

Theory of Social Change

In the face of persistent social inequality, the quest for meaningful and impactful change is obligatory; however, one can not embark on this journey without a theory of social change. I believe that youth empowerment, liberatory education, and individual expressions of radical love all culminating into heightened critical consciousness will lead to a more caring society where more people feel a true sense of belonging and a commitment to justice. In my opinion, true social justice work should be led by the people most affected by marginalization, but that does not pardon others from being a part of the fight to dismantle the sadistic patterns of oppression. In fact, allyship is central to my theory of social change, as shown by my understanding of radical love to fight for causes seemingly unrelated to oneself.

It is important to engage in the dismantling of oppression because, as Alexis Jemal stated in their piece about critical consciousness, “Social injustice creates[s] a self-perpetuating phenomenon; like a virus, social injustice infects the host system from individuals to families to institutions” (Jermal, 2017). This virus of social injustice is a danger to all, and requires constant dismantling. With a lack of social change, the virus will continue to spread, causing oppression and dehumanization to run rampant, which will continue to disadvantage some. In order to challenge these norms of social inequality and liberate the oppressed, Freire claims people must think critically and act accordingly about the reality of the systems we are a part of, to which I agree (Freire, P. 1972).

The only issue is, *how* do we enact this kind of change? One way I believe change is enacted is through raising a generation of critically conscious thinkers through literacy education by means of the public school system. That all being said, our public school system in America has never been an equitable place. While people might believe that school segregation ended

with Brown vs. Board of Education, racial segregation still exists today, along with funding disparities and inequitable punishment, among many more examples of oppression. Oppressive systems happen in large-scale policies and social ideas, but also on the micro level in schools through individual hate and bias. There are policies, practices, and procedures in public school education that replicate the injustices in the world and reinforce stereotypes; the education system can be used as a tool for oppression to conserve the dominant culture and sustain inequalities that are beneficial for the oppressors. Nonetheless, there is space to make change, and it starts with the influence of teachers.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explains how educators can foster critical consciousness to encourage social transformation. As Freire saw it, critical consciousness is the process of becoming aware of an oppressive system, and the ability to challenge the system, questioning the status quo, and reflecting on one's position within the system (Freire, P. 1972). I see educators as the generative force that will raise a generation of critically conscious citizens by teaching students to carefully evaluate systems of oppression through dialogue and problem-solving skills.

Education is fundamental to democracy because questioning and interrogating the policies and bills proposed for our nation requires civic literacy. Critical consciousness encourages us to imagine different futures and build skills for creating change.

Outside of education for liberation, I see individuals participating in praxis as a means of enacting social change. Praxis is theory, action, and reflection in constant circulation. Praxis is not a mindless action. It is, as Freire saw it, praxis is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1972, p. 36). Embarking in praxis is challenging your own thinking in conjunction with social change work that reflects how you see change in the world.

Youth always seems to challenge my thinking and change how I see the world. Social justice work that involves youth at an individual level can be difficult to track, but very meaningful. I anchor my theory of change in a belief that we affect systems through our daily interventions and interactions. Adrienne maree brown explains this as fractal theory, saying “a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop” (Brown, A. M. 2017, p. 52). In reference to social justice work, fractals is the idea that what you do on a small scale will be replicated enough times that it ends up having a large-scale impact. Not every action in praxis can, or should, be shocking to the system; instead, we must trust momentum and power in numbers that, with enough faith in fractal theory, change will commence (Brown, A. M. 2017).

My social justice work is grounded in a foundation of community, coalition, and trust, as marie brown teaches us. Educators, as change makers, need to trust our fellow activists to also be putting in the work for social change to avoid burnout. I trust my friend Maeve will take on environmental equality, and my teammate Eleanor will continue to advocate for reproductive justice, while I work to decolonize education. We need to lean on our community to hold each other accountable while also making space for personal well-being to consistently organize to make change.

