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Pragmatic Humanism in CSD Diversity Education: A Conceptual Framework to Engage Students Across The Political and Cultural Spectrum

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to thank three anonymous reviewers for their valuable and insightful comments.

Introduction

In the wake of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, of the violence against Jacob Blake, and the historical anti-racist protests that ensued in 2020, a robust discussion about our lack of diversity has ensued in the field of teaching and learning in Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD). This is commendable, for three closely related reasons. One, the CSD field is one of the least diverse professions in the country (Thompson, 2013), with 95.5% of us identifying as female, and 91.5% as White (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2021). Two, a robust body of literature exists that testifies to the disparities in healthcare outcomes between White and non-White people, both in the healthcare field at large (e.g., Egede, 2006) and within the CSD field (e.g., Robinson & Norton, 2019). While a causal link has not been proven to the best of our knowledge, it is plausible to assume that at least some of the causes for this are found in racial gaps between patients and providers, particularly in issues in communication and rapport building (e.g. Johnson, Roter, et al., 2004; Johnson, Saha, et al., 2004; Shen et al., 2018; Spooner et al., 2016). Three, as educators in the field we are therefore tasked with ensuring that every student who goes through our programs of study has acquired an amount of cultural competence (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n. d.) and humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) in order to best serve their diverse clientele.

While the present debate is timely, it is also an occasion for us to offer a note of caution and a suggestion. The note of caution relates to the way we approach this topic in the classroom. This is particularly relevant for those of us who are faced with a student body that is not only overwhelmingly White (which is the norm in the field) but also culturally and politically conservative, as is the case for CSD educators in many geographical areas around the country. Our first author has seven years of experience teaching diversity to conservative-leaning undergraduates in CSD, and he has learned that the predominant way racism is discussed in the public square is unlikely to reach this population. In the words of one writer, centrist and right-of-center individuals see much of current diversity education as “radical and weird” (French, 2020a).

Why does diversity education miss the mark this way? A prime reason is the human tendency to defend one’s identity against any negative judgment; in the case of anti-racist education, this response has aptly been termed ‘White fragility’ (DiAngelo, 2018). Some of the backlash, however, can be traced back to an issue within the anti-racist movement: a posture of exclusionary access to truth. We might term this posture *epistemic absolutism*: a way of knowing that excludes facts and experiences that contradict its tenets. It is our contention that this stance, while understandable given the importance of the issue, ultimately harms the cause of anti-racism. Instead of providing opportunities for growth and healing, it presents a wholesale worldview, and all but forces students to choose between its own perspective and the one into which they have been enculturated.

The origin of this epistemic absolutism is based on the misappropriation, in much anti-racist work, of the conceptual framework of critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT offers a very specific set of analytic tools to grapple with racism and other power structures. In much of popular current discourse, however, it is not utilized as a set of tools but as an all-encompassing explanatory paradigm. And herein lies the problem. When diversity education and anti-racist discourse use CRT as their *only* framework, it tends to become a ‘grand narrative’

(Lyotard, 1984), and like all grand narratives, it then falls short of the cohesive and unified explanation to everything it purports to deliver.

This brings us to our suggestion. Our purpose in this reflection on scholarly teaching is to lay out an alternative framework for diversity teaching that both encompasses and surpasses critical theory: pragmatic humanism (Honnacker, 2018), an action-oriented, pluralistic approach to knowing. We believe pragmatic humanism offers the epistemic openness that students who are unfamiliar with the issue of racism need in order to accommodate their newfound knowledge. Of note, we will argue that this framework can make use of the scholarly benefits of CRT without succumbing to the exclusivist claims of its popularized version.

Our argument will proceed as follows. We will first offer an overview of CRT, and a critique of the epistemic absolutism with which CRT gets burdened when appropriated by popular discourse. We will then introduce pragmatic humanism as an alternative framework, and frame its benefits in five maxims for teaching our first author uses in the classroom. To illustrate the practical consequences of either framework, we will center our discussion on two specific bits of didactic content that are usually discussed in diversity education in our field: the historical and ongoing presence of racism in American society, and the question of codeswitching in dialectally diverse clients. We will also consider the need to develop future healthcare professionals' empathy for diverse clients, and the need for anti-racist teaching to adopt a therapeutic stance toward White students.

