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The Implications of Critical Race Theory (CRT) on Two Significant Findings of a Study of Black Catholics on the Social Frontier

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Delivered during the 2007 meeting at St. Meinrad Archabbey, Bartlett discusses the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) on qualitative research projects involving marginalized persons, particularly African American Catholics in predominantly white parishes. He concludes that CRT calls us to action to end racism. That call must be heard especially by Catholic Church leadership.

Choosing a research methodology and theoretical or conceptual framework can be, at times, the most challenging and controversial part of doing any study. As a graduate student the two become the soul focus of conversation until the pluses and minuses of one over another are hammered out between student and one's committee. Choosing "well" or what some might consider "playing it safe" can positively impact one's research completion and possibly one's future in the academy. For some of us however choosing well or being chosen by a particular method or theory becomes like taking the road-

less-traveled. Delays, struggle and controversy are to be expected. Such struggles come not as a surprise but rather to be expected. They appear to some of us to be in our DNA.

After an extensive search of the literature it was determined that Critical Race Theory (CRT) had never been used in the study of black Catholics although many had been outspoken and critical of the church for decades prior to the time CRT came on the scene in the 1970s. In this particular case, the process and experience of studying both race and using a theory with the word “critical” in it would proved to be challenging. Having to choose safe over risky reminded me of a childhood experience which leads me now to a slight digression.

When I was a boy of about 7 or 8 I found myself one summer day staring into a cardboard box alive with six-week-old puppies. It was my first time at choosing my own pet rather than inheriting them from my older brother. I remember kneeling next to the box and feeling anxious about choosing the right one and most importantly knowing the importance of not inadvertently choosing the runt of the litter. This was my first chance and at that young age I was already feeling the pressure that comes with opportunity and being aware of the consequences of choosing poorly.

Just when I was about to reach in to the box to pick one from the litter my father stopped me short and offered what proved to be a wise suggestion that would serve me for life. Dad gently removed the six puppies from the box and placed them in the middle of the floor only a few feet from me. His words of wisdom that day I have applied throughout my life. “Son,” he said, “Rather than you

choosing the puppy, trust that the right one will choose you.”

The first ball of fur that eventually found its way to me that day would prove to be not the prettiest or the smartest of the litter but we quickly became best friends. He and I would be companions on many roads-less-traveled for well over a decade and I never doubted once whether we were meant for or right for one another.

With that story in mind I now pose the obvious and somewhat rhetorical question: So what does my story have to do with methodology, theory and the focus of this article? It is about story-telling and being chosen. Nearly a half century later I found myself starring at several different qualitative methods and theoretical frameworks. I had my research question that I knew was the right one. I knew I wanted to capture counter, silent stories, the rest however was not as clear. However, at some moment, I am not exactly sure when, I was 7 or 8 years old again and my approach to choosing and the anxiety I once felt back then resurfaced. This time, however, the choice was not a puppy but rather a conceptual framework that might slow my progress yet shape my future. I knew then what I had to do. First and foremost I had to trust that the right conceptual framework would choose me. In the end I truly believe that's what happened, and CRT chose me. It, like the puppy, continues to come with its share of controversy and challenges. However, CRT has also become like that first puppy, a welcomed companion on roads-less-traveled.

CRT is about the power of stories and counter-story-telling. It is about allowing people the chance to define their own reality. Although it is argued by many that we

live in a post-race epoch, CRT argues that race is embedded in our way of life and that we live racialized lives. Race is simultaneously about *everything* and about *nothing*.

My 2007 study¹ was dedicated to the my interviewees and to the stories they told of exclusion, isolation and racism at the hands of both white Catholics and black Protestants in the town of Three Forks. Stories from Peter, Sophia, Mark, Sarah, Moses and Elizabeth were shared. Their stories confirmed the need repeatedly articulated by Church leadership, Black Catholic leadership and scholars for renewed efforts to address racism and exclusion in the church wherever it is found. In summary, the focus of that first paper was on the lived experiences of the participants and their day to day experiences of “sticking out like a sore thumb.”

This article is on the implications and use of CRT on two of the original study’s significant findings: a) identity at the intersection of black and Catholic as a complex social phenomenon; and, b) Black Catholics’ experiences of marginalization by other blacks and other Catholics. The focus of this paper is on CRT and on those significant findings.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CRT is a race-based methodology. It is critical and action oriented. In the spirit of CRT scholarship, I assumed

¹ Robert Bartlett, “Committed to the Faith While Sticking Out Like a Sore Thumb: Stories of Black Catholics on the Social Frontier” *The Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 1 (2007): 84-107.

in doing the original study that when a people's "invisible truth" is made visible, the truth of racism and exclusion are revealed and that, once revealed, a cure can be thought of. True to CRT I attempted to identify the *hows* of Black Catholic people's lives on the social frontier, as well as their traditional *whats*. CRT was used for this study because of its emphasis on race and for a number of its fundamental concepts.

