Critical Race Theory and Social Work – Laura S. Abrams, MSW, PhD, and Nicole Vazquez, MSW, MPP
Episode 37
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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Dr. Laura Abrams and Nicole Vazquez about critical race theory (CRT) in social work. Shout out to my former student Gaby for suggesting I do a podcast episode explicitly about CRT in response to the anti-CRT executive order. Laura is the Chair and Professor of Social Welfare at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. Nicole is a critical race scholar, a former Field Director and Chair Designee in Cal State Dominguez Hills' MSW Program, and currently runs Vazquez Consulting. They discuss the history of CRT, honoring the scholars of legal studies who developed CRT with the analysis that the law is not neutral, and has been used to oppress people of color and others from marginalized groups.

Shimon Cohen:

Laura and Nicole provide an overview of some of the core tenets of CRT using specific examples that connect to social work and ways to implement them in practice. Some of the core tenets covered are: race is a social construct, racism is an ordinary everyday experience, myth of colorblindness, critic of liberalism and the myth of meritocracy, differential racialization, interest convergence, and counter-narratives.

Shimon Cohen:

They talk about white supremacist culture and its impact on all of us, particularly how it works to strip communities of color from their collective and community-based cultures. We discuss CRT's fit with social work's social justice focus and how social work educators, students, and practitioners can implement CRT in their work and programs. We also talk about barriers to change and how to address them. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

So, before we get into the episode, I'm so excited to tell you all about this episode's sponsor, Designs by Tee. Tee is a Brooklyn-based social worker who's created a line of t-shirts and accessories to disrupt places and spaces in the fashion industry. This t-shirt line is doing what no other social worker has done before, fusing creativity with art, and she's managed to create a local buzz. She gives 10% of all sales towards purchasing essentials for children and families in a local shelter. She's got a social work collection, a socially conscious collection, a royalty collection, a kids collection. You've got to check her

out at Designs by Tee. That's T-E-E, designsbytee3.com. Check out the link in the show notes and take $5 off your next T-shirt order with the code TEEPOD5. That's T-E-E-P-O-D and the number five, TEEPOD5. Now, here's the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Nicole. Hey, Laura. Thank you both so much for coming on the podcast. I'm so excited for this episode to kick off 2021. We all know how horrible the year 2020 was. Hoping 2021, really wanted to start this year with Doin' the Work by really bringing it. I just can't think of a better way to do that than to have both of you on here, two people I just respect so much and I've learned so much from already to talk about critical race theory and then also critical race theory in social work.

Laura S. Abrams:

Thank you for having us.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. Thank you. We're excited.

Shimon Cohen:

So, let's get right into it because this could be a whole podcast in and of itself, not just one episode.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. That's true.

Shimon Cohen:

Right? We're really hoping that this is something that people listening can learn about, it could be an entry point, and it's also something they can take away practical speaking and begin to implement it whether they're an educator, whether they're a student, whether they're a social work practitioner doing work in the community, all those ways. There's a place for all of those areas to apply CRT. .

Laura S. Abrams:

Definitely.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

So, let's start with some history.

Nicole Vazquez:

For sure, yeah. So, critical race theory sprung up in the late '70s and it originated in legal studies. So, one of the main aspects of CRT is to look at our history, and in that taking it further to honor our past. So, I'm going to namedrop some CRT OGs like Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, and Angela Harris, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cheryl Harris, and Jerry Kang. So, folks like Derrick Bell back in

the '70s, legal scholars started to look at legal studies and look at the absence of any discussion around race or racism and legal studies.

Nicole Vazquez:

If you think about potentially what law students are taught or in society we're taught that justice is blind. Sensibly, justice is blind, but we know that in our history in the United States that there have been laws that have been created to explicitly further marginalize and oppress people of color and people from marginalized groups.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, what eventually became critical race theorists started to question that and moved to integrate discussion around race and racism into legal studies. So, since then, it's branched off and been included I would say pretty deeply in fields like education and public health and social work.

Nicole Vazquez:

The first article was written in 2002 by two Canadian scholars. In the U.S., Abrams and Moio came out in 2009, I believe. So, that's how long it's been put out there in terms of social work in the United States. I think it slowly gained traction since then.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, critical race theorists came up with a set of tenets. So, there aren't a standardized set of tenets of critical race theory because it has been applied in different disciplines. So, therefore, for social work, there isn't a standardized set of tenets, but there are some very fundamental ones that we use when we apply it to social work practice.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, thanks, Nicole, for that awesome introduction. One of the things that I think is important to add around critical race theory and the law, which really relates to social work, is the time period of the '70s when people were believing that the post-civil rights era, that it was important to be colorblind, so to speak, and in that colorblindness meant that to have a race consciousness itself or to notice race was racist.

Laura S. Abrams:

You hear this now if you're watching any of the backlash against critical race training or the news speaking out against telling teachers that they need to confront their white privilege. What people who teach and study and train people on critical race theory right now are being accused of is being racist, actually. We can get back to that later.