Critical Theory: A Tool for Inquiry Popularized as Epistemic Absolutism

Critical race theory is an offshoot of critical theory, developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1968; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947) with the goal of understanding the development of German society after World War I; with the authors' emigration during the Nazi era, it found its way to the United States (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Originally, it was formulated on explicitly Marxist assumptions about history as a succession of power struggles between the ruling classes and the oppressed. Of note, classical Marxism locates the driving forces of history primarily in economic power structures. Over time, this perspective became untenable given the comparable affluence of the societies of interest. Consequently, critical theorists shifted their focus towards cultural matters, seeking to determine who, in any given society, has the power to shape language and ideas, and thereby to dominate others (Bohman, 2019; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). This shift is the origin of much of our present debate about acceptable uses of language in the public realm.

Critical theory is an irreplaceable conceptual tool to elucidate cultural power structures that would otherwise go unnoticed because of their relatively abstract nature, and it has been deployed successfully to this end, for example, in feminist and post-colonial thought (Bohman, 2019; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). In its latest iteration as critical race theory (CRT), it is used to explain persistent racial disparities in the face of formal legal equality (Crenshaw et al., 1996). It has since been extended to other areas of life affected by racism (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Of note, CRT is the *only* theory that has the capability of explaining the converging evidence, accumulated by varying fields of study, for the past and present existence of structural, systemic racism in the US. This evidence is overwhelming and need not be reviewed here; suffice to say

that CRT offers the one explanatory framework that brings said evidence together, much like evolutionary theory brings together countless bits of evidence for evolution in the natural sciences.

Also in this most recent iteration, however, CRT has left the confines of academia and come to dominate current American discourse about racism—particularly, it seems, on social media, in student activism, and as a framework in for-profit diversity trainings. And it can be argued that this has become, to an extent, detrimental to the cause of anti-racism. Used as an all-exclusive grand narrative, this popularized, misappropriated CRT is elevated to a narrative that claims all-explanatory power (French, 2020b; McWhorter, 2018; Sullivan, 2020). And it is here where it reaches its limitations—much like evolutionary theory reaches its limits when applied to areas of inquiry it is not meant to elucidate, such as psychology (cf. Gannon, 2002).

In the case of misappropriated CRT, those areas of inquiry include American history in all its facets; the dynamics of social interactions and human relationships; and, indeed, psychology, i.e. the inner lives of persons. Viewed through the lens of a paradigm not developed to analyze them, they lose their richness and become projections. In stark contrast to its popular association with postmodernism, popularized CRT, when encroaching on these fields, thus morphs into a decidedly *modern* framework in Lyotard's (1984) sense: a claim of absolute and exclusive access to truth. Arguably, this runs counter to the intentions of critical theory's originators (Wilson, 2014).

We wish to remain agnostic as to the precise dynamics of this development. It may be that epistemic exclusivism is, indeed, the *intent* of those who appropriate critical race theorists' work. It may also be that said epistemic exclusivism is much worse in the *perception* of their detractors than it is in reality. The result, at any rate, is the same: the public square is dominated by a discourse of absolutist assertions and counter-assertions which, in our view, ultimately harms the cause of anti-racism. We will call those aspects of this discourse that claim origin in CRT *absolutist critical race theory* (ACRT) to draw a sharp line separating it from scholarly CRT and its benefits, and we will argue that ACRT poses five distinct problems for educators.

ACRT Cannot Accommodate Empirical Facts That Contradict Its Claims. Methodologically speaking, critical theories rely on a mixture of conceptual analysis of empirical facts and phenomenological study of lived experiences. However, ACRT can only accommodate facts that fit into its view of human life as a power struggle between oppressed and oppressors. Facts that do not fit this framework are ignored or assimilated into it, which makes for awkward results.