Theory of Social Inequality

Before looking into how I understand social inequality in our world, I must look at what social equality is. Social equality to me means that all individuals in society have equal rights, liberties, freedoms, and autonomy. By this, I mean that everyone regardless of race, gender, or

status can enjoy equal access to opportunities both structurally and socially. An example of social equality would be all schools, regardless of local property tax, having access to funding and resources that represent and support their schools. This does not mean it is necessarily divided equally, but the schools need to have equal access to said funding. This example would be social equality, something our country does not have right now. On the flip side, social inequality is where people are limited by law and social influence to certain opportunities. An example of social inequality that I think of a lot of from Peggy McIntosh's writing 'White Privilege Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' where she says "I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location (that you recently moved) will be neutral or pleasant to me," McIntosh, P. (2003). This is a white privilege that can lead to social inequality. If our society was socially just, people of color would not have to fear their white neighbors would not be pleasant to them due to their race; this is social inequality.

My theory of social inequality revolves around my view of world history and my positionality. Historically (and currently) there have been many laws and policies that influence social inequality. Globally, I think one of the most influential events causing social inequality in recent history is Apartheid. Apartheid institutionalized and legalized racial segregation and discrimination in South Africa. From 1948 to 1994 the government enforced discriminatory policies that limited educational and employment opportunities for non-white populations. Economic disparities negatively affected Black South Africans and still do to this day. The psychological, physical, and health inequalities also caused much harm to the black community in South Africa and globally. The attitudes and influence of apartheid spread across the globe and white supremacy was legitimized causing apartheid to not just affect South Africa, but the whole world. The dismantling of legal Apartheid in 1994 led to policy changes however the social

inequalities persist. I believe that the legacy and social implications like generational trauma, and white supremacy are still prominent and have caused severe racial injustice in both South Africa and the globe. Although there is injustice everywhere, I believe some of the worst is perpetrated in the US immigration system.

Institutionally, the US immigration system is flawed, and looking at it through a critical systemic racism lens helps me see where there are inequalities and injustices. Using the loose definition of social inequality from earlier, stating that it's where people are limited by law and social influence to certain opportunities, one can easily define the discrimination of non-white immigrants in the US as social inequality. European immigrants and Latinx immigrants are treated very differently in the US in both structural and social settings. This stems from many xenophobic influences that have torn through our country. Latinx immigrants face harsher consequences, and while some claim this is language-based, I would argue it's also heavily racist. This systematic racism in immigration officers and others stems from deeply entrenched racism that is learned behavior in the US.

Along with historical events like Apartheid and racist structural policies like immigration I believe that social inequality is caused by biases taught in the home. I believe that children learn racial bias by the time they go to school and this causes drastic social inequalities because they spend their whole lives causing microaggressions or explicit prejudices that severely affect non-whites. The seeds of bias are planted by children observing and internalizing the attitudes and behaviors of their families. Family environments that perpetuate racial stereotypes, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to the development of biases in children. Moreover, the perpetuation of racial bias in childhood can lead to the normalization of discriminatory attitudes

and actions in adults who often obtain positions of power and can perpetrate severe racial segregation.

While there are many more social inequalities, than those that I have highlighted, I believe that inequalities are grounded in history, breed in biases, and thrive in communities where white supremacy is not challenged, deserves immediate justice. I believe the treatment and social acceptance of immigrants in the United States fall into this category and should be critically examined and counteracted. That being said, it is certainly not the only social inequality that should be addressed, but part of social change is trusting my peers to tackle other forms of social inequality.

Positionality

Walking into Lucy Stone School I would head straight to the office to log in as a volunteer, solidifying my identity as an outsider. During the first week of research many of the students in the 6th grade had never met me before. Despite that, as I walked the halls to get to class, I was frequently approached by kids I know personally from my employment at their afterschool program and my visits to the school through University classes. In Ms. Mahoney's class, three of the students attend the program I work at, making me a constant in their lives. While this does not change my positionality as an outsider, it complicates how the students see me because I am in a position of authority at work being a lead staff, but in their classroom I wanted to be seen as more of just a classroom participation, observer, and facilitator.