Laura S. Abrams:

This is because these really important legal scholars and activists and scholars of color were saying to us, "We cannot assume colorblindness in the law or in the practice of the liberal welfare state, so to speak, because we know that our society is racist," right? So, even the law cannot be neutral. Social welfare can't necessarily be neutral. Education isn't going to be neutral because these are all arms of the state. So, colorblindness itself is a contradiction because in order to address racism, we first have to acknowledge it.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, a couple of tenets around race and critical race theory that are intertwined are, one, that race is itself a social construction, that it's not biologically rooted, it's not genetically rooted, but that racism exists. So, acknowledging race as a social construction does not disavow the presence of racism. In fact, critical race theory asserts that racism isn't ordinary everyday occurrence for people of color in the United States, and that it's in other parts of the world, and that racism is as it's ordinary is deeply embedded in institutions and people's experiences in the day-to-day world.

Laura S. Abrams:

As colorblindness tries to erase noticing racism, it had the unintended effect of allowing covert and overt forms of racism to exist without people being able to pinpoint who the actors are or who the racists are, so to speak, in a world where civil rights was supposed to eradicate over racism.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, there's a lot of nuances there, but I have to say I think one of the biggest waking up points for me as a white woman and academic who grew up childhood in the '70s was understanding that everything I was taught about how important it was not to notice race or to point out anything about race because of colorblindness actually was perpetuating racism.

Shimon Cohen:

I think it's such an important point in that you gave that personal aspect of it at the end is important because something that I was thinking about as you were talking about colorblindness in that the framing of even trying to talk about race and racism is who is talking about colorblindness because it was most likely white people framing it that way and because for people of color, people of color know that racism exists. People of color know their race exists. So, it's like who gets to set even the discussion, and I think that's where CRT are ready from that beginning saying racism is baked in to the fabric of the United States, right? That acknowledges that right there, too. We can't even have these conversations without acknowledging that.

Laura S. Abrams:

I would admit growing up in a white liberal Jewish family in the '70s talking about somebody's race was a no-no. It was a mm-mm. You can't do that. That was something I unlearned in college when I took critical classes, sociology, women studies, African-American studies, but I would say that there's been a few generations of people, I guess, especially my generation, gen-X, that we all grew up with that edict that when you talk about race, it's racism.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. I think that idea of colorblindness is so key and important. So, thank you, Laura, for bringing that up, and then Shimon, you were saying that it's just baked in to the fabric of the United States, just goes along. It follows in to the next tenet that I wanted to talk about, just the critic of liberalism. I think when folks see that in written form, when you see the term liberalism, we think about it on political spectrum of conservatives and liberals, but the idea of liberalism really grew out of the time of kings and queens.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, kings and queens, we think about the divine right of kings. The kings and queens at the time monarchs believed that they were ordained by God to be in the positions that they were, and the people that serve them, their peasants and servants were ordained by God for their positions, and thus grew revolution, right? People revolted against that idea and pushback against that idea, and then came forth with this idea that all "men" are created equal.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, on the surface, that's great because we all should have this ... There's this equal playing field that we all have, an equal shot at opportunity in life, but in the United States, so that idea of liberalism then came over with the colonials that came to what eventually became the United States. That idea of if you all "men" are created equal translates to this idea of rugged individualism, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. If you just work hard enough, you will succeed in life.

Nicole Vazquez:

Again, on the surface, that all seems all good and well, but underlying that is it is focused on the individual, and if someone falls on hard times, is poor, for example, or commits a crime or starts to use substances, then that focuses on the individual and it's their fault, and it's due to their own personal moral failings. So, that's where the critic of liberalism comes in in critical race theory. It's this myth of meritocracy that we all have this equal opportunity in life.

Nicole Vazquez:

One liberalism then is in the United States sets the standard and this norm for what is normal or acceptable behavior here in the U.S., and if anyone falls away from that, then the focus is on them and not the systems that potentially created the situation that people end up finding themselves in.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. When you're talking about that, I think of quotes that get said sometimes in education or in social work. So, I'm just going to say one that I've actually heard in one of my classrooms, a student said, which led into an interesting conversation because I was like, "Hey, we need to talk about that." So, "Where there's a will, there's a way," right?

Shimon Cohen:

That goes straight to that idea of this meritocracy, that as long as someone's got a will or the one in education you hear a lot about is grit, if you just work hard enough and that conversation, "What does that mean when you're working with people as a social worker if you think that way and how are you going to potentially do harm by putting that belief system onto that client?"

Nicole Vazquez:

Right.

Laura S. Abrams:

Well, the interesting, let me, if I can, I think one of the interesting parts of that conversation is also within communities of poverty and vulnerability, there are many messages that you hear like in faith-based services, for example, in 12-step programs that resemble the individual aspiration model, I would call it along with community uplift, but there's very much a focus on personal responsibility, and it's an

ethos that permeated not just white culture, but I would say also institutions that operate in many communities in the United States.

Laura S. Abrams:

Now, is that unique United States? I'm not certain, but I think it does have a particular relationship to the history that Nicole was speaking about earlier-

Nicole Vazquez:

Definitely.