According to Bell,² Taylor,³ Delgado and Stefanic,⁴ Olmsted,⁵ and Parker,⁶ CRT is the heir to both critical legal studies (CLS) and traditional civil rights scholarship; it is a commitment to being critical; and it inherits from traditional civil rights scholarship a commitment to a "vision of liberation from racism through right reason"⁷ CRT sprang up in the 1970s as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country responded to what they considered to be the stalled progress of traditional civil rights litigation to produce meaningful

²Derrick Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory." *University of Illinois Law Review* 4 (1995), 893-910.

³ E. Taylor, "A Primer on Critical Race Theory." *Journal of Blacks in Education* 46 (1995): 122-124.

⁴ R. Delgado & J. Stefanic, *Critical Race Theory* (New York University Press: New York, 2001).

⁵ A.P. Olmstead, "Words Are Acts: Critical Race Theory as a Rhetorical Construct." *The Harvard Journal of Communication*, 9 (1998):323-331.

⁶ L. Parker, L., "Critical Race Theory and its Implications for Methodology and Policy Analysis in Higher Education.," in *Interrogating Racism in Qualitative Research Methodology*, ed. G.R. Lopez & L..(New York: Peter Lang Publishers Inc: New York, (2003), 181-202.

⁷ Derrick Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory." 899.

racial reform. CRT also has an intellectual root in feminist thought.

The impetus for CRT grew out of a student and faculty boycott of law school classes at Harvard in 1981 including black law professor, Derrick Bell. Bell is referred to by many as “the intellectual father figure” of the movement they later labeled “critical race theory.”⁸ CRT evolved from its early focus on African-Americans and the impact of the law on black/white relations.

CRT became a form of oppositional scholarship but its promise remains optimistic. It embraces a body of scholars whose members are committed to the struggle against racism. According to Bell, from its earliest beginnings critical race theorists were committed to a program of “scholarly resistance oriented around race” that sought to “attack a legal system which disempowered people of color.”⁹ CRT theorists “not only try to understand our social situation, but change it.”¹⁰ CRT assumes that the gender of the knower, their race, ethnicity, language, class, etc., will inform their relationship to the knowledge they seek.¹¹

Four fundamental concepts of CRT

I identified four fundamental concepts of CRT from the literature as being most relevant for this study. Racism

⁸ R. Delgado & J. Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*: 5.

⁹ Bell: 900.

¹⁰ R. Delgado & J. Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*: 3.

¹¹ G. Ladson-Billings, “Racialized and Ethnic Epistemologies,” in *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed), ed N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (California: Sage Publications, 2000), 266.

is the everyday experience of most people of color; storytelling is a way of discovering their versions of truth; the limits to liberalism for eradicating racism; and the notion of intersectionality. These four developed further look like the following:

1. Racism is ordinary and the everyday experiences of most people of color in this country. Racism is so enmeshed in the fabric of the United States that it appears both normal and natural. It is the way society does business. According to Smith-Maddox and Solorzano,¹² race is central to people's lives.
2. Storytelling is a critical way of discovering truth for the knower. According to Delgado and Stefancic, a key feature of CRT and storytelling is allowing one to "name one's own reality." Stories "challenge the status quo." Stories build consensus and create a shared, communal understanding. Stories determine "what is and what ought to be."¹³
3. Limits of liberalism and eradicating racism. Liberalism because of its failure to bring about deep lasting social reform. That color blindness and the law are manifestations of the ineffectiveness of liberalism.
4. The notion of intersectionality. The experience that no one person has a "single, easily stated, unitary identity."¹⁴

¹² R. Smith-Maddox and D. Solorzano, D, "Using Critical Race Theory, Paulo Freire's Problem Solving Method and Case Study Research to Confront Race and Racism in Education," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, no. 1 (2002): 66-84.

¹³ R. Delgado & J. Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 541-542.

¹⁴ *Ibid*: 9.

Intersectionality means recognizing and examining the multiple identities people live simultaneously and the tensions that come from them. Intersectionality reveals the multiple identities of people's lives as gender, race, religion, allegiances, racism and other social constructs and how they intersect in the lives of black Catholics.

From Ladson-Billings's review of critical race theorists and their perspectives,¹⁵ a common theme emerged. According to her, scholars of color have been searching for a "place to stand" in relation to Western standards that impose an interpretative measure on other cultures. Ladson-Billings wrote about herself as a woman of color and a CRT scholar who studies other people of color and black people specifically:

As I attempt to do my own work I am struck by the number of scholars of color who have chosen to go back into those fields, construction sites, and kitchens to give voice to their own people . . . All of my selves are invested in this work—the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, the self that is a community member, the self that is a black woman.¹⁶

¹⁵ G. Ladson-Billings, "Racialized and Ethnic Epistemologies," in *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed), ed N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Sage Publications: California, 2000), 257-277, especially. p. 266.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 270-272.

Themes

A total of six distinct themes were developed from the original stories participants shared during one-on-one interviews. These were:

1. Self-identify as a black person and a Catholic;
2. Experience of prejudice in church, school, and community;
3. Being Catholic as an issue with other blacks;
4. Remaining in neighborhood parishes despite bad experiences;
5. Willingness to move to a hypothetical black parish;
6. Living as a black and a Catholic.