Unfortunately, due to standard practices in public schools, Ms. Mahoney introduced me as Ms. Fontaine on the first day. This directly juxtaposed what the youth call me at the after-school program, which is simply Miss Ella. While I know I would have needed to gain the

students' trust no matter how the students were expected to address me, this formal distinction made it feel harder to relate to the students because they automatically saw me as the teacher equivalent with my name and identity, rather than horizontally positioned to them. I could tell there was immediate hesitation to open up to me, because for all they knew, I was just another form of boring literacy intervention. As my time in their class continued

While I don't believe that being a person of color would innately warrant trust in a situation like this, my lack of racial similarity to most students positioned me as even more of an outsider. In the classroom I shared racial identity to three people, two of them being teachers. Being a white person I have many social privileges different than that of my students, making it potentially hard to discuss microaggressions or relatability of the text we were reading because I do not share the experiences of my students or the characters in the book.

I spent many hours deliberating the dilemma of whether my racial identity would significantly impact the research, and I, with the support of many friends and classmates, came to the conclusion that with enough time and effort, I could build trust that transcended racial relatability. I built trust in this group in many ways by emphasizing listening to my students, relating to their interests, and putting a priority on our relationship rather than my research. In hindsight, I think the racial diversity that I added to the group allowed for some rich conversations, but I can't help but think the students, particularly towards the beginning of the four months, might have held back thoughts or contributions to conversations regarding race due to our differences.

And yet, we had many conversations about female beauty standards and what it's like to be the eldest daughter which I was able to relate and contribute to. Of course, my students held intersectional identities regarding gender, but I think being able to relate about gender with three

out of four members of the focus group gave the students a sense of ease which helped build trust, and complicated my insider outsider identity.

Positionality is not just based on physical identity though. There is much of a person's past that directly affects their non physical positionalities. For me, one of my most guiding experiences that shifted my positionality and understanding of the world was challenging my identity as someone who exists and benefits from colonization, while living in Namibia for five months. This experience came as a study abroad opportunity where I went to school, taught pre-k, played frisbee and most importantly *lived* in Windhoek, Namibia. Namibia is the second least densely populated country in the world with a rich history of colonization, resistance and liberation. During my time in Namibia, I experienced living as a racial minority for the first time in my life. I do not equate my experience to that of BIPOC people in the States because the social implications of my whiteness, while in the minority, were still prevalent and beneficial. Living through and grappling with my white fragility confirmed in me my commitment to continuing to educate myself of the world's inequalities, and specifically historical events that influenced the social hierarchies that exist today. I gained a deeper understanding of the nuance of identity, and systemic racism, specifically in the context of southern Africa, but what I learned during my time abroad is applicable to all aspects of my life.

Another shift in my positionality recently came with the influence of radical love. To best sum up radical love, I leave it to bell hooks who said “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.” (hooks, 2000. p. 13) I believe what hooks is saying there, that love is not just a feeling but a practice, a commitment to the struggle for justice. It is about transforming the world and ourselves through radical care and solidarity.

To me, I have learned that radical love is not just an emotion, but a political stance against oppression. I see this influencing my praxis, and the way I live my life, because radical love motivates me to engage in struggles that may not directly affect me, with the goal of love for others and the greater good. I envision a future where all people can live with dignity and freedom and radical love is a powerful force working to achieve this goal. An example of a time I experienced love as a means of resistance was the summer of 2024 when I worked at a camp for youth with physical disabilities. The philosophy of the camp was to use radical love and treat our campers, as we would any other child. While on the surface this may not seem aligned with radical love, I see treating people who are physically disabled as you do able bodied people as a form of resistance against the status quo being as this is not a practice everyone follows. It is normalized that people act differently around those with different abilities, but we combated that notion at camp. That summer I experienced the most amount of concentrated joy I ever have in five weeks which was proof that our world would be a happier place if everyone used radical love to support and spread joy that resists systems of oppression.

I see the addition of radical love to my daily routines and my ability to resist my white fragility as being crucial to my positionality within this research because it makes me more equipped to teach using critical literacy. Being an undergraduate without a degree in teaching or specific training in critical literacy to build critical consciousness is certainly a limitation on this research, but based on my new found life philosophies I feel better prepared to take on this work while continuing to build my critical consciousness along with the students.

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