Laura S. Abrams:

... and that it becomes embedded in, for example, model minority myths, and ways that we tend to say, and this is part of critical race theory as well, "Okay. Well, this group is doing well. Chinese-Americans are doing well, so they must be doing something right." So, that's a principle called differential racialization in critical race theory.

Laura S. Abrams:

Another area where my work has been in the criminal justice system and that is an area where I see a lot of the personal ethos, personal responsibility, self-reliance discourse really taking a toll on people because in all the folks I talk to who have been incarcerated or who are struggling post-incarceration, they have really come to internalize the belief that is solely on them if they're going to succeed or fail. They don't want to rely on others. The ethos of personal responsibility runs very deep.

Laura S. Abrams:

In my research, what I found is that that cuts across racial alliance, too, and also, that is particularly cued among men who, obviously, also majority of people in prison they're male, but the sense of masculinity and needing to provide in addition to being basically indoctrinated in prison that it's you're fault that you're here, and it's only you who can help yourself when you get out.

Laura S. Abrams:

That can be a huge trap for people when they find themselves in conditions where they aren't doing well, that they just real blame themselves, and not necessarily that they were sent out of jail with $50 in their pocket and no place to live, right?

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, that's come up a lot in my research and in the work that I've done both in youth prisons and adult.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. I think that that to me is ... I will fully say that I've 100% drunk the Kool-Aid of critical race theory, and it courses through my veins because, Laura, you're talking about what you just said to me goes back to the critic of liberalism in that this idea of liberalism upholds white supremacist culture. So, that's why we use the term white supremacy that people react against because I think, I mean, and that's changed,

that shifted very quickly, I think, in the last year or two, but many people still react to that term, but it's important to talk about it because it is white supremacist culture that has created this standard and this norm such that we've all bought into it. Even people of color, even people from other marginalized groups have bought into it.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, when you talk about these men that are in prison that have bought in to that, they blame themselves for the conditions that they're in, and they feel that they're only ones that can get them out of these conditions that they're in, right? We've bought into that idea, that personal responsibility that, "It's on me."

Nicole Vazquez:

Again, why I say white supremacist culture is that because that really, particularly for people of color, that takes away our identity and our historical generational lineage that we come from where we are very communal, community-based cultures, right? We intergenerationally rely on each other, and that has been taken away from us, and particularly for Black folks here in the U.S. that have history in slavery. That's been taken away from them for centuries, and it's been reinforced for that long, too, then, hopefully, it's easier for us to understand why we buy into it, why everybody buys into it.

Nicole Vazquez:

That's why it's important I think to talk about white supremacist culture because it is so ingrained and so embedded that we have to get in there and look at it to start to be able to tear it apart and really get back to our roots.

Laura S. Abrams:

That brings up another really something I think about a lot about rehabilitation narratives. So, when you think about what most of the central premises of even social work is and not just liaisoning and getting people their needs and services, which is a big part of social work, but another big part of social work is getting people to "help themselves," right?

Laura S. Abrams:

So, the narratives of rehabilitation in prison, and in substance abuse programs, and in employment programs, and in even youth mentoring and youth counseling is really is then based on this white supremacist ideals, I believe. So, there's been some interesting work around that, but I think more needs to be done to think about how social work practices are enforcing those narratives and scripts that we don't even think about where did they come from, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. I think I'm sure this isn't the first time this has come up in your podcast, Shimon, the idea that social workers are agents of social control, right?

Shimon Cohen:

Totally. Yeah. I think like what you're both saying in the quote that I think of that that student of mine said that one time. I actually think that that quote was something she told herself that helped her, actually, probably get through some stuff. Nicole, as you're talking about how we've all bought in, it's so

deeply ingrained and it's like the oppression plus indoctrination together, right? So, things are taken away, culture is taken away as this new way of thinking as the mind is colonized, too, right?

Shimon Cohen:

Some of this stuff is so subtle. So, like Laura was saying, we might do something and not even know exactly where it comes from, I think about that quote because on the surface, it can seem so neutral or so uplifting like, "Hey, where there's a will, there's a way," you can do it is what the message that they're trying to say, but it's like there's just zero analysis of the conditions that are just slamming this person down everyday.

Nicole Vazquez:

It also makes me think for the students out there and for the educators that are out there, there's ... Tara Yosso is a critical race theorist and her article, Whose Culture Has Capital, is so great because it flips that narrative of what our common understanding what social capital is, and then she introduces this idea of community cultural wealth.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, when you talk about grit, it's really, I mean, that's, again, for me, the beauty of critical race theory is it really deepens our understanding and really our practice of person and environment and strengths-based perspective, right? So, Tara Yosso is a sociologist. She's not a social worker, but, I mean, that article is so great because it gives us a different way of thinking of ... She defines new terms in terms of social capital for people of color.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, this idea of grit is what people of color and people from marginalized groups have to do to survive in a world that wasn't created for them. So, that's an article that I highly recommend, Tara Yosso's Whose Culture Has Capital, for any practitioner or educator or student to look at.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Love that article and flipping the deficit lens totally around is so powerful. You're right. When I read that article, I actually thought, "Wow! I've heard some of this stuff said about actually social work students from educators." So, people really do need to read it and really think about the way we talk about students, the way we talk about clients to what we're doing.

