



## **Critical Social Work**

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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <https://ojs.scholarsportal.info/windsor/index.php/csw>

***Critical Social Work, 2022 Vol. 23, No. 1***

# Reconsidering Intersectionality: Falsity, Negativity, and Radical Racial Pragmatism in Social Work Praxis

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## Critical Social Work 23(1)

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### Abstract

The present historical juncture, characterized by overuse of the word “intersectionality” and underappreciation for its historical evolution and intention, warrants not only clarification of intersectionality as a concept, but thoroughgoing reconsideration of its contemporary utility and limitations. This is precisely the task undertaken in this article. Upon close scrutiny, extant theories of intersectionality fall upon a continuum ranging from falsity to negativity, the former indicating misrepresentation of identity through reliance on categories, the latter suggesting deconstruction to the point of making translation into practice difficult or impossible. Neither theoretical extreme of this continuum, nor any point in between, advances the intended mission of racial justice without also creating new problems or inflicting collateral social damage. This necessitates a theoretical and practical push beyond intersectionality toward a new project of radical racial pragmatism in social work praxis. Radical racial pragmatism offers a platform from which to begin a campaign for racial justice that avoids the obstacles of falsity and negativity by adhering to a program centering upon provisional racial relationality, epistemological and moral pluralism, and participatory, interracial democracy. The liberatory and transformative aspiration that guides but ultimately eludes intersectional theorization is thus restored by radical racial pragmatism in social work praxis.

*Keywords:* intersectionality, pragmatism, race, theory

In December of 2018, senator for the state of New York and short-lived Democratic presidential candidate, Kirsten Gillibrand, released a tweet, which read, “The Future is . . . Female . . . Intersectional . . . Powered in our belief in one another . . . And we’re just getting started.” One can safely assume that Gillibrand’s primary intention must have been to leverage the vernacular of a progressive, broad—indeed, intersectional—electorate to her personal advantage, to galvanize these constituents in support of her political aspirations. The alternative interpretation that the tweet reflected a deep-seated concern for and commitment to the pursuit of a more equitable future across lines of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., is less plausible, given Gillibrand’s history as a lawyer for major tobacco companies and her record as a politician who fought to preserve gun rights and restrict the freedom of immigrants (Flanagan, 2018). Accordingly, the tweet drew swift backlash and widespread condemnation from precisely those whose support Gillibrand disingenuously elicited.

This reaction is valid, understandable, and arguably one that Gillibrand should have anticipated. As a lawyer, and later as a politician, who devoted her resources mainly to causes directly affecting her and her narrow intersectional stratum of white, wealthy, straight women, Gillibrand’s appeal to intersectionality, as a theory, bears every indication of eventual translation, in practice, to a central concern with gaining women like her (i.e., white, wealthy, straight) equal access to the power historically held by white, wealthy, straight men. This self-serving conception of intersectionality holds little, if any, space for equity across a true plurality of identities, and is, in fact, not so intersectional. Intersectionality was never intended to be invoked in the name of myopic, ultimately exclusionary, promotion of the interests of a narrow few, and Gillibrand’s detractors were right to vociferously correct the public record.

The tweet raises a larger issue, though, about the circulation and conditional appropriation of terms in relation to the underlying concepts that they signify. There is nothing unusual or surprising about a term being subject to repeated cycles of reinterpretation (along with inevitable misinterpretation) and application to novel contexts, thereby growing relatively detached from its original referent. It is not too common, however, for a term such as “intersectionality,” originating at the margins of the social-justice-oriented academy, to gain such ubiquity as to infiltrate mainstream discourse. (A similar, though more extreme, example might be the term “queer,” also born at the margins of society, now fully integrated into mainstream discourse—a transition reflected by the “Q” now appended to the LGBT banner) (Berlant & Warner, 1995). Within the mainstream, as vernacular usage gains popularity, intersectional terminology acquires a valence divergent from its originally intended purpose.

Intersectionality as a term, circulated among the contemporary general public, functions to refer less to the sociopolitical project that is its namesake than to a socially desirable, presupposed humanistic enlightenment and compassion characteristic of whoever deploys the term. That is, to invoke intersectionality requires no familiarity with the term’s genealogy, but carries a certain cachet of presumed sensitivity to suffering and lived complexities beyond one’s own identities. Proficiency in the lingo of intersectionality is, as the social media generations might put it, “woke.” Similar transformations have reworked the relational connotations of Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) “white privilege,” and, more recently, Robin DiAngelo’s concept of “white fragility” (2018). White millennials and Gen Z tirelessly “check their privilege” and guard against “fragility” induced by uncomfortable conversations, all the while cultivating a white identity that grows increasingly disconnected from any awareness of the historical-material

and ideological antecedents that condition the very whiteness they embody. Mainstream affiliation with intersectionality most often operates as a hollow badge of honor, carelessly appropriated, which obfuscates the history of the term and movements it generated.