Consider ACRT's take on American history. As CSD educators, we have to make students aware that racism is not only an ongoing issue but also one that is deeply woven into American history; otherwise, we risk that conservative-leaning students may dismiss our efforts as liberal talking points. CRT scholars are keenly aware how important it is to understand a society's past to assess its present. Consequently, they frame American history as one *of* racism (e.g., Crenshaw et al., 1996), that is, of power structures that benefit White peoples (particularly males) and oppress Black and Indigenous peoples as well as people of color (collectively referred to as BIPOC peoples).

This perspective is not false, of course: the evidence for the past and present existence of structural, systemic racism is overwhelming, as we said above. The issue is, rather, that it is not the *only* possible perspective on American history. A more complete appraisal would conclude that racism

has always existed in sharp conflict with America's professed ideals, which include the belief that all humans are created equal, and the promise of 'liberty and justice for all.' Of note, this is precisely the perspective Hannah-Jones (2019) professes in her opening essay of the New York Times' *1619 Project* (The New York Times, 2019). This is worth mentioning, as Hannah-Jones and the *1619 Project* have recently become strawmen for detractors of CRT (McGee, 2021; Schwartz, 2021)—an illustration of the detrimental properties of the current discourse in the public square.

In our view (and that of Hannah-Jones, 2019), a well-rounded appraisal of American history must inevitably conclude that the conflict between ideals and reality is precisely the reason we treat racism as a problem. A brief glance at America's history serves to corroborate this. The abolitionist movement, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement and our current discourse (including this special issue) all speak to the conflict between ideals and reality. Put otherwise, the nation is shaped not simply by the ideals of 1776 (as per our founding myth) or by the reality of 1619 (the onset of slavery), but by the tension between both (French, 2020c; Stephens, 2020), and we would expect anyone who has graduated from K-12 schooling in the States is at least marginally aware of this. To reduce this history to one facet or another is to unduly simplify it.

ACRT Cannot Accommodate Lived Experiences That Contradict Its Claims. In addition to empirical facts, students' lived experiences also contradict absolutist takes on our current situation. Our White students are not only sheltered from racism in their daily, lived experience. They have also imbibed the founding values of the country on a personal level; they have learned about the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movements (and get a day off to celebrate the Rev. Dr. King every Spring); they are aware of structural anti-racist efforts such as affirmative action; and many are used to harmonious and fruitful coexistence with BIPOC communities. Were we to claim, as per ACRT's emphasis, that racism is the defining feature of American society, we would deny both students' personal experience and the historical and social facts they have learned.

Of note, this denial could well extend to BIPOC persons. For example, there *are* Black individuals whose lived experience is not primarily one of racialized oppression (e.g., McWhorter, 2020; Wood, 2020).

ACRT Cannot Cope With Real-world Problems Such as Multifaceted Clinical Decisions. The 2020 events have sparked a flurry of discussions as to how to combat racism in clinical practice. One of these pertains to the merits and detriments of code-switching, particularly in Black K-12 students. It is well-known that code-switching has an ambiguous status: research as well as personal testimonies speak to its necessity and to its academic and professional benefits, while also detailing its cognitive and psychological cost (Adikwu, 2020; Brennan, 2018; Craig et al., 2009; Harris, 2019; McCluney et al., 2019; our third author can speak to both aspects from personal experience). ACRT-influenced contributions to the relevant debates rightly focus on the latter, questioning the justice of such cultural power structures: why, they demand to know, should minority students have to exert extra effort and pay an additional price for fitting into a majority society that tends to regard them with disdain?

For the practicing clinician, this important question highlights the ethical ramifications of the use of Standard American English norms when working with students who speak African American English (or other dialects of devalued social status). On the one hand, academic and social

expectations for students are generally centered on the mastery of the Standard dialect. It would therefore seem unethical *not* to target Standard when the therapy goals involve academic language, or social communication skills for academic and professional use. On the other hand, this makes clinicians complicit in a power structure where minority students are expected to conform to majority norms, which may result in a lived experience of not being accepted for who they are (Adikwu, 2020; Harris, 2019).

