It also highlights how the influence of systemic systems of oppressors and oppression on health can trump individual health behaviors, pointing to the need for health interventions to address structural inequality.

Crash: a movie that documents coloniality and intersectionality

The transfer or critique of knowledge in the classroom should reveal and interrogate institutional legacies and policies of power, privilege, and oppression. Empirical discussions in the classroom require boundaries drawn around educator, student, and client contexts that provide a structural mapping around intersectionalities.

Academia is an enormous location of power and privilege for teachers and students. Critical pedagogy in the classroom requires a live connection between educators and students from multiple communities, with nuances of privilege

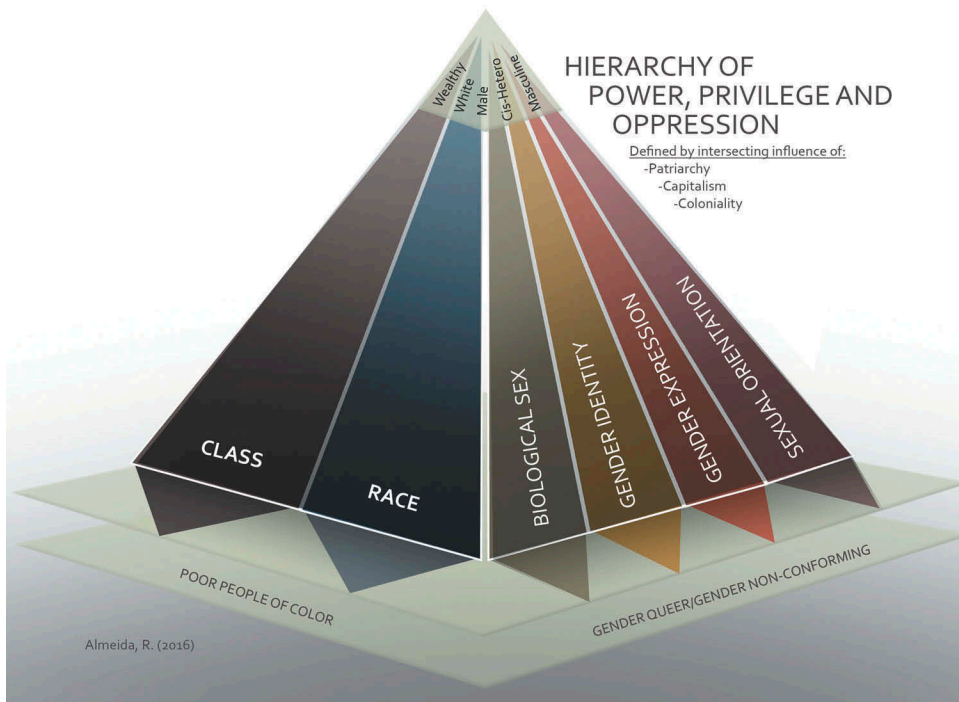


Figure 1. Hierarchy of power, privilege and oppression.

from the stature of universities and nuances of oppression that exist in these privileged spaces. Social work pedagogy that intends to disrupt coloniality first in the classroom can practice critical consciousness using an intersectional framework. Understanding power and its various vestiges is critical to the process of decolonizing and bridging scholarship from alternate spaces.

Crash: populist knowledge as the informational route toward decolonizing

The use of popular culture through social media, film, and literature can be extremely useful in creating this context (Kranke, Constantine Brown, Danesh, & Watson, 2016; Robbins & Singer, 2014). Popular film, with clips edited to highlight themes of intersectionality, can be used in the classroom and with clients to raise critical consciousness through dialogue, reflection, and inquiry (Liles, 2007; Rorrer & Furr, 2009). For example, *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis, addresses intersectionality and the multiplicity of identity markers that challenge, affect, and define lived experiences. Let us examine the process of using a 20-minute clip accompanied by the tool of hierarchy of power, privilege, and oppression.