### **A Brief History**

Most attribute intersectionality as a term to Kimberlé Crenshaw, but it should be added that the concept was prefigured by the work of the Combahee River Collective (1981), developed notably in Patricia Hill-Collins' (1990) conceptualization of "interlocking systems of oppression," and even partially discernable in W. E. B. Du Bois' (2014) long predating formulation of "double consciousness," first posited in 1903. Crenshaw conceived of intersectionality from her position within the legal academy (a fact that will be important later), working among the cadre of legal scholar-activists who founded Critical Race Theory (CRT) in reaction to the unsatisfactorily conservative Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement. While CLS and CRT found agreement in the shared critique that the legal system often, if not usually, discharges its constitutionally mandated institutional responsibilities in racially unjust ways, CRT went further to assert that the legal system actually plays an integral role in constructing the very notion of race itself, setting the preconditions for oppressive social stratification on the basis of race (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). In contribution to the overarching CRT project of exposing and extirpating the systemic misrepresentation and erasure of marginalized racial groups and subgroups therein, Crenshaw (1989) delivered the inaugural use of intersectionality as a term, writing, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). The first application of intersectionality thus referred directly to Black female experience, integrating emergent CRT methodology with the priorities of contemporaneous trends in Black (lesbian) feminism espoused by the already mentioned Combahee River Collective (1981) and others like Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1984). Crenshaw continued to delve more deeply into the hidden and silenced oppressions suffered by Black women, ranging from employment discrimination (1989) to domestic violence (1995) to political exclusion (1995), the key insight being that no instance was accurately or adequately captured by analysis of Blackness, analysis of femaleness, or analysis additively combining the two; Black female experience occupied an experiential territory informed by, but distinctly irreducible to, Black experience and female experience, respectively.

The intersectional insight that the embodiment of numerous identities is, in the aggregate, greater than the sum of individual identities quickly found ready application to persons and populations other than Black women. Intersectionality promised to shed new light on previously unrecognized subjectivities across analyses of age (Calasanti & Giles, 2018), disability status (Pal, 2011), coloniality and white supremacy (Almeida, Rozas, Cross-Denny, Lee, & Yamada, 2019), historiography (Gibson, 2015), education (Jani, Ortiz, Pierce, & Sowbel, 2011), and nationality (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008), to name only a few, with assurances of a more inclusive feminism (Carastathis, 2014) and fuller social justice, more generally (Dill & Kohlman, 2014). The applicability of and enthusiasm for intersectionality is evidently wide-ranging.

But the veritable explosion of intersectional scholarship, research, and activism across disciplines and professions also brings confusion as the intersectionality marketplace grows ever

more crowded with alternative theories vying for preeminence as the most incisive and generative iteration of intersectional theory to date, and claiming purviews of ostensibly unexcavated theoretical terrain. Notwithstanding the additionally complicating irresponsible appropriations of intersectionality in popular discourse, a la Gillibrand, the proliferation of well-intentioned attempts to advance intersectional theory alone render a sprawling network of axiological, ontological, and epistemological diversity that can, at times, make it difficult to ascertain what was meant by intersectionality in the first place and what it means today.

### Sorting Through Proliferation

At this juncture, it will prove instructive to organize the field of intersectional theories promulgated thus far according to commonalities and distinctions. The operative word here is *organize*, for the intention is not, and could not possibly be, to settle all debate among competing and conflicting theorizations. The utility of this exercise is twofold: On the one hand, grouping intersectional theories will allow for concision that would be impossible if every single variant of intersectionality were considered; on the other, taking classes of intersectional theories together will facilitate more comprehensive coverage of intersectionality as a conceptual and methodological paradigm, leading subsequently to a surer evaluation and critique.

The first step, then, must be to establish some criteria for what even counts as an intersectional theory. Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana (2009) explicitly delineate a set of criteria, suggesting that intersectional theory is:

characterized by the following four theoretical interventions: (1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized; (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and (4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions. (p. 5)

Having just reviewed the origin of Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality, these criteria seem to do a satisfactory job of remaining true to the initial motivation behind intersectionality, while also allowing for additional theorization extending across a broad range of positionalities.