Nicole Vazquez:

Right. I mean, just as a quick example from her article, one of the examples that she provides is linguistic capital. So, where the dominant narrative might be, where it's a deficit, where someone speaks with an accent, for example, or that a student has to translate for their parent who doesn't speak English has to translate for their teacher, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

She flips that and it's looking at in a strengths-based way of like, "Well, no. Here's a child who can speak two languages and think about the brain power and the energy that it takes to interpret and translate at a young age, right? So, there's that. That's another way of looking at that.

Nicole Vazquez:

Then also, she doesn't explicitly talk about code switching, but also, she doesn't use that term, I don't think, in the article, but it's also this idea of code switching of how people who are used to talking a certain way have to switch the way they talk in order to be seen as legitimate or relevant or to be taken seriously. That also takes an additional level of brain power and effort when you're just communicating with somebody.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Absolutely. Those are just all such good points, and they come up everyday. All this stuff comes up every day.

Laura S. Abrams:

Yeah. I was going to add, actually, related to three different tenets of critical race theory, a conversation that I had yesterday in my research with a Black man, who's my age, in his early 50s, who was imprisoned over 32 years for a crime, a homicide that he committed when he was a teenager. So, he was 16 or 17, and he was locked up until he was about, as he will say, 32 years, something odd days, and however many hours because he knows exactly, so until he was about 51 years old.

Laura S. Abrams:

Anyhow, my connection with him is in the realm of my research, but over the course of interviews, we've developed a working relationship. So, we were talking yesterday, and I asked him about current events, and COVID, and George Floyd, and Black Lives Matter, and Trump, and he had some really interesting things to say, and critical race theory actually gave me a lens to situate them. So, I'll give you a couple of examples.

Laura S. Abrams:

One was when I asked him about the murder of George Floyd and how did that affect him, he said, "That aint nothing new. I've been harassed and thrown around by the police so many times, I can't even tell you," even though he had been in prison from when he was 17 on. That was his experience as a Black man growing up in Los Angeles. So, the principle of racism as an ordinary experience, including violent racism was absolutely nothing new for him.

Laura S. Abrams:

Then he went on to say, "The only reason people got up in arms about it is because white people were out there protesting." He said, "Otherwise, it would have just been another Black man getting shot, which has been my experience since I was a kid."

Laura S. Abrams:

So, I thought about interest convergence, which is another CRT lens that basically says progressive change regarding race occurs when those who are in power, the white majority, those interest happen to converge or in other words, the white majority starts to create a policy platform that they care about.

Laura S. Abrams:

Then in talking about his experiences with the police and in his life and the lives of all of his family members growing up in a Black community, what I really listened to was his voice and experience, and that's another CRT principle, which is to center the narratives of people with lived experience.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, I think in saying that, there's a way that we can bring this work to direct conversations with clients. In this case, this is not a client, I'm not in practice, but in listening to what he had to say about current events, all of these principles came in to play in order for me to help understand his experience.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. I think that or a couple of things I think with this gentleman's experience, one, in terms of interest convergence, it's interesting, where this has been his experience, and I absolutely agree the reason why people are taking notice is because these types of murders of Black men in particular, people of color, have always happened and we're just getting an inside look at them now because of cellphones, and cellphone footage. So, it's been happening for forever. Now, we're being forced to look at it.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, I would agree that he's saying that this movement is happening and people are taking notice because now ... and I think the reason why, I'll say that the reason why folks are up in arms is because there's no ignoring it, right? There's no ignoring it. I don't remember who it was that told me that they had heard her read how Ava DuVernay was saying, "This is the first time we saw both perpetrator and victim within the same frame, within the same screen," right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, you actually saw it happening, and I think that's something interesting, too, and you see the juxtaposition, right? So, that's interesting to think about, and that's the thing with interest convergence is it's just that, that these interests are converging like Black folks have been murdered by police for centuries, but now because the dominant society can't ignore it, they have to step up and they have to respond. I think it's amazing and it's necessary that there are hundreds and thousands of people out on the streets.

Nicole Vazquez:

The thing with interest convergence is that, unfortunately, once we see change, we can't stop there. So, that's another part of critical race theory is that there's an activist component to it because once we know and have a better understanding of how things work, and have a better understanding of these tenets, then it's like we can't really ignore it, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