It is precisely the highlighting of such unjust power structures where the methodological approach of CRT is at its finest. It is also where it reaches its limits when it is misappropriated and absolutized. ACRT-based expositions generally result in identifying the problem without offering a solution; the unjust power structures are condemned but no way forward is offered. The reason for this is, again, that ACRT cannot cope with contradictory realities, leaving the clinician in a quandary.

ACRT Construes Race as an Essential Identity, Which Precludes Empathy. Recently, it has become popular, among adherents of colorblindness, to label any discourse about racism as racist in its own right. It would be easy to dismiss this as White fragility lashing out, were it not for the fact that ACRT does, indeed, argue that all knowing, perceiving etc. is a function of one's location in the intersectional structures of oppressing and oppressed identities (e.g., Corlett & Mavin, 2014). Hence, if one is a beneficiary of these structures (e.g., as a White person), one is constitutionally unable to understand the reality of those who suffer from them (e.g., BIPOC persons).

Like most of ACRT's claims, this one is not false per se: empirical studies that link social status to inner dispositions abound (e.g., Belmi et al., 2020; Manstead, 2018). The problem is, rather, that ACRT does not allow for any possibility of softening or bridging these gaps, for example, by foregrounding the shared humanity of all involved. For the educator (and for the student) grappling with the realities of racism, this raises the immediate question of empathy as a precursor to change. If the 'other's' experience is, in fact, completely alien to my own, why would I care for their suffering (Arisaka, 2020)?

BIPOC peoples, and Black peoples in particular, have been subjected to 'othering' at the hands of White supremacy for hundreds of years. It could be argued that drawing uncrossable lines between these groups may have the unintentional effect of hardening such group distinctions (Brubaker, 2020; Chait, 2020; Wood, 2020). This would be severely detrimental for the formation of future healthcare professionals. Empathy and patient-provider rapport are key to functional therapeutic relationships, and thence to beneficial outcomes (Adams et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2004; Weng, 2008). Were we to leave our students with the impression that they are structurally unable to empathically connect with their non-White patients, we would have done a tremendous disservice both to them and their future patients.

ACRT's Conceptual Rigidity Makes it Unsuitable for Therapeutic Purposes. We believe that anti-racist education is best seen as a *therapeutic* effort: a path to conceptual and behavioral change. Unfortunately, there is scant evidence that *any* form of diversity training is effective in fostering change (Bergner, 2020; Paluck & Green, 2009). While no research on the efficacy of ACRT-informed education has been done to the best of our knowledge, the backlash against it in the public discourse suggests it is unlikely to reach individuals who do not already agree with its

main tenets. One reason for this may be its lack of ability to accommodate conflicting ideas. In its relentless focus on the realities of racism—but not on the ideals that fuel anti-racist discourse, or on a pathway out of racism—ACRT becomes an attempt at replacing White Americans’ positive (but incomplete) self-understanding with its (equally incomplete) opposite. Simply put, White students who assume they are colorblind and that America is a beacon of equality are asked to accept the idea that they are steeped in cultural racism (which is true, but hard to accommodate) and that this racism is the defining trait of their identity (which is questionable). In addition, ACRT does not give any suggestion on how to overcome this. White identity formation—more precisely, re-formation when faced with the reality of racism—is a protracted and painful process that requires time and guidance (Ponterotto et al., 2006). The ACRT approach provides neither. As a result, it may be said that in a discourse predicated on identities, White participants are pushed to assume an identity of ‘perpetually repentant racist’ (McWhorter, 2020).

Even more problematically, ACRT’s conceptual rigidity keeps it from addressing another contradiction that is, perhaps, at the heart of the difficulty of anti-racist education. This innermost tension is found in the need for seeing BIPOC persons in their full, complex, and equal *humanity* and *individuality* on the one hand without obscuring the very real systemic, cultural, experiential and power differences between *groups of people* on the other (see Senna, 2021, for an account of how ostensibly anti-racist writers attempt to grapple with this contradiction). This dual perspective is hard to entertain, and any framework that squashes conceptual pluralism is unlikely to succeed in this regard. Illustratively, ACRT-based accounts, such as accounts of historical struggles against racism, have gone so far as to erase Black individuals’ agency from the narrative (Bergner, 2020; Chait, 2020; Senna).