Taking this understanding of *what* intersectional theory is, the question becomes *how* intersectional theories approach the requisite theoretical interventions outlined by Dill and Zambrana. First, two conceptual and methodological schools should be differentiated according to how they interpret and apply analyses of intersecting identities. In short, these can be referred to as the additive and multiplicative schools—unsurprisingly, Crenshaw's original wording (“intersectional experience is greater than the sum”) has invited endless mathematical metaphors, which serve as useful heuristics at certain times, but constrain imagination and limit interpretive facility at others (Luft & Ward, 2009). Take the illustrative case, again, of a Black woman as an example. According to an additive intersectional theory, a Black woman's positionality is characterized by oppression experienced by Black persons as well as oppression experienced by

women—the identity is the sum of the parts (Valentine, 2007). According to a multiplicative intersectional theory, a Black woman’s positionality is characterized by oppression experienced by Black persons, oppression experienced by women, oppression experienced by Black persons who are women, and oppression experienced by women who are Black, neither of the latter two being captured by frameworks of Black or female oppression—the identity is more than the sum of the parts (Hancock, 2007). It should be noted that additive intersectional theories, though they still enjoy currency in positivistic, empirically based social science theory and methods, are inherently reductive and elide the complexities of lived experiences that span liminal subjectivities and embodiment across multiple marginalization (Gregory, 2020). This is not an absolute endorsement of the multiplicative school, as many problems with multiplicative intersectional theory will become apparent later, but the point cannot be overstated that the astute practitioner should be wary of additive models for the epistemological violence they inflict upon marginalized and oppressed groups by misrepresenting or only partially representing the contested parameters of their existential personhood.

Moving to a more sophisticated conceptualization than the additive-multiplicative dichotomy, Leslie McCall (2005) explicates an insightful typology, classifying intersectional theories as intercategory, intracategory, and antcategory. She describes the intercategory approach as “requir[ing] that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (p. 1773); the antcategory approach, conversely, “deconstructs analytical categories [because] social life is considered too irreducibly complex . . . to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (p. 1773). The intracategory approach dialectically derives from each of the other two, critiquing the veracity of social boundaries and the processes by which they are constructed, yet also conceding that such boundaries may momentarily reflect temporally and contextually contingent conditions of relationality that inform the ways in which persons embodying particular positionalities live.

These orientations can manifest in myriad forms. Returning, for the sake of consistency, to the earlier example of Black womanhood, certain broad strategies for navigating lived experience illustrate the range of possibility, though they do not exhaust the infinite potential subjectivities therein. An intercategory mode of Black, female embodiment might navigate social life using a repertoire of self-identifying and interpersonal gestures that comport with static definitions of Blackness and femaleness, either as an enduring commitment or merely a contingent, goal-directed pattern of interaction with definitional criteria; that is, one understands themselves unwaveringly as a Black woman, or chooses to invest in notions of Blackness and/or womanhood at least temporarily in order to achieve a personal end like connecting to genealogical ancestry or to advance a collective cause such as equal employment for women of color. However, an antcategory view may reject not only the aforementioned criteria, but the validity of any “Black” or “female” social construct whatsoever, thus disavowing affiliation with either as a signifier of any part of their situated sense and performance of being; which is to say that such a person neither identifies nor hopes to be perceived as “Black” or “female” at all, maybe investing instead in a sense of self dependent both internally and externally upon dimensions other than gender or race—sexual identity and nationality, perhaps, to name only a few options. Taking an intracategory position, lastly, would entail the assumption that, while the categories of Black and female do convey meaningful approximations of personally

subjective and relationally negotiated identity, both their internal criteria and socially constructed boundaries are fluid, dialectically constituted, and ever-changing; put another way, this individual conceives of a self that can, in the same moment, be a Black woman in one context but not another, or, just as plausibly, be a black woman in both settings today but neither tomorrow. Specific instances of each of these orientations abound according to uniquely individual and local circumstances that attend their manifestations.