Now, we have the tools to understand, and I like to say, you have to know the beast to slay the beast, right? So, you can't really ignore it. So, once these victories are gained, we have the policy change that's happening now as the result of the murder of George Floyd, but that doesn't mean that we can stop, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, one example of interest convergence is with the Brown versus Board of Education in 1954. Derrick Bell first introduced the idea by saying that Brown versus Board desegregated schools at the Supreme Court level. So, yes, it was the right thing to do. Yes, it was the morally right thing to do, but he questioned why it was happening.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, his argument or analysis of it was 1954 we were coming out of World War II. We were spousing democracy worldwide, speaking out against communism, talking about how these dictatorships have crossed the world, but how can we do that and say we're the land of the free and the home of the brave when we're oppressing our own people here in the U.S., right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, it served the United States at the international policy level and diplomatic level to pass Brown versus Board and say, "Yes, we do treat everybody equally," right? Then Brown versus Broad passed and that's how those interests converged, right? Black folks have been fighting and with their white allies have been fighting for change for years. You know what? They gained this victory, but then what happened when Brown versus Board passed, then you have Jim Crow laws, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, I think that's the thing with interest convergence that we have to understand is that, yes, we have these gains, but, unfortunately, that's not the end. So, when George Floyd was murdered, yes, we've had these policy changes, yes, we've had now it's called performative allyship is a term that I learned, where you have all these corporations that have said, they're released all of these statements, "We're going to do better. We're going to change," and all of this. Rightfully so, these corporations are being questioned like, "Okay. That's great, but what exactly are you going to do? What does your board look like? What does your C-suite look like? All of your CEOs and your chief executives, what is the racial ethnic gender makeup of those positions?"

Nicole Vazquez:

So, I think that's something we have to be careful with with interest convergence that, yes, it's important to get these gains, to achieve these gains, but one understanding, what is the real intent behind them and then for us that are out there, pushing for change to ensure that it's meaningful and to keep the pressure on that the change is meaningful, and it's not performative.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. You're talking about corporations and I'm just thinking and I'm laughing, but it's not funny. You know, it's a schools of social work, right? I mean, talk about performative allyship, right? It's all these statements that came out and then it's like, "What's your curriculum? Who's on your faculty? How do you treat students?" All of that can fall under everything you're talking about with corporations.

Laura S. Abrams:

Yeah. I think what's both interesting about the position of social work and peculiar as well is that at the very least, the mission of social work is and should be aligned with values of social justice, including antiracism, human rights. So, it is a liberal enterprise in itself, right? That's not true with corporations. Their mission is to make money.

Laura S. Abrams:

Now, what does that all mean? We are expected in social work to do better, right? A corporation does a reorg or hires a CEO like NBC just did yesterday, a Black woman, after 25 years of having a white male CEO. We're all like, "Oh, they're great. Woohoo!" But their mission is still one... corporate America, the mission is still counter to what social work values are if you really look at it all. So, I think in one sense we're held to a different standard because we are expected to be doing the work. Hahaha. Pun. Title of your podcast.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, yeah. Hey, I love it. I love it.

Laura S. Abrams:

With that expectation, it does hold us to a higher standard. I think we need to rise to that challenge.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. I think that's maybe Shimon's point in that, that's what's disappointing, unfortunately, is that, apparently, there have been programs that have put out statements and that's as far as they've gone. It is disappointing, but, again, going back to CRT, it helps me to understand why that happens because even though, yes, we're social work and, yes, we're supposed to be rooted in social justice and seek and try to obtain social justice, we still operate within this capitalist system, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

We still follow these ideas of focusing on the individual and personal responsibility. As social work professionals and practitioners, we buy into all of that and practice that. So, I think that's what makes it harder for people to actually do the real work of ... because it's like reversing and overturning how many years of doing something a certain way.

Shimon Cohen:

I think what you're saying is so important, and for me, as I'm going through my own process of learning CRT because this is not like something I ever got in college or grad school, and even where I've been working in higher ed for a number of years, this didn't come up really either. It's been my own process of really pursuing this and then it's like somehow came across an article, which led me to another article, and then I got to Laura's article, and then I'm reading her citations in that article, and I find the report, Nicole, that you worked on from 2007.

Shimon Cohen:

It just keeps going deeper and deeper and deeper, and that's why I wanted to do this episode, too, to really put this out there for people because some of this stuff is a lot. It's like thick text and it can be complex, and that's good, and it should be because it is complex, and then break it down, but interest convergence, just as you're talking about it, I'm thinking about experiences that I've had and how that explains the experience. So, when you say we've got to keep pushing for gains, right?

Laura S. Abrams:

Organizations and movements and fields, they're tied to the way things have been. So, it makes sense that there's a reluctance to change, and it makes sense, unfortunately, that we haven't moved that far

since Razack & Jeffery's CRT model and social work came out in 2002, where they suggest that CRT and social work are very compatible, but that we continue to offer up a model of diversity or cultural competence that, really, weakens students' abilities to practice in diverse spaces.

Laura S. Abrams:

I want to add, the reason I became interested with not only because of the work of our students and particularly the work that Nicole started with her colleagues in doing a critical race analysis of the school public affairs at that time, but also as an educator, I needed a way to get students to think beyond the cultural competence model that is so common in social work and teaching about diversity and difference.

Laura S. Abrams:

Again, this is a paradigm shift that I'm surprised hasn't happened and now there's an opening following the murder of George Floyd and the emphasis on antiracism. I feel like there's now a movement and an opening to say, "Hey, there is a model out there to teach antiracism. It does go beyond cultural competence, which is rooted, really, in post-colorblindness and multiculturalism, but not in antiracism."