Crash tells interlocking stories of various ethnic groups (Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Koreans, and Iranians), cops and criminals, the rich and poor, and

the powerful and powerless, all defined in one way or another by structural inequity and racism. All characters are victims and perpetrators of this inequity. The film connects stories based on coincidence, serendipity, luck, and social location; presumes that most people feel prejudice and resentment toward members of other groups; and observes the consequences of those feelings.

For example, an Iranian (Shaun Toub) is thought to be an Arab. Both the Iranian and the White wife of the district attorney (Sandra Bullock) believe a Mexican American locksmith (Michael Peña) is a gang member and a crook, but he is a family man. A Black police officer (Don Cheadle) is having an affair with his Latina partner (Jennifer Esposito), but never gets her country of origin correct. Another police officer (Matt Dillon) thinks a light-skinned Black woman (Thandie Newton) is White. When a White producer tells a Black television director (Terrence Dashon Howard) that a Black character “doesn’t sound Black enough,” it never occurs to him that the director doesn’t sound Black either.

The characters say exactly what they are thinking, without the filters of political correctness. These interlocking and intersecting identities offer students in the classroom and clients in the therapeutic endeavor the opportunity to engage in complex conversations about the larger embeddedness of all identities. The focus away from a purely individual structure to embracing multiple stories in the format of film or other social media allows the building of critical consciousness and collectivity. These interlocking nuances of lived experience are time- and context-contingent, rather than fixed and ahistorical (Hulko, 2009).

The hierarchy is a visual aid that depicts the various demographic characteristics reflected by a range of individuals, families, and communities. The genogram figure is an illustration of where a couple (of varying gender identities, expressions, or orientations) with children of a particular class, race, and age might locate themselves, portraying intersecting identities. Students and clients can be asked to locate characters from a popular film as they move through various identities.

Similar to the use of case examples, using media brings the lived experiences of a community into the classroom, a tactic that excites students of the 21st century (Almeida, Melendez, & Páez, 2015) and offers a powerful venue for contemporary literacy. Analysis of multiple intersecting identities can examine the complexity of lived experiences and the intervening effects of power, privilege, and oppression on those experiences. The very transparency of social locations in the matrix of coloniality is transformative.

To practice critical consciousness in an intersectional framework, the traditional definition of the individual as learner must be reimaged to represent the broad coalition of students as learners, creating connections and collectives of learners (Almeida, 2013; Almeida et al., 2015). A critical focus on the intersection of knowledge, truth, and power sets the stage for transforming institutions

and creates a foundation for learning how liberatory practices through decolonizing strategies – use of dialogue, reflection, and praxis – ultimately transform students as members of the social work community.

Conclusion

In this limited space for articulation of complexity, this paper hopefully offers a window into the structure and meaning of coloniality. The application of an intersectional lens creates opportunities to decode the matrix of coloniality along with its conspirators, White supremacy, patriarchy, and gender oppression. This provides educators, students, practitioners, and clients with an opportunity for structural change in which they confront their experiences of socialization by challenging, resisting, and questioning the debilitating effects of privilege, power, and oppression in their own lives and the lives of others, or lived experiences of coloniality.

Through critical pedagogy that emphasizes critical consciousness, empowerment, and accountability, students can deliberate and resolve their own issues using a critical lens to explore social, political, economic, and historical experiences. Oral and written language that departs from traditional codified texts (like psychosocial assessment), specific educational tasks that bring knowledge from border spaces into the classroom, and social media from popular culture make visible the hidden systems of power, privilege, and oppression involving gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity markers. This is what Mignolo (2009, 2011) refers to as epistemic disobedience, beginning the process of decoloniality through de-linking from the colonial matrix of power.

These experiences challenge the status quo of unquestioned norms and practices, effecting critical transformations. Using the perspective of intersectionality, critical consciousness can be achieved via collective use of critical language, social media, dialogue, inquiry, and reflection, and most importantly, when dialogue and inquiry occur through popular culture rather than the discourses of expert knowledge and delivery, power is shared between educators and students and between students or practitioners and their clients. It is critical to be transparent about the fact that although institutions of learning are coveted spaces, they are simultaneously sources of oppression for many educators and their students, not unlike the agencies where they will practice.

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