In what serves as an important qualification to these examples, though, Gita Mehrotra (2010) urges social workers to arrange the intercategory, intracategory, and antcategory approaches, respectively, along a continuum ranging from reification to deconstruction, rather than to assign each to a discrete epistemological category. She consequently appeals to antcategory intersectional theory (the most deconstructive of the three approaches) as what she perceives to hold the greatest potential for liberatory social work praxis and social justice. Setting aside, for the moment, whether this claim is justified, the point is well taken that intercategory intersectional theories often rely upon hegemonic categorization that generally does not subvert the status quo of prevailing sociopolitical relations. More important to the present discussion, though, the alignment of intercategory, intracategory, and antcategory intersectional theories along a continuum from reification to deconstruction serves well to summarize the full breadth of potential variants of historical and contemporary intersectional theories.

### **Reconsidering Intersectionality: Falsity and Negativity**

With the foregoing sections having covered *what* constitutes intersectional theory (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Dill & Zambrana, 2009) and *how* intersectional theories might conceive of identity (e.g., Mehrotra, 2010; McCall, 2005), the task taken up in the present section is to elucidate *with what effects* intersectional theories function. In service of that objective, a new organizing framework for intersectional theories is presented in the form of a continuum that ranges from falsity, on one extreme, to negativity, on the other. This theoretical intervention is truly the linchpin of the entire discussion unfolding here, so a caveat should be mentioned before proceeding in greater depth. The terms falsity and negativity may presage a disconcerting feeling, which could creep in, that this project is unduly skeptical, perhaps even cynical. Indeed, the framework to be developed will contend that the whole lot of available theories of intersectionality falls along a continuum between two poles, each being theoretically erroneous or practically unsatisfactory in a different way, with a spectrum of only partially adequate interventions bridging the distance in between. But this seemingly bleak diagnosis will not mark completion of this project; for a hopeful prognosis lay in considering an alternative vehicle for undertaking the pursuit of social equity and liberation that has traditionally guided initiatives in the name of intersectionality. That will come in time. First, intersectionality is reconsidered in terms of falsity and negativity that manifest as the effects of the manners in which intersectional theories have historically been deployed and still are today.

### **Falsity and Intersectionality**

Recall the earlier mention of Kimberlé Crenshaw's position as a member of the legal academy. The legal system, in its very procedural substance, requires—in fact, hinges upon—conceptions of identity that fit into categories. Think, for example, of the necessity that plaintiffs and

defendants be categorized as male or female for cases involving gender discrimination, or as Black, white, Latinx, Asian, etc. for cases involving racial discrimination. The inception of intersectionality within the legal academy, therefore, necessarily propagated notions of identity recognizable according to categorical definitions. These categorical definitions may be additive or multiplicative, or, in the schemes of McCall (2005) and Mehrotra (2010), intercategory or intracategory. That is, dependence upon categories permits the arrangement of these categories in additive, reductive ways, or in multiplicative, dialectical ways; yet both strategies fundamentally rely upon the epistemological presumption of categories as representative of phenomenologically and empirically valid ontology.

Categories, as a tool—a shorthand device, a heuristic—for apprehending intersectional identity, however, innately purvey some degree of falsity, and so, *invalid* ontology. In other words, identity categories project authoritative interpretation, imposing bounded objectivity on infinite subjectivity; they circumscribe the totality of the subject for the sake of communicability; they suppress the experiential situatedness of the subject irreducible to the referential capacity of the signifier; and they shed any connotation of representational limitation through gradual, discursive vernacularization, imbuing with tacit authority what is actually, to varying extents, falsity. To put this falsity in simpler terms, an identity category is an approximation that conventionally operates under a pretense of wholeness that is, in reality, unattainable. Categorization is always accompanied by some misrepresentation.

This deficiency relating to categories in intersectional theory is seldom acknowledged for its full pervasiveness or consequence, attributable largely to a superseding problem of language and epistemology, both across professions and disciplines, and in communication writ large. The predominant impetus for this problem can be traced to the 1689 publication of John Locke's treatise, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In the Essay, Locke advocates for a linguistic and empirical doctrine of absolute referentialism—language must conform to unambiguously clear referents, and only those phenomena suited to reference by such language can be verified as true. It should be obvious that this ambition could only possibly be aspirational. Nonetheless, the vision of unimpeachable communicative and scientific mastery motivating Locke's Essay quickly found tremendous purchase among a European audience already intent on conquest of a different form in their campaigns of colonial imperialism. And given the eventual trajectory of the colonial imperial efforts of this very audience, their commitment to the logic of Locke's essay—as an ideology if not a reality—played a pivotal role in shaping the future of epistemological schemas that rose to Western dominance and global preeminence (Bauman & Briggs, 2003).