In sum, Critical Race Theory is an invaluable tool to analyze power structures empirically and phenomenologically. However, when it is misappropriated, popularized, and transformed into an epistemic absolutism, the result—ACRT—is unsuitable as a pedagogy, since human life, at the individual and the social level, cannot be reduced to such structures alone. Anti-racist education, therefore, requires a more nuanced conceptual paradigm that can reap the benefits of CRT without reducing it to an ACRT. We will make the case that pragmatic humanism is well-suited to serve this purpose.

Pragmatic Humanism: A Pluralist Realism

‘Humanism’ is often equated with an Enlightenment humanism that presupposes a universal Western-style rationality, and that has rightfully been criticized as Eurocentric and colonialist (Conrad, 2012; Dussel, 1995). In stark contrast to this, the humanism we endorse here assumes an ineluctable plurality of perspectives as its starting point (Honnacker, 2018). Honnacker terms this perspective *pragmatic humanism*, and traces it back to the Anglo-American pragmatist tradition, in particular William James and F.C.S. Schiller (e.g., James, 1907/1979; Schiller, 1903, 1907).

Much like critical theory, pragmatic humanism is both an epistemology and an ethic. That is, it inquires into the nature of knowledge and reality with the goal of fostering informed action. In doing so, it starts from the premise that all human knowing is grounded in experience. The same is true for human intention and action. This is obvious in phenomenological types of perception and knowledge, such as the socially and culturally mitigated life-worlds in which we live. It is even true for scientific facts, in two senses. One, any newly-established scientific facts presuppose

a history of inquiry that at some point began in human experience and then became institutionalized as a culturally mitigated life-world (Kuhn, 1962/2012). Two, no matter how reliable and replicable they are, facts must be incorporated into life-worlds to become guideposts for action. Such incorporation rarely occurs without a degree of interpretation (Honnacker, 2018; Lyotard, 1984). Thus, barring complete homogeneity of shared life-worlds, to be human is to be constantly faced with multiple realities that must be navigated. In other words, pragmatic humanism presumes an ineluctable pluralism of lived realities.

Of note, this is not an indifferent relativism. Pragmatic humanism recognizes the difference between scientifically established facts (e.g., that the earth is a sphere, and is four billion years old), time-tested moral values (e.g., *Thou shalt not kill*), and purely constructed ideas that abide by neither (e.g., flat-earth beliefs, ‘QAnon’ adherence, or White supremacy). It also recognizes, however, that any of these can guide human action, and hence deserve to be taken seriously *as* guides of human action. That is, it focuses on the agentive *consequences* of knowledge, rather than on the relationship of knowledge to a (presumed) absolute truth, while also acknowledging that there are different types of knowledge that are more or less reliable (in scientific terms), or conducive to human flourishing (in moral terms).

This combination of non-relativism and non-absolutism is the hallmark of pragmatic humanism: a sober recognition of the limitation and the context-boundedness of all human knowing, and of any action that flows from it. Accordingly, ‘pragmatic’ should not be read as ‘expedient,’ but rather in the dual sense of ‘applied’ and ‘realist:’ pragmatic humanism is deeply wedded to the meliorist project of caring for and improving the human condition while accepting its limitations (Honnacker, 2018, pp. 14-16). This combined stance of care and humility makes it an apt framework for a therapeutic approach to education.

With regard to diversity education, then, a pragmatic humanist uses their commitment to pluralism to scaffold White students’ understanding, taking into account who they are to guide them into deeper insight, and fostering their engagement with the issue by tying it to their identities. We will illustrate this by revisiting our criticisms of ACRT to explore how pragmatic humanism fares with them, couching each of them in a maxim for teaching that can inform practical classroom strategies in CSD.