Laura S. Abrams:

So, the question for the field I think is, "We have this information out here. Are we going to use it? Is this the opening?"

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. Just to go back just one second to that thought is with interest convergence and then it goes exactly with what you're saying, Laura, and the way things have been and who, I mean, yeah, there are these systems, but there's people who uphold these systems, and that's the same in educational programs, and social work programs, and social work practice. The interest convergence part wherein it's like, "We've got to keep pushing for gains." So, who are we pushing against when you're in a school of social work? Why do we have to put ... Who do we have to push against, and then if those are the same people that have been doing it this way long enough, it's like just waiting for someone to finally get it and have this epiphany that, "Oh, I've got to change after all these years." I mean, that's I think also where there's a really big tension with all of this.

Laura S. Abrams:

I think, Shimon, we have to remember that we're up against a very dominant liberal framework that has also guided social work. So, in the same way that the law and education are presumed to be race neutral, and so is social work. So, it's like saying to someone again and again all of the things, the principles that your work has been based on, that your thinking's been based on, is we have to rethink all of those. That's hard for people. So, I think what we're up against is decades of learning and ideas about racism that are fundamentally incompatible with antiracism.

Nicole Vazquez:

I have a few different thoughts. One of the things that works for critical race theory as well is I was a former field director and chair designee. Last year, I was there at Cal State Dominguez Hills that was founded as a program that integrates, that uses critical race theory as its theoretical foundation. So, there's a class critical race studies in social work practice, and all students take it in their first semester

of the program. Then it's rooted and integrated throughout, and infused throughout the whole rest of the program.

Nicole Vazquez:

At Dominguez Hills, 90% of the students are students of color. So, for those students and for myself, as a student, as a woman of color, what CRT did for me was name the lived experiences that we've had. I, fortunately, grew up in a middle class household. I'll say that's because my dad had a union. He worked at General Motors and he had a union paying job that gave him a living wage. I'm thankful for that.

Nicole Vazquez:

The majority of the students at Dominguez Hills grew up in the area surrounding Dominguez Hills, so South LA, the South Bay, some of the largely marginalized and oppressed communities in Southern California. So, they come in to our program having these lived experiences and then we introduce them to critical race theory and on one hand, it's like a light bulb goes off for them where they're like, "Wow! The blinders are taken off," and that they're actually terms for their lived experiences. There's a validation of their experiences, and it's great, and it's beautiful, but then there's anger that comes with it as well, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

Then they're understandably pissed where they realize that saying that the system isn't just the way it is, it was created this way, and it was created this way purposefully, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, they're understandably upset, and they have to figure out, "Now, what does this mean for me as a person of color, X gender, sexual orientation, whatever, living in this world? What does that mean for me as a person, and now what does it mean for me as a social worked, and then what does it mean for me as a social worker going back and working in the community that I grew up in?"

Nicole Vazquez:

So, there's just so much to that, and there's so much that comes with that, but I'll say for the most part, and this is anecdotally at this point, what we hear from our students, it's a liberating, really, experience for them and that's what I hope when Laura's saying you're putting that challenge out there of like, "This is something that's there for social workers and social work educators and students that really provides a basis and a foundation of understanding," because they think people will ask, "Why are things the way they are?" I think the tenets of CRT help us to understand that.

Nicole Vazquez:

Then it's out there, so there are terms for lived experiences that we can go back to and can speak to and make us effective social workers. So, it really is an opportunity that's out there, I think, for all of us.

Laura S. Abrams:

I've noticed and, Nicole, I think those are some really important and rich points to make because social work as a whole educates lots of different folks, and a lot of folks with lived experience and system experience as well.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, CRT can be experienced as liberating, it can be experienced as overwhelming, but it puts a frame and an analysis, and a way to guide understandings of social systems that I think ends up being very positive. So, for white students and students from highly privileged backgrounds, I also think it can be really helpful, and the reason why is that because those students are sometimes have trouble contending with the ideas of white supremacy or the idea that somehow they've participated unknowingly in a system that's stacked against others, and that benefits them, it takes it a little bit the theory out of the personal all the time, that I'm being personally attacked for who I am, and into the realm of this is how in American society you cannot grow up as white and not think that somehow you are responsible for your own successes or it helps you unpack how the system has benefited you rather than the focus on just, "Oh, my gosh! I have guilt about this," or "I never really understood anything about my whiteness," and that's becoming an emotional barrier, right?

Laura S. Abrams:

Those things still happen, but I think CRT gives us principles and theory and also ways of unpacking the systematic privileges that also are a benefit to more privileged students in the classroom.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah, and I think going back to that focus on the system, what it also allows us to do and make it more, I don't want to say palatable, but easier to take in for white folks is that understanding the history, that one race is socially constructed, and then in this country, the hierarchy that's been created has been reinforced for 400 years, right? So, the socialization that we've experienced, however many years we've been on this earth, before we were here, it has existed, again, for centuries, and it's embedded and ingrained, and it's in the fabric of our society.