This historical shift in epistemology paved the way for the modern belief that designation with language renders phenomena verified—or at least verifiable—as true. Far-reaching preference for positivist and post-positivist epistemologies, descended from Locke's referentialism, endures in social work and the social sciences (Kemp & Samuels, 2019), not to mention regressive insistence in the natural sciences that categories such as race reflect immutable traits (e.g., Fullerton, 2007). The enveloping delusion persists that categorization as approximation captures wholeness. When identities, intersectional or not, are represented using categories, full personhood—true personhood—is abbreviated. Yet categories are prevalently cited in order to presumptively lay claim to certainty, and this is nothing more than falsity.



## Negativity and Intersectionality

In stark juxtaposition to the approaches to intersectionality found in intercategorical and intracategorical theories, theories at the opposite end of the spectrum take an anticategorical approach to intersectionality. To restate the apt summary articulated by McCall (2005), the anticategorical approach “deconstructs analytical categories [because] social life is considered too irreducibly complex . . . to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (p. 1773). This disavowal of categories as “social fictions” avoids the problem of falsity just elaborated.

Anticategorical intersectional theories belong to a larger family of poststructural and postmodern theories that reject passive acceptance of ontological and epistemological tenets historically granted as unquestionably true, such as those relating to the self, the other, society, race, gender, sexuality, or nation, among innumerable others. This critical posture effects theoretical and practical repercussions that destabilize not only the terms that populate ontological and epistemological systems, but the systems themselves. Such deep conceptual and perceptual unsettlement leads to what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) terms multinaturalism and perspectivism—the former depicts a universe of parallel, reciprocal, mutually inclusive ontologies existing in parity (de la Cadena, 2010); the latter portrays a network of relativistic epistemic relationality among entities (sentient, non-sentient, and otherwise) in which each constituent is “capable of providing a counter-description of the image drawn of it by [another] and thereby capable . . . of ‘returning to [the Other] an image in which [it is] unrecognizable to [itself]’” (p. 55). Within the context of intersectionality, orthodox anticategorical theory such as this implies that even the self cannot be known with certainty, let alone another.

The extreme ontological and epistemological relativism characteristic of anticategorical theory certainly avoids the theoretical problem of falsity, but runs up against the practical dilemma of negativity—it subtracts more than it adds, tears down more than it builds, criticizes more than it offers in return. Although typically employed in a spirit of liberation or emancipation, the complicated fact is that anticategorical theory, being so rigorously deconstructive, often casts such expansive and serious doubt upon phenomena crucial to navigating lived experience as to make it difficult, if possible at all, to practically translate this theory to action. McCall (2005) demarcates the philosophical position of anticategorical theorists on this matter, stating their conviction that, “since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change. Whether this research does in fact contribute to social change is irrelevant” (p. 1777). This is an odd disclaimer, since social change depends upon the possibility of social change, and the possibility of social change depends on the possibility of translation from theory to action. Therefore, to dismiss contribution to social change is, essentially, to confess that anticategorical theorization may actually impart no pathway from intersectional theory to practice. This is utterly, paradigmatically, negative. Put in plain, but admittedly pessimistic language, this is to position anticategorical intersectional theory as theorization for the sake of theorization, thinking for the sake of thinking, however purportedly enlightened or transcendent that thinking may be. Thinking alone cannot redress lived injustice.

## Toward Radical Racial Pragmatism

The prior sections have made claims tracing *what* intersectionality is, *how* different schools of thought interpret intersectionality, and *with what effects* variants of intersectional theory intervene in understandings and applications of differences within, among, and across relational identities. The question remains: *To what end* does this reconsideration bring social work practitioners? The promise was made earlier that neither falsity nor negativity would signal the end of the present excursion into intersectionality; so, perhaps, then, this endeavor might be better construed as an excursion *beyond* intersectionality. The ramifications should be clear that categorical intersectional theories of any sort (i.e., additive or multiplicative, intercategory or intracategory) necessarily propagate an element of falsity, yielding a *theoretical* problem; while conversely, anticategorical intersectional theories bring negativity, leaving a *practical* problem. The difference between existing frameworks and the reconsideration underway here is that extant models posit a continuum of possibilities for intersectional theory, holding up *one* or *some* as being satisfactory, but the current analysis asserts a new arrangement along a novel continuum of possibilities for intersectional theory, with *none* being satisfactory. To step through, and thus beyond, intersectionality, so to speak, demands sound theoretical and practical footing on the other side, upon which to begin to build a foundation for social work praxis that pursues the agenda of social change to which intersectionality aspires but never reaches without collateral damage or error. None of this is to say that the intersectional theories critiqued above offer no insight or benefit, but rather that they do not quite achieve their stated objectives, and further, in the attempt to reach their desired ends, do not take full account of their implicit epistemology or material applicability. The liberatory, transformative spirit of intersectionality can, should, and must always be preserved, but the desired ends require different means.

