

Critical Social Theory Related to Inequity

As someone who wants to create and maintain social change, I believe that I need to carefully investigate my social world to understand where social inequality stems from. Detailed inquiry must be done first, then I can figure out an informed plan. One question that I have been struggling to expand on is, “How do we explain the inequalities that are connected to race, gender, and social class?” Of course, I do know the answer. However, I want to be able to write about my understanding and experience in a way that people who are not interconnected with the liberal world of Clark, will understand and relate to. I want my research to make sense to those not involved in an academic setting. I don’t want to *read* about social inequalities; I want my research to come from people who *experience* inequality. Understanding something and relating to it are different; however, they all do the same thing. To understand inequality, one must have the ability to actively comprehend the injustices that structures of America create. To relate is to experience inequality, where you have a first-hand account of what it feels like. Understanding or relating to the topic that one is researching is important to be able to conduct meaningful research. As a lesbian, white-presenting woman, I have not experienced many inequalities when it comes to my race. I am multi-racial; however, I am white presenting. I live in a town with primarily lower to middle-class families. I do have other experiences that make me passionate about educational equity, but it has to do with my loved ones' experiences that have affected me the most.

The type of social inequality that I focus on at Clark and in my everyday life is education inequality. There are many forms of educational inequality, but at Clark I focused on educational

accessibility for vulnerable groups. I am a Peer Learning Assistant (PLA) for Liberal Arts for Returning Citizens (LARC) program at Clark, which utilizes grants to offer formerly incarcerated people college classes for free. I have been a PLA for five classes now. In my undergraduate, I have been looking for a program at Clark that is not performative and makes some sort of change. I have noticed throughout my time at Clark that some students will organize or join programs just to get credit. Then, they will graduate and leave the inequalities of Main South behind. I have learned from people who have experienced injustice firsthand instead of reading about it. I learn as much from my students as they learn from me and the leading professor. In the Sociology of Law class, it was set up like a round table discussion. My professor made it so the students felt empowered to interject in the conversation and share their experiences as victims of the justice system connected to the topics we were discussing. This classroom environment is important to create so the students do not feel like they are being *talked at*. The difference between reading research on incarceration and hearing experiences firsthand is that I can learn about who these people are at their core, separate from the crime they committed. This is important because many people who commit crimes are not bad people. More often than not, people who commit crimes are struggling with their mental health or are born into an environment where choices are forced upon them. I try to look at the bigger picture—what brought them to where they are. The overarching aspect most of my students share is that they were victims of their environment and those who were supposed to care for them.

This group of students are the kindest, most well-mannered, and most respectful people I have ever met in my life. These people have committed crimes that have landed them in prison, some for ten years. Going into this program, I had some knowledge about how students are

pushed out of school. When I was in high school, I witnessed teachers targeting students who had trouble in school and over policing. A common disciplinary action that my teachers often took was to send the “at-risk” students to the office when they misbehaved, while other students just got reprimanded. What is going on in a child’s life, affects them in every aspect of who they are.

I myself have struggled with my mental health. On days where I was depressed and had to go to school, I roamed the halls, didn’t do my work, and lashed out. The disciplinary actions I received were far different from my at-risk classmates. When I had bad days, no one noticed that I was doing any of these things because I am white presenting and a girl. Being a part of LARC gave me the chance to hear students stories from when they were in school. I learned about troubled parental relationships. How having a father who is a bad cop can raise a son who detests law enforcement violently. I learned that motherhood at a young age and no support system can set you up for unlawful failure. Too much stress and responsibility at such a young age can lead someone to addiction or criminal behavior to make ends meet. I learned what goes through a 14-year-old's head, when an adult they trust gives them a gun. I learned from a student who has not climbed a staircase in a decade due to being in solitary confinement. And lastly, I learned how the majority of Clark’s student body does not know what it means to serve time in prison. Clarkies will protest against mass incarceration but will be terrified to speak to someone who used to be in a gang. Most Clarkies come from privilege, unless you are like me and go here on government assistance. This is me generalizing my classmates, but from what I have experienced through conversations and observation, Clarkies stop protesting when someone commits a crime. It is hard for some of my classmates to separate a person from their crime because of internal,

unacknowledged stereotypes of people labeled as "criminals." One of the students told me about how they were treated poorly in Clark's library, and they think it was due to their older age. The consequence of this situation is that my student feels like they cannot ask questions of people in the Clark community when they need help. Still, some Clarkies are exclusionary to everyone outside of their known student body.

How do power and privilege work in the education world? There's one student I will call Mark, who is a white, straight, cisgender male. Another student I will call Jacob immigrated from Africa (not specifying country due to privacy) when he was a kid to Worcester. Mark was placed in a minimum security facility where he was taught a trade and spent his time in prison being educated and entertained. Jacob does not talk much about his time in prison. This is a simple example of race affecting the way one is treated, but that does not make it any less important. I remember Jacob telling me, *I'm a black man. I was born on this earth expecting to go to prison at some point in my life.*

To minimize the existence of inequality, there needs to be larger-scale programs such as LARC to support one of the most intensely disadvantaged groups, individuals who are formerly incarcerated. One does not know the actuality of reentering society after prison unless they have spoken to someone who has been through it. It is difficult to get and maintain a job, and if you are on parole, that is a whole different story. After seeing the "Yes, I committed a crime" box checked off, some employers immediately turn their application down. I had another student say, in a discussion, that *we need to give support to the youth*. Somewhere in my research, I want to include information on the school-to-prison pipeline. This phenomenon was present in my high school, and I observed instances of over policing at my current job as a middle school

paraprofessional/substitute teacher. I have noticed that once a student is seen as a troublemaker, they are more likely to be targeted by staff members. I have my suspicions as to why, but I want to do some research to confirm my thinking. I have observed that some teachers either do not want to deal with the higher-needs students or are lacking support and energy. After an individual gets charged with a crime or spends time in prison, it makes it harder for them to integrate back into society and stay out of prison.

I have a good amount of knowledge when it comes to education and mental health. During my research, I want to broaden my knowledge of the prison system, reentry programs, and how to better serve my current and future students. This essay has been a mess, but I deeply care about education equality, and throughout my praxis, I want to expand my knowledge and immerse myself in an inclusive academic environment. I will also keep in mind that my place in the LARC program is as a teaching assistant, not an expert. I carry myself guided by the students' needs and wants rather than what I think is best.