Teaching Maxim 1: Use Contradictory Facts Intentionally. Thanks to its commitment to a realist pluralism, pragmatic humanism is able to cope with the contradictions of US history. Specifically, it can acknowledge that this history comprises *both* systemic racism *and* massive efforts to counteract this racism because it contradicts American ideals. It is precisely this tension between ideals and reality that prompts (self-)reflection (Salaverría, 2017) and helps students, particularly conservative-leaning ones, accommodate their novel knowledge about racism as well as spur them into action: by tying anti-racism to their identity as Americans and to their sense of patriotism.

Teaching Maxim 2: Open up Space for Conflicting Experiences. Even more so than facts, lived experiences can appear mutually exclusive. Some speak to the stark reality of systemic racism, others seem to contradict it. In fact, CRT’s own concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) hints at this variability. For example, higher-SES Black families are better able to navigate majority-White environments than Black families in poverty, and hence see racism as less of an

issue in their life as the latter (e.g., Lareau, 2011). To help students accommodate this, however, a certain narrative nuance is necessary. Contradictory lived experiences must be allowed to coexist within a framework that resolves or at least holds the tension between them; this is a common tenet of many schools of psychotherapy. Pragmatic humanism provides such a framework: one of its explicit goals is to help persons recognize that their identity is not a coherent whole but characterized by ambiguities and tensions (Honnacker, 2018, pp. 76-77). As outlined above, both ACRT and the efforts to counter it attempt to impose coherence on American history, flattening it into a simplistic oppressor-vs.-oppressed schema or an equally simplistic paean to the country's ideals that glosses over very real pain and cruelty. In contrast, pragmatic humanism explores history in all its complexity, in which power and oppression, pain and cruelty, ideals and reality can all find a place.

Teaching Maxim 3: Open up Space for the Messiness of Real-world Decision-making. In our view, the real problem for practicing clinicians is not to formulate ethical stances in a vacuum, for example, by arguing about the ethics of code-switching in online forums. The real problem is to decide what to do when faced with a dialect-speaking BIPOC student with a language or communication disorder. In a typical (if hypothetical) scenario, teachers and the school system expect the student to use SAE linguistic and communication norms. The student may or may not be open to that, depending on their prior experience with the institution, and with racism in general; either way, it can be expected that learning to code-switch will come at a cost to them.

As a result, the clinician is forced to weigh two legitimate considerations. On the one hand, there is the clear imperative to ensure our client's success with functional communication in real-world contexts. On the other, there is the injustice of the situation: an SAE-speaking student would only have to work on their language or communication issue, while the dialect-speaking student is additionally tasked with acquiring a separate variety for the purpose of fitting into an unjust power structure.

The general ACRT response to such situations is a call for the wholesale change of said power structure. And it is true that part of our vocation is to advocate for our clients, be it with teachers, schools, or even employers. It is also true, however, that full acceptance of dialects in academic and professional settings would presume large-scale cultural changes, the effecting of which is beyond the capacities of individual clinicians and even the field as a whole. Thus, any efforts to systemic change will run into their limits. No matter how avid their advocacy, at some point clinicians will be faced with the conundrum outlined above.

It is our contention that the only practical way out of this conundrum is found in the therapeutic relationship and the day-to-day interactions between clinician and client. We work with our client using SAE, and we expect SAE productions from them (if and only if, it needs to be reiterated, this is a functional part of their goals). While doing so, we tend to their struggles around code-switching. We validate any feelings of resistance or grief and acknowledge that the expectations are unjust. We cheer on their successes not because those make them a better fit for mainstream culture but because they broaden their opportunities for personal flourishing and for pursuing their aspirations. At the same time, we validate the beauty and the importance of their home dialect. We expose them to dialectal works of art; we strengthen their connection with and pride of their heritage. We cheer on their correct dialect productions as much as on their correct Standard productions, even though they may not be in our formal list of goals. It is well-known that

strengthening the home language is best practice in fostering academic and professional idioms (e.g., Brennan, 2018); doing so is thus not only an ethical and relational imperative but also serves the goals of therapy.