If true equity within and across lines of identity, with race occupying the focal concern, is taken as the end goal, a new program of radical racial pragmatism offers a promising alternative means to intersectional theorizing. The qualifiers “radical racial” should be paid due emphasis, because the intention here is certainly not to invoke the colorblind project of historical American pragmatism, but instead a pragmatism closer to that expounded by scholars, intellectuals, and activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1967), Cornel West (1989), and Harvey Cormier (2007). Indeed, Charles Mills (2007) has poignantly theorized the ways in which historical visions of political philosophy, including but not limited to American pragmatism, have depended upon what he calls white ignorance, which has obscured the imbrication of white supremacy within the constitutive epistemology of such modalities (see also Margonis, 2007). If the aim of radical racial pragmatism is first to determine what is true, and second to act upon that truth, then Cormier (2007) provides a suitable point of departure from which to grapple with racial truths, opining, “If a novel reconception of mainstream politics or human rationality actually makes life, thought, and the world better, then that reconception will be true, or it will at least have the only kind of truth we are interested in getting” (p. 74). By this measure of truth, the divergence from intersectionality and the utility of radical racial pragmatism are fully realized; irresolvable debates around how to *apprehend* the infinite plurality of racial identity and relationality cede priority to the *implications* of said apprehension; truth is judged less by what it *is* than by what it *does*. And what it should *do*, in the case of radical racial pragmatism, is, to use Cormier’s words, make “life, thought, and the world better” for the racially oppressed and marginalized. To apply this to Crenshaw’s seminal case study of intersectionality, a true conception of Black, female identity is one that improves lived experience and alleviates injustice suffered by Black women. Any other portrayal would not be, for the radical racial pragmatist, the “kind of truth we are interested in getting.”

Recently, Kathryn R. Berringer (2019) reviewed social work's long history of engaging with pragmatic thought and praxis (e.g., Addams, 1911; Borden, 2010, 2013; Carr, 2015; Forte, 2004a, 2004b; Hothersall, 2015; Greenstone, 1979; Lushin & Anastas, 2011). The unifying feature of the pragmatic social work literature reviewed by Berringer, as well as her treatment of this literature, is a reticence to prioritize, or to even include at all, a thoroughgoing analysis of the consequences of pragmatism for the racially marginalized and oppressed. Berringer's review, for example, identifies this cursory consideration of race as a "historical elision in social work and pragmatism" (p. 623), but notes this shortcoming without offering any substantive remedy. Her work, though, is invaluable for renewing a contemporary dialogue between social work and pragmatism, and also for delineating the following principles of pragmatism that resonate with the mission and technical repertoire of social workers, and that may illuminate potential inroads to the development of radical racial pragmatism in social work: (a) "Fallibilism, abductive reasoning, and experience" (p. 614); (b) "instrumentalism, or the unity of thought and action" (p. 617); (c) "epistemological and moral pluralism" (p. 618); (d) "the social self, symbolic interactionism, and relationality" (p. 619); and (e) "experimentalism and participatory democracy" (p. 620). These principles can be summarized as follows: (a) All knowledge is only ever a working hypothesis; (b) the value of knowledge is what it does; (c) diverse ways of knowing, and of deriving morality from resultant knowledge, exist complementarily and equitably; (d) the self exists only in and through symbolic relations with others; and (e) the appropriate means for testing knowledge and morality is through participatory democracy.