Two significant findings were developed from the six themes for the purposes of this paper. These are; the complexity of racial identity and Catholic intersectionality; and dual marginalization by Blacks and Catholics in Three Forks. The study revealed the following using CRT:

The Complexity of Racial Identity and Catholic Intersectionality

The identity of being Black and Catholic remains complex with significant differences among and across participants. The notion of intersectionality holds that no person has a single, easily-stated, unitary identity and that everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances.

Among the participants, all but one was explicit about their identity being Catholic first and black second. One participant's emphatic comments best summarizes his

position, simply, “I figure myself a Catholic first, and I’m black second.”

Only one participant was emphatic about being black first and Catholic second. According to her, “The Catholic religion, I think, is secondary to my blackness.” Two participants shared stories of how normal it was for them to be both black and Catholic and attributed this to the racial diversity of the black Catholic parishes in New Orleans where they grew up.

The lack of a single black and Catholic identity among the participants is consistent with previous literature that has found that there are no uniform black Catholic experiences in the United States. The stories of the participants who identified themselves as black first and Catholic second appear to echo the statement of Lucas¹⁷ who empathically argued that before his baptism he was a “a black man.”

It appears that one’s racial identity is mediated more by other dimensions of one’s life than place. Rather, our identities appear embedded in our consciousness through other social, cultural, and historical experiences over time. This appeared to be true for participants originally from Three Forks who described growing up and living their entire lives in this overwhelmingly white place and living the experience of “sticking out like a sore thumb” as “normal.”

¹⁷ Lawrence Lucas, *Black Priest White Church: Catholics and Racism*. (New Jersey: African World Press, 1970), 5.

Dual Marginalization by Blacks and Catholics

Most participants reported both feeling marginalized by the Catholic Church because they were black and feeling marginalized by other blacks because they were Catholic. One participant shared stories of other parishioners not wanting to hold hers or other members of her family's hands during The Lord's Prayer. She shared, "They acted like the black was going to rub off on them." Other feelings of being marginalized by other black people were described by one participant after informing a few black Protestants that she and her husband were Catholic as, "They looked at me like I just ate the baby."

Matters of race and feeling marginalized appeared to lie just under the surface of their experiences. All participants shared stories, some more painful than others, associated with race and feelings of isolation and rejection in Three Forks.

According to critical race theorists, black people in this country instinctually see and experience life from a race-conscious perspective even if they are uncertain as to how significantly it influences or impacts them individually at any given point in their lives. CRT explains that we all live complex lives with multiple identities, however, unlike Whites, Blacks live everyday lives conscious of their race. To be Black and Catholic remains outside the norm for both Black Protestants as well as for White Catholics in Three Forks.

A Call to Action

CRT assumes that there is a wrong that needs fixing in society. That wrong is rooted in a legacy of white

supremacy. Implicit in CRT is a call to action, stemming from the position that our society and our institutions are inherently racist. This study supports that claim and adds that the Catholic Church as an institution while existing in a post-race epoch is not exempt from acts of overt racism and exclusion.

As researchers, and as the sons and daughters of Africa, we are called to continually make visible the invisible lives of black people--to add voice to the voiceless. This study affirmed that the voiceless are anxious to tell their stories regardless of how painful. Their stories affirm a deep level of commitment to a Church that is not always loving or inclusive. It is imperative that the greater Church leadership and its many members hear these stories and others of exclusion and learn from them.

It is the responsibility of Catholic leadership particularly at the local parish level to pay attention to what the Church demands of itself, regardless of the absence or presence of Black Catholics in the pews. The Church has called itself to address racism as sin. In 1991 the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral letter stated that "racism is a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called the children of the same Father."¹⁸ According to Collum,¹⁹ Pope John Paul II spoke of structures of sin, which he said are "rooted

¹⁸ Brothers and Sisters to Us. *U.S. Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1991).

¹⁹ D. D. Collum. *Rising to Common Ground: Overcoming America's Color Line* (Louisville, KY: JustFaith, Inc, 2006), 5.

in personal sin and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove,” and, “Once we become aware of [social sin], we are obligated as Christians to avoid participating in it as individuals—even by our silence.”

My heartfelt belief and faith as a Black Catholic researcher remains that the Catholic Church leadership would learn something new from the often voiceless and invisible Black members specifically in their predominantly white pews. Again, as stated in the U.S. Bishop’s Pastoral Letter (Brothers and sisters to us on racism:

There must be no turning back along the road of justice, no sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solutions from another age. For we are children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all His brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.²⁰

This research only marked the beginning of a road-less-traveled. Whether the results help fill a gap in the literature or contribute to the development of a theology which is “authentically Black and truly Catholic” is yet to be determined. I am convinced however that CRT in the hands of Black scholars has the potential to accomplish both.

²⁰ Brothers and Sisters to Us, 14.

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