ACRT cannot provide a conceptual framework for this approach: due to its focus on the changing or abolishing of power structures, it gives no guidance on how to work *within* them. Pragmatic humanism, by contrast, is at its best in precisely such ambiguous situations. Cognizant of the tragic limitations of all human efforts, it allows for contradictory experiences and for the acknowledgment of the full, conflicted humanity of everyone involved.

Teaching Maxim 4: Weave a Tangled Web of Otherness and Shared Humanity. This maxim addresses criticisms 4) and 5) outlined above, that is to say, the related problems of empathy and of unintentional othering. We argued that the very goal of anti-racist education is characterized by an inner tension: between learning to see BIPOC persons as *individuals* on the one hand who suffer from *systemic, group-based injustices* on the other. We also argued that holding this tension is necessary to allow for empathy. We will now attempt to make the case that pragmatic humanism provides a way of holding these contradictions in an open, accommodating space.

One of first author's teaching tools is the movie *The hate u give* (Tillman, 2018). It follows a Black high schooler from a disadvantaged neighborhood through her experiences of attending an affluent, majority White school. At one point, she witnesses how a childhood friend of hers is killed by a White police officer who mistakes a hairbrush for a gun. Racial justice protests erupt and change existing structures both in her neighborhood and in her school.

One dialog in the movie is particularly pertinent to the present topic. It happens between the protagonist and her White boyfriend. Still grieving and traumatized, she discloses to him, for the first time, the cost of navigating two cultural worlds, and the hardships of living in her world. He responds by contending he does not see color, to which she responds: "If you don't see my Blackness, you don't see me".

From an ACRT perspective, the analysis of this scene is simple. The boyfriend is oblivious to his privilege, which has allowed him to ignore the very real and pressing differences between his lifeworld and that of his girlfriend. Again, this analysis is not false. But it obscures the central dynamic of the encounter: at its core, this is not a matter of 'checking one's privilege' but of two human beings jointly wrestling with their experience, one struggling to see, the other wishing to be seen. In disregarding this relational aspect of the dialog, ACRT flattens lived experience and leaves out the complexities of human-to-human encounter across centuries-old barriers: the boyfriend's wish to understand; the protagonist's wish to be seen fully *by him*; the individual yet shared vulnerability of disclosing one's inner vagaries; and the deeply personal effects of toxic ideologies on individuals' psyche. We contend that attending to those complexities is a prerequisite for empathy. If we focus exclusively on the wrongness and the injustice of the situation, as ACRT does, we highlight the mutual otherness of the movie characters, and fail to alert students to the blossoming of understanding and empathy between them—and, by extension, to foster their vicarious experience of it.

We contend that pragmatic humanism allows for attending to these deeper layers. Unencumbered by conceptual orthodoxies, it gives the educator freedom to weave narratives that do justice to the

complexity of human individuality and culture-boundedness. We wish to add a word of caution, however: in weaving such narratives, they must come to terms with the fact that this complexity cannot be exhaustively explored in a diversity course in CSD. The question of the relationship between individual and group identity is as old as philosophy itself, and has not been answered conclusively except, perhaps, for the recognition that it is constantly renegotiated. If the anti-racist educator manages to insert a modicum of nuance into this negotiation, we would consider their work a job well done.

Teaching Maxim 5: Own the Shadow. We argued above that anti-racist education is best seen as a therapeutic effort. In the case of White students oblivious to the realities of racism, the latter can be understood, from a Jungian perspective, as the ‘shadow’ of their individual and collective identities which needs facing in order to be addressed and overcome (Johnson, 1991). The ACRT approach runs the risk of wholly ignoring this necessity: in its relentless focus on abstract power structures and their dismantling, it shirks any concrete struggle with the issue and attempts to leap into an unspecified future where said structures no longer exist. It is this lack of realism that makes it unsuitable for therapeutic purposes.