Now, imagine these principles reconceived from the perspective of radical racial pragmatism: (a) All knowledge about race is only ever provisional; (b) the value of knowledge about race corresponds to the extent to which it combats racial injustice; (c) perspectives on race and racial justice *from* racially diverse standpoints are mutually informative and equally valid—white epistemology and moral adjudication do not reign supreme; (d) racial identity exists only through interracial, symbolic relation; and (e) the appropriate means for testing knowledge about race and racial justice is through participatory, interracial democracy. This set of principles can be taken as an acceptable foundation upon which to begin to build a program of radical racial pragmatism in social work. Guided accordingly, radical racial pragmatism, in social work and applied elsewhere, is attuned to the ends intersectionality would hope to realize (e.g., the value of knowledge about race corresponds to the extent to which it combats racial injustice), but more fully and effectively actualizes outcomes related to the broad aspiration of racial justice by avoiding falsity (e.g., all knowledge about race is only provisional) and overcoming negativity (e.g., the appropriate means for testing knowledge about race and racial justice is through participatory, interracial democracy). Radical racial pragmatism can serve to effectively bridge the gap between two of the most salient and consequential social problems presently facing social work in the United States and globally—namely, that *racial injustice abounds relatively unabated*, especially despite the longstanding and widespread commitment to mitigating its sources and symptoms by social workers and other social justice acolytes; also, that *translating theories and moral convictions into actionable modes of practice grows increasingly difficult* in the midst of professional and socio-ecological settings fraught with rising levels of polarization, partisanship, entrenched administrative bureaucracy, and ascription to conservative and neoliberal ideologies that both belie worsening inequities.

### Implications for Social Work Praxis

Radical racial pragmatism circumvents the barrier between theory and practice by arguing for a truth that is what it does, and so tenets of pragmatist theory already carry in them a direct corollary of prescribed practice. This is perfectly in keeping with the intellectual and technical orientation of the social work profession, which urges, in its educational policy and accreditation standards, that social workers “engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 8). Evidently, social work, like radical racial pragmatism, values the unimpeded translation of theoretical innovation and attendant moral implications into tangible, practical intervention in service of the amelioration and eventual eradication of social problems, such as racial injustice. That is to say, both social work and radical racial pragmatism do not value theory *or* practice, but theory *in and through* practice, or praxis. The following discussion demonstrates two praxis modalities for radical racial pragmatism in social work, intended to effectuate racial justice while avoiding falsity and negativity, the pitfalls indicated by the foregoing review of intersectionality.

### **Avoiding Falsity Through Empathic Unsettlement**

Dominick LaCapra (2001) articulates a relational concept he terms “empathic unsettlement” (see also Horigan, 2018), which readily extrapolates to the provisional mode of interpreting and relating across racial identities prescribed for radical racial pragmatism in social work. He develops the notion of empathic unsettlement in the context of understanding historical trauma, worth quoting here at length:

Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. (p. 78)

In the same way that historical trauma exceeds its moment of occurrence and imparts lasting physical, psychological, or emotional alteration, so does racialization constitute a formative process that ultimately shapes an identity that comes to be perceived as race. As such, both historical trauma and race represent exceptionally personal facets of identity unamenable to ascertainment through “taking the other’s place.” This should not be mistaken to suggest that empathy is useless or inadvisable, only that it is always, to use LaCapra’s phrase, unsettled—imperfect, incomplete, transitory.

Despite this limit, the fact remains that racial identity is, in every case, relational (Hoagland, 2007). For this reason, it is imperative that human beings strive for interracial empathy, but even more vital that human beings resist closure in empathy, vigilantly foregrounding the impossibility of wholly representing to themselves another’s racial identity. Be it uncomfortable or counterintuitive, there is often benefit, power even, in *not* knowing, and respect for this unknown can restore the autonomy of the racially marginalized and oppressed who have historically been denied the freedom to set the terms by which they themselves are known (Bailey, 2007; Code, 2007). If the truth of racial identity is never foreclosed, then this is a truth that both avoids falsity and precludes the possibility that those with power might define the

parameters of racial identity for and against the will of those without. Radical racial pragmatism in social work is thus aligned with empathic unsettlement as intentional praxis, which rejects the misguided interventions and nomenclature of so-called cultural competence models that serve primarily to commodify the histories, cultures, and bodies of non-white persons for intellectual consumption by those who are white.

### **Avoiding Negativity Through Participatory, Interracial Democracy**

Not only the ideological entanglement born from postmodern and poststructural deconstructive theorization, but also material conflict, plain and simple, can lead to negativity, to incommensurability, that is potentially paralyzing to racial justice initiatives. Either circumstance yields a sense of impasse resolvable only through acknowledging the impossibility that the tensions balanced in seeking resolution can always be commensurable. Using the example of decolonization in the literal sense, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) powerfully interrogate incommensurability that manifests in the relations between and among social justice movements, “recogniz[ing] what is distinct, what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights based social justice projects,” noting that “there are portions of these projects that simply cannot speak to one another, cannot be aligned or allied” (p. 28). Civil rights for colonizers and natives alike on stolen land is not the same thing as sovereignty for native peoples, the latter entailing both material repatriation and sociopolitical autonomy for those indigenous to the land that was stolen in the first place; the two are, in fact, mutually exclusive.

