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### Critical Theory of Social Inequality

When I try to make sense of the inequality present in so many institutions in our world, I begin to uncomfortably ponder the notion of structure versus agency. It is unclear how much power and control one really has over their own life when systems in place leave them unsupported and despondent.

My experience studying abroad in South Africa in the Fall semester of 2021 comes to mind when exploring this query. With an extremely tumultuous and complex history of racial inequality, the past has translated into a current state of race-related poverty. Walking on the beautiful streets of Cape Town, I was consistently disheartened to see almost exclusively Black and Brown faces from babies to elderly folks experiencing hunger and homelessness. The contrast of upper middle class white people walking past these communities on their way to expensive restaurants or their gated neighborhoods made this an even more upsetting site.

It was clear to me that the upper class white population and post-apartheid government was failing these communities, unable to provide the justice and resources that their lower-income population is in dire need of. Zooming out of South Africa, we see this all over the world. Throughout history, there have been vicious events and systems of oppression that leave communities under-resourced and traumatized. When wanting to gain some semblance of agency and control, it can result in people inflicting the oppression that they experience onto others. We see that in the cyclical nature of violence in our society. This fact of life can make it impossible

to see the world in black and white, as people are simply “good” and “bad”, as we are all shaped by our experiences, including the ones we didn’t have control over.

That is why it is so important to use the agency we do have to the fullest, in regard to how we engage with ourselves and our social world. We can go to therapy if we find we are repeating the very same patterns we have been oppressed by. We can use the resources we have to assist and empower those who are unable to exercise the same agency that we are able to. We can educate ourselves on social inequality and lead a life that reflects that learning and growth. We are all responsible for combating social inequality in whatever ways our agency allows us to do, and supporting others in developing and exercising their own agency in ways that foster empowerment on personal and societal levels.