In contrast, the pragmatic humanist approach is to face this shadow and to hold the tension between its existence and the meliorist ideals that propel the person into action. In the case of anti-racist education for conservative-leaning White students, such ideals are enshrined in their identity as Americans: equality, liberty, and justice are what the country aspires to, even as it denies them to large swaths of its citizenry. The hope is that this contradiction between students’ inherited self-understanding and their newfound insights sparks an ongoing process of self-reflection, dialog and action as they make their way into the professions.

Conclusion

It is our view that the cause of anti-racism is too important to allow it to fall prey to dysfunctional public discourse. This is why we contend that while CRT is indispensable, ACRT should be avoided in teaching, for two reasons. One, the goal of anti-racist education is not to change laws or policies but to change hearts and minds. This entails educating our students about structural and systemic inequities, but also preparing them to work *within* existing structures—and highlighting the need for changing them. We believe that the best way to achieve this is to center diversity education around formative experiences that encourage growth in the desired direction (Dewey, 1938/1997).

In order to achieve this, we believe a therapeutic stance needs be adopted that works *with* the persons it seeks to change, rather than against them. Pragmatic humanism offers a broader and more accommodating framework than ACRT that holds not only the potential of bridging gaps between divergent lifeworlds but, importantly, can reap the benefits of actual, scholarly Critical Race Theory—its analytical precision and clarity of scope—without falling prey to misguided claims to epistemic absolutism. In Honnacker’s (2008) words, “[i]t demands to take a plurality of perspectives into account, and to take a critical [sic] stance toward absolute truth claims in order to challenge the established status quo and to strive for the better” (p.4). In this reflection, we hope to have made the case for nothing less.

The other reason we believe educators should steer clear of ACRT is that it lends itself to serving as a handy target for those who wish to dismiss the importance of anti-racism. Its simplistic and absolutist claims are easy to refute, providing a useful foil for the present backlash against equity and justice. In its latest iteration (we are writing this in July 2021), said backlash has found expression in various efforts to ‘ban CRT’ in K-12 teaching (Kearse, 2021). While we have our concerns about ACRT, it seems rather obvious that said efforts are but thinly veiled attempts at avoiding the harsh truths CRT has to offer. It goes without saying that we are thoroughly opposed to any such endeavors. Misguided attempts at ACRT-based grade school instruction do exist, to be sure, usually in conjunction with other systemic issues (Packer, 2019; Senna, 2021). We believe, however, that the actual danger lies in anti-‘CRT’ laws keeping teachers from addressing racism altogether (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). As mentioned above, CRT is the only theory that can make sense of the converging facts about racism. Teaching those facts without recourse to the theory would be as impossible as teaching facts about evolution without recourse to evolutionary theory.

All that said, detractors of ACRT have one argument on their side that deserves to be taken seriously. As we explained in this article, popular ACRT does, indeed, fail to offer a way for White students to accommodate the insights offered by CRT. The reason for this is that CRT has a clear aim and scope: to critique and combat systems and institutions that exercise and maintain oppressive practices. By contrast, the aim and scope of anti-racist teaching is to help students *understand* those systems—their history, their impact on themselves and others, and their own place in this entire problem complex—so they can advocate for change while working within them. This requires learners to engage on a path of self-reflection and growth, which is difficult, can be painful, and usually happens in relationship. CRT was never intended as a framework to facilitate this, and ACRT, due to its absolutist leanings, is incapable of doing so.

This was what prompted us to offer an alternative approach. Pragmatic humanism opens a pathway for teachers to guide students through these difficulties and engage in the protracted process of identity (re-)formation, both individually (Ponterotto et al., 2006) and at the societal level (Hochschild, 2021). It is our hope that it can serve to foster growth and healing without glossing over harsh realities.

Disclosures

Dr. Honnacker is the author of our main reference for pragmatic humanism and earns royalty from her book sales. Drs. Townsend and Kroll are employed by an institution of higher education that pays them for scholarly work such as publishing. In addition, both have a vested interest in making the US a more just and equitable society: Dr. Townsend as a Black man, Dr. Kroll as an immigrant married to an immigrant of color.

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