Incommensurability—whether from the unactionable dissolution that leads to negativity, as mentioned earlier, or from utterly incompatible material initiatives, here—cannot be resolved through integration, but only through contingent cooperation and coordination, as particular agendas are sometimes simply unassimilable. And cooperation and coordination are not possible without dialogue among racial groups with different priorities and potentially competing interests. Herein lies the value—the necessity, perhaps—of participatory, interracial democracy as a means for avoiding negativity and other seemingly ineradicable obstacles that stand in the way of progress toward a cohesive plan for racial justice, which, inevitably looks different for different people. Participatory, interracial democracy is precisely what radical racial pragmatism in social work prescribes. This does not mean participatory, interracial democracy in the sense that “diverse representation” is euphemistically deployed all too commonly today to stand for what in practice actually pacifies racial discontent with begrudging, incremental concessions instead of sweeping racial justice reform. It means active authority rather than passive representation; it means access, participation, and power for all racial groups affected by any contested issue; it means at times postponing the demands of some, maybe even many, to meet the needs of others, working toward equity for all, even when—and often most importantly when—equity diverges from equality.

An example that concretizes this imperative is the typical outcome of intersectionality curricula or anti-racism pedagogy in social work classrooms. Educational exercises of this sort primarily unsettle existing categories of identity and ways of relating without reconstructing viable alternatives through which to act, thus leaving well-intentioned students prepared to critically self-reflect, but not to navigate social and material realities beyond the classroom according to any other strategy than the prevailing hegemony to which they are forced to default at least in part, if not entirely. That is, the exercise is negative, albeit epistemologically valuable

and freeing, wanting for a positive outlet by which to direct actions in the attempt to move beyond historically harmful and conformist modes of identity thinking. The reality is that there is not one right way to bridge the gap to practice, here. So, the only ethical and moral way, the only racially just way, would be a turn to behavior guided by participatory, interracial, democratic decision making; which is to say, a commitment to whatever course reflects the will of the majority of those seeking racial justice; listening not to the voices of the few and (debatably) altruistic powerful, but to the many oppressed who embody the living stake in the fight for change. That means embracing, uplifting, and following the guidance of voices of color who constitute the core of resistance not because they always want to, but because they often have to, unifying to exercise agency in service of their will for a better world. It means directing time and energy away from introspection and reallocating it to the pursuit of things like voting rights, prison abolition, criminal justice reform, and wealth redistribution *if* and *when* called upon to do so by people of color and those they identify as their genuine allies; in other words, called upon to do so by the participatory, interracial, democratic majority.

### Conclusion

What began as a reconsideration of intersectional theory has moved well beyond the identified limitations and constraints of intersectionality, and justifiably so. At worst, intersectionality operates as an empty signifier thrown about within the mainstream to garner the benefits of socially desirable affiliation with anti-racism or feminism, vaguely defined, without requisite consideration of the historical genesis of the term or commitment to the contemporary social movements with which it is identified. At best, intersectionality offers partial progress toward equity across lines of identity spanning race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, etc., but is inevitably stymied by the theoretical problem of falsity or the practical impasse of negativity. The mission with which intersectionality began, for liberation and transformation leading to racial justice, is and will always be worth preserving, but the end requires alternative means that intersectionality cannot, itself, furnish. Intersectional understanding can and likely must function not as an end in and of itself, but as a transitional step through prescriptive identity thinking and toward liberatory relational praxis; a component piece of the larger program of radical racial pragmatism, operating in parallel to and subsumed within this overarching mission. Radical racial pragmatism in social work offers a suitable platform from which to begin a campaign for racial justice that avoids the obstacles of falsity and negativity by adhering to a strategy centering upon provisional racial relationality, epistemological and moral pluralism, and participatory, interracial democracy. And the timing is opportune. Today, social work is faced with the realities of worsening racial inequity in the United States and globally, and the profession bears an obligation to intervene. When Du Bois lamented in his haunting and incisive meditation on race and racism, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that “the problem of the Twentieth Century [was] the problem of the color line,” (p. 3), he turned out also to have presciently forecast one of the most toxic and recalcitrant social ills that endures well into the 21st century. With a commitment to radical racial pragmatism, social work can take a meaningful step toward extricating and eliminating, rather than simply mediating, the unparalleled social problem of racial injustice.

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