Nicole Vazquez:

So, from the textbooks that we read, the movies that we watch, the TV shows that we grew up watching, thankfully some of those things are changing now, but the billboards that we see driving down the street, all of that socialization just reinforces the biases that we have and places, people from X group into this box for us, right?

Nicole Vazquez:

So, I think also another UCLA alum and one of my friends and colleagues, Susie Parras, talks about how CRT helps us to feel like we're not the worst person in the world because it helps us to understand. I think also as social work students, we go in knowing in our heads, "I have to be objective. I can't be homophobic. I can't be transphobic when I'm going in and working with this client. I can't fear this person because he's a male and he's six-feet tall."

Nicole Vazquez:

We know that in our heads, but in our hearts and in our bodies, in our physical beings, we can't help how we feel, right? I think that understanding that race is socially constructed, there are other markers of identity that are socially constructed as well like gender, for example, and how that's reinforced and socialized for us helps us to, then again, going back to Susie, where it helps me feel like I'm not the worst person in the world, we understand where they're coming from and helps us give ourselves a little bit of a break.

Nicole Vazquez:

That introspection and that reflexibility is so key and important. So, when we talk about, Shimon, you were asking, "We're supposedly working with fellow social workers here at the administrative level in our programs. How do we get to this point?" That reflexibility to me is so key and important because you can't just tell someone, "You have to be antiracist and this is how you do it," because if you don't feel it and you don't do that, again, look at your dirty insights and understand where they're coming from, you're not going to be able to be effective in translating that in the classroom, and facilitating dialogue or conversation or engaging with an article with your students.

Nicole Vazquez:

In turn, doing that, if you're practicing social worker, doing that with your clients. If I have this visceral reaction to this person that walked in, I have to be honest with myself about what is that about, and then knowing it's okay, that it's because she's Black. I'll encourage you all to look at Dominguez's website because there's a video on there about CRT and I interview Susie, and she's talking about that, just being honest with herself about understanding where her biases come from, and knowing that it's okay because how can you not? If it's been socialized in us, and that socialization is based on centuries of socialization and reinforcements of these biases, how can we not? How much work is it going to take to unlearn those things? I mean, we have to do it, right? We absolutely have to do it. We don't have a choice, especially as social workers. We don't have a choice.

Laura S. Abrams:

What I'd like to see is that we take the principles of critical reflexivity and critical self-awareness that you just mentioned, but instead of applying that of just, "If I'm aware of my biases, I'm going to be an effective antiracist practitioner," which some multicultural models presuppose self-awareness as the precursor to being an effective practitioner, and it is in a lot of ways, but it's not enough.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, moving beyond the multicultural model, which has really been a colossal failure in social work education from all accounts and research is if we were to say we have critical self-awareness and critical reflexivity and we learn about critical race theory, just like we learn about systems theory, if this becomes a theory that is just as important or just as central as person environment, and it actually goes together quite well will be as a foundation training practitioners to be far more equipped to intervene at all levels of practice in communities of color than we do now. So, that's going to be my plug here.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm onboard, Laura.

Laura S. Abrams:

I know you are. So, at UCLA, when we started to include a couple of units on CRT, and now it's become a staple of one of our theory classes along with queer theory and feminist theory, and we've also moved into intergroup dialogue, which has some elements of CRT baked in as well, it's not perfect, and I'm not going to say that we've reached a point where we don't have to keep working at it, but I think those elements, they do lend a foundation to antiracist practice.

Laura S. Abrams:

One of the key parts about that is challenging colorblindness or challenging the idea that, "Okay. We all bring a culture and that equalizes oppressions." That's really what sparked me to write that article on critical race theory back in 2009, and I don't believe that even though this article is widely used and cited that it hasn't infiltrated the mainstream of social work education in terms of what most schools are doing.

Shimon Cohen:

I know we're going to be wrapping up soon, but I just want to put out there what's been helpful to me that I've been thinking a lot about lately as I learn more about CRT and when you think ... Going back, Nicole, to what you said about all men are created equal, and that on the surface that seems like a good concept. We can apply that same thing to social work, right? Then social work is rooted in social justice simply of these codes of ethics. I just keep contrasting the United States with social work as these institutions that put out these ideals, but that from the core, racism was deeply, is in the foundation, right?

Shimon Cohen:

So, when I think about these blocks and these challenges of making change within social work, I think of it as the blocks and the challenges of making change within the United States.

Nicole Vazquez:

Absolutely. It's going to take a radical shift. There's been plenty of discussion. There have been plenty of articles written about the professionalization movement of social work. Social work started as a community work. It wasn't a profession, right? There were community organizers out there trying to help people of different races, but then whose stories do we hear, and do we learn about in our programs? That's a start.

Nicole Vazquez:

You're right. If we want to do social work and truly uphold the code of ethics in our values and things like that, it doesn't fit in with academia. It doesn't fit in with these academic structures. So, what does that mean? What can that really, really look like?

Nicole Vazquez:

I think I've attended so many webinars and things lately. I can't remember which one it was in. It was either our critical race scholars one or it was the one that Laura, UCLA, and Houston, and I don't want to get on this Howard, right?

Laura S. Abrams:

Howard and ASU.

Nicole Vazquez:

There was someone there that was talking about the way they grade and how it's a conversation that they have with their students, and then the instructor and the student at the end of the semester come to a consensus as to what the student's grade should be, right? To me, that's decolonizing academia. How much more work does that take? Imagine. Having those conversations throughout the semester

with each one of your students, that's a lot of work, but I thought that was beautiful when that professor was explaining that.

Shimon Cohen:

Got to do the work.

Laura S. Abrams:

Doing the work.

Nicole Vazquez:

Doing the work.

Laura S. Abrams:

We have work to do. That's for sure.

Shimon Cohen:

I mean, if students have listened this far along, it's like hold your faculty to this stuff. First of all, hold yourself to this stuff, but hold your professors to this. Bring this up in your classes and same with practitioners. Bring this up to your directors, right? I mean, we've got to have these conversations. They're super hard to have, but we got to do it.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. That's one thing I was thinking. Thank you, Shimon, for bringing that up to students is that, one, there's power in numbers. The faculty that are listening may not appreciate this, but administrators respond to students, and they respond to numbers. So, if they're not listening or you feel like your curriculum isn't reflective of what it is that you need to learn, then hold them accountable, and do it in numbers. I mean, hopefully, you learn this in your policy. Whatever policy class you take or if there's a policy advocacy class you take, take what you're learning in your classes and do it in a strategic way.

Nicole Vazquez:

Do a power analysis to figure out who is the right target. Learn the hierarchical structure of your program if it sits within a college or where it fits in the university. Yeah. I mean, we're calling out social work and in doing that, we have to call out the institutions that are teaching social workers, that are producing social workers.

Laura S. Abrams:

As an academic administrator, I can say that it also helps to have a conversation with your associate dean of curriculum or the chair director, and just say, "Hey, I'm curious about these things." So, not everything has to come in the form of a petition in the sense that sometimes people are more open than you think. That's going to be my academic administrator pushback in the sense that I think there's a lot of openness. I think there's a lot of open doors right now, and it shouldn't be up to students either to do all the work on this. I think faculty also, they need to do the work and learn and revise the curriculum without students always having to put in that unpaid labor, too.

Laura S. Abrams:

So, a call to my fellow faculty out there as well, let's try to do the work and not, so to speak, get in the situation where we end up with masses of students unhappy with the curriculum. Maybe we can get ahead of that this time.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. Like Laura said, too, compensate, find ways. If you're bringing your students in to help, if they're putting in some work, they need to be compensated for the work that they're putting in because I've heard this from students across the country. Again, I've sat in on quite a few webinars and workshops and things over the last few months, where I hear students saying, "I'm doing their job for them. I rewrote a syllabus," and they're doing it because they care and this is what they want to learn.

Nicole Vazquez:

The faculty is either they're taking it and saying, "Thanks," and not compensating the students or they're saying, "Thanks," and then not implementing it, which is worse. So, yeah, I mean-

Shimon Cohen:

So, pay them, and implement.

Nicole Vazquez:

That goes back to critical race theory and the counter-narratives, right? Centering the voice. I mean, if anything and we look at power structures within social work programs, students are in diminished positions of power, and it's taking a lot for them to stand up to their administrators, and offer something, a form of change and that in and of itself is a struggle I think for them to do. So, we need to be centering the experiences and the voices of our students when we're trying to change for the better.

Laura S. Abrams:

Well, that's interesting being a former student who used to stand up to administration, and then being an administrator, but that could be a subject of a whole other podcast.

Nicole Vazquez:

For sure. For sure.

Laura S. Abrams:

When you see yourself in your students who are half your age or less, it's aggravating because you know that they're going to be at your door and pushing you, but then it's like you remember, "But I was that student and I wanted to be listened to, and I didn't feel heard."

Nicole Vazquez:

I think that's the thing, as off the wall as this may sound, is that I think we forget that our students are adults. They are adults, right? They're not high schoolers. High schoolers should also be listened to, but these are adults. A lot of them come in with not only their lived experiences, but professional experiences as well. We have just as much, if not more to learn from them than they do from us. That goes back to social work practice, being vulnerable and having humility in that space and in that relationship.

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely.

Nicole Vazquez:

I could just keep going. You need to take me off my soapbox for to me stop. I think we're good.

Shimon Cohen:

So, we've covered a lot. There's as much, if not more to go. Obviously, we got to wrap it up at a certain point. I think we've really covered a lot. I think you both have given people a lot to think about and a lot of entry points, beyond entry points. I think that's really important. I hope that this conversation is going to continue in a lot more places and build a broader movement around this.

Shimon Cohen:

So, I just want to thank you both for coming on here, sharing your time, and doing the work, the work you both do everyday to really make things better. I just really appreciate you both so much.

Laura S. Abrams:

Thank you, Shimon.

Nicole Vazquez:

Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity.

Laura S. Abrams:

Thank you, Nicole.

Nicole Vazquez:

Yeah. Thank you, Laura.

Laura S. Abrams:

It was fun.

Nicole Vazquez:

It was fun.

Shimon Cohen:

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